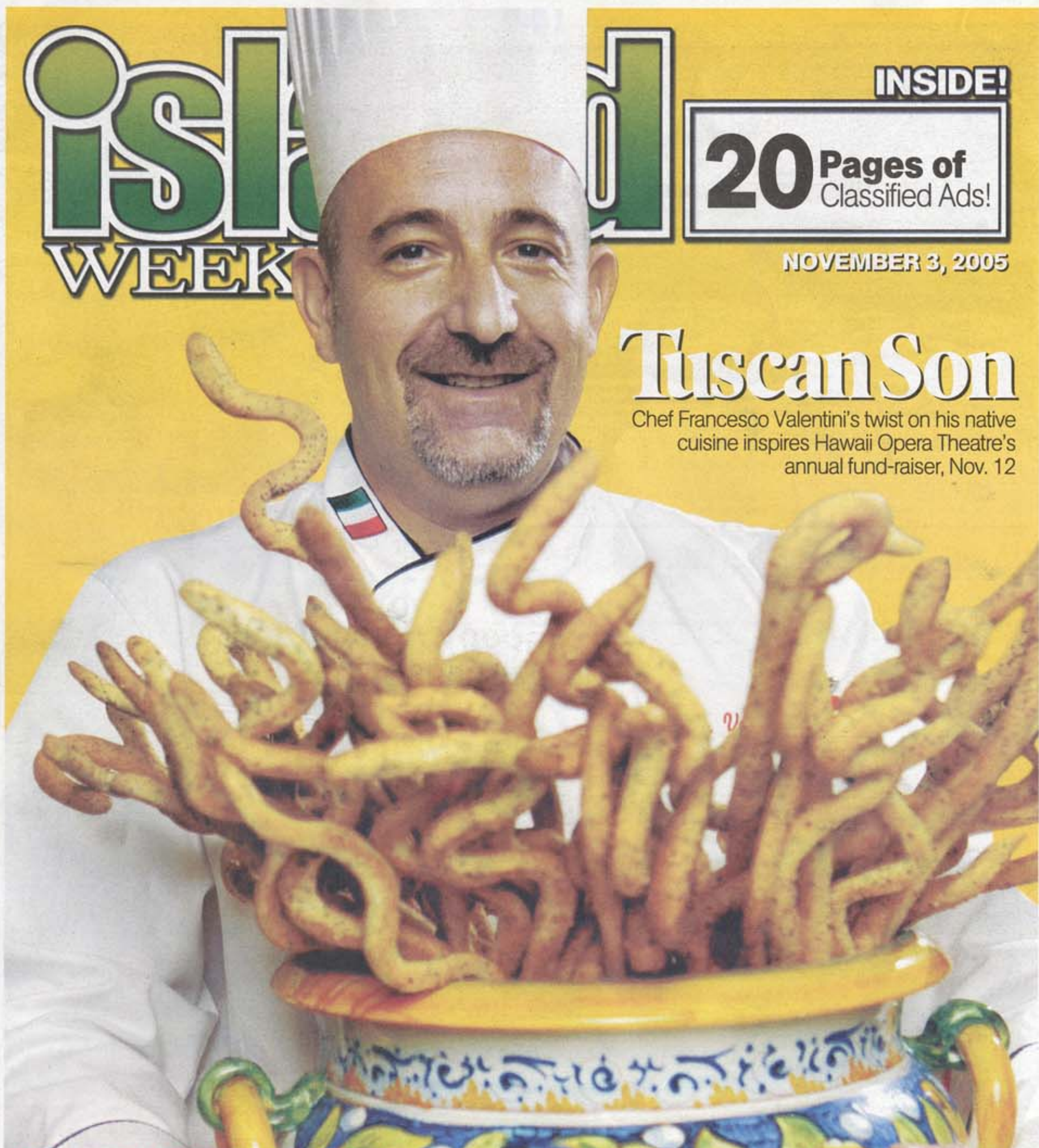


Tuscan Son

Chef Francesco Valentini's twist on his native cuisine inspires Hawaii Opera Theatre's annual fund-raiser, Nov. 12



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Chef Valentini creates menu for HOT's annual fund-raiser dinner

BY WANDA A. ADAMS
 Advertiser Food Editor

Francesco Valentini loves to share the food of his native Tuscany with others. And he loves to correct common misunderstandings about Italian food.

A self-taught personal chef who has made a lifelong hobby into a career, Valentini is acting as a friendly consultant to Sheraton Waikiki executive sous chef Dwight Yoshioka in planning the menu for Ballo Italiano, the annual Opera Ball benefiting Hawaii Opera Theatre, Nov. 12.

He designed three dishes that may surprise some who think Ital-



Tuscan ragu does not call for pasta to be swimming in sauce. The meat sauce can be served over pasta or ravioli, or used in lasagna.

ian food is all pasta, pasta, pasta with tomato, tomato, tomato.

The menu begins with a plate of simple antipasti — cured meats and such — followed by a marinated and grilled veal chop with a ragu of porcini and other mushrooms, and potatoes roasted in olive oil and lemon juice.

"Very simple," declares Valentini in his emphatic way. "When you serve so many people at once, you keep it very simple."

He gets a bit more elaborate when he is making an intimate dinner in the homes of his private clients, he said, but still, simplicity is best. Get the best ingredients you can — he hand-carries cheese and olive oil back from his family's home in Sienna — and respect them.

Valentini was bitten by the travel bug when he got the opportunity to journey around Europe a bit as a teenager. After completing his required military service, he set off for London, and then to San Francisco, where he landed at age 19 with the expectation of a job that didn't quite materialize. Broke and in a strange city, he got a job in retail and continued on that course for 15 years, working his way up the ladder of a European clothing manufacturer. That job brought him to Hawai'i some years ago.

All the while, Valentini was doing his small best to introduce Americans — friends who enjoyed his dinner parties — to authentic Italian food and, particularly, Tuscan style. Four years ago, he decided to give

BALLO ITALIANO

Hawaii Opera Theatre annual benefit
 Nov. 12, Sheraton Waikiki hotel
 Italian menu, auction, dancing
Tickets: Sold out
Information: Nikki Nielsen, 596-7372, ext. 14

his days, as well as his evenings, to his first love, cooking.

He's never had any formal education in the field. "My food comes from my heart and from my family," he said. "It was a hobby and then it became a passion."

After years of fast-paced work and travel in the retail world, he enjoys working on his own, though the pace is no less hectic during a week when he may have a cocktail party for one of his commercial clients (such as Fendi, Christian Dior or Louis Vuitton) plus a dinner or two for the well-heeled Islanders who hire him to cook for them in their homes. Hawai'i's lack of a good Italian grocery mean he's kept running. He can tell you which stores carry the best olive oil, which always stock flat-leaf parsley.

But much of what he serves he makes, including sauces, pasta, and his trademark breadstick centerpieces. His twist on this common Italian bread — grissini — is literally a twist; he shapes the ropy dough, flavored with herbs, poppy seeds or spices, to resemble undulating snakes, and places them dramatically in a vase or bowl in the center of the table. "My mother only eats grissini, she doesn't eat bread. So this is in honor of her," he said.

Valentini said the thing he misses most between visits to Tuscany — where his family operates an inn in their 500-year-old home, Podere Casanova — is the cold cuts. Salami,

prosciutto, mortadella and other cured meats are a favorite of Tuscans, who enjoy them for a merenda, an afternoon snack, piled into some fresh bread in a panini sandwich.

Tuscans eat a lot of meat in general and particularly enjoy barbecuing, he said — ribs, sausage, wild boar and other game. He built an outdoor grill for his family's inn (you can see it online if you follow the link from his Web site, chef-valentini.com).

Another Tuscan favorite is ragu — a sauce that incorporates vegetables slowly simmered until they've literally melted, and ground meats; it is common to grind your own meats from a well-marbled cut.

The thought of sauce brings Valentini to one of the most common differences between authentic Italian dishes and American-style Italian. Americans tend to heap on the sauce, while Italians lightly scatter sauce. Also, many American pasta sauces tend toward the soupy, while ragu is very concentrated, cooked down and almost, but not quite, dry.

Another common misconception: "They think Italian is garlic, tomato, oregano," said Valentini, rolling his eyes and flapping his hands in a dismissive gesture.

"We don't even use garlic sometimes. And when you do, you put one clove, you cook it just a little while in the olive oil and you take it out, then you make your sauce," he said. Tomatoes are used when they're red, ripe and in season. But there are many preparations that don't make use of tomato sauce, while others — like his ragu — call for just a touch of tomato paste. As for oregano, it's far from being the only herb used in Italy, but when it and other herbs are used, they are generally picked fresh, and added as a layer of flavor toward the end of the cooking.

If he could change just one thing in Italian-American restaurant cooking, it would be the tendency to make a marinara sauce by first frying the garlic until it's browned (meaning it's burned), then adding entirely too much tomato sauce and dried oregano. The result is a thin, bitter sauce; instead, marinara should be quickly cooked, fresh-tasting, only lightly scented with garlic and herbs (if at all) and chunky-thick.



Chef Francesco Valentini, above, a native of Tuscany, Italy, cuts his hand-made pasta into wide strips for one of his hearty Tuscan dinners. Valentini makes his own pasta (inset). As a private chef, he caters events and cooks private dinners.