

The Island in the Sun

Charles Scicolone (April 18, 2008)



Sicilian cuisine is a combination of many different cultures.

Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Germans, French, Spanish, Italians, and Americans and have all left their mark on this beautiful but star-crossed island in the center of the Mediterranean. The island's customs, dialect, economic and political institutions as well as the Sicilian character have all been shaped by these foreign invaders.



Today's Sicilian cuisine reflects these influences, for example, the Greeks introduced the cultivation of grape vines. The Arabs may have had the greatest influence. Sicily was a paradise so different from the harsh land from which they came. It is no wonder the Arab writers lamented the loss of the Island for many years. They introduced the use of raisins and pine nuts, many of the savory dishes including couscous, popular in Trapani, and the sweet and sour tastes typical of caponata. The frequent use of almonds dates from Arab times and they may have introduced gelato into Sicily.

From the French there is the tradition of the Monzu (Monsieur in French, a word the Sicilians could not pronounce). The monzu was a chef in a wealthy home trained in French haut cuisine techniques who used Sicilian ingredients. Many years ago at the Tasca di Almerita winery I had an elaborate meal prepared by one of the last of the monzusi who has since passed away.

Michele and I were invited to Sicily by the Gruppo Ristoratori Italiani (GRI), a not-for-profit trade association composed of Italian restaurateurs in America.

It was founded in 1979 to increase the awareness of authentic Italian cuisine, promote the member restaurants and to give culinary scholarships. The current Chairman is Tony May from San Domenico and the President is Gianfranco Sorrentino from Grattopardo both in New York.

What made the trip so interesting was that we were able to taste the best products from all over Sicily. Producers were only too happy to show this group of restaurateurs and journalists the best Sicily has to offer. We were all in for a treat! Here are some of the things that we tasted that impressed me the most.



Blood

Oranges (Provincia di Siracusa)

Once in a hotel in

Sicily I witnessed an American couple arguing with the waiter over the juice they ordered for breakfast. They asked for orange juice and what they got resembled tomato juice. Who could blame them, Sicilian blood oranges juice is as red as tomato juice. Blood oranges are produced in Eastern Sicily in the Provinces of Catania, Enna and Syracuse. The different types are Tarocco, Moro and Sanguinello. I can not tell them apart, they are all good. They have a very pleasant sweet taste, with a fresh delicate aroma unlike any other orange I have ever tasted and the juice is just as good.

The Lemons of Siracusa

Lemons have been cultivated along the Ionian coast in the Siracusa area since medieval times. They were brought to Sicily from Asia during the Arabic domination. The Normans were connoisseurs of lemons but used them only for ornamental purposes.

It was not until the 17th century that they began to be used as we know it today thanks in part to the Jesuits. The lemons are aromatic with a unique citrus flavor. The Sicilians use lemons on fish, vegetables and grilled meats. The citrons from this area are also exceptional and can be eaten fresh or candied.

The Black Bread of Castelvetro (Provincia di Trapani)

Sicilians make some of

Italy's finest bread but I was especially taken by the black bread made close to the Greek ruins at Selinunte. It is made from a blend of two different flours, locally grown durum and an ancient rare local variety called tumminia. The tumminia gives the bread its dark color, softness, and toasty flavor. The dough is shaped into a round called la vastedda, and is always baked in wood fired ovens.



Pistachios from Bronte (Provincia di Catania)

This variety grows on the rough terrain of Bronte near Mount Etna. The trees

bear fruit every other year. The Arabs brought pistachios to Sicily and in local

dialect they are called frastuca, a name of Arabic origin. You have to taste them to believe them! I could not stop eating them. We had torrone, pesto, gelato, and several kinds of cookies, all made with Bronte pistachios.

Almonds from the area around Noto (Provincia di Siracusa)

There are three varieties of almonds cultivated around the town of Noto:

Pizzauta d'Avola, Fascionello and Romana. We were told that Romana has the best flavor but is a hard sell because of its chunky, irregular shape. Almonds are used in many Sicilian desserts. Almond paste is used in cassata, a cake made with ricotta and sponge cake that we were served all over Sicily. Almonds are also used in marzipan, a mixture of crushed almonds and sugar. I think Sicilian almonds are best with a glass of Marsala.

Manna (Provincia di Palermo)

Manna is made from a bluish, resinous substance extracted from the bark of ash trees that grow



near Castelbuono and Pollina in the Madonie mountains. When dried in the sun, it solidifies into manna, a natural sweetener with a very low glucose and fructose content. The extraction techniques are very ancient and are only done in this region. We had it in one of our favorite restaurants, Nangalarruni in Castelbuono. One of their specialties was pork tenderloin encrusted with manna. For dessert there were candies made from manna. We liked these so much we took boxes of them home with us.

Sicilian Sea Salt (Provincia di Trapani)

This unrefined sea salt is produced by evaporating sea water in huge shallow pools near the shore between Trapani and Marsala.. The salt is unrefined, unwashed and unaltered in any way. This process goes back in time to the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Windmills turned by an Archimedes screw were added later in the Middle Ages to help move the water. The salt beds are managed completely by hand. The salt is left to dry in the hot Sicilian sun in large pyramid shaped piles on the beach. These piles turn pink and some are covered with ceramic tiles to protect them from the possibility of rain. The crystals are bigger and dissolve quicker and taste saltier than regular salt though we were told that it is actually less salty because it contains less sodium chloride. All I know is that it made the food taste better.

Chocolate from the Antica Dolceria Bonajuto (City of Modica)

The Spanish introduced to Sicily the chocolate making method they learned from the Aztecs of Mexico. Bonajuto, the oldest chocolate maker in Sicily, was founded in 1880 by Francesco Bonajuto and even today they make chocolate with the same way as the ancient Aztecs from the cocoa seed. In the demonstration we witnessed, a mass of semi-ground cocoa that still contained cocoa butter and heated it. When it turned to liquid it was mixed with sugar and spices, and kept at a temperature that prevents the sugar crystals from melting, this gives the chocolate its unique texture. It has lightness, crunchiness and a great chocolate flavor that makes it different from any other chocolate I have tasted. We tasted the



chocolate in both its liquid state (it was the essence of chocolate) and after it was formed into bars and bought many bars to take back with us.

Cannoli (All over Sicily)

Cannoli probably originated in Palermo during the Arab domination. Cannolo means "little tube" and consist of a fried pastry tube filled with sweetened ricotta flavored with sugar, chocolate chips, pistachios and candied fruits. In the Ninth Century the Arabs brought sugarcane to Sicily. Before this, honey or grape must was used to sweeten desserts. This made it possible to make better and sweeter deserts.

When we were in Taromina many years ago, we had cannoli so good that Michele asked what made it so special. The clerk in the bakery replied that it was made with sheep's milk ricotta and the pastry had been deep fried in lard. Sheep milk ricotta is richer and creamier than that made with cows' milk and has a tangy taste which gives it a new dimension.

Next time from Sicily: wine, olive oil, hotels and restaurants

Michele and I are hosting a tour to Sicily, Malta and Tunisia aboard the 114 guest Corinthian II. From Sept. 24 - Oct 2, 2008

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