

Sicily Has its “Embassy of Taste” at the Fancy Food Show

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Outstanding goods produced by small and medium firms. L’“Ambasciata dei Sapori” successfully presented a full basket of Sicilian niche products at this year’s Fancy Food Show in New York

More than 250 booths with dozens of Consortia, Food Associations and Producers coming from all over the country populated the Italian Pavilion at this year’s edition of the Fancy Food Show in New York. Among them, we covered one in particular, the one belonging to the “Ambasciata dei Sapori” (Embassy of Taste) located on the third corridor of the space reserved for Italy on the first floor of the [Jacob Javits Center](#) [2].

A non-profit organization founded in 2009 by Mr. Marco Scapagnini and Mr. Livio Mandarà, the Ambasciata set up a booth that certainly stood out from all the others surrounding it for its elegance and sobriety. The display was arranged in such a way as to spotlight the genuine, authentic Sicilian products being presented. Cubes of **Iblealat** Primo Sale cheese were displayed on a fancy tray and paired with [Marisco](#) [3] fruit and vegetable compotes, spreads, and jams exalted its flavor. The shelves surrounding were covered with goods of every kind, including Sicilian Pasta and Pecorino Cheese by **Delight from Corleone**; Cerasuolo di Vittoria D.O.C.G. wine by Pevin; Malvasia delle Lipari D.O.C. by **Marchetta**; Vegetables in Oil by **L’Oro di Laura**; Extra Virgin Olive Oil Monti Iblei DOP by [Cinque Colli](#) [4]; Sicilian Extra Virgin Olive Oil by [Azienda Agricola Muscarà](#) [5]; Chocolate from Modica by [Pasticceria Bonomo](#) [6]; and Chocolate Candies Filled with Sicilian Flavors by [Antica Cioccolateria Acese](#) [7]

“The products that we are presenting this year were not chosen by chance. We followed strict criteria: Since we know that our fellow Americans just love Italian food, we decided to offer them the



best that our region presents, selecting only the brands to which the Italian government has already conferred its mark guaranteeing the quality and authenticity of these foods. This way we managed to put together an extremely varied basket of goods that can introduce the US consumer to a small, but outstanding sample of what Sicily can offer”, Mr. Mandarà told us.

Such a choice reflects the spirit upon which the organization was first founded a year ago. “A network of small and medium producers of genuine food and wine specialties”, as so defined by its own statute, the Ambasciata’s mission is “to promote Sicilian products through presentations, tasting events, and theme dinners both in Sicily and abroad. Part of their mission is also to promote wine & food tourism by emphasizing the inseparable relationship between the products and their territory”.

Tracing back the brief history of this ambitious association, we have no hesitation in stating that such an aim is not far from being fully fulfilled. The Ambasciata’s participation at Fancy Food this past June, in fact, has been only the last of a number of national and international initiatives that it has embraced in 2010, having already traveled to Palermo, Milan, and Berlin.

Its activities not only benefit the producers they represent, but also have a wider social and economical value given that its growth and success encourage the spirit of enterprise of Sicilian producers that often remain anchored to a narrow and often claustrophobic local dimension. Sicily, just like many other regions of Italy, hosts in fact firms that probably produce the best food and wine in the country in all its regional and local varieties but often do not have the strength to promote themselves abroad and, actually, many times they are even unable to reach other regions of Italy.

Considering this last point the Ambasciata decided to further expand its activities and also embrace the one of promoting wine & food tourism in Sicily by emphasizing the inseparable relationship between the products and their territory: the unseparable relation based on a common history, legends, and traditions makes in fact both of them more attractive and interesting to the foreign visitor.

Following this trend of thought, the Ambasciata used the Fancy Food opportunity to promote two books related to this subject.

Both books are available in English and in search of a distributor in the United States, *Charming Sicily* by Laura Crescimanno (Marcello Clausi Editore, 2010) and *Treasures of Sicilian Cuisine* by L. Frusteri S. Fraterrigo, A. Allotta, and P. Salerno (Promo Libri, 2009). They trace an imaginary map of Sicily that takes the reader on a journey through the region’s most unknown beauties and cultural attractions while at the same time allowing him to experience the local way of life by savoring some of the most traditional Sicilian dishes.

“Charming Sicily is a very particular tourist guide divided into ten chapters; each one of them presents the visitor with a different point of view from which he can explore the island, according to his instinct, passion, and interests. All of the routes start from Palermo and guide the ‘explorer’ through the most unknown beauties of our territories, including national parks, lakes, minor islands and secret beaches. It certainly suggests a different idea of tourism that was also embraced by our Regional Commissioner to Tourism Nino Strano, who bought hundreds of copies of the book and brought them throughout the world to fairs, conferences, and events involving the regional administration”, editor Marcello Clausi told us.

Treasures of Sicilian Cuisine, on the other hand, is divided per course, from the appetizers to the sweets, all of the dishes having been faithfully scaled to American measurements and accompanied by inviting and mouth-watering pictures. The subtitle of the book “a taste of yesterday and today’s Mediterranean” tells much about the idea that guided the authors in writing this book: Sicilian cuisine, being the fruit of Arabian, French, and Spanish influence is by its own nature in continuous transformation and evolution, and still nowadays it maintains this inner characteristic that makes it a culinary tradition that, although based on simple and few ingredients, is never poor.



Americans had the opportunity to savor the numerous products brought to them by the Ambasciata dei Sapori during the various events organized by its representatives Mr. Scapagnini and Mr. Mandarà during the three-day Fancy Food fair. On Saturday June 26 Lou di Palo hosted their stand in his [Di Palo's Fine Foods](#) [8] Italian speciality store located right in the heart of Manhattan's Little Italy, while on June 28 a press conference attended by both an Italian and American public was hosted at the Jacob Javits Center. It was an occasion for journalists, distributors and importers attending the fair to meet the producers in person and ask them about their business and their products, making promising contacts.

During one of these initiatives we took the opportunity to exchange a few comments on the outcome of the participation of the Ambasciata at Fancy Food, and about the presence on the US market of Sicilian and Italian products: “We all know and agree that “Made in Italy” is synonymous for quality and taste but entering the US market is becoming extremely difficult since it is over-inflated with Italian-sounding merchandise. For this reason, our commitment as Ambasciata dei Sapori is given by the responsibility that we feel towards the small firms that have joined our organization to expand their market share abroad”, he told us.

Imports of Italian products, and of course the Sicilian ones as well, face two other obstacles: the parameters imposed by the US Food and Drug Administration that are often dissimilar to the Italian ones; and the distributors' preference for cheap (and often fake) products to the outstanding but more expensive ones that Italian small producers can offer. “This is why we were born as an Associazione Temporanea di Scopo - Association with a Temporary Purpose: our members are aware that they need to belong to a bigger network to access the US market. Once they get their feet on this soil and can carry on their business on their own, they are free to leave us, as we'll consider our mission accomplished”.

All the products presented by the Ambasciata this year are already distributed in America, particularly in specialty stores such as Di Palo's Fine Foods. The Fancy Food Fair, however, bore its fruit as a number of distributors and importers have already made significant orders, showing that they had appreciated the spirit behind each one of those goodies: quality has no price.

The successful outcome of this visit to New York was rightly celebrated in an authentic Italian restaurant in the Upper West Side, [Salumeria Rosi](#) [9]. Chef and owner Cesare Casella used the Ambasciata's products to prepare an infinite number of dishes for us, making us feel for a moment as if we were in the countryside of Palermo, kissed by the sun of Sicily, sitting around a table with delightful fellow diners...

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