

# The Secrets of Sicily

BY PAULETTE HURDLIK

When I saw my first carefully designed St. Joseph's altar 20 years ago in New Orleans – row upon row of traditional cookies, loaves and loaves of intricate breads, gourmet delicacies that had clearly received hours of intensely loving attention – I immediately added Sicily to my travel wish list.

So here we were at long last in Taormina, an exotic village etched into the cliffs overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. (photo)

On the way to our hotel, we'd negotiated a series of hairpin turns under embankments dripping with bougainvillea in bright pinks and reds and gnarled century-old cactus. Inescapably loom-



*Local fisherman tends to his net*



*View of Taormina with Mount Etna visible in the background*

ing over Taormina and the bougainvillea and the cacti was an unusually active Mount Etna, belching smoke by day and whose fiery lava flows were visible for miles at night. (photo)

Every night, the volcano deposited a thin layer of black ash on every surface. And every morning the shopkeepers and homeowners all turned out, patiently sweeping, sweeping, the fine ash with impossibly gnarled straw brooms held together with wood and twine. The brooms, their design as old as Sicily itself, required multiple passes, but finally, they did sweep clean.

Only once in Taormina did I see a youngster tending to the ash with what seemed to me a far more reasonable tool – a portable vacuum cleaner. The setting was a trendy Swatch store.

A shop with its corporate roots in Milan seems not the kind of place that honors the merits of the broom – or the traditions – handed down from the grandparents.

Its staff isn't likely to appreciate the meditative power and spiritual rejuvenation rooted in the loving, careful repetition of familiar tasks – harvesting olives, pruning the family orange grove, mending a



*View of the Mediterranean from Taormina*

fishing net, meticulously painting a cart ( that takes a full year to complete), finding the freshest fish at the best price every day for the evening’s meal, carrying out a

Sicilian olive oil is a far cry from the pale insipid stuff that is exported to the States, and a slice of freshly baked Sicilian bread sprinkled with oil and salt and preferably still hot from an oven that has been fired with lemon branches confirms this.

chef’s complex and operatic daily negotiation with the vegetable farmer.

But for a couple of stressed urban Americans, the Sicilian approach to life seems like a little bit of paradise.

Let’s start with the food. Growing it, selling it, preparing it, and anticipating that next meal punctuates Sicilian daily life like no other culture I’ve seen – with

the possible exception of New Orleans, of course. And New Orleans has a disproportionately large Sicilian community.

Fresh rules. For example, bread that is served for lunch is considered unacceptable for dinner, leading to the preponderance of bread crumbs in Sicilian cooking. A loaf of bread, six hours old, is simply left to dry, then grated and the crumbs sauteed with onion, garlic and olive oil and used the the preparation of many traditional dishes.

Our hosts Giovanni and Marcella explain that as working professionals, they are unfortunately unable to shop twice a day for bread. The situation is mollified somewhat because the bread delivery man comes faithfully to their home, everyday except Sunday, always at 10 am.

We were lucky to visit during

“I’m not so sure that at this stage of my life I could live in a place where things that are important to me are not emphasized – like olive oil”

–*Marcella Croce*  
*Palermo native*

the olive harvest. As we drive from Cefalu to Bagheria, we notice a thin black mesh net underneath each olive tree. Then we hear the sounds of conversation and laughter, punctuated by whacking noises. Wooden ladders lean against the trees; husbands and wives pick what they can reach from the ladders and beat the rest of the olives down by hit-



*Balcony view, Ortygia island*

ting the branches with canes.

Olive oil, the soul of Sicilian cooking, is a far cry from the pale, insipid stuff that is exported to the States. All it takes to confirm its quality is one bite of freshly baked Sicilian bread, preferably still hot from an oven

that has been fired with lemon branches, when it's sprinkled with oil and salt.

My friend and guide Marcella who attended the University of Wisconsin with me, puts it like this, "I'm not so sure that at this stage of my life I could live in a place where things that are impor-



*Fountain in siracusa's town square*

tant to me are not emphasized – like olive oil."

We discover that it's not enough to know the trees your olive oil comes from; you must also know where and how it has been pressed. Each family and each restaurant has a favored olive press they have patronized for generations. They purchase a year's supply of oil during the November harvest. And if they don't use it all, most people throw it out when the next harvest rolls around. Fresh rules.

After Taormina, we set out for Siracusa on Sicily's Eastern coast. Siracusa is the summation of

Sicilian splendor, the city that gave the world architectural beauty with a baroque heart. Its spirit is mostly clearly felt in the narrow lanes of Ortygia island, approachable by only one bridge. (photo)

We know we are near the market on Ortygia when we hear the operatic locutions of the fish monger. The array of goods is dizzying, ranging from the day's fresh fish and produce (including special apples only grown in the volcanic soil of Mount Etna) to fresh sun-dried tomatoes, lovingly displayed and individually arranged by the farmer himself, an incorrigible flirt, who charms us into a purchase. (photo)

The market is bustling with grandparents (most living with their working adult children) who come to practice their daily art and ritual – only the freshest! the

best! and at the right price! – as they choose the family's food.

The smallest question results in extended gesticulations and lengthy prognostication on the merits and price of each loaf of bread, lemon, pear, fish, olive and tomato. Of course, there's a healthy serving of gossip and socializing thrown in for good measure.

And forget Euros. Four years after the currency conversion, everyone here still seems to shop



*Our tomato charmer proudly displays his wares*



*Typical daily market*



and bargain in lire.

Sicilians are both the most Italian of the Italians, as Luigi Barzini writes, and the least. They are heir to a complex, fascinating heritage with remnants of ancient Greeks, Carthaginians, Arabs and Normans clearly visible in the area's many monuments.

The city's cathedral in the center of Siracusa is the perfect place to

begin to understand this cultural pastiche. Its elaborate baroque exterior belies the 6th-century BC Temple of Minerva which was the foundation for the church, and whose massive columns are still visible inside. The

Greek temple became a Christian church, a Muslim mosque and finally a Sicilian baroque cathedral – with Norman era mosaics thrown in for good measure. (photo)

We travel on to the village of Bagheria, about 20 miles east of Palermo where, among the summer homes of the old Sicilian aris-

tracy, we meet Giuseppe Ducato, a painter of traditional Sicilian carts. (photos)

Way before cars, the intricately decorated cart was used to transport everything from farm products to personal belongings to children. On festival days, it was pulled by a horse decked out in beautiful tapestry with a tall feather plume on his head. Many of Guiseppe's orders are from American Sicilian communities who want to preserve a piece of the old country. He has even shipped three of his carts to Disneyland.

A carpenter, a wood carver and a decorative metal craftsman have already plied their trades by the

time the cart comes to the master painter. Giuseppe inscribes miles of miles of precise geometric designs in bright colors with a delicate sable brush he crafted himself. These form the frame for more realistic scenes featuring the daring exploits of Charlemagne's knights errant, scenes recreated in the famous Opera dei Pupi (puppet theatre). They look like paintings we might see in a Renaissance museum.

The wood carver has supplied totems, angel figures, and other fanciful creatures to support the bottom of the cart – they also climb in columns up its side. Giuseppe's paintbrush gives each creation its own distinctively colorful character. Filigree metalwork of intricate design adds to the overall artistry.

A cart takes a year to complete

and costs \$30,000. During our visit, we see at least six carts lined up awaiting his brush – and Giuseppe is 73.

When he gets a new order for a cart, Giuseppe asks his client to light a candle to the Madonna, so that he may finish all the orders he has. There is some hope, though. He tells us that his son will finish architecture school in a week and will come to work with him. He seems to have a new optimism that he will be able to finish all his commissions before he dies.

As we drive through this marvelous island, we understand Giuseppe's inspiration for his colorful art. We witness the ever-changing colors of the vineyards, olive groves, citrus, lemon, tangerine, orange, and almond trees laden with fruit, cacti with prickly



pear, palms of all types, bougainvillea in riotous color exploding everywhere, rich coastal vistas and the deep crystalline turquoise sea.

The final destination of our two-week odyssey is Mondello, a charming seaside village with shops and restaurants within easy walking distance. It's also the perfect spot for exploring the richness of Palermo, 15 minutes away by car.

Wandering the village's winding cobblestone lanes one evening, we stumble upon an empty restaurant. A table on the sidewalk outside is laden with today's fresh catch. The chef/owner gives us a mischievous grin as he waits for the evening's customers, chin resting on his hand underneath the archway that frames his kitchen. Before him, lovingly prepared and displayed, are at least 30 different antipasti. (photo)

As the diners arrive, he whips the kitchen into a frenzy of preparing everything from scratch,



*Carmelo Costa at work in his restaurant the Grotto Azzurra in Taormina*

including elaborate roses formed from purple cabbage and lemon peel garnish. Before a dish is served, the waiter slowly walks each creation through the restaurant for all to admire, to rounds of enthusiastic applause.

The next morning, we walk by the restaurant and pause to watch the chef negotiate with the produce vendor for that day's creations. Neat crates of cucumber, lettuce, tomatoes, squash, begin to pile up outside the door. Precisely as the last crate is delivered, out comes the chef, crisp order sheet in hand. Just as we observed in the market in Siracusa, the quality, color, firmness and price of each piece of produce are open to dramatic debate.

There are some disagreements, which erupt into wild gesticulations, hands raised to the heavens, mopping of brows and, in one case, a clutching of chest. The vendor grabs a crate from the hands of the chef and stomps away in a big fat pout. The waiter is dispensed to bring him back, the price is finally agreed upon, and money is counted into the hand of the waiting purveyor.

We are grateful for this free morning's entertainment, but as

the vendor ultimately leaves with the yellow squash in question, we worry if this relationship has been undeniably severed.

Luckily we linger to finish our cappuccino long enough to see the vendor return with his son, smiles and back slapping all around, as they pick up lunch from the kitchen and help themselves to sodas in the refrigerator. Business is business. And nobody allows a little business to interfere with lifelong friendships.

I remember reading that in Sicily, nothing moderate can survive. And I begin to understand.

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