



## SICILIAN FOOD

Sicily became part of the Italian Republic in 1860. Up until that point Sicily had, for the previous 3000 years, been under the occupation of one foreign power after another. The Phoenicians were the first to arrive, c. 1000 BC and they were followed by the Greeks, Romans, Goths, Byzantines, Moors, Normans, Swabians, French and Spaniards. The majority of these occupations lasted at least 200 years. Therefore, the occupying powers had the time to introduce to Sicily agricultural systems and produce native to their homelands. As a result Sicilian cuisine is the most interesting of all the Italian regions, since each new invasion added another layer to an increasingly rich culinary tradition.

Feasting is still an incredibly important part of Sicilian life. None of life's milestones, birth, baptism, first communion, marriage, is considered properly marked without a substantial feast, although much of this is also a matter of keeping up appearances. In the North they explain this as "Il culto della famiglia e del mangiare".

However, although there is, and always has been, incredible wealth in Sicily, the majority of this wealth is, and was, concentrated within the hands of a very small section of society. Much of the peasantry lived in great poverty, and the extremes of lifestyles led by feudal landlords/nobility and the serfs/peasants are reflected in the cuisine which is both simple and elaborate; exotic and even sumptuous at the same time as being humble. Much of the cuisine can be termed "**la cucina povera**", deriving as it does from peasant cooking being based on making the most of what is available, using the basic produce of the land.

Luckily, Sicily's produce is wonderfully abundant. The powerful sun and rich volcanic soil, combined with an irrigation system introduced by the Arabs, means that a wonderful variety of crops can be grown, all with a pure, intense flavour. Much of the main valley stretching west from Catania is now intensively farmed and Sicilian markets display an incredible wealth of produce. Since very little fruit or vegetables are imported the markets also display only what is in season and can be grown locally and therefore Sicilian cuisine still changes noticeably from season to season. Sicily is also home to more than 1/3 of Italy's organic farms. There are 7000 organic farm estates in Sicily, making up the widest organic cultivation area in Italy.

One of the main crops is **durum wheat**, which is particularly suited to the warm dry climate and Sicily's soil. It is a hard grained wheat with a high gluten content and is used for making high quality pasta. The grain shatters when it is milled producing fine, silky, golden flour, '**semola**', which makes wonderful bread, also golden in colour. Pasta was first produced (some say invented) in Sicily under the Arabs, in **Trabia**, near Termini Imerese, on the north coast. From Sicily it was exported to Genoa and so began its domination of the Italian peninsula. However, right up until the 1860s pasta was a rich man's food and the peasantry were lucky if they ate it once a year. New Year's Eve was the big feast with each family

eating a huge plateful of store-bought pasta in the hope that this would bring good fortune for the rest of the year. Bread was the main staple of the Sicilian peasant's diet, hence the existence of many dishes in which bread, or breadcrumbs, play an important role.

**Citrus fruits** are also vital to the Sicilian economy and cuisine. 62% of Italy's citrus farms are in Sicily. Citron ('cedro') and lemons were introduced to the island by the Greeks and mainly grow in the Piana di Catania. Oranges, native to southern China/Vietnam were introduced by the Arabs and grow in profusion around the Conca d'Oro. Mandarins were not introduced to Europe until the 1850s but production has taken off in Sicily. The Sanguinella blood orange is used for juicing while the Tarocco is found only in Sicily and cannot be exported far as its skin cannot be waxed and therefore the fruit dries out very quickly. However, eaten fresh they are wonderfully juicy with an incredibly intense flavour. Their deep red pigmentation is a result of the striking differences between daytime and night-time temperatures.

**Sicily is 3<sup>rd</sup> largest among Italian olive oil** producing regions. It now has 3 DOP olive oil areas: DOP Mt Iblei, DOP Valle Trapanese and DOP Val di Mazara, with 2 or 3 other areas awaiting certification. The main varieties of olive cultivated in Sicily are the Nocellara del Belice (Trapani), Cerasuola (Agrigento), Tonda Iblea (Ragusa), Moresca (Ragusa), Nocellara Messinese (Messina), Nocellara Etnea (Catania) and Biancolilla. Olives were first brought to Sicily between C.8 and C.5 B.C by the Greeks, they used the wealth created by the trade in oil and wine to build Syracuse. Sicily has been producing oil ever since although production was reduced under the Arabs who preferred to import oil from the Magreb and so uprooted many Sicilian olive groves to make way for citrus and irrigated crops. Production was restored under the Normans and the Spaniards.

Although **rice** is now mostly consumed in Northern Italy it first entered Europe as a foodstuff via Arab occupied Spain and Sicily. The Romans knew rice only as an extremely expensive commodity imported from India for medicinal purposes (tummy upsets). The Arabs were so skilled in irrigation that they were able to create paddy fields in the area around Lentini, south of Catania. Cultivation persisted here until C.18. Risotto is not much eaten in Sicily, but it is essential for making **arancini** – stuffed and deep fried rice balls. When well made they are fantastic, when badly made they stay with you for days!!!

Despite sheep and goats being more suited to the hilly and mountainous terrain and sparse vegetation, EU subsidies mean that more and more cattle are being farmed in Sicily. All produce enormous quantities of milk, flavoured by the wild herbs: thyme, fennel, sorrel, basil, oregano, mint and rosemary, on which the animals feed. The milk is then turned into a host of wonderful varieties of cheeses.

**Pecorino:** A sheep's cheese, made with full-fat milk, each region has its own version. It can be eaten fresh, immediately after production, when it is known as **TUMA**. Eaten after 15 days when the flavour is just starting to develop, it is known as **PRIMO SALE**. After 50 days it can be classed as **SEMISTAGIONATO** and after 4 months or more as **STAGIONATO**. Only this last qualifies for the Sicilian Pecorino DOP appellation.

**Ricotta:** This literally means "cooked again" and is made by re-boiling the whey left over when the curds have been lifted during the making of other cheeses. It is eaten fresh, baked or is salted and left to mature and is then used grated.

**Caciocavallo:** A cow's cheese which can be eaten at various stages: fresh, matured and occasionally, smoked (*provola*). It is made, like mozzarella, using the 'pasta filata' method.

The curds are worked when hot into a stringy mass, this is then moulded by hand into a pear shape and the cheeses are hung to dry in pairs.

Pigs are also farmed, although many are allowed to roam freely in the woods. They are fattened on the whey left over from cheese-making, but also feed on acorns and prickly pears which grow wild. Pork accounts for 1/3 of all meat consumed by Italians and Sicilians are no exception. Meat is mainly prepared very simply, either grilled or roasted, but wonderful sausages flavoured with local herbs and a wide variety of cured salumi are also produced.

It should come as no surprise that Sicilian cuisine varies hugely between the coastal and the mountain regions. **Fish** dominates Sicilian cuisine on the coast. Tuna was first fished by the Phoenicians, it was they who also developed the salting process to preserve this precious catch. Nowadays most tuna is fished off the NW coast. Swordfish, prized by the Greeks, and amberjack, (ricciola, “la regina del mare”), run in the straits of Messina. Vast shoals of sardines and anchovies are fished between March and September. Squid, cuttlefish and octopus are to be found in abundance, not to mention mussels, clams, prawns, crabs, sea urchins etc...

No description of Sicilian cuisine would be complete without mention of ‘**dolci**’. The Arabs introduced sugarcane to Sicily and revolutionised the whole of European confectionary, which had previously centred on honey. The latter has a strong flavour whereas sugarcane is neutral. With the introduction of sugarcane Sicilians also developed their Oriental taste for the overpoweringly sweet, which is still characteristic today. Sicily produces a phenomenal quantity of nuts: pistachio, almond, hazelnut, pine nut, all of which contribute to the vast array of confectionary. Almonds are ground down to produce the famous ‘pasta di mandorla’, or are turned into marzipan by adding water and icing sugar. The **marzipan** is then used to create the famous ‘Martorana’ marzipan fruits and figures, which feature prominently in the various annual feast-days. There was a very strong Sicilian tradition, almost totally lost now, of the nuns enclosed within the convents almost competing amongst themselves to produce the most spectacular marzipan creations, Martorana was one such convent. These sweets and pastries provided the nuns, leading very restricted lives, with a rare outlet for creativity.

**Chocolate** was only introduced into Europe in the 1520s and then it was only known as a luxury drink for the rich. In 1828 the Dutch discovered how to press out part of the fat (cocoa butter) from the ground cocoa bean. Pure cocoa butter, along with sugar and spices could then be added to more ground cocoa, which on its own does not contain enough fat to form block/eating chocolate. Solid, sweet chocolate therefore only became part of the confectioner’s palate in the 1830s. Bitter chocolate has a long tradition of use in Sicily however, and was used during the Baroque period as a spice to flavour savoury dishes. Chocolate from Modica, still made without the addition of cocoa butter and flavoured with peppercorns, vanilla and cinnamon is internationally famous and has maintained its reputation for quality since production first began in 1880.

Sicily is rightly famous for her ‘**granite**’ and ‘**sorbetti**’. Tradition has it that the Arabs fetched snow from Mt. Etna to make them and the habit of mixing sugar and jasmine essence in a glassful of snow goes back to those times. Sicilians were also the first makers of ice-cream in Europe and they consume it in vast quantities, sometimes as a filling in a brioche as a pre-dinner snack!!!

## SPECIALITIES:

### *Antipasti*

Melanzane parmigiana: sliced aubergine cooked in oil with tomato basil and parmesan, baked in the oven.

Caponata: mixed aubergine, olives, tomatoes, celery, garlic cooked in oil.

Peperonata: green and red peppers, grilled skinned and cooked in oil.

Insalata di mare: seafood salad comprising squid, octopus, clams and strips of carrot.

### *Primi*

Pasta alla Norma: a tomato/basil sauce with fried aubergine named after Bellini's opera.

Involtini di melanzane: spaghetti with tomato sauce rolled in cooked aubergine, baked with extra cheese.

Pasta con le sarde: with fresh sardines, wild fennel, pine nuts and raisins. – sometime served with breadcrumbs.

Spaghetti alle seppie: with black cuttlefish ink.

Pennette all'isolana: with tuna, tomatoes, capers, mint and olives.

### *Secondi*

Fritto misto: deep-fried fish and seafood.

Pesce Spada: grilled with oil and lemon juice.

Salsicce: pure pork, sometimes with wild herbs.

Involtini: meat rolled around stuffing and sometimes offal.

### *Dolci*

Cannoli: crisp pastry cylinders, deep fried, then filled with ricotta mixed with sugar (sometimes vanilla, lemon zest, candied peel, chocolate pieces added)

Cassata siciliana: ricotta cake, mixed with sugar and vanilla and decorated with colourful candied fruit on brightly painted icing and marzipan.

Ravioli di ricotta: deep fried pastry cases filled with fresh ricotta, and/or cinnamon, honey, lemon zest.

Bucconcini: pastries filled with figs & nuts or orange & almonds.

Cubbiata: soft nougat.