

More than a modicum of taste

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Jo Hegerty is seduced by Sicily's sweet heart.

IT'S A cold night in Modica. Corso Umberto I is deserted and dim lights flicker from within the grand old houses lining the wide, main street. This used to be a raging river but it flooded one time too many and was filled in to create the city's main thoroughfare.

Two men in overcoats and felt hats hurry past, muttering to each other, bringing with them an intriguing scent. It's not chocolate - Modica is famous for that - but something far simpler, and its sticky fingers reach down the small, dark alleyway, wrap around some basal pleasure centre and reel us in.

At the end of the little alley the smell abandons us. Confused, we peer through the window of the shop, then tentatively open the heavy door. With its dark wood panelling and glass cabinets lining the walls, Antica Dolceria Bonajuto looks more like an old-fashioned pharmacy than a chocolate shop. A white lab-coated woman with long grey hair is deep in conversation with a customer.

On closer inspection, the shop is like a mini-museum, with detailed pictures of the chocolate-making process and big stone grindstones with distinctly Latin American designs.

We lurk around the counter until the other customer has finished her transaction. The lengthy discussion seems to have resulted in just one bar of chocolate so I am prepared for a hefty price tag if we make a similar purchase.

But we've come here for one thing: a chocolate and meat empanada. I try to pronounce the word "mpanatigghi" but end up pointing in the general direction of my Lonely Planet instead. The woman smiles and disappears into the brightness of an industrial kitchen where we can see men in more white coats, each intensely focused on his station. Within minutes a black, square plate arrives with two half-moon shaped mpanatigghi.

The ivory, just-firm pastry is lightly dusted with icing sugar. As I bite into the warm filling I make a crumbly, mumbly moan of happiness. It's unidentifiable as meat - sweet, but only slightly, with nutmeg, cinnamon and almond flavours. The casing is packed with the finest mince, perfectly balanced with the heady flavour of chocolate.

Like some kind of omniscient scientist, the woman behind the counter nods, interpreting our exclamations. It's beef, she assures us, and explains that the meeting of two such disparate ingredients came about through practicality - the chocolate preserved the meat long before eskies were invented.

Sicily has every kind of dolci (sweet) you can imagine, from pistachio marzipan to candied fruits and sweet ricotta-filled cannelloni, and like many of the ingredients that characterise the island's cuisine, chocolate came here from a distant land.

The tradition of making chocolate in the ancient Aztec way was handed down to the Modicans by the Spanish rulers of the 16th century, who were then ruling what is now Mexico. This method involves the simple combination of sugar, bitter cocoa paste and cocoa butter, plus either cinnamon, vanilla or chilli. These were laid on to a crescent-shaped block made from lava stone and heated slowly by charcoal and were travagghiata, passata e stricata (worked, blended and refined) with stone rolling pins of varying sizes.

The samples on the counter before us may have been beaten out with something a little more industrial than volcanic stone but we don't need much encouragement to have a taste. Black as Mount Etna herself,

the chocolate is surprisingly crunchy.

Our friend has the answer before I've even formed the question: the ingredients are heated enough for the cocoa butter to melt but not enough to dissolve the sugar crystals. Thus, she explains, Modican chocolate is not cooked but amalgamated.

After much deliberation between fiery chilli and exotic cinnamon, plus many more samples, we decide on a bar of the hand-wrapped canella cioccolato Modica and nearly die of shock when the bill comes to just \$3.60. We're almost out the door when my better half remembers.

"What's that smell?" he asks, looking out into the little alley as if we'd somehow passed Willy Wonka's factory out there.

"Try some," she says, and we leave the cold night outside for a few moments longer. The harbinger of sweets brings out another square plate with two rounds of something sweet and sticky. It's the deepest gold of a tiger's eye and, like the chocolate before it, epitomises the yin and yang of bitterness and sweet.

"We call it nougat but it's nothing like nougat with almonds," she says. "It's just a big candy stick, really." Arranciata e cedrata is made from honey, heated and infused with piles and piles of the rind of the big gnarly citrus fruits sold in three-wheeled mini-trucks all over Sicily.

We buy a 200-gram log that will take us nearly two months to eat and farewell the Antica Dolceria Bonajuto.

TRIP NOTES

* Fly from Sydney to Catania via Tokyo and Munich with Lufthansa from \$2125. Phone Flight Centre on 131 600.

* Established in 1880, Antica Dolceria Bonajuto is at 159 Corso Umberto I. See <http://www.bonajuto.it>.

* Visit the Rizza Brothers chocolate boutique (128 Corso Umberto I) to sample savoury tapenades, plus carob syrup, red-orange jam, crushed pistachios, lemon-lime marmalade, cream of almond, pesto di pistachio and chocolate-flavoured liqueur. The caseificio (dairy) down the road is family run and the owners will be deeply offended if you don't try every cheese on offer.

* Modica was built on steep banks rising from the river, so be prepared to do a lot of climbing up and down hills (at least it means you can eat more chocolate). Both Modica Alta (Upper Modica) and Modica Bassa (Lower Modica) are worth wandering around for the multitude of wedding-cake churches and sun-bleached laneways high in the sky.

* Don't miss Cattedrale di San Pietro and the church of San Giovanni, and climb to the pizzo (peak) for views.

* There is a fantastic range of boutique accommodation. See <http://www.sicilyhotels.com>. Modica is in the province of Ragusa.

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