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Sicily's Superior Cannoli: A Guide for Connoisseurs—and Skeptics

On a trip to Sicily, birthplace of the Italian sweet, a recent cannoli-convert learns what separates the mediocre from the mouth-watering, and where to find the best



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By Charlotte Druckman

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SOMEWHERE ON the coastal road between the Sicilian towns of Marzamemi and Siracusa, from behind the wheel, our guide pointed out the giant reeds growing above the Ionian sea. “Those are the *canna* they used to make the cannoli with,” Salvatore Coppola explained. From the back seat of the car, in unison, my mother and I made the same face, the one where we purse our lips together while curling the upper halves.

“I’ve never been into cannoli,” Mom said, giving voice to our shared facial reaction. Granted, our experience had been limited. We knew only the heaving cannoli we’d had back home, in New York City’s Little Italy, which had dense wonton-like exteriors and toothpaste-thick innards. Mr. Coppola, unfazed by our disinterest, continued, telling us that the singular “cannolo” translates to “little tube” and refers to what is probably the Italian—and Sicilian—dessert best known around the world.

Later he would tell me that when he was 10 years old, he found those canna tubes (the reeds easily break into small sections) in a drawer at his grandmother Mimma’s house and started to play with them until she smacked him on the hands, informing him they were not toys but tools for cooking. She proceeded to show him how the pastry dough is rolled around the pieces of cane and fried to form the shells that are stuffed with sweetened fresh ricotta.

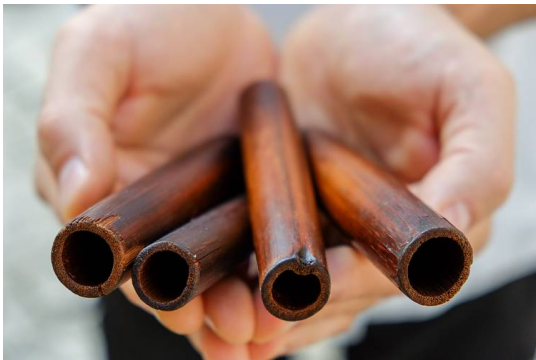
That night, on our weeklong mother-daughter trip to Italy’s largest island, Mom and I had dinner at **Il Consiglio di Sicilia**, in a small fishing town called Donnalucata. A laid-back, modish place, with shaded outdoor seating, the restaurant is owned by Roberta Corradin, an Italian food writer, and her husband, Antonio Cicero, who runs the kitchen, lavishing his attention on the local seafood. Ms. Corradin’s wine list features bottles from the region with cheeky descriptions like “more than a best buy—a miracle.” Once she relayed that the chef’s cannoli had been ranked number nine out of 100 on the island, I decided that if we were going to try one of these things while we were in Sicily—and really, we should—this would be it.



HOME, SWEET HOME The Sicilian town of Scicli, where local chefs say you'll find superior cannoli. PHOTO: FRANCESCO LASTRUCCI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The Golden Rule of cannoli, Ms. Corradin informed me, is that the crust and ricotta should melt in your mouth at the same time. Mr. Cicero's did just that. As I took a bite, the shell shattered like the flaky layers of a French mille-feuille might, and the filling disappeared on my tongue. I was beginning to reconsider my position on cannoli.

The next day, we were off to a cooking lesson with chef Rita Russotto at **Gli Aromi herb farm** outside of Scicli, the picturesque town where her restaurant, **Satra**, is located. At Aromi, we toured the nursery, plucking different strains of mint and wild oregano leaves, crushing them into our palms and inhaling. Later, in the kitchen garden overlooking the sea, Ms. Russotto demonstrated the technique for shaping the shells for her macallè, a doughier cousin of cannoli, around the same tube used to make the latter.



The canna tubes chef Rita Russotto uses to make cannoli's pastry shells. PHOTO: FRANCESCO LASTRUCCI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

That night, back in Scicli, we peered into the majestically lit San Giovanni Evangelista church before walking around the corner to Ms. Russotto's restaurant, **Satra**, in a stone-lined space with vaulted ceilings. Though already stuffed from a meal of spaghetti with bottarga and breadcrumb-coated scabbard fish, we felt compelled to order the cannolo, which came with a cold shot of toasted-almond milk. Again, here was a thin-crust marvel, and this time it arrived with a hint of spice—the chef sneaks a pinch of nutmeg into the dough. Her ricotta is whipped for extra-soft creaminess. She finishes the pastry with a sprinkling of cinnamon, powdered sugar and crunchy toasted almonds. I loved it and regretted that this was our last night in Sicily and I hadn't given cannoli a chance sooner.

I plan to return to Sicily for a proper cannoli tour, and have done the necessary research. First, I checked in with Fabrizia Lanza of the **Anna Tasca LanzaCooking Experience**, a culinary school set in a vast vineyard in the middle of the island, asking her where to find the island's premier examples. "I am the wrong person to ask," she replied, "I have never had a cannoli from anywhere else [on the island]." She does her own with ricotta made from the milk of sheep on the property's farm and shells made with flour milled from the wheat harvested there. But she had some indispensable wisdom to impart: "Never eat a cannolo that is filled with ricotta in advance. It has to be done espresso, as we say." Left to sit, the crust will get soggy, and if it doesn't, she added, it's full of preservatives.

Preferably, when I return for my cannoli tour, I'll arrive in the colder months, which is when this pastry was originally enjoyed—specifically at February's annual carnevale. As Mr. Coppola advised, winter is still the best time to eat it because it's when the ricotta is made from the new milk of grazing sheep, "and you can taste the freshness in it." The

‘The Golden Rule of cannoli: The crust and ricotta should melt in your mouth at the same time.’

better the grass, the better the milk, and the better the milk, the better the ricotta. His favorite cannoli are found where the great grass grows at Piana degli Albanesi, a mountain plain in the island province of Palermo. **Antico Bar Sport** houses his top pick, although the small cheese shop a few doors up the hill makes a mean one too, he assured me.



Ms.

Cannoli at Duomo with prickly pear coulis. PHOTO: FRANCESCO LASTRUCCI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Corradin and Ms. Russotto each shared their lists of favorite cannoli on Sicily. Both stayed close to home, focusing on the **Val di Noto**—the southeast section of the island famous for its Baroque architecture. Both women also shared a preference for restaurants, where you’re more likely to get a “just-fried” crispy shell, over pastry shops. Ms. Corradin’s first pick was **Caffè Sicilia** in the 18th-century city of Noto, where the pastry chef, Corrado Assenza, is the cafe’s fourth-generation owner. People make pilgrimages for Mr. Assenza’s gelato, but apparently we should genuflect before the cannolo too, where the ricotta stuffing is unadulterated. “No stupid ingredients such as chocolate chips and pistachio allowed,” said Ms. Corradin. She also endorsed the cannoli of the Michelin-awarded chef, Ciccio Sultano, at **Duomo** and **Il Banchi** restaurants, both of which are in the nearby town of Ragusa. His versions are “refined, sensual, voluptuous,” and at Duomo, they’re plated more formally, with a seasonally changing coulis.

Another favorite of Ms. Corradin’s is found in a chocolate shop in the hill town of Modica. The marble- and brass-bedecked **Antica Dolceria Bonajuto**, established in 1880, is a destination in itself and where I single-mindedly stocked up on bars of dark chocolate flavored with cinnamon, ginger or vanilla. Foolishly, I skipped right over the multitude of cannoli.

In Licata, a coastal city known for its beaches, Ms. Russotto goes fancy at **L’Oste e il Sacrestano**, where chef Peppe Bonsignore’s cannolo contains ricotta cream, orange marmalade, chocolate, pistachio ice cream and toasted almonds. But Ms. Russotto is also fond of **Pasticceria Basile**’s in Scicli—despite the fact that it’s a pastry shop. It is a good reminder that when in Sicily, you should abandon all preconceived notions—and closefitting clothing—and stop for any cannolo that shows promise. If it lives up to that promise, ask whoever made it where to find your next.

PASTRY WITH A PAST // The Cannoli’s History Is as Colorful as Sicily’s

In Sicily, every dish comes with at least one story—the beloved cannoli comes with dozens. Rita Russotto, chef of the island’s Satra restaurant, told me a favorite: According to Giuseppe Pitrè, a turn-of-the-century folklorist who documented Sicilian customs, practical-joker nuns loved shoving cotton into the centers of cannoli, and piping the regular filling into the ends to hide the inedible substance. But no one seems to know where the cannolo was born.

It may derive from an Arabic recipe brought over, along with sugar, by the North Africans when they ruled the island. Ms. Russotto passed along another legend that links



Assorted cannoli at Antica Dolceria Bonajuto. PHOTO: FRANCESCO LASTRUCCHI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

the Italian sweet to the harems frequented by emirs in the Sicilian township of Caltanissetta. The harems' residents are said to have molded the tubes as a tribute to the virtues of their lovers. The pastries were also a regular at weddings, winking at the newlyweds' first night of connubial bliss. Our guide, Salvatore Coppola, offered a G-rated alternative, explaining that cannoli were the sweet of choice for nuptials because they were an inexpensive treat for people who couldn't afford to provide guests with a whole meal. Profane or practical, it was always welcome.

ADDRESS BOOK // A Connoisseurs' Guide to the Best Cannoli on Sicily

- **Antica Dolceria Bonajuto** Corso Umberto I, 159 Modica, bonajuto.it
- **Antico Bar Sport (aka La Casa del Cannolo)** Corso Giorgio Kastriota, 48 Piana degli Albanesi, 011-39-091-857-5555
- **Bar di Noto** Via Martiri Portella della Ginestra, 79 Piana degli Albanesi 011-39 -091-857-1195
- **Caffè Sicilia** Corso Vittorio Emanuele, 125 Noto 011-39-093-183-5013
- **I Banchi** Via Orfanotrofia, 39 Ragusa; ibanchiragusa.it
- **Il Consiglio Di Scicilia** Via Casmene, 79 Donnalucata; ilconsigliodisicilia.com
- **Duomo** Via Capitano Bocchieri 31, Ragusa; cicciosultano.it
- **La Madia** Corso F. Re Capriata, 22 Licata; ristorantelamadia.it
- **L'Oste e il Sacrestano** Via S. Andrea, 19 Licata; losteeilsacrestano.it
- **Pasticceria Basile** Viale I Maggio 3, Scicli; basilepasticceri.it
- **Satra** Via Duca degli Abruzzi, 1 Scicli; ristorantesatra.it

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