

Sweet Sicily

The Story of an Island
and Her Pastries



Victoria Granof

Antica Dolceria Bonajuto

MODICA



Modican chocolate is unparalleled in savor, such that tasting it is like reaching the archetype, the absolute, and that chocolate produced elsewhere, even the most celebrated, is an adulteration, a corruption of the original.

La Contea di Modica. LEONARDO SCIASCIA

Customers speak in reverential whispers at the Antica Dolceria Bonajuto. Here in the stately Baroque town of Modica, Signor Franco Ruta and his family have upheld the tradition of *original* Modican chocolate since 1880. You can feel the weight of history as you enter the shop, even before the aromas of chocolate, cinnamon, and vanilla come wafting toward you.

In the early sixteenth century, the town of Modica was home base for a large population of wealthy Spanish nobles who, at the time, were also colonizing Mexico. In the New World, they encountered myriad new foods, among which was *xocolatl*, made from ground cacao beans using a laborious process developed by the Aztecs. *Xocolatl* was eaten in solid form and as a beverage and enjoyed as a stimulant and for the feeling of euphoria it was thought to induce. The Spaniards liked it too. They named it *cioccolato*, the masculine form of the word

(deeming it masculine for its cigar shape), and brought it home to Sicily, along with the secret Aztec recipe. This recipe never traveled far beyond Modica, the only city in the province wealthy enough to afford both the costly importation of cacao beans from Mexico and the traditional method of production.

Continuing to use the Aztec method, with cacao imported from the Ivory Coast and the help of a few modern tools, the Bonajuto chocolate remains true to its roots. During the heating process the mixture is kept below 120 degrees, just hot enough for the cocoa butter, but not the sugar, to melt. The resulting product has the lushness of chocolate with a pleasant crunch to the teeth.

The Dolceria is as much a museum as a shop. Signor Ruta and his son Pierpaolo have created meticulous still lifes in the glass-front mahogany cabinets that line the walls of the reception room, all bearing witness to a cen-

turies-old culinary tradition, curated tenderly by the Rutas.

Chocolate takes on many personalities here. It is made into a thick, spicy beverage similar in flavor and texture to Mexican hot chocolate. Tiny trufflelike sweets are bathed in the stuff, and a lighter-than-air *gelo di cioccolato* is flavored with chocolate and thickened with wheat starch. Remaining true to the old recipes, the Rutas use no butter or dairy in any of their sweets.

By far the most intriguing way in which chocolate is put to use here is in the pastries known as *impanatigghe* and their cousins, the *lucumie*. *Impanatigghe* are sweet pastries filled with ground beef, almonds, sugar, honey, cinnamon, and chocolate. *Lucumie* are the poor man's version, with eggplant taking the place of beef.

Both have their roots in sixteenth-century Spain. The name *impanatigghe* (pronounced "im-pan-a-tee-gay") is a corruption of the

Spanish word *empanadilla*, referring to a small pastry containing a filling. The *empanadilla* in question had a filling that is still popular in Latin America today, made with meat, almonds, cinnamon, raisins, and olives. The Sicilian Spaniards sweetened the mixture, adding chocolate and honey and subtracting the olives and onions, until the savory *empanadilla* became the sweet *impanatigghe*.

It is exciting to see how, with intelligent use of modern technology, the Rutas have taken up the task of bringing these traditions to the attention of a global audience. Pierpaolo has created an informative and bilingual Web site. (www.ragusaonline.com/bonajuto) and is currently researching a documentary on the history of chocolate in general and Modican chocolate in particular.

At last, the world beyond this tiny province will know the archetypal chocolate that the people of Modica have enjoyed for more than five hundred years.



Meat and Chocolate Pastries

Impanatigghe

DOUGH

- 4½ cups unbleached all-purpose flour*
- 6 tablespoons sugar*
- ½ tablespoon salt*
- ½ pound (2 sticks) unsalted butter or margarine, chilled*
- 1 egg*
- 6 tablespoons sweet wine, such as Marsala*

FILLING

- ½ pound lean ground sirloin*
- One 8-ounce jar unsalted roasted almond butter*
(available at health food stores and some large supermarkets)
- 3 ounces unsweetened chocolate, chopped*
- ½ cup sugar*
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon*
- 2 teaspoons vanilla*
- ½ cup thyme honey (see Sources)*
- 3 egg whites*

For the Dough

Sift together the flour, sugar, and salt into a large mixing bowl. Cut in the chilled butter or margarine until the mixture resembles coarse cornmeal. In a small bowl, beat together the egg and wine just to blend, then add all at once to the flour mixture, tossing together until the dough forms a ball.

Transfer the dough to a lightly floured work surface and knead gently a few times until smooth. Wrap the dough in plastic and chill while you make the filling.

For the Filling

In a medium skillet, sauté the beef over medium heat, stirring to break up any large lumps, until it is no longer pink. Drain and transfer to a food processor fitted with the steel blade. Immediately add the remaining ingredients and process until the mixture forms a very smooth paste.

For the Pastries

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Divide the dough into quarters. Work with one piece of dough at a time, keeping the remainder covered. On a lightly floured work surface, roll out each piece very thin (no thicker than $\frac{1}{8}$ inch). With a 3-inch cookie cutter, cut out circles of dough. Place a teaspoonful of the filling in the center of each, moisten the edges with a little water, and fold over. Pinch the edges together to seal and trim the edges with a fluted pastry wheel. Reroll the scraps of dough to make more circles.

Place the pastries 2 inches apart on ungreased baking sheets and bake for 15 to 20 minutes, or until light golden brown. Cool on a rack.

MAKES ABOUT 4 DOZEN

