

Sampling the motherland

An Italian odyssey wends through city, countryside, and kitchen, finding marriages of subtle and surprising ingredients

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RAGUSA IBLA - The way homes cling to the hillsides in southern Sicilian cities often looks like an M.C. Escher drawing: Look up and there's a stairway, look down and there's a stairway, forget to look and you fall down the stairs.

Contrast that tightly-packed beauty with the Ragusa region's endless fields of fruits and vegetables, almonds and olives, all neatly delineated with mile after mile of white stone walls. It's Baroque and Liberty architectural styles brought to a high point, juxtaposed with pastoral perfection, all joined and made human by the history of the table.

"When you look at it from far away, you feel the harmony that's been created, but there's nothing casual in that harmony," says Ciccio Sultano, who runs the kitchen at Ragusa Ibla's Il Duomo restaurant and is arguably the island's best chef. He's talking about Sicilian architecture, particularly his Baroque hometown on a hill, but this is also a key to understanding his philosophy on cuisine. "Even from the inside you feel it

. . . you feel the layers of architecture piled atop one another. From past to present, history made them harmonious," he says. "When I make a recipe, I don't hide ingredients. I build upon them. It's stratified."

Now, a year after my first visit to Sicily, Sultano officially restarts the tour by coming at me with a layered spoonful of contrast.

"This," he says cryptically, "is Sicily."

Sultano had just spent a lot of time drawing a diagram of his one-bite course to explain the key contrast between sweet and bitter so that I would understand the idea. Finally, he threw in the towel and prepared the real thing.

The spoon combines a rectangle of raw snapper floating on a cloud of fresh ricotta with flecks of raw spring onion, all posed under a tiny dollop of caviar. The secret weapon, represented by a black dot on his diagram, is on the bottom of the spoon - a smudge of local Corbezzolo honey.

The honey is beguiling, more bitter than sweet and thick enough to be almost rough on the tongue. The textures and flavors mingle: raw milk cheese, raw fish, raw onion crunchiness, caviar's sea-saltiness. It's a mouthful of the Motherland.

I began traveling to Sicily and learning about its layers last year in a three-month effort to connect with my Sicilian heritage. Francesco Padova, who works for his family's almond and olive oil business, Matri di San Basilio, became a friend and guide, highlighting the contrasts that make this island famous: old and new, bitter and sweet, and, above all, a culture unto itself.

"Ciccio looks at Sicilian cooking from a simple, straightforward angle. Sometimes you have the feeling his kitchen is the only place where rural and sophisticated cuisines find common ground," says Padova. "Centuries ago, this same attitude created arancini [literally "little oranges" - cooked, stuffed rice balls], cannoli, and other Sicilian cooking staples."

At Il Duomo, placing perfect products together has magical results, like a "prosciutto" of house-smoked grouper combined with ultra-sweet melon from the nearby town of Pachino. There's also octopus, softened in a 40-minute boil before being grilled, with an orange salad. Inspired to up my cephalopod consumption, my tasting notes read simply: "Cook more octopus."

After lunch, Padova and I make the short drive from Ragusa Ibla to Ragusa to meet photographer Giuseppe Leone. Compared with the region's rolling hillsides, populated mostly with sheep and lonely shepherds, the adjoining cities are compact doses of urban Sicilian culture. Old men, typically wearing driver's caps and thick glasses congregate in the town squares, their wives gathered elsewhere in smaller groups, to cook or knit in the front windows of street-level apartments.

Outside, fruit and vegetable hawkers comb the city's warren of streets in tiny three-wheeled Vespa "trucks," bringing the country into the city, announcing their offerings in a mix of Italian, Sicilian, and what a smirking Padova identifies simply as "grunts and noisemaking so their customers will recognize their voices."

Leone's decades of work make him one of the island's best historians and the de facto keeper of its visual memory. Many of the labels on his photo cabinets revolve around food: "agriculture," "harvests," "products from the earth," "carob and almond trees," and "festa" - festivals that combine religious ritual and gastronomic heritage.

"Sicily can be like a time machine and festas are the most evident way to see how past and present coexist," says Padova. "Today in a festa, you see young faces pray to a saint just like their ancestors did. Leone frames these faces and these ideas with the same eye, and sometimes the same cameras, as he did 50 years ago!"

The grainy, high-contrast images are instant reminders that Sicily is an island that time forgot. Modern life may be here, but round any corner and you can go 50 to 100 years back in time.

Leone's photos instantly recall a pair of festa scenes I saw last year. In Palermo, the capital, I followed thousands who had come out to watch as giant statues of Mary and Jesus were carried in a Good Friday procession through the ancient Ballarò market. Old couples watched from their windows, Roman guards protected the fallen body of Jesus, uniformed schoolchildren in berets escorted a grieving Mary. Under a light rain, a band alternated between dirges and uplifting songs.

It became a moment with no indicator of what decade or even what century it was.

A few weeks earlier, I had watched as members of the city of Catania's fish sellers' union hoisted a 10-foot pylon, filled with lights, sculptures of saints, and religious scenes onto their shoulders, walking and running it through the city's main square for several hours as part of the feast of Saint Agatha. Though there was a jovial atmosphere, the men had just spent the entire day hawking fish, and hauling a 200- or 300-pound column around at night was clearly an act of devotion.

"The roots of the farmworker culture are based on the festa," says Leone, recalling Sicily's connection to its rural roots, "Take the fava bean; historically, it's poor people's food." Now, something as simple as a fava bean soup is a celebration of, and perhaps longing for, the past, a devotional to spirit and sustenance.

"These festa come from past cultures and events," says Leone. "They are the DNA of Sicily."

While Leone's work often shows how present the past can be in Sicily, and chef Sultano has the luxury of using history as a springboard, at Antica Dolceria Bonajuto, something between a chocolatier and a pastry shop in Modica, Pierpaolo Ruta and his father, Franco, tread carefully between being the guardians of food culture and practitioners of how to do things best.

"Cocoa has 450 flavors and 380 of those disappear in sterilization," says Pierpaolo, alluding to the flavor-stripping industrial process where chocolate is cooked for up to two days. The Rutas refer instead to a 17th-century book by Francesco Redi, where cocoa is crushed by stone.

Modican chocolate is a bizarre and beautiful experience, with a granularity that takes it about as far as you can get from a Hershey bar. The Rutas' shop is the local inspiration for doing things the old-fashioned way.

"What we do isn't marketing," says Franco at a desk so covered with books and magazines that there's no workspace. "We choose our sweets as a way to remember how our ancestors worked: making things by hand. For me, the soul of the artisan is in the way you use your hands."

"Sometimes we're more of a cultural association than an enterprise," says Pierpaolo half-jokingly.

With fresh ricotta filled to order in a crisp crust, their cannoli are something of a religious experience. "There are many ways to make things faster," says Pierpaolo. "But we prefer to make them one by one, the way it was transmitted to us."

Eating one, it dawns on me that getting cannoli into the mouths of FDA or USDA representatives might be the easiest way to relax US laws against raw milk cheese imports.

"If someone asks what we're doing, I have to show them," says Franco, pointing to the kitchen. "The only way to keep the soul is to continue like our ancestors."

This makes Pierpaolo think of their centuries-old chocolate shaking process, where chocolate tablets, still in molds, are shaken to get rid of any air bubbles with what he describes as a "tupa-tuptup" noise. "That's the sound of my childhood - that's the sound of his childhood," he says, gesturing toward his father. "We don't want to change that."

Later, I join Padova's family for a Sunday cookout just outside the small town of Ispica. A plate of their cured, home-grown olives is making the rounds and his uncle Guido presides over the festivities and mans the barbecue, cooking several cuts of meat over wood from olive and almond trees. At the table, it's a fun free-for-all; Vincenzo, Padova's father, and Guido laugh and talk in a mix of Sicilian and Tuscan dialects. There seem to be more conversations than people, with everyone munching, talking, and reaching across the table for a little more.

In some places, I look at a good mom-and-pop store and wonder if it will be there next year. But protected by history, Sicily is preserving my next taste of a memory.

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