

## WEEKEND JOURNAL

## REVIEW / Food

## The Sweet Italian Job

Small Chocolatier  
Uses Old Methods  
For New Taste

By FREDERIKA RANDALL

MODICA, Italy  
THIS DELIGHTFUL little city in southeast Sicily is a long way from Brussels — the Mecca for many chocolate lovers. Yet Franco Ruta runs the family chocolate business and pasticceria, Antica Dolceria Bonajuto, with the absolute self-confidence of a Belgian chocolatier.

Oh, and with four centuries of Sicilian know-how.

Elsewhere in the universe of chocolate, finely milled is the operative word. Chocolatiers hate texture and go to great lengths to drive it out of their product. At Antica Dolceria Bonajuto — which sells gritty, grainy cold-milled dark chocolate adored by the cognoscenti from Los Angeles to Tokyo — smooth signifies boring, bland, over-processed. Mr. Ruta has that on good authority, because the people of Modica have been making delicious, gritty chocolate since the 1500s.

The year was 1519; on the other side of the world, Hernan Cortes, arriving on the coast of Mexico, first heard the word *xocolatl* and learned that it referred to a foamy, bitter brown beverage that smelled of vanilla and burned with hot ground chillies. The conquistador didn't like the taste much, even though Montezuma served it to him in a golden cup.

But he was struck by the fact that the Aztecs used the precious cocoa beans as a form of currency. So Cortes planted a cacao plantation. The trees matured their fleshy red and yellow fruit pods with the aromatic beans inside. A few years later he was sending Theobroma cacao ("food of the gods" as Linnaeus would later term the plant) back to Spain, where cooks began adding a little sugar after they ground the beans.

The taste for chocolate spread quickly



Photo: Carla Capalbo

Owner Franco Ruta in front of Antica Dolceria Bonajuto

to Modica, which was a Spanish possession even before Spanish rule came to Sicily. Along with the imported cocoa beans came the tools of the trade: the rough stone metate, a curved slab the Aztecs and the Maya once used to grind the beans and reduce them to a paste; a stone rolling pin to work them; and the New World spice of *tlixcchitl* — vanilla — for flavor.

As the centuries went by down here in Europe's deep south, commercial chocolate-making never arrived and families just continued milling chocolate at home the old way. Today Modica (along with Oaxaca in Mexico and a couple of towns in Spain) is one of the last places where the pre-Columbian method has survived.

A stone metate is one of the prize possessions of the Antica Dolceria Bonajuto, a graceful old-fashioned pastry shop tucked

away off the main street of Modica. In the front customers are buying up stacks of Bonajuto chocolate bars in plain red and white wrappers and taking out cannoli, filled on the spot with creamy, just barely sweetened ricotta and dusted with ground pistachios, on trays the size of flying saucers. Other memorable things you can taste here include the S-shaped nucatoli biscuits made of almonds, figs, quince and honey; liccumie biscuits made of chocolate and eggplant conserve; wafers of chocolate, almond and carob paste; delicately flavored marzipan sweets called da riposto; 'mpanatigghi, from "empanadas," dumpling pastries filled with a mixture of beef and chocolate; and the orange and citron rind sweets of Arab origin called aranciata and cedrata.

There are two kinds of chocolate bars: flavored with vanilla or with cinnamon. Or you can have a box of 20 petite chocolates sharply laced with peperoncino. Mr. Ruta offers a morsel of each kind on a little plate for tasting.

Grainy with crystals of half-dissolved sugar, Bonajuto chocolate is not a blend but a timed sequence of flavors. First the aromatic bitterness of the chocolate, then the sweetness of sugar, then 1) the smoky kappow of the vanilla, or 2) the hot explosion of cinnamon, or 3) the delayed-action sting of peperoncino. That's all there is to it. Don't even breathe the word "milk."

In the kitchen behind the store Mr. Ruta and his son Pierpaolo show me how the "cocoa liquor" — the partially ground cocoa beans, which look like solid, striated rock at room temperature — is worked at temperatures that don't go above 40-45 degrees Celsius, just above the point where cocoa butter liquefies, to incorporate sugar. Other chocolatiers heat their mixtures to 80-90 degrees Celsius for several days during the process called "conching," but Mr. Ruta thinks heat is anathema to fine chocolate and that it destroys the natural aromas of cacao. The chocolate is turned out, to be worked on plain brown paper and then the still-gritty mixture is spooned into metal tins. I watch as they shake the tins and smack them smartly on the counter to

drive out air bubbles and smooth the surface of the chocolate bars.

Grand cru chocolate made from rare criollo beans is very much in vogue these days but at Bonajuto they continue to use the humbler forastero variety of cacao. "I'm puzzled how delicate criollo aromas can survive days of cooking at high temperatures," says Pierpaolo Ruta, "although that's what they claim."

Franco, a courtly, cultivated man who knows how to give a visitor a wonderful tour of Modica's Baroque architecture, moved into the business, which came down through his mother, in 1992. He was employed as a medical technician at the time, although he was already deep into research on Aztec chocolate. Later, the Los Angeles restaurateur Piero Selvaggio, who was born in Modica, helped spread the word about Bonajuto's classy products.

It isn't easy to be on the cutting edge when you are working in a provincial town in far-off Sicily, Franco and Pierpaolo Ruta acknowledged. To name just one problem, transport alone is very costly. But there's also a kind of perfectionism that thrives because you are far from the mainstream. These makers of astonishingly sophisticated chocolate have a big streak of that.

*Antica Dolceria Bonajuto*  
159 Corso Umberto I  
Modica, Italy.  
Tel/fax: 0932-941225.  
Mail order: [www.bonajuto.it](http://www.bonajuto.it).

*In the U.S.:*  
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422 Detroit St.  
Ann Arbor, Michigan  
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