

Travel

Over a farm table littered with tasting glasses, Arianna Occhipinti – a 34-year-old vintner working in the rangy south-east of Sicily – talked us through her career, her wines and the philosophy underpinning both. “Wine is something that binds you to a place,” she said, explaining that she had come here a dozen years ago, taking over a 19th-century farmhouse outside the town of Vittoria and planting her first vines. By then Sicily’s oenological renaissance was already in motion: turning their backs on the island’s famously cheap and robust table wines, winemakers began to grow indigenous varieties of grapes with new levels of care and rigour.

Occhipinti went further, creating some of the first wines made uniquely of the endemic Frappato grapes, with low-yield vines and organic methods that rely on naturally occurring plants to protect the grapevines. “The land gives you everything you need here,” she said. “We interfere with the grapes as little as possible so the wine will be a true expression of the land.”

Tipsy from the strawberry-noted Frappato, we sat enraptured as we listened to the story of a woman who symbolises the new vibrancy of her region’s agriculturally-inspired gastronomy.

Val di Noto, as Occhipinti’s part of Sicily is known, comprises a cluster of towns included on Unesco’s World Heritage list for their Baroque beauty: Ragusa, Modica, Scicli, Noto and a few more. But it’s the food and wine, produced in the surrounding countryside and served in the towns’ restaurants, that are providing a new impetus for visitors to this corner of the island. I had come with my husband and two friends, arriving from Milan and New York respectively, to go exploring on a route delineated by restaurant reviews, chefs’ recommendations and tip-offs about promising wineries.

The following morning we struck out for Gulfi, a vineyard 15 miles north of Vittoria which, like Occhipinti’s, offers tastings and tours to visitors (as well as a small hotel). Though grapes may have been grown on the island before, serious viticulture was introduced by the Greeks in the eighth century BC. New crops and cooking styles followed as the Romans, Arabs, Normans, French and Spanish each dominated the central Mediterranean island in turn. Sicily, with its fertile soil and ideal climate, became the rich repository for a hybrid cuisine.

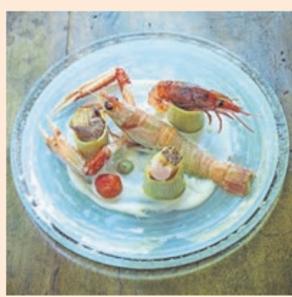
After a tasting at Gulfi, we drove towards the elegant white-stone city of Ragusa. It is becoming synonymous with the high end of the island’s cross-bred culinary arts and boasts a pair of restaurants with two Michelin stars each. The old part of town, Ragusa Ibla, looked like an impossible stack of buildings – all built atop each other and clinging to a hill. The city, like all of Val di Noto’s Unesco-protected sites, was razed by a 1693 earthquake and rebuilt in the following century, creating a series of towns that are an architectural time capsule of late Baroque style rendered in the region’s pale limestone.

Ragusa’s heart is dominated by the columned and curlicued church of San Giorgio. Tucked behind one of its flanks is an old baron’s palazzo where Ciccio Sultano, probably Sicily’s most famous chef, opened Il Duomo in 2000. Sultano serves what he terms “gastro-rural” cuisine, relying on the fertile land for delicacies such as wild herbs, almonds, and fresh ricotta – but he’s a man who believes most in his own talent.

“Cuisine is created by the chef, not by the territory,” he told us, turning his back on the loamy hills behind his restaurant. His plates are as baroque as San Giorgio itself – flights of fancy that frequently clash fish with sweet flavours, combining almond milk and red mullet



Clockwise from top left: the Church of Santa Maria La Nova in Scicli; the single suite at Locanda don Serafino; San Pietro church, Modica; winemaker Arianna Occhipinti; Ragusa; Ciccio Sultano in the kitchen at Il Duomo; harvesting at Gulfi vineyard; one of Locanda del Colonnello’s desserts — Gaetano Mallia



said, leaning on the traditional checkerboard tiles that line the restaurant walls.

Modica is composed of a more ferrous limestone than Ragusa, giving it a rosy hue. The city spreads upwards from a valley to the hilltop, where a little outpost called Casa Belvedere ferries trays of local specialities to tables with a glorious view. There we ate *arancini* – deep-fried, saffron-laced rice balls stuffed with ragù – and *scacce Modicane* (a layered, tomato-filled flat bread), washed down with an earthy white wine and local Minchia beer (a name too vulgar to translate here). As we enjoyed our aperitivo, the setting sun turned the town a deeper pink – it was enough to make us start studying local house prices.

On Modica’s Corso Umberto we indulged in sweeter treats. Latteria Caffè Storico serves *granitas* (a sort of sorbet) in classic flavours of lemon, mulberry, coffee, almond, and crowd-pleasing pistachio – even more delicious when scooped up, in true Sicilian



style, with a soft brioche. Most of these flavours arrived with the Arabs who ruled Sicily in the 10th and 11th centuries. Chocolate, however, arrived from Mexico with the Spaniards in the 16th century. Five hundred years later, Modica’s chocolatiers still hew to the original recipe: freshly ground beans and sugar, heated and mixed at no more than 45C. The result is a rich, grainy bar that retains a range of cocoa flavours lost in regular high-heat chocolate production. Family-run Bonajuto has been making chocolate since 1880 and sells antique flavours such as jasmine, cinnamon and vanilla as well as new introductions such as salt and seaweed. We gorged on enough of its freshly made chocolate to preclude dinner that evening.

From Modica we headed closer to the sea, to Scicli, where the buildings are a warm coppery pink, and the central, smooth-cobbled pedestrian drag is jammed with amblers in the evening. The Scicli Albergo Diffuso, which opened in 2012, has rooms throughout Scicli’s centre, in converted palazzos, apartment buildings and even *dammusi* – stone dwellings that are holdovers from the Arab reign. Our room was in the Palazzo Favacchio Patané, a grand villa turned art gallery with four elegant rooms for guests and a cozy courtyard where we relaxed with a bottle of our Occhipinti wine.

Leaving Scicli, we drove through a landscape of sun-dried pastures tufted with carob trees and Aleppo pines until we reached Casa Salina, a stone farmhouse newly converted into a four-bedroom holiday rental, with a salt pool and jacuzzi by the olive grove garden.

For us, though, the USP was its chef-for-the-day service, with Ragusa-native Laura Giunta arriving to prepare exquisite versions of classic Sicilian dishes. Arrayed in Eames chairs around the wood slab table, we caroused our way through her lunch of swordfish-stuffed eggplant, anchovy tarts, vinegar-cured ray, Ragusano cheese drizzled with saffron and honey, and plenty of Valle dell’Acate’s flowery Zagra wine. Still in our swimsuits, we struggled to polish off the final delight – Giunta’s freshly filled, chocolate-dusted ricotta cannoli.

A glutton’s guide

Sicily | The Val di Noto is doubly blessed – with beautiful Baroque architecture and a thriving food and wine scene. By *Laura Rysman*

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Occhipinti wines: agricolaocchipinti.it; **Gulfi:** locandagulfi.it; **Il Duomo:** cicciosultano.it; **Locanda Don Serafino:** locandadonserafino.it (suite from €350); **I Banchi:** ibanchiragusa.it; **Antico Convento:** anticoconventoibla.it (doubles from €99); **Locanda del Colonnello:** locandadelcolonnello.it; **Casa Belvedere:** casabelvedere.oneminutesite.it; **Latteria Caffè Storico:** facebook.com/LatteriaCaffeStorico; **Bonajuto:** bonajuto.it; **Scicli Albergo Diffuso:** scicli.albergodiffuso.it (doubles from around €80); **Casa Salina:** casasalina.com (villa from around €250 per night)

or topping a honeyed ricotta cannoli with raw shrimp.

Peering over Ragusa’s craggy outskirts is the Locanda Don Serafino, where chef Vincenzo Candiano won his second star in 2014. “Here we’re raised with the culture of eating well,” he said, calling his cooking style “nostalgic” – his signature dish is a classic spaghetti and sea urchin interpretation, which has been loaded with ricotta and squid ink. The restaurant is in an old cave carved out from the mountainside, and a single luxurious hotel room, with a private garden and jacuzzi, abuts the dining room. On the large stone terrace, with views over juniper-covered slopes, we enjoyed our second double Michelin-starred meal in as many days. In truth, though, the culinary acrobatics of both restaurants proved less fulfilling than the simple delights we would find in the coming days.

In 2015, Sultano opened a new restaurant, recognising the desire for more

forthright cooking and a growing respect for Val di Noto’s traditional cuisine. A kitchen and bakery, I Banchi serves what he calls “high-end common food” and fresh bread from ancient endemic grains such as Russello wheat, used for a dark and delicious focaccia topped with organic tomatoes. Located near the lovely Antico Convento, a monastery newly transformed into an airy hotel, the restaurant sits in a stone-walled stable converted into a long dining room filled with old animal hitching hooks and contemporary art.

In Modica, we sought out the Locanda del Colonnello, where 28-year-old Francesco Mineo produces simple but sensational cooking grounded in the typical produce and recipes of the region – octopus with potatoes and oregano, for example, or stuffed gnocchi with lemon ricotta and cucuzza squash. “We’re guided by our past and our memories – combined with a touch of innovation so we don’t get bored,” Mineo

Shortcuts

Lancashire The Foulridge Tunnel is to be opened to canoeists this weekend, allowing them to paddle beneath the Pennines for the first time. The mile-long tunnel, north of Burnley on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, was completed in 1796 after more than five years of construction work. It is regularly used by narrowboats but now canoeists will also be permitted, following a safety audit by the Canal and River Trust and the installation of a grab chain along one wall. Entry is controlled by a traffic light system to ensure canoes do not meet boats coming the other way, and canoeists must carry a light, whistle and life jacket. The move is part of an ambitious ongoing project to create the UK’s first coast-to-coast canoe trail, a 162-mile route from Liverpool to Goole that would take the average paddler between a week and 10 days. Facilities being installed include canoe hire and storage centres, and a pontoon where canoeists can disembark before carrying their boats up the Wigan flight of 21 locks. The trail is due to be completed in 2020. canalrivertrust.org.uk

Oman Could the yachting set be tempted to swap the Med for the Straits of Hormuz this summer? Six Senses, the luxury resorts group, is launching a restored dhow which it



The Foulridge Tunnel — Getty

hopes to charter for \$11,000 per night for explorations of the Musandam peninsula, the mountainous Omani governorate which juts out from the Arabian peninsula towards Iran. The Dhahab sleeps up to six in three cabins and has an air-conditioned saloon, broad sun decks and even a cinema; the crew includes a chef and butler. sixsenses.com

London RwandAir, the state-owned airline of Rwanda, has launched the first direct flights between Kigali and the UK. The flights will operate three times per week to Gatwick; previously most visitors flew via Brussels or Amsterdam. rwandair.com

Florence The Hotel Lungarno, a Florentine landmark owned by the Ferragamo fashion dynasty, reopened last week after a six-month refurbishment. Interiors have been redesigned with a nautical theme and the number of rooms cut from 78 to 68, 40 of which have views over the Arno. Doubles from €410; lungarnocollection.com

Tom Robbins



The restored dhow Dhahab

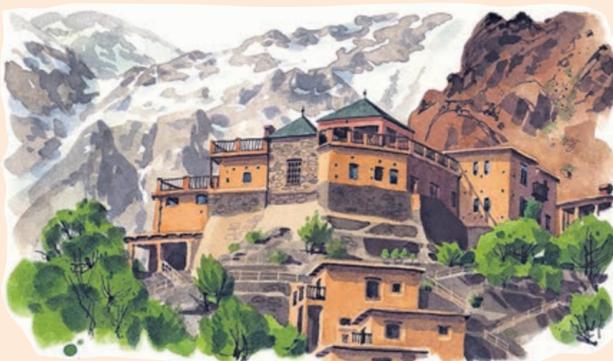
POSTCARD FROM...

MOROCCO

When I first came to Imllil, up in the Moroccan Atlas, 15 years ago, the talk was all about the impact of satellite TV. Deeply traditional Berbers, who lived in isolated mountain villages and who had previously viewed the outside world through the prism of the Koran, were sitting slack-jawed in front of MTV and late-night German sauciness. Never mind that they couldn’t understand a word of what was being said.

On my return I find that a new technology has penetrated the valley, and this time the community’s religious leaders are happier: the internet has arrived and brought with it a whole new tourist economy. Imllil sits under the shadow of the highest peak in the Atlas, Mount Toubkal. It’s where the tarmac of modern Morocco hands over to the mule trains of a mountain existence, and although it is barely more than an hour’s drive south of Marrakech, it is in such a different, steep-sided world that it might as well be another timezone. It is too vertiginous for cars, so the Berbers in the surrounding hills lead a back-breaking existence based on goats, fruit trees, walnut groves and corn-crop terraces.

The first foreigners came here to tackle the 4,167-metre Mount Toubkal. Walking along these precipitous paths



Matthew Cook

is like going trekking in Nepal, but without having to fly halfway round the world. In fact the mountainscape is so reminiscent of the Himalayas that it provided the backdrop for *Seven Years in Tibet* and featured in Martin Scorsese’s *Kundun*.

Imllil’s main street is still busy with shops that rent mountaineering gear and guides, but these days there are more carpet sellers and restaurants, and only a small percentage of visitors have their heart set on making it up the mountain. Two big-name properties have changed the face of tourism here, and the backpackers and mountaineers have now been joined by a far bigger crowd of visitors who come simply for

the spectacular setting and to interact with mountain communities.

The pioneer of this change is the Kasbah du Toubkal, perched like an eagle’s nest on a rocky outcrop above Imllil, and reached by a short, steep climb either on foot or on the back of a mule. The setting and the equally impressive building, and the British/Berber co-operation behind it, ensured the Kasbah marched on to the covers of travel magazines and won a clutch of responsible tourism awards after it opened in 1995. It was followed a decade ago by Richard Branson’s Kasbah Tamadot, further down the valley, which brought extreme luxury to the neighbourhood for the first time.

I was full of admiration for the Kasbah du Toubkal when I first stayed but this time I am disappointed. Although the setting is still magnificent, the place is looking scruffy, the staff uninterested, and a lot of the revenue comes from curious day-visitors, like me, who have to pay an entry fee to have a coffee on the terrace. Rooms start at €180, which seems too much.

But while the Kasbah itself may have lost its edge, it has had a warming effect on its surroundings. Where once it stood practically alone, today there are around 60 tiny “hotels” in the Imllil valley, the vast majority run by Berbers who took Kasbah du Toubkal’s lead, saw there was a market, and have undercut it by a significant percentage.

This time I stay in the well-equipped four-bedroom Kasbah Imllil, which, like Kasbah du Toubkal, has a great view, but whose room rates are barely more than 15 per cent of the latter’s prices.

But back to the technology. The reason why this clutch of new hotels has prospered is thanks to online booking agencies such as Booking.com and Trivago. Before their existence, you either came to Imllil through the laborious and expensive portal of a specialist travel agent, run by outsiders, or else you took a plunge into the unknown on the chance that there might be some kind of local accommodation. Now, thanks to the online booking sites, punters like me can get an insight into the range and the detail of Imllil’s accommodation before travelling, and have the security of making a reliable reservation.

The one element of modern travel that hasn’t reached Imllil is alcohol (except within the walls of the isolated Tamadot). That certainly keeps the mosques happy, and it also has the effect of protecting the one-man-and-his-mule hoteliers. For big international tourism companies, who might otherwise be tempted by Imllil’s success, that prohibition is quite a stumbling block as the vast majority of holiday-makers remain reluctant to go anywhere where they can’t get a drink.

Andrew Eames

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For more on visiting the area see visitmorocco.com. The Kasbah Toubkal (kasbahdoutoukbal.com) has doubles from €180. Kasbah Tamadot (virginlimitededition.com) has doubles from MAD6,350 (£506). Kasbah Imllil (kasbah-imllil.com) has doubles from €30