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TAKES ON THE WORLD

A TASTE OF SICILIAN HISTORY

As the largest of the Italian islands, Sicily offers a cuisine unlike anything that can be found on the mainland. A long history of colonisation has provided this diverse autonomous region with a fusion of flavours influenced by French, North African and Arabian settlers, with a proud gastronomic heritage to match.

STORY **ELIZABETH KERR**

Bonajuto, the oldest chocolate factory in Sicily.

In mid-summer, the searing Sicilian sun beats down on vineyards that line the slopes of Mount Etna, the island's legendary and highly active volcano. These are perfect conditions for wine lovers. The atmosphere – the heat, the surroundings and the languid pace of life – is sexy in a Sicilian way. While many people associate Sicily with the Mafia, and as a critical plot point in the *Godfather* films, the island's history stretches back millennia, with plenty of vivid flavours surviving to tell the tale.

Sicily is truly a one-of-a-kind destination; everything about the island is just a little *different*. Drivers are cautioned to "slow down" to 110 km/h on some of the craggiest roads conceivable. Getting overtaken by a group of nuns packed into a tiny Fiat is the norm. It's also not unusual for breakfast to consist of a fluffy brioche filled with gelato (*brioche con gelato*) – chased with a nice, strong espresso. And if ice cream for breakfast isn't a sign of sophisticated decadence, nothing is.

Sicily's strategic location in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, at the nexus of Europe, Africa and the Middle East and the trade routes connecting them, made it a target of conquest for Greece, Rome, the Saracens, Spain, Carthage, the Normans, the Vandals and the Bourbons among others. It became part of Italy in the unification of the 1860s, and then a special autonomous region after 1946's Republican Referendum.

Each of Sicily's overlords left a little something behind: the Arabic architecture of Marsala on the west coast, its Norman counterpart in Palermo, the Roman landmarks of central Piazza Armerina and the Greek ruins at Agrigento. And just as the architecture of passing empires still casts shadows over the landscape, the couscous, pasta, spices and wines they brought form a culinary trip through history that's every bit as engaging. Dining in Sicily is an interconnected journey through a history of invasion, warfare and recovery that's endlessly surprising.

COAST TO CULINARY COAST

There are several entry points into Sicily. There are the ruins and beaches of Taormina, once an essential stop on any young aristocrat's grand tour of Europe in the early 19th century. There is also the trading port of Messina. But a proper culinary tour should start in historic city of Syracuse, on the southeast corner of the island.

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Syracuse was once a powerful city-state, founded in 734 BCE by Greek settlers, and the city can be said to have given Sicilian cuisine its colourful, creamy elements. When the Greeks colonised this corner of the island, they brought horticulture with them; farming grapes, olives, nuts, as well as sheep – ultimately giving the world ricotta cheese.

Meandering through the Mercato di Ortigia street market in the old city inevitably leads to Caseificio Borderi, a deli recognisable for the long queues stretching out its door, back past the bright, fragrant produce and seafood of the market. Borderi is the go-to spot in Syracuse for tricotta – a triple-cooked ricotta allegedly invented by that famous son of Syracuse, Archimedes.

Slightly sweet, with a silky texture, ricotta has become a hallmark of Sicilian sweets and pastas. The richness of Sicily's cheeses and the abundance of its seafood are ideally matched by wines from the relatively new Etna denominazione di origine controllata (DOC), a classification used in Italy to protect its most important terroirs.

The white carricante and catarratto and red nerello mascalese wines are influenced by the volcano's terroir, altitude and microclimate, which allows for more rain in the autumn and winter and radical temperature swings. This results in distinct, minerally wines – admittedly not to all tastes, but with a refreshing bite and singular flavours. These flavours are evident in vintages by Sicily's oldest wineries, Tasca d'Almerita and Benanti, as well the newer Planeta.

After the Greeks, the Romans arrived, promptly transforming the island into a breadbasket for the Empire. It's believed that emperors Augustus and Hadrian encouraged the cultivation of hard durum wheat – a key ingredient in pasta.

Sicilian pastas are arguably superior to those in any other part of Italy. Within stewed sauces are

01 Ricotta cheese has found its way into Sicilian sweets and pastas

02 Chef Ludovico De Vivo of the Capofaro Malvasia & Resort on the island of Salina

03 The famed cannoli is said to be an early Arabic import

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found thick, chewy noodles like *casarecce*, *busiate* (farther west), the native *pasta alla Norma* – made with sautéed eggplant topped with ricotta – or hearty ragùs, made with rich meat stocks that put the more famous Bolognese to shame.

The southern coast, stretching around from Syracuse to the ancient Greek temples of Agrigento, is the ideal place to discover how well those pastas go with the island's indigenous nero d'avola wine. Another new and innovative winery, Cusumano, produces its nero d'avola in San Giacomo (near Messina), but Planeta's Buonivini vineyard near the southern city of Noto demonstrates what makes Sicilian wines so unique. Its chardonnay – grown in Menfi, farther west – shouldn't thrive in the sunny and dry climate, but it does, and the almost sweet, anti-oaky finish breathes new life into a stodgy grape.

A DISH BEST SERVED COLD

After the Romans came the Saracen conquerors of the 9th century. These Arabic tribes moved the capital from Syracuse to Palermo and introduced exotic spices, marzipan, pistachios and perhaps even coffee to Sicilian kitchens. Classic Sicilian desserts like cannoli (the *Godfather*-approved tube-shaped pastry stuffed with ricotta and pistachio) and cassata, a shatteringly sweet liquor-soaked, ricotta-layered sponge cake covered in marzipan and candied fruit, can be traced to the Arabic arrival on the west coast. When the Saracens brought rice with them, the iconic *arancino* was born — deep-fried rice balls stuffed with ragù and cheese. It's a common street food or snack across Italy now, but remains a traditional food for December's Feast of Santa Lucia in western Sicily.

Amid some of the area's most impressive Arabic structures are wineries producing Sicily's most famous

CLASSIC SICILIAN DESSERTS LIKE CANNOLI (THE GODFATHER-APPROVED TUBE-SHAPED PASTRY STUFFED WITH RICOTTA AND PISTACHIO) CAN BE TRACED TO THE ARABIC ARRIVAL

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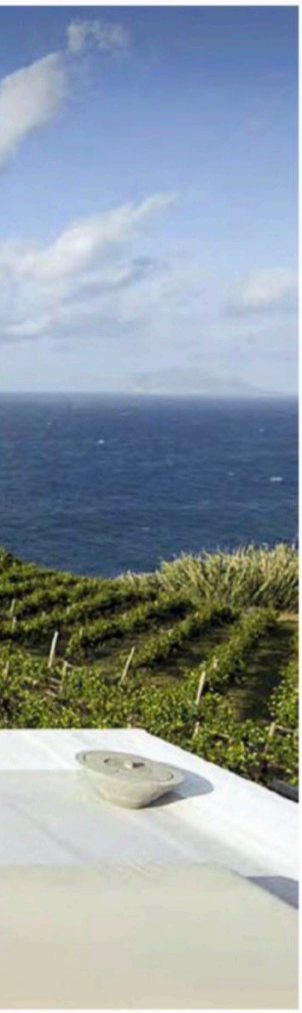

export, Marsala. But aromatic Middle Eastern spices and blistering weather demand cooling beverages, and local winery Donnafugata's zingy Tancredi, a red blend, and crisp SurSur (made from local grape grillo) have found a way to co-exist. Donnafugata can thank the Arab invaders for planting zibibbo grapes on the parched, windy island of Pantelleria, 200 kilometres south in a strait separating Sicily from Africa, as this eventually gave rise to the winery's standout dessert wine Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria.

The 11th century brought the Normans, former Vikings that had settled in France and were more focused on architecture and Byzantine mosaic work than dining. A people used to the cold, with a food culture based around meat and potatoes, the Normans were happy to concentrate on a structural legacy while basking in the decadent, sun-kissed pleasures of the south. One thing they did leave behind was the idea of high and low cuisine, an import stemming from the Normans' French affectations.

In the late 1400s, the Spanish finally got their chance at Sicily, and they're the reason the island now brims with tomatoes (stolen from Mexico by Hernán Cortés) and produces some of Europe's best chocolate – regardless of what the Swiss say. The service is somewhat surly at Sicily's oldest chocolatier Antica Dolceria Bonajuto, a tiny store tucked in an alley off Modica's main street. But it's crowded for a reason, and its hand-made confections in flavours such as lemon, pepper, vanilla and orange are far superior to anything Godiva is selling.

THE SPANISH ARE THE REASON THE ISLAND BRIMS WITH TOMATOES AND PRODUCES SOME OF EUROPE'S BEST CHOCOLATE – REGARDLESS OF WHAT THE SWISS SAY

A food tour of Sicily will also take you past the remains of Selinunte near Marsala (sacked by Carthage in 250 BCE), the Baroque structures of Noto (the last Saracen city of Sicily), Palermo's Palazzo dei Normanni and the Norman-Byzantine-Arab Monreale Cathedral and the outstanding Greek ruins at the Valle dei Templi. The wineries along the way – new and old – showcase their vintages through food pairing dinners, picnics and unpretentious hospitality.

There are no more invasions awaiting Sicily, save perhaps for Starbucks, that avatar of corporate America. But while pondering the possibility over a casual lunch at Planeta's Buonivini's vineyard, or perhaps the modern Sicilian fare of Tasca's Regaleali estate, that is one invasion that doesn't seem much of a threat just yet.

04 Wine tasting at Capofaro, the resort by Tasca D'Almerita Winery in the Aeolian Islands

05 A Sicilian spread includes plenty of cheese and local wines

06 The many wines from Donnafugata Estates

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