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BEEF & CHOCOLATE PIES ('MPANATIGGHI)

If you find yourself in a certain alleyway in Modica, Sicily your nose will take you where you need to go: Antica Dolceria Bonajuto. There are many chocolate makers in this opulent Baroque town, but this one is an institution. Founded in 1880, the wood-panelled shop still produces award-winning cinnamon, vanilla and chilli chocolate made in the style of the Aztecs – without conching, tempering or adding extra fat. Because the temperature of the chocolate never exceeds 45°C / 113°F, the sugar never completely melts, resulting in a crunchy, highly textured bar that's distinctive to Modica. The Spanish, who once ruled Sicily, introduced the technique after discovering it in the New World – and Modica is one of the few places outside Latin America where chocolate is still made in this style.

Among Antica Dolceria Bonajuto's range of chocolate treats you will also find 'mpanatigghi, little empanada-style pies stuffed with minced beef, Modica chocolate, spices and almonds. Legend has it these extraordinary morsels

were invented in the 1600s by nuns of the Origlione monastery in Palermo, as a surreptitious way to partake of meat during Lent, when it was forbidden. Another theory suggests making the pies was a way to preserve meat in times of abundance. What is certain is that there's nothing meaty at all about them, and that they're heavenly eaten warm from the oven. In Modica, recipes for 'mpanatigghi are closely guarded, but Pierpaolo Ruta – the sixth generation of his family to run the business – very kindly shared his recipe with me. This is my adapted version.

Ingredients:

MAKES 16

FOR THE PASTRY

350g plain flour, plus extra for dusting
90g icing sugar, plus extra, sifted for dusting
100g cold lard or butter
4 large egg yolks, lightly beaten
100ml cold water

FOR THE FILLING

65g good-quality lean beef (not ready-bought mince), finely chopped
70g ground almonds
75g caster sugar
10g cocoa powder
25g dark chocolate (about 70% cocoa solids), grated
1 tsp ground cinnamon
2 large egg whites

BELOW: Beef and chocolate pies, possibly invented in the 1600s by nuns

Method:

1 Start with the pastry. Using a fork or balloon whisk, whisk the flour and sugar together in a bowl to combine. Grate in the lard or butter and rub it in with your fingertips until you have small pieces of fat – maybe slightly larger than grains of rice – coated in flour. Stir in the egg yolks, then add the cold water, a little at a time, stirring to bring the mixture together into a scraggy dough. Knead lightly in the bowl until smooth, then shape into a disc, wrap in plastic wrap and chill for at least 1 hour.

2 Now, make the filling. Fry the beef in a dry frying pan, moving the meat around constantly, until browned. Set aside to cool for 5 minutes. Place the remaining ingredients in a food processor, add the cool meat and blitz to a paste. Scrape into a small bowl and chill until needed.

3 When you're ready to make the pies, preheat the oven to 180°C / 350°F / Gas mark 4 and line 1 large or 2 small baking sheets with baking paper. Roll out the dough on a lightly dusted work surface to 3mm thick. Using a 10cm cutter or small bowl, cut out 16 rounds and transfer to the prepared baking sheet as you go.

4 Place 1 level tablespoon of the filling in the centre of each pastry circle. Lightly brush the edges with water and fold the pastry over the filling; gently press around the filling with your thumbs to remove any air pockets, and lightly press the pastry layers together to seal.

5 Trim the pies using a cutter roughly 7cm in diameter – I use a fluted cookie cutter, but you could use a glass dipped in flour. Place the cutter over the halfmoon-shaped pies so that the filling is roughly in the centre. Press down to cut away excess pastry, making sure not to cut into the filling, and to leave a sealed edge all the way around. Using scissors, snip the top of each pastry to make a small air hole.

6 Bake for 15 minutes, or until the bottoms of the pies are pale gold. The tops will be firm but not brown. Leave to cool a little and dust with icing sugar before serving.



Photo: Yuki Suigura