

# FOOD & HOME

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# LA DOLCE vita

From cannoli and cassata to almond granita and pistachio gelato, **Katelyn Allegra** eats her way through Palermo, Bronte and Modica on a dessert road trip across the island of Sicily

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **KATELYN ALLEGRA**

**I** can't quite pinpoint the moment I fell in love with Sicily. Perhaps it was the first time I ordered gelato for breakfast – and no one batted an eyelid. Or maybe it was when I went back for my third iris frita (in a row) and nobody cared. In Sicily, dessert is a way of life, calories don't count and a sweet tooth like mine feels right at home.

With its rugged mountains that tumble into a blue sea, Sicily looks like home too. For centuries, its warm Mediterranean ocean has brought with it wave after wave of conquerors. Each new ruling nation left traces of its cuisine, language and culture, which vary quite drastically as you travel from town to town.





## PALERMO

I watch the rocky seaside gradually turn into intricate Arabic architecture through the window of my rented car as I drive from Palermo airport into the capital city. Sicily is the perfect road-trip destination – it takes just four hours to drive from one side of the island to the other. While most people head straight for Palermo's markets and street food, this wasn't that kind of road trip – and I have a cannoli craving to satisfy!

Cannoli are found all over Sicily, but I think the ones from Palermo are the best. The crisp, blistered shell is thanks to the addition of Marsala wine – hailing from the eponymous town nearby – and has a bitterness which perfectly counteracts the smooth, sweetened ricotta filling made from sheep's milk. There's a pretty easy way of telling which ones are worth the calories: a really great cannolo is always filled to order, so the shell stays crisp and crunchy. You'll also find modern twists on the classic, with interesting flavour variations, but my favourite (from Gelato & Cioccolato) is stuffed with scoops of ricotta and pistachio gelato.

Next on my list is what's been described by Sicily's most famous pastry chef, Corrado Assenza, as "the most elegant expression of Sicilian culture": the cassata. Layer by layer, the cassata symbolises over 1 000 years of Sicilian history. The sugar cane, the almonds, the lemons and oranges were brought here by ninth-century Arab invaders. The pan di Spagna (sponge cake) is from the Spanish, the white fondente (fondant) icing from the French. The marzipan is dyed green in homage to the days when bakers could afford to use pistachio paste, from those famous nut trees that flourish in the nearby village of Bronte. I choose a cassatine (the miniature version) from the pastry counter of Pasticceria Cappello. I find a bench overlooking the Piazza Ruggero Settimo and tuck into my pretty little cake with a plastic fork. As cathedral bells clang, I marvel at the ornate Arabic influence of Palermo's skyline and how that design is echoed in the beautiful piping on the dessert I'm devouring. Licking my fork clean, I'm already thinking about my next treat.

I leave this historic centre of Palermo in my rear-view mirror and head to Altavilla Milicia, an outlying commune of Palermo. September is the month of the Madonna in Sicily and throughout it, you'll find small towns celebrating the saint with spectacular processions, street food, nut-roasting, sweet-making and revelry. The scent of vanilla and caramel on the hot summer air lures me from my itinerary to explore the festivities. The closed street is lined with pastry chefs armed with giant swords and marble slabs, each lifting and moulding the hot sugar and almond mixture into perfect bricks of torrone.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:  
PISTACHIO GELATO AND  
CANNOLI SHELLS FROM  
GELATO & CIOCCOLATO;  
CASSATINE FROM  
PASTICCERIA CAPPELLO**

### THE SWEET SPOTS

#### PALERMO

Gelato & Cioccolato  
Piazza Ruggero Settimo 11, 90139  
+39-(0)91-442-570

Touring Café  
Via Roma, 248, 90133  
+39-(0)91-322-726

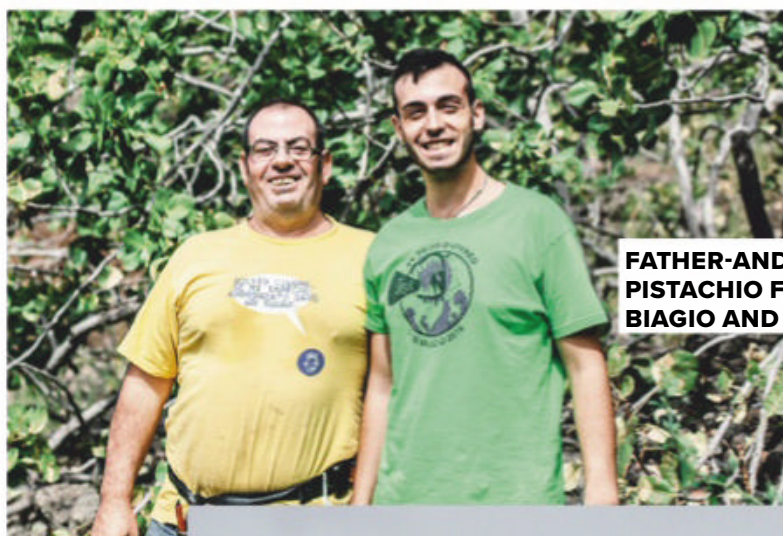
Pasticceria Cappello  
Via Colonna Rotta, 68, 90134  
pasticceriacappello.it

Bar Greco (Altavilla Milicia)  
Strada Panoramica Del Ponte, 6,  
90010  
+39-(0)91-951-436

Gelateria Ciccuzzi  
Via Belvedere Principe di  
Piemonte, 80, 90018  
Termini Imerese







**FATHER-AND-SON  
PISTACHIO FARMERS,  
BIAGIO AND NICOLO PACE**

## BRONTE

If the gigantic pistachio I passed along the way hadn't given me a clue that I'd arrived in Bronte, I'd never have known that the tangled mass of trees are, in fact, of the pistachio kind. I pull over to the first café I can find – Bar Collina Verde Di Sanfilippo Giuseppe – and have the best pistachio granita of my life while waiting for Nicolo Pace. At 22, he's the younger generation of pistachio farmers in Bronte who are inheriting plantations from their fathers.

Nicolo tells me he's studying food science and technology in order to improve innovation in pistachio farming in this area. "Bronte pistachios are the finest and most expensive in the world because we only harvest every two years. It takes patience, but the quality's the most important thing to us. Real Bronte pistachios have PDO [Protected Designation of Origin] – they're bigger, saltier and have darker skin than any other pistachios."

As I fire a million questions at him about what are called "emeralds" in these parts, we whizz along an alarmingly bumpy, steep road in Nicolo's car before arriving at his modest family farm. A quaint little house on a floor of lava rocks (this is Mount Etna territory, after all) is surrounded by the same tangled mass of trees sprouting straight out of the hard, black stones.

We trek across the hot rocks ("Mind the vipers!" he tosses casually over his shoulder) until he excitedly points to a branch laden with bright red drupes (fruit). As the drupe ripens, it splits open to reveal the seed (not nut) inside. The drupes have to be hand-collected and dried in the sun before the pistachios can be sold. Harvesting is hard work and Nicolo rewards me with a lunch of ice-cold prickly pears. I leave with a bagful of Bronte's finest green golds – the best kind of padkos!

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**BRONTE PISTACHIOS ARE THE FINEST AND MOST EXPENSIVE IN THE WORLD BECAUSE WE ONLY HARVEST EVERY TWO YEARS.**

**NICOLÒ PACE**



## THE SWEET SPOTS BRONTE

Bar Collina Verde Di  
Sanfilippo Giuseppe  
Viale Catania, 21, 95034  
+39-(0)95-691-377

Pasticceria Dolce Bacio  
Cortile Dema, 2, 95034  
+39-(0)32-9111-7750



## PIT STOP

Pasticceria Dolce Bacio

### What to order:

The arancini (not arancine, as they're known in Palermo), which are shaped like nearby Mount Etna.







## MODICA

I take a two-hour drive along the Eastern coastline of Sicily to reach the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Modica. That's also the amount of time I have to think about what to ask a sixth-generation chocolate maker. Pierpaolo Ruta is as intense as the chocolate he makes at Antica Dolceria Bonajuto, the oldest chocolate and pastry shop in Sicily. He and his family are the creators of what's described as "a different kind of chocolate" – the granular sort that's made Modica famous worldwide.

So why is chocolate so famous in a city without cocoa trees? It's all thanks to the Spanish, who left behind their language, Baroque architecture and their obsession with chocolate. "Until 1960, my grandfather made Modican chocolate from cocoa mass using a stone metate by hand. The sugar crystals remain intact inside the chocolate, giving it a very special granular structure and texture," says Pierpaolo.

The Ruta family have always had an open-door policy when it comes to showing how their unique chocolate is made and you can take a tour of their chocolate lab on the hour (which I do). It's because of this that Modica is now filled with copycat artisans claiming they make the "original Modica chocolate". But Pierpaolo humbly shrugs it off and excitedly tells me about his plans for a new factory next door that will make them a full bean-to-bar chocolate brand. "Making our chocolate from scratch is a controversial step because, technically, Modican chocolate is known to be produced from pre-made cocoa mass. But I want to make sure we keep innovating. I want to leave a legacy for my son, just as my father and his father did for me."

I leave with a small satin bag filled with Pierpaolo's latest invention: jasmine-infused Modican chocolate drops and a box of the pastry shop's mpanatigghi and nucatoli biscuits (specialties of Modica).



**ABOVE AND RIGHT: NUCATOLI BISCUITS, A PROUDLY MODICAN SPECIALITY; PIERPAOLO RUTA (LEFT) AT HIS FAMILY-OWNED CHOCOLATE AND PASTRY SHOP, ANTICA DOLCERIA BONAJUTO, WITH THE BRAND'S HEAD OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT, SALVO GIANNONE**





I reach Dolceria Donna Elvira flustered and out of breath. Despite it being probably the best-known Modican chocolate brand in the world, Google Maps still got me terribly lost. But all is forgotten as I'm ushered through the door by Elvira Roccasalva (the "donna"). She plies me with her favourite 100% chocolate bar. "This will make you feel better," she says. It's an intense savoury block with a rough texture. I can feel the cocoa high kicking in.

Elvira admits that when she started the dolceria back in 1999, she had no experience in desserts or making chocolate. "I learnt with practice and research, visiting cocoa farms in Peru and tasting a lot of cocoa beans. It was always my dream to make our bars from scratch," she tells me as we walk through her factory, where logs of homemade marzipan are being rolled by hand.

That dream came true three years ago, when Donna Elvira became a full bean-to-bar Modican chocolate brand – the first in Sicily. "As a woman in a male-dominated, small-town industry like Modica, it wasn't easy. In the beginning, nobody took me seriously, but I focused on sourcing incredibly rare cocoa beans and making sure that Donna Elvira became synonymous with Modican chocolate," she explains. Countless awards later, I'd say she's succeeded.



THE "DONNA" HERSELF, ELVIRA ROCCASALVA



### THE SWEET SPOTS MODICA

Antica Dolceria Bonajuto  
Corso Umberto I, 159, 97015  
bonajuto.it

Donna Elvira  
Via Risorgimento, 32, 97015  
donnaelvira.it

Sabadì Chocolate  
Corso S. Giorgio, 105, 97015  
sabadi.it  
+39-(0)93-21-91-23-27

Bar Gelateria Fiore Dal 1966  
Corso Umberto I, 23, 97015

### PIT STOP

Gelateria Fiore

**What to order:**

Any of its seasonal gelato flavours served in a brioche bun. If you're asked whether you want "crema", the answer should always be "sì!".







### TRAPANI

My sweet tooth's taking a beating, so when I zip past the salt flats in Trapani with mountains of flakes raked up on the side of the road, I breathe in the salty air and feel a renewed sense of excitement at my next stop. Vito Allotta is well worth a visit. A quaint little shop hidden in the maze of central Trapani, it's named after its owner who has quietly been making Sicily's first craft chocolate, not too far from Modica.

"It's been difficult for locals to understand what makes my chocolate so special. They only understand Modica chocolate or the imported stuff. The craft chocolate movement is very well known in the rest of Europe and America, but not here in Sicily. I think I'm probably the first," says Vito. His chocolate bars are all made with single-origin cocoa beans and feature ingredients that are famous in this region: Trapani salt and Sicilian saffron.



**VITO ALLOTTA**

### THE SWEET SPOT TRAPANI

Vito Allotta – Craft Chocolate  
Via Argentieri 7/9, 91100  
+39(0)34-56-06-16-95







**VITO PERALTA AT LABORATORIO  
DOLCI SICILIANI**

### THE SWEET SPOTS SAN VITO LO CAPO

Laboratorio Dolci Siciliani  
(Pasticceria Peralta)  
Via Immacolata, 17, 91010  
+39-(0)330-269-917



### SAN VITO LO CAPO

Most travellers head to San Vito Lo Capo to lie on the breathtaking beach and enjoy its aqua water, but since this is my last stop on a seven-day dessert-eating spree, I'm pretty sure I won't be fitting into my bikini. Instead, I drown my sorrows at Laboratorio Dolci Siciliani (Pasticceria Peralta). Its almond granite is made from hand-ground almonds from a farm nearby and is so good that I have three in a row. But I secretly go back to swoon at its window display of impeccable frutta Martorana – Sicily's most famous sweet. Fruits are realistically moulded by hand from almond paste to show off the skills of the pastry chef.

Vito, the owner, tells me they were invented in the 12th century by the nuns of La Martorana, a church in Palermo. The story goes that the nuns originally decided to sculpt fruits from marzipan and hang them from their bare trees to impress the visiting archbishop. He was so taken by the sight that they kept making them. It's a fading art

which won't die on my watch! I leave with an entire box of them.

As I walk on the beach of San Vito Lo Capo, with the warm sea lapping at my feet, licking my final gelato of strawberry and lemon, I think of the talented people I've met on this trip. Sicily is notorious for its mafiosi, as portrayed in *The Godfather* movies, but what its people should really be famous for are their warmth and hospitality. In a land known for its rich history and heritage, I've encountered a younger generation eager to preserve age-old traditions, but also to create their own. I can't wait to taste those on my next trip – but first, I need to hit the gym! 🏋️



**FRUTTA MARTORANA**

### TRAVEL TIPS

South African nationals require a Schengen visa to travel to Italy. Visit [it-za.capago.eu](http://it-za.capago.eu) for more information on how to apply.

