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SPECIAL REPORT: HIGHLIGHTS OF SICILY

DREAM OF ITALY®



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Five Unique Places to Stay in Sicily

If you have preconceived notions about Sicily, you're not alone—and we're not talking about stereotypes of Mafia activity or country tables laden with food. We're talking about the actual land and contours. Many people, including some of the most sophisticated travelers around, believe that this island, just at the toe of Italy's boot, consists mostly of flat, arid terrain.

Maybe it's the abundance of cacti and yucca, maybe it's the reports of strong sun (Sicily is closer to the Equator than almost anywhere else in Europe), but the truth is, Sicily's gorgeous coast and verdant hills will remind visitors less of desert

and more of Provence, Wales—and even Northern California.

Those fortunate enough to visit different parts of Sicily will understand both how geography affected its many-layered history (first settled by the ancient Greeks, it has also been called home by the Romans, the Byzantines, the Normans and, finally, the modern Italian nation) and how that geography can vary in just a short distance.



Duca di Castelmonte

One minute you're glimpsing a sleepy hillside town, the next a valley with row upon row of cultivated fruit trees, the next a lively urban vista.

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Getty

Maria Grammatico

Portraits of Sicily: Three Natives and Their Stories

From Cloister to Cookies

Getting to the medieval walled town of Erice is easiest and most picturesque via the globe-shaped *funiculari* that leave every 10 minutes from the top of *Trapani*. As the pods rise, they offer vistas that distinguish that city from its Sicilian fellows—the meeting of the Mediterranean and Tyrrhenian Seas, the city's well-preserved naval ramparts, and the wide white swathes of the salt flats that produce some of the most delicate seasoning in the world.

But once the funicular stops at the foot of the snail-shaped road winding up to Erice, the eye is drawn up to the town's gray brick towers and arched gate. The gate opens onto cobbled streets full of nooks and crannies that only occur when inhabitants know they can't build out or up and have to make the most of what they have.

Making the most of what was available applies to *Maria Grammatico*, a lifelong resident of Erice who, at age 75, still presides over the pastry shop bearing her name. Her eyes are partly blurred by thick bifocals, but

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Sicily is the clue to everything. —Goethe

Where to Stay *continued from page 1*

Sicily contains many geographical surprises in its tourist lodgings, too. You could also take to Sicily's highways (be patient; there are a few glitches in the region's infrastructure) and try one of the following five very different ways to stay in Sicily and add to your experience through your accommodation.

Historic Elegance in Palermo

Gaze down from the second floor onto what is now the main lobby of Palermo's *Grand Hotel Piazza Borsa*, and you can almost imagine monks passing serenely through its arches: From the 16th to the 19th centuries, a Roman Catholic order, the Mercederian Fathers, maintained their main Sicilian residence in this cloister.

Look out again, and think about how the same space might have appeared in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when it functioned as the

Sicilian Stock Exchange (*Borsa*). Scores of merchants, bankers, and other business owners would convene over cigars and good bottles of wine to discuss deals.

In the hotel's upstairs bar and meeting rooms you can see some beautiful paintings, commissioned by those men, that represent Sicily's most important symbols and natural resources. You can also see some typically 19th-century Sicilian chairs and sofas upholstered in a striking floral silk also made in Sicily. The same furniture maker sold many similar pieces to a famous client—the interior designer of the *Titanic*.

Given its previous incarnation, it's not surprising that the grand hotel is set behind the Bank of Sicily, just steps from the *Via Vittorio Emmanuele*. Those few steps mean that the hotel itself is fairly quiet for such a central location. Hallways are wide and cool, leading to

rooms and suites decorated with quiet, modern elegance and comfort, many offering small balconies overlooking the central courtyard.



All meals can be taken in the rooftop garden restaurant, but the breakfast buffet is particularly tempting and includes fresh local *ricotta*,

cannoli, cakes and *cornetti*, as well as the usual cereals, yogurts, fruits, eggs and items to toast.

Grand Hotel Piazza Borsa

Via dei Cartari, 18

Palermo

(39) 091 320075

www.piazzaborsa.it

Rates: From 126€ for a single to 813 € for the "Regina Costanza" suite with breakfast.



Hotel Piazza Borsa

Seaside Tranquility in Trapani

Let's do some guided imagery: You're sitting on a wrought-iron terrace, gazing at the Mediterranean. Feel the warm sun, the cool breezes from the sea; smell the salt water and the citrus trees scattered around your resort environs. See the smooth yellow stone of the wall behind you and the gorgeous silk drapes that allow you to shut out the light when you're ready for a long *siesta*.

Are you there yet? If so, stay serene when you realize that your new favorite place is a converted tuna factory, two words that don't normally inspire that relaxed, vacation vibe.

Trapani's newest, and unique, resort, *Hotel La Tonnara di Bonnagia*, is on the

Sicily



Teatro Massimo in Palermo is

road to the stunning hilltop medieval town of *Erice*, and feels similarly removed from time.

The building itself was constructed in the 17th century, so don't let any modern ideas of "factory" cloud your view—this *tonnara* features thick walls, a turreted tower, and lots of arched gateways, more like a seaside chateau than anything industrial.



Hotel La Tonnara



Hotel La Tonnara

Trapani is well known for its salt flats, which also border thousands of acres of marine-life reserve, making the Hotel La Tonnara unusually quiet, a perfect place for romance, retreat, or even rejuvenation—skip the "Wellbeing Oasis" and just hang out at the gorgeous pool, which may be this hotel's best feature, with fantastic views of *Monte Cofano* and a path to the clear sea waters, where guests can go snorkeling with equipment on loan from the front desk.

However, don't expect luxury. The dining room is lovely and food is adequate, but not resort level. Rooms are also adequate—furnished with spare pieces, and not at all fancy. The location is also well removed from Trapani center, so unless you have a car, you'll be hard pressed to find other dining and entertainment options. The Hotel La Tonnara isn't for the busy sightseer; it's for the quiet nature- and history-lover looking for time to walk, swim and think.

Hotel La Tonnara di Bonagio Resort

Piazza Tonnara Bonagia
Valderice
(39) 0923 431111
www.tonnaradibonagia.it

Rates: Start at 125€ per night for a double and can go up to 678€ for a suite. Breakfast is included.



Rustic Charm in Xitta

You may know a great deal about Italy's *agriturismi*, farms that offer dining, accommodations, and a peek

into agricultural life, but you may not have stayed at one of Sicily's *baglio*, or traditional farmsteads. In *Xitta*, en route to *Agrigento* (famous for the Valley of Temples), the *Curatolo* family operates the *Duca di Castelmonte* Agriturismo out of the *baglio* they have owned since the early 19th century.

Step through the cool, old-fashioned dining room/restaurant into the sunny courtyard and you may find the family matriarch leaning over a wrought-iron balcony, her snow-white hair perfectly coiffed and her black-cotton dress perfectly starched. She gazes down as her son "Toto," or *Alfonso*, explains the ricotta-making process.

Fresh ricotta is not actually a cheese; its official description in Italian is *latticio*, or "milk product." It's made from whey, and the reason this is important is that the best farms and organic food producers have understood for thousands of years that using everything is economical—and can be delicious.

Toto Curatolo and his family are rightly proud of their *baglio*'s products, which include olive oil, cheeses and *caponata* from their eggplant crop. Guests can take part in various stages of making

these foods through regular cooking classes. Every Thursday night is "pizza and ricotta night," when everyone joins in even if they haven't signed up for a class. A pristine blue pool is

surrounded by olive trees, several acres of garden walks and tennis courts, all centered on the colorful and charming farmhouse and inn.

Rooms and suites are simple; think "shabby chic," but impeccably clean and furnished with

everything you need for a laid-back week or few days in the Sicilian sun. Photographs, tools and collectibles line the walls and enhance the feeling that

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Kathleen A. McCabe
Editor in Chief and Publisher

Executive Editor: Bethanne Patrick
Copy Editor: Stephen J. McCabe
Design: Kim Leaird
www.leaird-designs.com

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Editorial feedback is welcome.

E-mail: kathy@dreamofitaly.com

Advertising opportunities are available.

E-mail: kathy@dreamofitaly.com

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s Italy's largest opera house.

you can still see their twinkle as she wraps beautiful assortment boxes of the almond-based cakes, cookies and confections that her bakery is justly famous for around the world.

But it's not just her use of local almonds that show Grammatico's canny use of resources. As her popular memoir *Bitter Almonds* explains, when she was 11 her mother sent her to be raised in a local convent because there wasn't enough food in post-World-War-II Italy to feed their entire family. From 1951 to 1963, Grammatico was raised by, and then worked for, the nuns. The order was well known for producing sweet, fancy treats for sale to wealthy families and for grand occasions.



vialbos, flickr.com

Pasticceria Grammatico

Although the techniques were supposed to be the province of the nuns, Grammatico was a quick learner with a superb memory. She paid attention to the supplies and methods needed to turn out trays of almond-paste cookies or feather-light, custard-filled *Genovese*. When she left the convent at 26, the nuns allowed her to keep only a small amount of almonds and a tiny stove. She began to practice and refine the recipes she'd memorized to her own exacting standards.

Today the bakery produces over two dozen varieties of *pasticcini*, as well as jams and preserves from Grammatico's own recipes. All are made from local ingredients: Almonds from *Avola*, milk from nearby dairies, and organically grown fruits.

In the shady garden behind the Grammatico's tiny shop, visitors from all over the world sit and sample treats on fluted paper trays. One bite of a

pastry and eyes close as groans of pleasure prove that these old-fashioned baked goods have 21st-century staying power. No wonder the nuns preferred to keep the sugary secrets of their preparation to themselves!

Fortunately, there's no worry that Grammatico will do something similar. She employs quite a few younger family members and Erice residents who plan to keep her bakery going for a long time to come. Maria Grammatico was given almonds in bitterness, but she's turned them into a very sweet legacy.

Pasticceria Maria Grammatico
Via Vittorio Emanuele, 14
Erice
(39) 0923 869390
www.mariagrammatico.it



A New Chapter in A Family History

In 1917, *Anna D'Angelo* and her three eldest children left *Castellammare del Golfo* for New York City, where Anna's husband had emigrated a year before. Although he would eventually prove unstable, the couple had six more children. Jean, born in 1924 in Detroit, was the last and most doted on, growing up hearing her mother's tales of the beautiful seaside Sicilian town of the family's roots.

However, it wasn't until Jean's 70th birthday that she was able to visit, on a

two-week trip sponsored by her son, *Jehr Schiavo*. Now an internationally known hair stylist, Jehr is also a devoted son, and wanted his mother to see the entire island, as well as spend a few days in the town that meant so much to her own mother.

Jehr visited several times on his own, but didn't return until a few years after meeting and marrying his wife Jeanette in 2003. Their first visit as the *famiglia di Schiavo* was in 2007, when their daughter LouLou turned three. Although after her fourth summer in Castellammare they took a break, they have returned for her 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th birthdays, so often now that LouLou Schiavo considers Castellammare a second home.

And why shouldn't she? Her grandmother grew up on that town's *Via Ferrantelli* and attended the *Chiesa di San Guisepppe*, speaking the region's dialect. Jehr Schiavo now speaks some Italian, but not his mother's Sicilian; he says it sounds so familiar still, "the way an old song can be remembered."



Jeanette, LouLou and Jehr Schiavo

Schiavo believes Castellammare today looks like La Jolla might have appeared two hundred years ago, its rugged coastline scattered with sandy beaches, and cacti popping up from the gold and green hillsides. The entire family loves to feast on *sfnicione*, a sort of open-faced pizza covered with sardines; *calamari totani*; toasted sesame-seed cookies, the enormous local capers, and much more.

After the requisite daily stop at the market (Schiavo reminisces fondly of "fresh baked bread with nutmeg from *Domingo Panificio's* coal oven"), they

Sicily is the largest island

feast on local fruits, from baby pears to white peaches to cherries and figs. After a morning at the seaside, they return to a lunch, usually heavy on more produce from the *frutte e verdure* stalls. An afternoon siesta is followed by a snack of fruit, and then a few hours of work for everyone (LouLou has been homeschooled for many years).

This year, the Schiavo family switched things up a bit and spent a few weeks on the island *Lampedusa*. "I always thought Sicily felt rustic, but Lampedusa gives rough around the edges new meaning," says Jehr Schiavo. "However, Rabbit Beach there is in a class of its own when it comes to beaches—beyond stunning, if there could be such a thing."

Schiavo says that the Sicilian landscape continues seeping into him, from water to mountains to people, including their adoration over children. And his greatest inspiration for his signature "Jehrcut" may have come directly from Sicily, too: His Uncle Tony, one of the three D'Angelo children born in Castellammare, had a rule for packing: "Lay everything out on the bed that you'd like to take. When you think you're done, put half away, and pack the rest." Schiavo says he was right, and that the rule applies as much to fashion and beauty as it does to travel.

Domingo Panificio
Piazza Europa, 12
Castellammare del Golfo
(39) 0924 082254

Rabbit Beach
Via Ponente
Lampedusa
(39) 0922 975901



His Wheels Keep on Turning

Imagine a culture without books, newspapers, or text-based signs. How would you remember important dates in history, learn about current events, or know whom to call when for the best groceries?

In Sicily for hundreds of years, most of the population was illiterate—just like most of the population elsewhere. But clever business owners realized that by painting symbols and figures on the vehicles they used could help them attract customers, who would then recognize them again and again. These owners were the first donkey-cart painters.

Today, gaily decorated donkey carts virtually represent Sicily for thousands of tourists, who snap endless

photos of the wooden conveyances and buy souvenir versions from miniature to huge. While other people consider the carts a symbol of history, there's one man who still considers them his life's work.

Franco Bertolino is the last donkey-cart painter in Sicily. In his studio on *Salita Ramirez* behind the cathedral, he plies his trade and paintbrush with devotion, knowing that while no one else may continue with that same devotion, the carts he finishes will be important reminders of Sicily's not-so-long-ago daily life.



Corbis

Franco Bertolino

Bertolino is a fifth-generation cart painter. Five generations! That covers more than a century of events that have brought modernity to an island suspicious of change—which explains the various scooters and motos that Bertolino also paints with intricate traditional designs.

The main colors used were once yellow and red, Sicilian colors, but today anything in the rainbow will do as Bertolino festoons pieces with flowers, repeating patterns, scenes of festivals, and even mythology.

The writer John Keahey made Bertolino famous in his 2011 book *Seeking Sicily*, devoting an entire chapter to the cart-painting workshop. Bertolino shared an anecdote with him about how, when he was a little boy, he and his friends would torment cart drivers by hanging on to the backs of the carts and shouting insults.

When his father found out about this, he beat his son with an umbrella and made him sit and watch father and grandfather in their workshop. "My father told me 'Learn the craft while you are sitting there,'" Bertolino told Keahey. "So I did."

Now in his 50s, Bertolino's face and thoughts contain many generations of sadness at what will soon be lost. Very few painted carts are still in active use; most are brought out only for festivals and parades, and those grow fewer every year as well. Sometimes people bring a family collection out for an exhibition, but there are fewer and fewer *carretieri*, or cart drivers, too.

Franco Bertolino
Salita Artale, 8
Karrenbemaler
Palermo
(39) 347 0576923



vici15, flickr.com

Bertolino's Studio

Edible Souvenirs: Bringing

A friend who grew up in a home with two Sicilian parents (both had emigrated to the USA in the 1950s) recalls that every meal was a groaning board of food, from *antipasti* to *primi* to *contorni* to *secondi* to *dolci*. That might have stemmed, for many Sicilian-Americans, from the post-war scarcity of food at home. However, it must also have something to do with the amazing variety of natural resources available in Sicily, from vines drooping with grape clusters to trees crowded with almonds to seas teeming with fish.



Chestnut honey

Some years after broom and thistle — the soil nurtures apple and chestnut trees — the chestnut honey is a particular delicacy. Deep brown and deeply flavored, it's wonderful on

yogurt or ice cream. Bonus: In the village of *Zafferana Etnea* you can find a museum dedicated to beekeeping.

To buy: Chestnut honey is readily available in Sicilian gourmet and gift shops.

Don't neglect the other types of Sicilian honey, because there are many, including cactus, dill, honeysuckle and thistle.

Manna Eletta, or Ash-Tree Sap

You may be familiar with the phrase "manna from heaven," meaning delicious sustenance provided by a creator—but in Sicily, *manna* is a real foodstuff, a sweetener that is harvested from the ash tree. The narrow-leaf ash produces this low-glucose substance in the *Madonie Mountains*, and although it originates as syrup, like maple syrup in North America, instead of being tapped, it is allowed to run out of holes in the bark and to harden in the sun (it never touches the bark itself).

The pale result is cut into short lengths for sale. Its health properties are much touted by Sicilians, who claim it cures everything from constipation to diabetes, but the truth is that it just tastes good—like a cross between maple-sugar candy and mild honey.

To buy: It isn't easy to find manna, but some pharmacies stock it. Your best

bet, when in Sicily, is to head to *Castelbuono* and find "The Manna Man," *Giulio Gelardi*.
www.facebook.com/MannaGelardi

Citron or Etrog

Imagine a lemon. Now, imagine that lemon has skin as thick as its inner pulp. You're pretty close to knowing what a Sicilian *etrog*, or citron fruit, looks like. You won't be able to smuggle one past customs, but don't fret: The two best ways to enjoy the citron are great souvenirs. The first is to buy some candied rind, known in Sicily as *succade*.



The second is to seek out one of the many fresh and light colognes and perfumes carrying the ancient fruit's oils. While we don't recommend trying to bring back fresh citron (*cedro* in Sicily), if you do manage to stash one or two in your suitcase, try using it in a salad.

To buy: Candied citrus rind can be found in many Sicilian gift shops and supermarkets. It's often the final ingredient in traditional *cannoli*, too.

Marsala Wine

You aren't wrong if you're planning to buy a bottle of Sicilian *marsala* so that your aunt can make your favorite chicken dish—you're just not well-acquainted enough with this storied tittle, which is technically a fortified beverage as it's made by adding brandy to wine. The process, called *in perpetuum* or *solara*, involves drawing wine from some casks and adding it to others at regular intervals until the

Forget the ceramics and wood carvings; the best souvenirs of Sicily are not just edible, but locally grown. Here are a few of the most delectable items available that you can easily cart home—since they're not fresh food, customs won't slap you on the wrist. The bonus is that these are also things that will keep for a while and allow you happy memories of your trip each time you open a bottle, jar or tin.

Mount Etna Chestnut Honey

The cool, dry air of *Mount Etna* fosters new growth, although it does take 700 years for volcanic lava to produce that growth. The broom plant, with its many flowers, is the first to appear—and it attracts honeybees. There are several apiaries around Etna, often appearing to be piles of colorful wooden boxes—get a little closer, and you'll hear the buzz.



Sicily is sometimes nick

Home Sicilia Naturale

desired balance of strength and flavor occurs.

At *Florio*, the first manufactory of the spirits invented by an 18th-century Englishman named John Woodhouse, you can try different types of marsala, from some resembling sherry to others more like *vin santo*. *Salute!*

To buy: The obvious place to buy Marsala is at the Florio winery, which has a superb gift emporium—and you can also see the oldest surviving cask, from 1939. www.duca.it/cantineflorio

Mulberries

Mulberries were imported to Sicily and other places from China, because silkworms fed on their leaves. Mulberry trees are beautiful and ornamental, but also remarkably hardy—they can survive for hundreds of years, still producing fruit. Today there’s not much silk produced in Sicily—but the dark purple *gelso* (*moro* in Italian) is considered a delicacy and used in many different preserves and syrups. A bottle of syrup can be used to flavor cocktails, iced tea, frozen desserts and many other treats.

These versatile, hardy fruits even provided the name to one of New York City’s Little Italy streets, not to mention the Dr. Seuss book, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, inspired by the same place.

To buy: If you don’t find syrup or jam at any Sicilian shops, try www.mtnero.com

Canned Tuna

Whether you’re partial to Starkist or Bumble Bee, you haven’t tasted canned tuna until you’ve had some from Sicily. You might think it’s a little fishy (sorry, couldn’t resist) to talk up something canned, which doesn’t often denote fine dining for Americans.

But Sicilian canned tuna is bluefin tuna, fresh caught and never frozen before being canned in olive oil and usually a little sea salt. It’s not cheap; six ounces may set you back \$15 or more. But you’ll never go back, either. This silky, delectable protein can go



straight from the can onto a salad or sandwich—no mayonnaise or any other fillers necessary. Buy more than one can, and for a

few meals you’ll be transported right back to the Sicilian coastline.

To buy: Believe it or not, one of the finest canned tunas, *Tre Torri* from Trapani, can be ordered on Amazon.com!

Olive Oil

You might associate Italian olive oil with *Tuscany* or *Puglia*, especially the latter because of its enormous, ancient olive trees, but there are plenty of groves filled with healthy olive trees in Sicily, too—and quite a few fantastic olive oils to try made from those trees.

One of the most interesting is made at the *Il Giardino di Kolymbetra*, an ancient Greek water reservoir next to the ancient Greek monuments at *Agrigento*. One of the olive trees here is rumored to be nearly 900 years old. Support from the *Fondo Ambiente Italiano*, or Italian National Trust, allows the Garden to harvest the crops grown in its microclimatic perfection and turn them into products like a smooth, buttery olive oil that is completely organic—and a part of history, too.

To buy: You may have to visit the park in order to get this oil, but it’s worth it. www.visitfai.it/giardinodellakolymbetra



Sicilian tuna



Guest Editor: Bethanne Patrick

Bethanne Patrick is the author and guest editor of this special report on Highlights of Sicily. Patrick is also the Executive Editor of *Dream of Italy* and traveled to Sicily in June to research this issue. She never knew how lush and green and varied the Sicilian countryside is, or how friendly its people are. Patrick’s favorite souvenir of her trip is a *trinacria* pendant (see our article on symbols in this issue) made out of *Trapani* salt dough tinted a true Italian red, but she’s still sorry she didn’t buy the biggest *cassata* in the *Palermo* airport to bring home and share with her family.

named “God’s Kitchen.”

Sicily Through Its

Today Sicily is officially part of Italy—but don't try to tell Sicilians that they are the same as Italians. The island has a long, rich history and a deep, complex culture that has many ties to the mainland, but remains separate and distinctive even in the 21st century. Although after the Italian Unification in 1860 some differences were downplayed, the post-World-War-II autonomous regional status granted to Sicily encouraged Sicilians to once again fly their flag. 🌿🌿 On that flag is the Sicilian *trinacria*, a symbol we'll describe further in a moment. The thing to note here is that Sicily's character can be seen in its colorful, storied symbols, each one representing history, culture and resources.

The Trinacria

Sometimes known as the *triskelion*, this pictograph consists of a head of Medusa, the mythological gorgon representing excellence, with hair made out of snakes; three ears of wheat, or corn to represent fertility; and three legs, each bent at the knee, in a pattern suggesting rotation and circularity.



In Sicily, those three legs are meant to represent the three points of the island's triangle; even the ancient Greek poet Homer referred to Sicily with the word *thrinakie*, meaning three-peaked. Those three points consist of three large capes equidistant from each other, pointing in their respective directions, the names of which were *Pelorus*, *Pachynus* and *Lilybaeum*. In fact, Sicily probably received the trinacria from the ancient Greeks, specifically from Crete.

Although there are many historical guesses about the origin and meaning

of the three-legged motif, no one has precise answers. We do know that the Spartans used a three-legged circular symbol on their battle shields to represent strength, and we also know that the motif has been adopted and adapted by other cultures, from the Manx (the Normans brought it to them from Sicily), the Danish and the Celtic peoples.

Visitors will find the trinacria sculpted in stone, baked in ceramics, molded out of dough, carved from wood, and stitched on silk.

The Fish

Truly Sicily's most representative fish would be the *sarduzza* or *nunnata*, depending on which dialect you favor—in English, that's just plain old "whitebait," meaning the immature versions of sardines and anchovies. While the older fish are eaten, too, and in preparations so numerous you could have nothing else every day on your Sicilian vacation without being bored, the "small fry" are considered a great delicacy because they can be eaten whole.

There's even a special Sicilian dish called *polpetti di neonata* that is a kind of whitebait meatball. While Sicilians love eating the *sarduzza*, they also love making representations of it, no

different from other cultures adoring statues of chickens, pigs or even wax fruit.



Fish is the mainstay of an island community like Sicily. Fresh sardines, completely unlike the canned varieties you might be used to in this country, abound, and are served fried, baked, broiled, stuffed, you name it; squid and octopus also show up prepared in many delicious ways—but don't forget seafood, from shrimp to clams and more, or ocean catch like swordfish, sea bream, and grouper, all tasting better than you've ever imagined this protein could.

The popular Italian "Feast of the Seven Fishes" Christmas Eve tradition may have originated in Sicily, although no one is really sure exactly how many fish dishes should be consumed (some say six, some seven, some even go up to 13 for Jesus Christ and his apostles). There's no danger that in Sicily there won't be a good selection of different types.

There are seven UNESCO

Symbols



The Fruits

It would be tough to choose just one fruit to represent Sicily. In another article in this month's issue, we mention citron, mulberries, olives, almonds, and grapes—but what about the India fig, the prickly pear, the *chinotto*, the orange, and the peaches grown on the slopes of Etna that cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world?

Ripe, sweet fruit is a nearly universal human symbol of abundance, and Sicily's green, green valleys crammed with orchard trees in neat rows, the healthiest grapevines you'll ever see, and hothouses nurturing citrus provide so many varieties of fruit that it's surprising the cornucopia symbol didn't start there.



Many of the fruits came to the island from other places, an excellent reminder of the historical layers in Sicily's past—but even if some oranges come from Valencia, the Sicilian sun and soil make the oranges grown there absolutely unforgettable. On one hand, poverty and infrastructure mean that many Sicilians eat locally whether they want to or not; on the other hand, the superb produce means that when they do eat locally, they're eating better than we who dine on imported melons.

Be sure to try the *tabaccheria* peaches, often called "donut peaches" here, as well as the lesser-known citrus fruits, including the chinotto, which some

foodies know from the *San Pellegrino* soda that highlights its bittersweet, nearly cola-like flavor. Chinotto fruit is usually smaller, rounder, and slightly lumpier than a clementine.

The Towers

Sicily's coastline is full of towers, whether they're structures built as a



kind of early-warning system against pirates, parts of castles, or integrated into churches and fortress walls. Early settlers, including the Phoenicians, built some; Romans added on; Arabs built others; Normans constructed in their own style; and the Bourbons did the same.

Sometimes a single building has towers from more than one of these eras, all of them showing how difficult it is to defend a place with three points sitting in the middle of two seas and readily accessible to three continents. Today, towers look quaint and romantic, but for centuries they were the only way whoever was in charge of a particular Sicilian town could fend off a new wave of invaders.

Towers also provided pre-aeronautics Sicily with a means of surveying large amounts of coastline and farmland, which is why fortresses at places like *Erice* and *Cefalu* were so well maintained. While modern Sicilians may play up the quaint and romantic factors of their towers, their pride in

these structures shows that deep down they understand the part they played in the island's past.

The Volcano

Mount Etna is probably the best-known symbol of Sicily—and one of its most potent symbols, too. The active stratovolcano (meaning a volcano made of alternating layers of lava and ash, which gives them their unique cone shape) is called *Muncibeddu* ("beautiful mountain") in local dialect and considered a living, breathing organism.



The largest active volcano in Europe, currently standing about 10,910 feet makes it by far the largest of the three active volcanoes in Italy, being nearly three times the height of the next largest, *Mount Vesuvius*. Mount Etna is one of the most active volcanoes in the world and is in an almost constant state of eruption. The most recent was in 2007.

Although Etna has never wreaked the kind of sudden havoc that Vesuvius did on *Pompeii*, its fitful slumbers mean that seismologists never know exactly how its next eruption will transpire. But what the volcano threatens—and sometimes takes away, as it did in the historic 1669 eruption—it also gives back. Wine made from Etna-cultivated vines has intense minerality and acidity, completely different from other Sicilian whites and reds.

World Heritage sites on Sicily.

you're part of the family for the time you're there.

Duca di Castelmonte

Via Salvatore Motisi, 3

Trapani

(39) 0923 526139

www.ducadicastelmonte.it

Rates: In high season, a night with breakfast only starts at 50€ per person and with half-board, it is 73€. Dinner alone costs 25€ per person.



Utter Simplicity in Ragusa

After a devastating 1693 earthquake, *Ragusa* divided into the Upper Town, and *Ragusa Ibla*, reached by winding roads or stairways.

It's not the easiest place in Sicily to visit or the most famous, but for fans of history and architecture it holds many jewels, especially its over-the-top Baroque cathedral, the *Duomo di San Giorgio*.



Ragusa Ibla

Across town, through a beautiful public garden, lies a hotel that might not satisfy travelers in search of *rococo* indulgence. However, the *Hotel Antico Convento* made from the old Capuchin monastery has severely gorgeous appointments. Even if your room doesn't have much in it beyond a bed and a chair, your linens are exquisite and your views of the *Val di Noto* that surrounds Ragusa unparalleled.

If you still crave a little activity after a day or two visiting the 18 UNESCO Heritage Sites in the towns, the hotel complex has a cooking academy, *Scuola Nosco*, where guests can learn the secrets of Sicilian and Ragusan cuisine, including baking, pasta making and seafood recipes. However, many people may prefer to simply sit back and enjoy the fruits of the more

serious students' (there are several courses offered for chefs in training, including a four-month *stage*) labors at the *Ristorante Cenobio* on site.

But there's more to this school, of historical interest: It may be the only culinary school created by episcopal decree. The Bishop of Ragusa deeded the school section of the convent in his will to the city of Ragusa on the condition that it be used to keep the beautiful 17th-century building in active use, and that it also keep a sort of "Mediterranean dialogue" open that is central to the hearts of Ragusa's people and surroundings.

Hotel Antico Convento

Giardino Ibleo

V.le Margherita, 41

Ragusa Ibla

(39) 347 1472915

www.anticokonventoibla.it

Rates: From 74€ for a single room with breakfast.

Pastoral Luxury at Donnafugata

In what might be the ultimate indulgence, the *Duc d'Arezzo's* spare Renaissance villa remains a private residence in the middle of Sicily's most gorgeous and sophisticated resort. When the *Donnafugata* wine family bought the acres from the *Arezzos*, they went along with these provisos, and good for them: The land and location would be worth giving the nobleman his own private pool if he so demanded.



Donnafugata Golf Resort

The Donnafugata Winery is a family-owned business (read more about the vineyard in the November 2006 issue

of *Dream of Italy*); at the winery itself, numerous photos of owner *José Rallo*, her husband, children and grandchildren grace the walls. The Rallos are transforming how Sicilian wine is marketed and with this new resort, they're also changing the way Sicily is marketed for destination events and conferences.

Set on a gentle hill in *Torre di Piombo*, the *Donnafugata Golf Resort and Spa* has everything any resort aficionado could want, from a trendy yet elegant lobby that's a great spot for evening cocktails, to a plush spa featuring some of the most gorgeous treatment rooms on the planet, to villas that will allow couples, families or groups of girlfriends to relax together in spacious comfort.

Options for meals help, too; anyone who has ever visited a resort knows that there can be dining-room fatigue. At Donnafugata, there's a beautiful stone dining room for breakfast, a sunny Clubhouse with terrace for lunch, a hip wine bar for light meals, and *Il Carrubo*, a restaurant specializing in local Ragusan recipes, for dinner.

A number of conversation lounges, a media room, a game room including backgammon and chess tables, and several other public areas ensure that

family or friendship groups will be able to find quiet time away from their suites.

Donnafugata Golf Resort and Spa

Contrada Piombo

Ragusa

(39) 0932 914200

www.donnafugatatagolfresort.com

Rates: Standard doubles from 250€ per night, including breakfast.



1€ = \$1.11 at press time

Sicily is home to hundreds of castles.