



# Sicily



## Tour de Pasta

A Gastronomer's Tour  
of Sicily

by Ellen Barone



Last May, I went to Sicily to eat — or so it seemed. Ordinarily I don't plan my vacations around food, but the brochure made it sound so simple and appealing. "Delicious seafood feasts, cooking demonstrations with Sicilian chefs, elegant stays in seaside villas, and spectacular coastal vistas." In spite of being a bicycling trip, it sounded perfect. What better way to immerse myself in Sicily's multi-faceted and intense personality than rolling through its archeological past on a bike? Seemed a good way to keep the calories from piling on as well.

So it was that I headed off for Sicily, a land of hillside vineyards and pistachio groves, stunning beauty, savory cuisine, passionate culture, fiery Mt. Etna and the exotic Aeolian Islands just off its coast. For eight glorious days I would leave behind the frantic pace of daily life, rejuvenating both my body and soul on what I came to call the "Tour de Pasta."

One of Sicily's best-kept secrets is its ancient and distinguished gastronomic tradition. Eating in Sicily engages all the senses: sight, smell, taste, touch and—if you're anywhere near the kitchen—sound. A Sicilian kitchen, one of the foremost in Italy, is bursting with flavor, color, fragrance, and high drama. Luscious vegetables that flavor many of the pasta sauces and main courses grow throughout the island. Delicious tangerines, blood and navel oranges, grapefruit, lemons and mandarins—superior to those sold elsewhere in Italy—are sublime eaten alone and are regular protagonists in every part of the meal. Exotic combinations of nuts, fruit, fish, herbs, and bread produce dishes of unself-conscious sophistication. They flavor memorable *primi* using pasta, rice, and couscous.

From the start, I was amazed at the quantities of food we put away. There was always much more than we could possibly eat. At one such meal, pasta was the first course; fettuccine in tomato sauce. Then came a salad of celery, onions, parsley, anchovies, oregano, locally grown green olives and olive oil; also a wheel of pecorino cheese made from sheep's milk. "Sicilian flavors," said the proud restaurant owner as he passed a platter of lamb and potatoes roasted in rosemary and opened a bottle of the best Regaleali red. Then coffee appeared, with a cake of sweetened ricotta and a blackberry tart. "Really, it's all too much," someone said.

"Yes," the owner agreed. "But what would you leave out?"

The largest and most fertile island in the Mediterranean, Sicily has invariably been somebody else's prize. The remains of the island's many calamities are strewn across the landscape, a spectacular flea market of the Mediterranean civilization. Paleolithic cave paintings have been found, as have the remains of a Neolithic man. The island was first overrun by the Sicels, an ancient people who left many stone tombs and the root of the island's name. The Greeks arrived in the eighth century BC, establishing important colonies and monumental works of architecture, primarily in the form of temples and theaters. After the Greeks were the Phoenicians, then the Romans followed by the Byzantines. Next were the Arabs, responsible for a flourishing legacy of agriculture, who were driven off by the Normans, who left behind castles, cathedrals and blue-eye genes, to be replaced by the French, then the Spanish. Finally, the Italians came, and then the Germans, who in 1943 were driven off by the Allies, who followed almost the same exact invasion plan used by the Arabs in 827 AD.

Sicily's landscape of ancient olive groves, vast wheat fields and copious fruit orchards reveals layers of history. The Greeks brought Sicily's most famous crop—olives—grafting their cuttings onto native bushes. The Romans planted durum wheat, which today is used for the semolina flour in the pasta that the Sicilians learned from the Italians and the couscous they learned from the Arabs. But it was the Arabs who were responsible for the greening of the sometimes arid island. They brought date palms, sugarcane, lemons, oranges, and melons.

Just as Sicily itself has been formed by its unique history of almost continual occupation by foreign forces and influences, so has this history had an inevitable influence on shaping the native cuisine of the island. Any meal in Sicily is a journey through time. Seafood couscous, a dish generally associated with North Africa, is considered one of the most Sicilian of dishes, as is *pasta con de sarde*—pasta with sardines, pine nuts, and raisins. And nothing is more Sicilian than the blending of sugar and ground native almonds, learned from the Arabs. This almond paste, known as *pasta reale* but more familiar to us as marzipan, brightens shelves and windows in the form of richly colored imitation strawberries, lemons, eggplants, corn, sausage, cheese and religious scenes. There is nothing that Sicilians will not reproduce in almond paste.

If you tell your friends you're going to Sicily, you are warned: watch your wallet, be careful of the Mafia, stay in

at night. But after several days, I realized that in this land of conquests, of thousands of years of colonization, the people have no fear of strangers. They had welcomed most of the conquering armies, and they welcomed us.

As we pedaled the winding, narrow streets of ancient villages dressed in our Day-Glo cycling jerseys and space-age helmets, we were greeted with friendly smiles. Apron-clad women waved hello from wrought iron balconies. Men in their 60's and older smiled curiously at us as they sat in groups around the piazza, appearing rather dapper, dressed in crisply ironed shirts, sweater vests, tailored jackets, and wool caps. At a ceramics shop in Caltagirone, where the shelves were stacked with goods made on a wheel and kiln in the back, the owner, after a brief conversation, asked me if I would look after the store for 10 minutes. "Si," I feebly answered. She grabbed a shawl and was gone for 10 Sicilian minutes—half an hour—while I dealt with customers.

Although rigorous, our route was as idyllic and picturesque as I envisioned. We cycled through roadsides thick with a vivid explosion of flowers. We passed soft green almond groves, terraced vineyards and fruit orchards abundant in the rich volcanic soil, while the white blossoms of the citrus groves filled the air with a fragrant perfume. The narrow, rural roads twisted through small towns and underneath high walls, past gates offering a glimpse of aging villas, alongside brightly colored and unpretentious gardens shaded by tall chestnuts and spreading magnolias. In town, wisteria blossoms dripped like early grapes from railings and balconies, window boxes bulged with color, and market stalls displayed pyramids of large yellow lemons, oranges, melons and vine-ripened tomatoes.

Upon arrival in Taormina, one of Italy's most stunning hill-towns renowned for its magnificent position above the Ionian Sea and celebrated view of Mount Etna, we learned that Etna was erupting. One of the most active volcanoes on earth and, at nearly 11,000 feet, the largest in Europe, it dominates the landscape. The smoking crater was belching gas and spewing ashes down the mountainside, leaving a gentle coating of ash.

One of the great beauty spots of Europe, Taormina is one of Sicily's principal tourist destinations. Like the throngs of tourists that visit Taormina, the ancient Greeks knew a perfect spot when they saw one. It was they who created Taormina's most dramatically sited amphitheatre, hewn from solid rock on the crest of a steep hill, affording not only superb acoustics, but also a spectacular and awe-

inspiring view across to smoldering Etna and to the pounding sea below.

But it was under a gray sky and gentle rain that I climbed to the top of the theatre's steps, and neither Etna nor the sea was in view. So without a photograph of the celebrated scene, I trudged back to the hotel. But my spirits were soon lifted at Ristorante da Nino, near Taormina, where we had a delicious array of antipasti followed by seafood pasta and grilled swordfish and one of the best wines I've ever enjoyed. The carafe of vino sfuso—anonymous 'open wine'—was exceedingly fresh and intensely fruity, and it went so perfectly with the robustly flavored foods. It was all you could ask for in a wine. We drank a litre, then another...

The last three days of our Italian bicycle sojourn were spent in Italy's Aeolian Islands, only 22 miles off the northeastern coast of Sicily. Born of fire and burnished in myth, the Aeolians have nurtured human culture for almost 6,000 years. Homer wrote that Aeolus, master of winds, ruled the seven islands: Lipari, Vulcano, Salina, Panarea, Stromboli, Filicudi, and Alicudi. Today, elemental ruggedness, including two active volcanoes, helps preserve a timeless aura despite proximity to the mainland.

Writing some 2,800 years ago, Homer sent war-weary Odysseus to a "floating island" —probably Lipari, our basecamp—ringed by a smooth wall of cliffs. There Aeolus, god of wind, comforted the wanderer with "numberless dishes," and the music of flutes. But things ended badly after Odysseus' men opened a sack of wind and Aeolus banished them.

But Aeolus smiled on us as we arrived by hydrofoil to the small harbor of Lipari, the largest and most populous of the Aeolians, and also the name of the island's chief town. Colorful fishing dories filled the harbor as grizzled fishermen in yellow, rubber boots and wool caps sat gossiping while mending nets on the harbor wall. Open-air cafes ringed the port beckoning passengers from the stream of ferries that stop on their continuous loop around the islands.

A sheer wall of lava topped by a stone fortress, the Castello, dominates the town of Lipari. Its soaring flanks jut aggressively into the water a few feet from the harbor. Each strand of the island's history has left its ghostly mark behind in the Castello's stones. You enter through an early-twelfth-century Norman gate, but the fortress itself was begun by the Greeks in the fourth century BC. Inside are



A picnic lunch aboard a tour boat in the scenic Aeolian Islands indulges in the abundance of fresh produce from the fertile island of Sicily.



The bounty of the sea in all its variety is a staple of Sicilian cooking.

This spring-fed fountain has been supplying a continuous flow of refreshing water for nearly two centuries, near Buccheri, Sicily.





the remains of a Bronze Age settlement, part of a Roman town, a heavily restored Baroque cathedral, and a rather gloomy Norman cloister. The whole compound is enclosed in massive walls built by the Spanish more than four hundred years ago. On each level of the tightly truncated fortress walls are represented mind-boggling leaps of time: six thousand years of Aeolian life, civilization upon civilization.

Riding out of the twisted alleyways and pastel buildings of town revealed a hilly interior with sweeping views of the sea, sparkling azure and turquoise before the distant deep green of Vulcano and Salina. Colorful fishing villages reminiscent of another century dot the island's shoreline.

Between boat excursions to the islands of Stromboli — famous for its active volcano and mediocre film by the same name starring Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini — and Panarea, our stay on Lipari settled into a comfortable routine; explore, eat, sleep (not necessarily in that order). Siesta is a time-honored and sacred tradition on the island, and after our initial days of heavy cycling, it was one to which we adapted quite enthusiastically.

Our evening meals were served at the multi-generational Ristorante Filipino, a restaurant with its own fishing fleet and a menu of infinite variety. Partaking of so many elegant seafood meals and airy desserts, we were reminded of Aeolus' "numberless dishes." Each evening, the chef would acquaint us with the exact spot our meal was caught. "In the Aeolians, fish are like people—each has its favorite hangout," he said with a smile.

I'm fond of my life in the States. But sitting one lazy afternoon on Lipari, beneath the shade of an isolated lemon tree, looking out at the unruffled expanse of the Mediterranean, while sipping Malvasia — the island's sweet, honey-colored passito wine — with an amiable farmer, it was tempting to trade it all for an Aeolian place in the sun.



## Tour

A guided boat tour of the Aeolian Islands includes a refreshing swim in the emerald waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea.



## When to go

The best months are March, April, May, June, September, October and November. In March it is possible to combine swimming with skiing in the region of Etna. In April and May, the wild flowers are at their best. Passports are necessary for all British and American travelers entering Italy.

### Getting there

The two main airports in Sicily are in Palermo and Catania. From the U.S. fly first to Milan or Rome, before changing to a connecting flight. Ferry services to the Aeolian Islands run at regular intervals and operate several different routes year round. I found the best rates flying American Airlines (800-433-7300) to Milan, then Alitalia (800-233-5730) to Catania. Note: The time in Sicily is six hours ahead of New York and nine hours ahead of Los Angeles.

Ciclismo Classico: Specialists in Italian active (walking/bicycling) tours: 30 Marathon Street, Arlington, MA 02474; 800-866-7314 or [www.ciclismoclassico.com](http://www.ciclismoclassico.com)