

The Food of SICILY

It seems appropriate that I am beginning to write this essay on Sicilian food at my mother's house. Three of my four Sicilian grandparents were born in Sicily, so I can say with some confidence that I was raised in a Sicilian household on Sicilian food. There was lots of fish including stuffed sardines, stuffed squid, fish soup with stripped bass, fresh flounder, or cod; broiled mackerel, marinated cold mackerel, tuna, or swordfish. Soups included fresh pea soup, dried pea soup and chicken soup. Many of these dishes were garnished with Locatelli Romano cheese (those not acclimated to its aroma claim they can smell it a block away). That is not to say that my mother could not resist some of the 1950s and 60s fancy new convenience foods once in a while.

My father was trained by the Army to be a cook, and usually did the Sunday dinner cooking-the "special" meals like a lamb roast, or a flank steak, or a roasted chicken. This type of food was special because it was American, and anything American was better than anything Italian. The majority of the food I ate as a child was made from scratch, including bread, pizza, and lots of fish.

The big culinary event of the year for our family (that was not associated with a holiday) was getting together with some of the really good cooks in my mother's family during the summer and having a cuscusu (couscous) feast. Preparing cuscusu was so complicated that my mother would not attempt it herself until instant couscous-just add water and boil- became available in stores in the 1970s.

Cuscusu is the apex of Arab-Sicilian cuisine; its successful preparation is considered the height of culinary art. Preparing cuscusu is a long, involved process. It can take four to five hours from start to finish.

The starting point for all couscous recipes is the same. Semolina grains are slowly poured into a large, round terra-cotta dish with sloping sides called a mafaradda and formed into small pellets by hand. The process of raking, rolling, aerating, and forming the pellets is called incocciata by the Sicilians.

The difference between Sicilian cuscusu and North African couscous is that the Sicilian version is always made with fish and seasoned with bay leaves,

while the North African type is made with lamb and seasoned with red pepper.

When the couscous pellets are formed they are then steamed over boiling fish broth in a couscoussiere (a steamer made especially for this purpose). The fish broth is made using a three-to-one ratio of white fish to oily fish. The fish used to make the broth is not eaten. Small fish, shrimp, and in our family octopus were cooked up and eaten with the cuscusu. The kids in our family were really grossed-out to see a whole baby octopus being eaten by one of the adults.

In a strange twist on the parental interview of new friends and possible girlfriends, my mother would subject these innocent non-Italians (I never had any Italian friends or love-interests) to a typical Sicilian meal to test their character and endurance for exotic fare. One of these interview/meals might include pasta con le Sarde (pasta with sardines and fried bread crumbs), “dry pizza” (pizza with anchovies, chunks of Romano cheese and spices-no sauce of any kind), and if they passed those culinary hurdles they were strongly encouraged to try stuffed calamari (squid) or the ultimate test: cold squid salad made with sliced squid and very prominent whole purple squid tentacles.

Needless to say, the few friends I had were loyal, had a well-developed palette, and were fed well when they visited. However, there were a large number of once-only dates in my teenage years. I started to smarten up in my “old age.” When I was about 19 I had a girlfriend who was Swedish. I never let her get near my house. We would meet at her house where she would make Swedish chocolate chip crepes stuffed with strawberries and cream. It was not new and unusual food, but the rest of the evening always involved something new and exciting.

This is all by way of saying that food was important in my family, as it is in Sicily, and Sicilian food is not the same as Italian food.

Sicilians eat much more dried pasta than fresh pasta or macaroni. Their sauces are simple, using tomatoes, basil, herbs and nuts. The cream and butter-based sauces that are popular in northern Italy are virtually unheard of in the south. Olive oil is extensively used, beef and chicken are used much less than in the north.

Today Sicily has the most varied and developed antipasto course in all of Italy. It is served as a series of dishes, both warm and at room temperature, with the emphasis on the play of contrasting flavors. This type of antipasto table is modeled on the old Renaissance antipasto, which was developed for the noble families of Italy. It has survived best in Sicily, having been much simplified in other regions

In Sicily the diet is strongly based on grains, vegetables, and fish. Meats and game are available, but often used in very special dishes, not everyday ones. Swordfish and tuna are the fish most frequently eaten.

Sicilian vegetable dishes are usually elaborate preparations, often with many ingredients added to the main vegetable to create complex flavors. Among the vegetables most stressed are eggplant, zucchini, peppers, cauliflower, broccoli and artichoke. And after Tuscany, Sicily offers the greatest variety of dishes using beans, especially the ancient Mediterranean ones, favas, chickpeas and lentils.

Sicilian bread is generally of very high quality because of the wonderful nutty flavor of the famous Sicilian wheat. Generally the bread is dusted with sesame or fennel seeds. The island has a wide variety of stuffed pizzas and focacce, called scacciate or panate.

The Arabs introduced the art of making confections, combining nuts and fruits with sugar and honey. Because of the mystical, ritualistic and religious connotations attached to sweets, the convents and monasteries of Sicily became the prime repositories of Arab-based desserts. Today the production of desserts has passed from the convents and monasteries to the commercial pastry shops.

The ingredients in traditional Sicilian desserts include candied citron, orange and other fruits, almonds, walnuts and pistachios, marzipan, sheep's milk ricotta, jasmine and orange essence, homemade bread crumbs, eggs and Marsala wine. The cakes often include ground nuts in the flour, and are often heavier in texture than normal cakes.

Desserts developed in the 19th century are based on creams, chocolate and butter, and are often French adaptations of lighter pastries from Florentine Renaissance cooking.

Historical Time Line of Sicily

- 650 B.C. The Siculi, the Socani, and the Elymi are the first known inhabitants of Sicily.
- 735 B.C. The first Greek settlement is established at Naxos.
- 734 B.C. Greeks from Corinth settle the colony of Siracusa. Honey, ricotta, figs, hazelnuts, walnuts, grapes, and pomegranates arrive with the Corinthians.
- 201 B.C. The Punic Wars give control of Sicily to the Roman Republic. Exports of wheat and barley to Rome earn Sicily the nickname “Granary of Rome.” Cherries, plums, and citron are imported from Asia.
- 535 Sicily is annexed to the Byzantine Empire.
- 807 The North African Arabs found the Mattanza—the ritual trapping and killing of bluefin tuna.
- 827 The Saracens conquer Sicily.
- 902 The Saracens plant sugarcane, citrus, rice, bananas, mulberries, date palms, pistachios, watermelon, and apricots. They figure out how to make ice cream. Irrigation methods are instituted in Sicily. Agriculture flourishes.
- 1060 The Norman Conquest begins, led by brothers Roger and Robert Hauteville.
- 1091 All of Sicily and the Calabrian Peninsula fall to Norman rule.
- 1189 Norman rule ends. Henry VI of Swabia claims the throne on behalf of his wife, Constance.
- 1268 Swabian rule ends. Pope Clement IV invests Charles, Count of Anjou and Provence, with the crown of Sicily.
- 1282 A French soldier insults a Sicilian maiden on her way into church for Vesper services. This event begins the popular uprising known as the Sicilian Vespers, leading to the eventual end of French rule.
- 1302 The Treaty of Caltabellota gives control of Sicily to Spain under King Peter of Aragon.
- 1492 The Spanish Inquisition forces the expulsion of Jews from Sicily. With the Jews goes Sicily’s thriving sugar industry. Chocolate, squash, tomatoes, peppers, and cactus are brought to Sicily from Mexico on Spanish ships.
- 1535 Pastry making takes hold in the kitchens of convents and monasteries.
- 1713 Sicily is turned over to the Duke of Savoy in the Spanish War over Succession.
- 1716 Savoyard rule ends. The Treaty of The Hague gives control of Sicily to Austria.
- 1734 Charles V of Bourbon claims the throne on behalf of Spain.
- 1767 Ferdinand I, son of Charles V, inherits the throne of Sicily and rules from Naples.

- 1805 The Royal Court relocates to Palermo. French chefs arrive to cater to the needs of the court.
- 1816 The Kingdoms of Naples and Sicily are united to form the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Corruption is at an all-time high.
- 1860 Sicily is liberated from Spanish rule by Giuseppe Garibaldi.
- 1861 Sicily is unified with Italy.

The Greek colony of Siracusa, on the southeast coast of Sicily, was founded in 734 B.C. by a group of Corinthians. To these rich but largely uncultivated lands, the colonists introduced grapes, figs, pomegranates, wheat, walnuts, and hazelnuts. They planted olive trees and vineyards, building a considerable reputation for Sicilian wines. Native bees were making honey that the Greeks used as offerings to their goddess Aphrodite. The rich pastures supported sheep and goats whose milk was made into the cheese we know today as ricotta.

Writings from this period document sweets called *dulcis in fundo*, made of honey, nuts, milk, and flour, served with baskets of fresh fruit and sweet wine at the end of a meal. The Greeks made a very sweet wine called *Malvasia* using dried and fresh grapes crushed together. The Greeks in Sicily also made custard of ricotta; honey and eggs called *tyropatinum*, a sweet version of the modern Greek cheese pie known as *tyropita*.

The colonies continued to grow and prosper, particularly Siracusa, which eventually extended its domain over the whole southeastern corner of Sicily. Throughout the island, the settlers constructed *horti*: vegetable gardens fenced in with stone walls that were the predecessor of the present day kitchen gardens called *orti*.

Under the control of the Roman Republic Sicily lost much of the prosperity it had enjoyed. Then, under the Roman Empire, Sicily settled into a period of peaceful prosperity. The Romans planted hard durham wheat, turning the island into the Empire's granary. Hard durham wheat is the secret of superior pastas. They also planted fava beans, and grapes to make Mamertino wine. Pliny the Elder wrote that Ceres taught milling and breadmaking in Sicily, and that is why she was considered a goddess.

Augustus and Hadrian encouraged the development of agriculture. The Roman general Lucullus imported cherries, plums, and citrons from Asia

Minor to accompany the cardamon, ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg and allspice in use by the Romans.

In 827 A.D. ten thousand Saracen troops landed in Sicily's west coast and established a foothold on the island. By 878 they had conquered Palermo, Messina, Enna and Siracusa. They moved the capital from Siracusa to Palermo, where it remains today. Even now, the western part of Sicily is casually referred to as "the Arab side," while the east is thought of as "the Greek side."

The Arabs introduced new cash crops, including cotton, linen, rice, and sugarcane. Land was divided into small plots, and new irrigation channels aided intensive farming.

Lush gardens of lemons, bitter orange, bananas, date palms, pistachios, mulberries, watermelon, apricots, and tangerines flourished in the horti left by the Greeks. Flowering jasmine, roses, and bergamot provided the flavoring for the exotic beverages the Arabs enjoyed, which they discovered could be mixed with the snow of Mount Etna to create ices, or sharbat (known as sherbet today). The two most famous desserts of Sicily, cannoli and cassata, trace their roots back to the period of the Saracen occupation. Saffron, cinnamon, cloves, sesame and other exotic spices brought new tastes into the island's kitchens. The Arabs started the tuna hunts, introduced couscous and marzapane (marzipan), and may have brought coffee to Sicily at this time. Arabic became the official language, and today many famous Sicilian dishes have Arabic names: the ricotta cake Cassata takes its name from the quas'ta, a big round pan in which it is made, and Cubbaita, the torrone made with honey, sesame seeds and almonds, comes from the Arabic qubbayt. The Arab geographer Idrisi noted that vermicelli were being made here as early as A.D. 1154 – a century before the birth of Marco Polo.

Although many traditional Sicilian dishes are termed Arab legacies, it is more accurate to say that they were born in Sicily and incorporate both Sicilian and Arab traditions. The Pasticcio di Pollo of the Emir of Catania is a good example, since it contains olives, capers, and other ingredients introduced prior to the Arab conquest but reflects the Arabic penchant for stuffed foods as well as the use of pistachio nuts.

The Arabs also influenced meal structure. Although most Italians insist on a first course of pasta or rice followed by a meat or fish dish, under the Arabs, Sicilians acquired a repertory of one-dish meals such as Riso al Forno or baked rice casserole.

The Norman Conquest began in 1060, led by brothers Roger and Robert Hauteville. These meat-and-potato men left the austerity of the north for a southern land bathed in sunshine and all the virtues and vices of the east. The many remnants of Arab culture in Sicily owe much to the Normans, who embraced their adopted culture while making few additions of their own.

His son Roger II succeeded Roger in 1112. His court was multilingual, speaking French, Greek and Arabic. He hired Arab chefs to prepare Arab food and retained Arab artisans to work alongside Norman architects and Byzantine mosaicists to create the dazzling Royal Palace in Palermo. In one hundred years the Normans were responsible for establishing a singular culture of immense splendor.

In the twelfth century the court of Frederick II became a bastion of high culture (the *scuola siciliana* of poetry greatly influenced Dante), and this was a time when class distinctions became entrenched. Even today two separate traditions of high and low cuisine persist. During the thirteenth century, Sicily and Naples were joined by arrangement of the pope under the French house of Anjou, and high cuisine took on some decidedly Gallic touches. *Farsumagru*, stuffed beef rolls, Sicily's undisputed premier meat dish was first called *rollo*, derived from the French *roule*.

In the Middle Ages, strict secrecy was employed by cooks, physicians, and alchemists regarding potentially lucrative formulas. Few, if any, recorded recipes survive from that time.

Sugar fortunes were made during the 1400s by the Jews, who managed its cultivation and exportation through the spice route from Damascus to Venice, through the Straits of Messina. The Spanish Inquisition of 1493 ended the sugar industry when the Jews were expelled from Sicily.

The influx of Spanish nobility under the House of Aragon expanded the ranks of Sicilian aristocracy. They developed a taste for the showy and

ostentatious embellishments of the Baroque period and, to a large extent with the Sicily of modern times.

By the early 1500s, cucina baronale had taken hold in the kitchens of the aristocracy. This is when the tomato and chocolate found their way into the Sicilian pantry. The town of Modica in the southeast corner of Sicily became the center of chocolate production because it was populated by aristocrats who could afford the ancient and very expensive chocolate-making methods, which have remained unchanged to this day.

Ships from the New World brought squash and cactus. Cactus fruit, called prickly pear in America, is known as fichi d'India, or Indian figs, in Sicily, and is a favorite for eating raw after a meal.

Maria Carolina, the wife of Ferdinand I and the sister of Marie Antoinette imported French chefs to the royal court in Palermo in 1805. These chefs became known as monzu, a corruption of the word monsieur. Gradually the Sicilians and Neapolitans who had apprenticed under the French monzu took over the kitchens and continued to bear the prestigious title.

Probably more than anywhere else, the wealthy convents and monasteries of Palermo and Catania have been responsible for preserving the traditions of Sicilian pastry making.

Spanish rule ended in 1860 when Garibaldi's "thousand Redshirts" entered Sicily to lead a populist overthrow of the corrupt Bourbon government. Naples fell five months later, and the unification of Italy was achieved.

SICILY TODAY

Sicily has gained more autonomy from mainland Italy since the end of World War II, but it has also faced many obstacles – an intrusive bureaucracy, Mafia interference, lingering ties with a defunct feudal system, and devastating earthquakes – that have hampered progress and economic stability. To make ends meet many women now work outside of the home and depend on family (usually a grandmother) to look after the children. Yet urban Sicilians are struggling to hold onto traditional ways. Many prepare homemade meals and drive to the country to buy wine, olive oil, and fresh vegetables from local growers. Those with country houses often have a garden and preserve their harvest for year-round consumption.

Regardless of economic circumstances, all Sicilians consider food a priority; they demand quality and often, especially during holidays, turn a blind eye to cost. Most people prefer a very simple cuisine using the flavors that the bountiful surrounding seas and strong Sicilian sun provide. Pristinely fresh fish particularly tuna, swordfish, octopus, squid, sardines, and anchovies constantly serve as a mainstay of the diet. Tomatoes, ripened to perfection in the intense sunshine, have a powerful full-bodied taste unlike any others, and sauces made with them give distinctive flavor to many favorite pasta and meat dishes. Vine-ripened tomatoes are available most of the year, but they are also sun-dried for the months when they are not. Likewise, olives and grapes are extraordinarily flavorful, and, in recent years, fine Sicilian olive oils and wines have received coveted international prizes.

THE SICILIAN PANTRY

Almonds

The almond was first cultivated by the Greeks in Sicily; it was revitalized later by the Arabs.

Amaretti

These crisp, almond-flavored cookies are used, crushed, in some meatball preparations.

Anchovies

Anchovies are frequently crushed and dissolved in oil as the foundation for many pasta sauces, with or without tomato. They are commonly used as a topping for pizza.

Aniseed

The Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans knew aniseed, but the Arabs introduced its cultivation in Sicily. In medieval times, Arab doctors used aniseed for the supposed medicinal properties.

Apricots

The Arabs introduced the apricot to Sicily. The word “apricot” derives from the Arabis al-berquq. Though both the Greeks and Romans knew of this fruit, combining it with meat or rice is an Arab and Persian tradition.

Artichokes

The artichoke was developed by the Arabs, or perhaps the Berbers, from the cardoon, a wild edible thistle that looks like celery and tastes like artichoke. The artichoke first appeared in Italy in Naples and then in Tuscany in 1446, but it was being grown in Sicily as early as 1290 in the kitchen gardens of Palermo.

Basil

Fresh basil is available in Sicily year-round. It is always added to a dish at the last minute, and most often paired with tomatoes, eggplant, or zucchini.

Bay leaf

Bay leaves grow all over Sicily and are often used when grilling.

Breadcrumbs

Sicilians use breadcrumbs to thicken sauces, to sprinkle over pasta and to add texture to many dishes.

Broccoli

Broccoli is called sparaceddi in Sicilian. Sparaceddi also refers to broccoli rabe or rapini. In Sicilian, green cauliflower is called broccoli, while white cauliflower is called vruculi.

Caciocavallo

Caciocavallo is a cow's milk cheese that can be eaten as a table cheese when young. Aging up to a year produces a sharper, harder cheese good for grating. Use the mild version in all recipes. Traditionally, the cheese is shaped in balls that are tied together, two by two, with raffia. Aged caciocavallo is grated and served with pasta as Parmesan is used on the Italian mainland.

Candied fruit

The Arabs taught the art of candying fruit to the Sicilians. The most common fruit used for candying are citrus fruit, specifically the peel.

Capers

The use of capers in Sicilian food goes back to the Greeks. Being a desert plant, the caper bush needs very little water or nutrients. The best Sicilian capers come from the island of Pantelleria. Sicilian capers are bigger and more strongly flavored than those from Provence, and are usually preserved

with salt rather than brine. Their pungent, almost peppery taste stands as one of the most characteristic flavors of Sicilian cooking.

Chickpeas

Dried chickpeas need to be soaked overnight and cooked at length.

Chickpea flower is used to make Panelle.

Chili peppers

Chili peppers are sometimes associated with the Arab influence by Sicilians, even though they came later from the New World, probably by way of Spain or Tunisia.

Cinnamon

Cinnamon is the inner layer of the bark of the cinnamon tree. An ancient spice, it was popularized by Arab traders in Sicily.

Currants

Called ribes, from the Arabic word for rhubarb, or uvette zante, currents are little black raisins. Palestinian Arabs may have introduced them to Sicily.

Eggplants

The Arabs around the late tenth century introduced the eggplant to Sicily. It did not become popular in the rest of Italy for another five hundred years. The best eggplants, according to Sicilians, are a variety known as the Tunisian eggplant, large egg-shaped and pale purple, which is very sweet and does not have to be salted before cooking. Tunisian eggplant is fried and combined with tomatoes, basil, ricotta salata, and pasta to make pasta alla Norma. Much of Sicily's eggplant is used to make caponata, a vinegary dish that can be put up at harvest time and enjoyed all winter long.

Estratto di pomodoro

This true Sicilian specialty is a dark red paste with a clay-like consistency, made by spreading salted tomato puree out onto large wooden boards to dry for two or three days in the sun until nearly all moisture has evaporated. Preserved under a layer of olive oil, estratto keeps in the refrigerator for several months. It is used in much the same way as tomato paste, yet it has a stronger, much more intense flavor.

Fava beans

The fava bean is an important food in Mediterranean societies. In Sicily the fava goes back to before the Greeks. Sicilians eat fava raw and in Frittedda, and raw served with pecorino cheese. Dried fava beans are used in soup called maccu, a staple of the peasant diet since antiquity.

Fennel

Wild Sicilian fennel has been an important ingredient in the cuisine since antiquity. It's found in numerous braises and pasta sauces and, most simply, sliced and served in a salad with citrus fruits and olives.

Figs

Fresh figs are popular and abundant in Sicily.

Garlic

Garlic is one of the four cornerstones of Sicilian flavor, along with onions, parsley, and oregano.

Lemons

The first mention of the lemon tree in any language dates from the beginning of the tenth century and is from an Arabic source. Sicilians are very fond of lemons, eating them raw with salt, in salad, in sherbet, and with meat and fish.

Marsala wine

Marsala wine is commonly found in chicken and meat dishes, yet also lends a particular sweetness and airiness to the dough for cannoli. Marsala is used to soak layers of sponge cake in the classic cassata alla Siciliana. Some of the drier Marsala wines are becoming increasingly popular as an aperitif.

Mint

Mint is used extensively in Middle Eastern cooking and in Sicily.

Nutmeg

Nutmeg is the kernel of the fruit of a tropical tree native to Southeast Asia. Sicilians use nutmeg to flavor pasta, fish sauces, and some vegetable preparations.

Olives and olive oil

Olive production did not suffer a setback under the Arabs, as some people claim. Since the olive is sacred in the Koran, it might be expected that the Arabs would greatly increase the number of olive trees in Sicily. But for some unknown reason the production of oil dipped in medieval Arab Sicily. The finest olive oil is cold-pressed extra-virgin olive oil. No heat-extraction process or chemicals are used in cold pressing, and in this first pressing the olive releases the purest oil with all its nutrients.

Olives come in a wide range of green and black hues. In Sicily, no dinner would be complete without a bowl of olives.

Onions

Onions were grown in abundance in Palermo, according to the tenth-century Arab traveler Ibn Hawqal. The Arabs considered onions to be an aphrodisiac.

Oranges

The orange was first introduced to Europe by the Arabs via Sicily. This was the bitter orange. The Arab emirs of Palermo created orangeries and used the bitter orange, lime, and shaddock for candying, preserves, and essence. In Sicily the sweet orange is known as the Portugal orange. Another orange grown in Sicily is the blood orange, called tarocco, ideal for orange salad.

Oregano

Oregano is a powerful flavoring in Sicilian cooking. It is always used dried, never fresh. Its leaves lend a strong, spicy flavor to sauces for grilled fish or roasted meat as well as pizza, pasta sauces, and chicken dishes.

Pancetta

Pancetta is Italian bacon.

Parsley

Parsley is used extensively in Sicilian cooking, both as a flavoring and as a garnish.

Pecorino

Fresh pecorino, a sheep's milk cheese, tastes similar to feta, though less salty. Aged pecorino is also common, usually grated over pasta or served with fresh raw fava beans.

Pine nuts

Pine nuts are an essential ingredient in cucina arabo-sicula. They are from the cone of the stone pine and are native to the Mediterranean. They are used in many sweet-and-sour dishes and fillings.

Pistachios

The Arabs introduced the pistachio in Sicily. Sicilians will tell you that the best variety is the pistachio di Sicilia, which comes from Bronte in the province of Catania.

Pomegranates

The pomegranate was first brought to Spain and Sicily by the Arabs to grace their pleasure gardens. It is an Asian bush that can attain a height of twenty feet.

Potatoes

Potatoes appear in frittate, salads, soups, and sauces, but are perhaps most widely acclaimed as the main ingredient in cazzilli, the cigar-shaped fried croquettes.

Raisins

Several kinds of raisins are used in Sicilian cooking.

Rice

The rice used in Sicilian cooking is Arborio or Vialone rice. Italians like their rice creamy; Sicilians like theirs al dente, with the grains more separate. It is used to make the well-loved street food called arancine ("little oranges"), fried balls of cooked rice stuffed with meat and peas or cheese or all three. Sicilians generally do not make risotto.

Ricotta

Ricotta is not a cheese but a creamy curd that has been cooked twice. Hence the name ricotta, literally, "recooked." The best ricotta is made with sheep's milk.

Saffron

Medieval Sicily, with its subtropical climate and loamy soil, was found to be ideal for growing saffron. The Arabs introduced it around the year 920.

Salt

Some culinary historians believe that the Arabs taught the Sicilians how to salt fish. Salt industries are today based around Trapani.

Sardines

Once among the most plentiful fish, have dwindled considerably as a result of over fishing in recent years. Nevertheless, they remain strongly identified with the cuisine, most notably in pasta con le sarde, the national dish that highlights Arab ingredients (pine nuts, currants, and saffron) as well as wild fennel greens.

Sesame seeds

Sesame seeds were introduced by the Arabs. They are often used on bread, in sauce, and for sweets.

Squash

Marrow or summer squash was cultivated in medieval Sicily in fields called nuara, a dialect word from the Arabic nowar. Today these squash are called zucca.

Sugar

The Arabs introduced sugar cane and sugar-milling techniques to Sicily. Cultivation was well established by the year 950. The sugar industry of Arab Sicily was centered at Palermo.

Sunflower-seed oil

The sunflower was introduced to Sicily by the Spaniards after its discovery in the New World, and now there are fields of sunflowers in Sicily.

Swordfish

Swordfish appears on nearly every menu in coastal cities and towns. Usually it is simply grilled, drizzled with olive oil, and seasoned with salt. Involtini of swordfish, thin fillets wrapped around various fillings (including herbs, breadcrumbs, capers, pine nuts, olives, and/or cheese) are also popular.

Tomatoes

Tomatoes are a New World fruit, but that does not preclude their use in cucina arabo-sicula. One theory holds that the color of the tomato was as important as its taste: Once it became rooted in Sicilian culture, it was used as a less expensive substitute for saffron.

Tuna

Each spring since the Arab occupation, fishermen have participated in a ritual tuna killing (the mattanza), using elaborate, multi-chambered nets to trap the fish before harpooning them. Usually tuna is braised, grilled, or pan-fried and served with an uncooked sauce. Bottarga (dried tuna roe) shaved over pasta is another specialty.

Vino cotto

Vino cotto is a syrup made from non-fermented grape must (the pulp and skin of processed grapes), was used as a sweetener (along with honey) before the Arabs introduced sugarcane. Table grapes (muscatel or other similar varieties) are passed through a food mill; the resulting grape must is then filtered and boiled for several hours until it has the consistency of honey or molasses. Many Sicilians still make their own vino cotto at harvest time and use it in desserts like buccellato.

Watermelon

The Arabs introduced the watermelon to Sicily, probably in the mid-tenth century. The seeds were roasted, then pounded into a paste or crushed into cakes. There are two kinds of watermelon in Sicily. One is round with a light green skin; the other is larger with a dark green skin.

TYPICAL DISHES

Pasta con le sarde: Fresh sardines, sautéed in extra-virgin olive oil, deglazed with white wine, dressed with golden raisins, pine nuts and almonds, and lots of chopped finocchietto, then tossed with pasta. The finished dish is garnished with toasted bread crumbs.

Pasta alla norma: Widely found all over Sicily, this dish consists of slowly-cooked eggplant chunks tossed into a basic tomato sauce with thyme, dried

oregano, and grated pecorino, then tossed with pasta and garnished with grated ricotta salata.

Involtini di Pesce Spada: Involtini: (Sweet-and-sour stuffed grilled swordfish) Little rolls of thinly sliced swordfish are stuffed with pine nuts, raisins, bread crumbs, anchovy filets, orange juice and lemon juice, eggs and grated pecorino. The rolls are then dipped in an egg-olive oil mixture and coated with breadcrumbs. They are then put on skewers with bay leaves and onion slices and grilled.

Impanata di Pesce Spada: (Swordfish pie) This pie is undoubtedly a legacy of the Spanish invaders. It is an elegant package bursting with all the wonderful tastes of Sicily: swordfish, olives, raisins, pine nuts, capers, and cheese.

Involtini di Melanzane: (Stuffed eggplant rolls) Slices of eggplant are stuffed with a mixture of cheeses, eggs, bread crumbs, and tomato sauce.

Fagioli alla Menta: (Marinated white bean salad with mint) Cannelini beans are cooked with garlic and celery until tender. They are drained and tossed with olive oil, vinegar, mint and salt and pepper.

Arancine: (Little oranges) Arancine are balls of saffron rice filled with tomato ragout, or meat or cheese or a combination of these. The rice balls are then rolled in flour, coated with beaten egg and rolled in bread crumbs. They are deep-fried until golden brown, and resemble an orange (arancine).

Panelle di Ciciri: A fritter made with chickpea flour and parsley and then deep-fried in olive oil. In Palermo the fritters are sprinkled with a few drops of lemon juice and often used as a filling for bread rolls.

Maccu di Favi: This very old recipe is known all over southern Italy and is the oldest of all Mediterranean soups. It was served for centuries as the midday meal of peasants, who carried it with them when they went to work in the fields. The soup is made with dried fava beans, wild fennel, and chili pepper. Toasted bread is placed in soup bowls and drizzled with olive oil, and the soup is ladled on top. The name comes from maccare which means “to crush.” The Sicilian touch is to add wild fennel.

Caponata: A slow-cooked ratatouille-like mix of eggplants, onions, tomato, olives, pine nuts, and extra-virgin olive oil, caponata is usually served cold or at room temperature. Most Sicilians think caponata is a Spanish dish.

Spaghetti alla Siracusana: Fresh anchovies sautéed with garlic and pepperoncini in olive oil, deglazed with white wine, then tossed with spaghetti, diced cherry tomatoes and lots of chopped parsley, and topped with toasted bread crumbs.

Sarde alla Beccafico alla Palermitana: Whole fresh sardines rolled around a stuffing of pine nuts, raisins, capers, and parsley all mashed together into a paste and then mixed with bread crumbs and olive oil, arranged in a baking pan with bay leaves, bread crumbs, sugar and lemon juice, and baked. The dish is named for the beccafico, a bird that eats ripe figs and is therefore considered a gourmand.

Sarde a Beccafico alla Catanese: This deep-fried version has practically nothing to do with the baked Palermitan dish that goes by the same name. The sardines are split open, marinated in vinegar, pressed together in pairs to form “sandwiches” filled with a bread crumbs-cheese mixture and deep fried.

Tonno e Spada Affumicata: Smoked tuna and swordfish shaved paper thin, and layered on a plate. These can be accented with shaved fennel and oranges, or olives and sun-dried tomatoes, or can be served with just a drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil and some good crusty bread.

Cuscusu: The apex of Arab-Sicilian cuisine; its successful preparation is considered the height of culinary art. The starting point for all couscous recipes is the same. Semolina grains are slowly poured into a large, round terra-cotta dish with sloping sides called a mafaradda and formed into small pellets by hand. The process of raking, rolling, aerating, and forming the pellets is called incocciata by the Sicilians. When the couscous pellets are formed they are then steamed over boiling fish broth in a couscoussiere. The fish broth is made using a three-to-one ratio of white fish to oily fish. The fish used to make the broth is not eaten. Small fish or shrimp are cooked up and eaten with the cuscusu.

Frittedda: (Sicilian sweet and sour vegetables) Artichokes which have been cooked in water and lemon juice are sautéed with onions and sprinkled with

nutmeg and salt and pepper. Fava beans and peas are added to this mixture until tender. The mixture is tossed with sugar and vinegar and served cool.

Sciuscieddu: (Egg-bread crumb soup) this is a thicker version of the Roman egg-drop soup called stracciatella. Garlic and parsley are chopped together to create a mince, and added to a mixture of eggs, grated pecorino cheese, and bread crumbs. This mixture is dropped by spoonfuls into boiling chicken or beef broth and served immediately.

Spaghetti aglio olio e peperoncino: (Spaghetti with garlic, oil, and hot pepper) Garlic and hot peppers or pepper flakes are sautéed in olive oil until the garlic is pale gold. This sauce is stirred into al dente spaghetti; parsley is added and served immediately.

Pasta con I broccoli di rabe: (Pasta with broccoli rabe) The vegetable and pasta are boiled together in the same pot and seasoned with sautéed garlic and anchovies.

Spiedini alla Siciliana: (Grilled scaloppine Sicilian style) these veal rolls are stuffed with a mixture of breadcrumbs, cheese, pine nuts, raisins, and salt and pepper. The rolls are threaded on a skewer with bay leaves and onion slices. They are grilled or broiled until brown on all sides.

Polpette all'Agrodolce: (Sweet and sour meatballs) Meatballs are made by mixing together beef, eggs, pine nuts, raisins, cinnamon, and amaretti cookies that have been soaked in milk, along with salt and pepper. They are sautéed in oil until cooked and finished by adding a sugar-vinegar sauce to the pan.

Farsumagru: (Stuffed beef roll) This is Sicily's undisputed premier meat dish. It originated as a humble and economical dish: a thin slice of meat rolled around stuffing of breadcrumbs to feed many more people than the meat alone would satisfy. The name means "false lean," because it is a simple-looking meat roll whose insides bulge with a rich stuffing of eggs, cheese, prosciutto, salami, and peas. It can be eaten hot or at room temperature.

Pollo all'Arancia alla Catanese: (Orange chicken Catania style) Chicken is not very popular in Sicily, presumably because the hens are kept for the eggs they produce. The cooks of Catania have taken advantage of the fragrant

orange groves that cover their hillsides to come up with this unusual chicken dish. Chicken pieces are rubbed with garlic, rosemary, mint and nutmeg. The chicken is then sautéed with onion in olive oil until brown. Orange juice is added and the chicken is roasted in a covered skillet until tender.

Pasticcio di Mohammed ibn Itmnah: (The Emir of Catania's chicken casserole) Sicilians pride themselves on this thousand-year-old chicken dish. This recipe for chicken with exotic nuts encased in a round bread loaf really is nearly a thousand years old; it dates back to the days when the Arabs still held Sicily and the Emir Mohammed ibn Itmnah ruled Catania.

Coniglio alla Siciliana: (Rabbit Sicilian style) the rabbit is marinated in wine and herbs, sautéed, and then braised in the marinade.

Pasta con alici e piselli: (Pasta with anchovies and peas) A sauce of sliced onion, chopped parsley, peas, and anchovies is served over "al dente" pasta.

Gatto di sarde e carciofi: (Sardine d artichoke pie) Sardines rolled in bread crumbs, thinly sliced artichokes, oregano, olive oil, salt and pepper, and primosale cheese are layered in a baking dish and topped with bread crumbs and olive oil and baked.

Ditalini con favuzze e ricotta: (Pasta with broad beans and ricotta cheese) Broad beans cooked in olive oil with scallions is served on pasta with ricotta cheese.

Scaloppine al Marsala: (Veal Marsala) In restaurants in the United States, this dish is often heavy and cloying. As prepared in Sicily, however, it consists of thin, tender scaloppine with a delicate Marsala wine glaze.

Tummala: (Rice Timbale) This is an elaborate casserole from eastern Sicily, which is said to derive its name from that of Mohammed Ibn Thummah, an emir of Catania during the Arab occupation. The casserole includes chicken, celery, onion, tomatoes, carrots, bread crumbs, veal meatballs, cheese, sausage, rice, and eggs in layers as follows: a layer of rice, a layer of meatballs and chicken, a layer of cheese, a layer of rice, a layer of sausage and meatballs, and a layer of rice and chicken topped by beaten eggs and cheese.

Pesce Spada alla Ghiotta: Swordfish cooked in onion and tomato sauce with potatoes, olives, capers, celery and black pepper. A Messina speciality.

Pasta al Nero di Seppia: Spaghetti served with a sauce made from the ink sacs of cuttlefish with salted ricotta cheese.

Pasta 'ncasciata: A pasta dish containing meat sauce, meat balls, caciocavallo cheese, sausage, hard-boiled eggs, eggplant or peas.

Tonno al Forno: (Baked Tuna) Sliced tuna is marinated in oil, vinegar, onion, parsley, and red pepper and baked.

Bracirole alla Siciliana: Marinated pork chops grilled with olive oil, salt, pepper, oregano and vinegar added at the last minute.

Cannoli: Fried pastry tubes filled with ricotta, sugar, candied orange peel, pistachios, chocolate bits and grated orange peel.

Cassata: A sponge cake doused with sweet liqueur and filled with ricotta, sugar, cinnamon, candied fruit and chocolate. It is covered with marzipan icing and decorated with candied fruits and slices of citron twisted into bows.

Sfingi or Zeppole di San Giuseppe: a fried dough delicacy resembling a holeless doughnut prepared for the feast of San Giuseppe (St. Joseph) on March 19.

Cuccia: a sweet wheat dish prepared after soaking the wheat grains overnight. It is connected with the festival of Santa Lucia on December 13, the patroness of Syracuse.

Sorbetto and Gelato: the Arabs mixed the summer unmelted snows of Mt. Etna with fruit-flavored syrups to produce a cooling confection which later developed into sherbet and, with the addition of milk and/or cream, gelato.

Granita: simple ices made by pouring flavors like lemon, coffee and almond milk over granulated ice.

Marzipan: a paste of sugar, almonds and egg whites, which is sculpted into remarkably real shapes such as apples, pears, prickly pears, etc. Marzipan is called pasta reale (royal paste) in Sicily.

Pignolata alla Messinese: (Snow on the Mountain Messina –style) These small, deep-fried cookies are piled high on a plate to resemble a mountain and coated with white and chocolate icing. They are Messina’s most famous pastries and they are on display in every bakery window.

Gelu I Muluni: (Watermelon “pudding”) This dessert is a Sicilian favorite full of the tastes of summer and the island’s Arab conquerors. In many parts of Sicily it is served during the Feast of the Assumption on August 15. In Palermo it is always served on the Feast Day of Saint Rosalie, the city’s patron saint. It is a cornstarch pudding made with watermelon juice, rose water, cinnamon, candied fruit and chopped chocolate. It is served topped with chopped pistachios, shaved chocolate and small Jasmine flowers.

Minni di Virgini: (Breasts of the Virgin) first made in Palermo’s Monastero delle Vergini, “virgin cakes” are more commonly known as “virgins’ breasts.” From Palermo they have spread as far as Catania, where they are dedicated to the patron saint Agatha. The most notorious of all the convent pastries, minni di virgini owe their fame to their name, which so delights the Sicilians that they will apply it to almost any cake, provided it is small and rounded.

WINE

Traditionally Sicily produced deeply colored highly alcoholic wines (up to 18% by volume) called “cutting wines” which were exported to the Northern Italian wineries to blend with their sometimes thin and acidic wines. This has been illegal for more than forth years, so the Sicilians had to find new markets. The old vineyards were all on the plains, which with their torrid summer heat ensured that the grapes were very ripe, high in sugar and perfect for making “cutting wines.” This climate and the method of pruning were not suitable for making a new-style table wine, so there began a process of planting the hill-land behind the coastal plains, which has continued until today under the watchful eye of the Palermo-based Vine and Wine Institute.

Most of this re-structuring has taken place in the Western provinces of Palermo, Agrigento and Trapani, where co-operatives manage the making of wine from the production of the myriad of small land holders.

There is still a production of fine wines, the best known of the fine wines being “Corvo,” still made by the ancient family of Salaparuta. Others, less well-known but equally good, are the wines of the Barone Villagrande made on the volcanic soils of Mt. Etna, and the Regaleali of Tasca d’Almerta. Most of Sicily’s production today goes for export, but some of the old-style wines are still made for the Northern production of Vermouths and also for the indigenous Marsala.

WHAT ABOUT PIZZA?

In June 1889 Queen Margherita of Savoy ordered Raffaele Esposito, a Neopolitan pizza chef, to make a pizza for a royal party. In an act of patriotism, chef Esposito designed a pizza pie made of red tomatoes, white mozzarella cheese, and green basil to match the colors of the Italian flag. Not only was this pizza visually appealing, but Pizza Margherita, as it was called, was a gastronomic hit. And the modern pizza was born.

About 1000 BC in northern Italy, the ancient Etruscans began baking a flat bread beneath stones on a hearth. To add taste, simple toppings consisting of herbs, olive oil, and spices were added after the bread was cooked.

In southern Italy and Sicily where Greek colonists lived, the people improved on the Etruscan “pizza” by cooking the toppings with the bread rather than adding them afterwards. And instead of being a side dish as was the case with the Etruscans, the Greeks in Sicily made their “pizza” a main course.

The thick Sicilian pizzas sold in the United States have their roots in the sfincione (flat bread) of Palermo. Like American “Sicilian pizza,” the sfincione made in Palermo and some of the towns in its environs is thicker than Neopolitan pizza and made with tomato sauce (not fresh tomatoes). Traditionally it is shaped into a rectangle or square, cooked in a special baking pan with 1-inch sides, and served cut into squares. Instead of mozzarella, sfincione employs a lightly salted Sicilian sheep’s milk cheese called primosale. Its other ingredients include anchovies (or sardines) and a topping of bread crumbs, grated cheese, onions, and oregano.

In the town of Bagheria, in the province of Palermo, the sfincione is even further removed from Neapolitan pizza. It is made without tomato sauce, and with scallions instead of onions. This pizza of simple ingredients, sheep's milk cheese, flour, bread crumbs, olive oil, salted fish, and scallions, is made for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, and also on Christmas Eve, New Years Eve and the day before the Feast of the Three Kings.

In the province of Caltanissetta, a favorite Christmas and New Year's Eve treat was a white pizza made with anchovies, oregano, caciocavallo or provolone cheese, and olive oil.

A sfincione recipe from Messina includes ripe tomatoes, chicory or curly endive, spicy provolone cheese, anchovies, and capers. In Enna, the pizza is made with artichokes, salted ricotta cheese, anchovies and olive oil.

Back in Massapequa, NY where I grew up, yes, the same Massapequa that gave us Jerry Seinfeld, the Baldwin brothers and Amy Fisher, my mother makes a white pizza very similar to the one from Caltanissetta. Her parents were from Marsala and her white pizza is made using anchovies, oregano, romano cheese, and olive oil. On special occasions she will make a double white pizza with the same "toppings" inside and on top of the pizza.

About every other month I receive a large envelope with one of my mother's white pizzas inside. She wraps the pizza in aluminum foil, puts it in a 10 by 12 inch envelope and takes it to the post office. They travel very well. It's simple peasant food made with love. I must be the only person in Royalston who can get pizza delivered. And I don't have to tip the pizza delivery boy.