Sicily: Heart of the Mediterranean Diet

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-By Danny Mellman

My first glimpse of Sicily was monstrous rocks, rugged cliffs and cactus. Across the isle, I saw the Mediterranean and flickers of tile rooftops. Sicily is not the memory of my three previous Italian forays. What I found in Sicily was another country; independent, autonomous, with a language and cuisine all its own. Sicilians, by history and nature, form a fiercely independent and rugged society. Their cuisine mirrors their lifestyle -- simple, clean and from the land.

An Education in Local
My culinary tour of Sicily began in Palermo, where my friend and fellow chef Steve Petusevsky awaited; our plan was to discover as much about the cuisine and landscape on our own before we checked in with Oldways, the organization that had invited us both to attend their conference. Our goal was to scout the area and its food before we were herded into lecture halls and organized meals.
What I discovered was a world apart from my expectations. Palermo itself is a tiny town of contrasts. It is a small, typically Mediterranean town, until you begin to walk. Very old windows draped with drying laundry, cobbled streets, smart cars parked every which way on sidewalks and in centuries-old doorways. As old and small as it is, Palermo is quite cosmopolitan -- fancy hotels, glitzy restaurants and an occasional Hummer.

Sicily was once its own country as the Kingdom of Sicily, ruled from Palermo. The kingdom originally ruled over the island, the southern Italian peninsula and Malta before the Sicilian Vespers. It later became a part of the Two Sicilies under the Bourbons, with the capital in Naples rather than Sicily. Since that time, Italian unification has taken place and Sicily is now a full-fledged part of Italy.

With every step, it becomes obvious that Sicily is food. Markets, butchers, gelaterias; fish stalls with boxes brimming with the tiniest sardine types to the largest tuna and massive bullets of swordfish, a mainstay of the local dining scene. Men carrying whole pig carcasses across streets; tiny three-wheeled golf carts overloaded with green cauliflower (broccoli); and yardstick-long prickly stalks topped with purple-green artichokes. A small wooden wine crate with a paper sign and striped land snails (like those known as Helix of Burgundy) slowly making their escape.

The grand or infamous history of Sicily is readily apparent in these markets, neighborhoods and stalls. Ethnic staples pay tribute to the marauding invaders of Sicily’s past. Couscous, coconuts and plantains from the Africans; pickled fish from the Norse; Almandalri (almonds and marzipan) attributed to the French, but now a Sicilian staple. Steaming covered baskets of seasoned pork fat, served on soft bread with lemon. Sesame candy and seeds are used extravagantly as are mint and wild mint -- not your average Italian fare.

The only limit to the fresh, local Sicilian diet is its rugged coastline, battered by the Mediterranean. And yet, this coastline is what preserves this region’s culture and cuisine. It gives way to verdant green hills and pastures -- a myriad of colors and hues, umber, mauve, olive, azure, ruby are evidence of the blend and infinite variety of fruits, herbs, grains and produce grown here.
Wild oranges, fennel, mint, asparagus, rosemary, figs and almonds border the winding country roads. Sheep, goats, chickens are raised on hillside pastures roamed by wild sheep, pheasants, hare, quail and boar. In Nebrodi, a rolling mountainous area wooded by heavy oaks, are found the not-so-famous Pigs of Nebrodi (Swino Nero), black-footed pigs that forage on acorns and are the same as the very famous and sought-after Ibericos of Spain. Staying true to their nature, Sicilians use every part of this heavenly swine, from hoof to tail, though you rarely hear of it.

Oldways Education
We arrived at Villa Agiea, a 150-year-old hotel set on a cliff above the Mediterranean looking over the coast of Palermo, an incredible setting for the Oldways' conference, Sicily: Heart of the Mediterranean Diet.

A cliffside pool; tennis courts surrounded by citron, blood orange, lemon and lime trees. Nespole, locale loquats heavy with their orange, velvety, apricot-like fruit, line the ancient marble and limestone paths. As expected, our first day was long with doctors, health gurus and olive salespeople proclaiming all the benefits of olive oil. The beneficial health effects of olive oil are due to both its high content of monounsaturated fatty acids and its high content of antioxidative substances. Studies have shown that olive oil offers protection against heart disease by controlling LDL ("bad") cholesterol levels while raising HDL (the "good" cholesterol) levels. No other naturally produced oil has as large an amount of monounsaturated fatty acids as olive oil, mainly oleic acid. And, of course, wrapped into all of this is the Mediterranean Diet.

Oldways was instrumental in bringing the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid to the U.S. along with the recently introduced Med Mark -- a consumer-friendly stamp designed to help shoppers quickly identify healthy Mediterranean diet products in supermarkets. The Mediterranean Foods Alliance and the Med Mark are developed and managed by Oldways, the nonprofit food issues think tank that developed and introduced the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid in 1993. Oldways also developed and manages the Whole Grain Stamp program, and the Latino Nutrition Coalition.

Their goal is to bring the Mediterranean diet -- one I have long advocated -- into mainstream America. It's not simply a way of eating, but a lifestyle as well; and nowhere is it more evident than in Sicily. The essentials of this lifestyle are shopping daily for fresh produce, cooking,
walking, making use of all the product that your local farmers and artisans are able to grow and produce, and most importantly, eating together.

The mood and "aura" that surround the Sicilian "diet" -- whether it be a snack of *panella* (thin chickpea pillow, cooked to order), a beer, *panino con la milza* (sesame bread stuffed with onion-seared spleen, topped with cacciacavalo cheese and lemon) -- are a richness and appreciation of life. Their history is amplified in their food and language -- a myriad of salads, relishes and pickles more reminiscent of the Middle East than Italy, all tidbits left from conquerors of the past.

And that is what I did not expect to discover on this trip. My knowledge of Sicily was simply lessons from Don Corleone or Tony Soprano. What I didn't expect from my journey was the ever-present local and wild foods, and the immense history of Sicily.

**The Largest Island**

Known as the Breadbasket of Italy, Sicily is the largest producer of durum wheat. Its central location -- in the middle of the Mediterranean, close to Africa and an easy trek from the North to the rest of Europe -- made it a central supply port for the Eurasian world. Crops such as wheat, almonds, pistachios and citrus, as well as tuna and sea salts made Sicily a highly prized trophy for conquering tribes and nations throughout history.

Throughout much of its history, Sicily has been considered a crucial strategic location due in large part to its importance for Mediterranean trade routes. The area was highly regarded as part of Magna Graecia, with Cicero describing Siracusa as the greatest and most beautiful city of all Ancient Greece.

It was also a center for Roman aristocracy, pundits, philosophy and architecture, making it a top priority for the spread of Christianity. As expected, no one conquered Sicily without leaving their provisions, tastes and cuisines behind!

As opposed to my experience and previous Oldways trip to olive-rich Puglia, but true to Sicilian style, olives here are used for food and oil production. Though very different from mainland Italy, and more to my culinary, fruit-forward palate, the Sicilian olives tend to be fruitier, grassier and with less of that peppery burn that is so loved by and touted by the North.
Sicilians follow the same world-accepted standards for picking, crushing, packing and acid levels as the rest of the union, but I enjoy the general "softness" and style of these lesser-known varietals -- Nocellara del Belice, Biancolilla and Cerasuola. As for the olives, the standard, oil, dry or salt cures are used. But once again, Sicily comes through; for their olives, jarred tuna and tables, they use locally harvested olives and fine sea salt from the flats of Trapani on the northwest coast.

The seaside villages of Trapani, near Marsala, known for the famous beverage, are in view of another small Sicilian island, Favignana. This little island is the only place left in Sicily to view the long-practiced Mattanza, a brutal capture of tuna, a major part of Sicilian history and economy.

The Mattanza, from the Spanish verb "matar" (to kill), was traditionally a celebration and boon to this island. In late spring, enormous schools of bluefin tuna, breeding off the coast in the warm Italian waters, would be herded in to nets by a series of small rowboats and stakes. The harvest would be performed and shared by all the villages. The giants, upwards of 1,000 lbs. each, were corralled near the beaches, and then brave souls would spear, gaff and drag the behemoth onto their tiny vessels. The sea would run red with the Mattanza.

Now, it is only a tourist attraction, like the bullfights of Spain. The great trawlers and factory ships of Asia have decimated the tuna stocks, for peoples' love of this "blood-red gold of the sea" and their willingness to pay for it.

**Cuisines & Travel**

Sicily, with its largely volcanic soil, is also a place of delicious wines. Home to typical, head-pounding Italian reds and light, clean pinot grigios, I found no bounds to the styles available on this small island. Like the food and history, there is a wine produced for everyone here. Sweeter, sun-drenched Gewurztraminer, more acidic Riesling, broad-oaked Chardonnay and then through the ranks of the reds ... Pinot Noir, Village Reds, Merlot, Syrah to the pinacles of Mt. Etna, reds all spawned from crops on the terraced slopes of this active volcano, and well-prepared to compete with the big, opulent, crimson kings of California.

The cuisine of Sicily is truly a food of the people; though I have made some restaurant adaptations, it does not translate well to "fancy" white-tablecloth establishments. It is best showcased as a food of the people -- clean, fresh ingredients, simply prepared with amazing results. Sicily is a locavore's nirvana, and the recipes/products couldn't be more sustainable. Every part of every product gets used in every way. Old wine becomes *vin cotto* (cooked, syrupy for salads and desserts); stale bread becomes croutons or crumbs for a topping or thickening agent. When sheep's milk is acidulated and then heated to make pecorino and all its younger cousins, the whey (leftover water) is acidulated and cooked again. The second cook -- ricotta (cooked twice) -- is then scooped out to draining baskets for ricotta, salata and other aged varieties. A third cook is sometimes done, the very light, fluffy curds are scooped warm over pasta or over crusty bread with fresh-ground black pepper -- the texture is that of the most divine panna cotta.

These truest forms of food, cuisine and lifestyle are most evident in the countryside, small
villages and masserias (farms). The Agrituristica, like a B&B but a true working farm where the guests may be expected to work, shows the independence, rural life and incredible food of Sicily. I found this at the Masseria San Giovanni Sgadari-Azienda Agrituristica in Petralia Soprana.

Looking out over Petralia Sottana (lower) and Petralia Soprana (upper), we discovered young green durum wheat waving in the breeze, like a freshly vacuumed carpet. I became entranced by fields of bright yellow mustard, velvety, crimson sulla, a red clover-like plant that grows on over-grazed hills, a source of local flavored honey. Seven-foot-tall wild fennel -- called ferula, whose fronds are used for cooking, and heavy, dried stalks are fashioned into chairs and stools -- beat against the side of our chariot. We made our way to an old fence post and dirt drive; with some maneuvering, our large tour bus made the turn, drove down a hill then up again to our destination and the epitome of Sicilian food, at least for me.

Yes, we had arrived. To our right, there were pens with chickens, geese, goats and pigs. To our left, just outside an ancient farmhouse, in a courtyard with an amazing terrace with a view of the Sottana, stood local farmers and cheesemakers showing their crafts. Beautiful products, cheese, olives, sausages, breads; all from the surrounding regions and small agrarian communities of Soprana, Sottana, Polizzi, Ganci, Geraci, Castelbuono, Sperlinga and Nicosia. The Masseria itself grows wheat, stone fruits, olives, grapes, olive oil, cheese, vegetables and mushrooms, all with "biological agriculture" or organic sustainability. The owners hunt for deer, boar, hare and birds; and the usual suspects of fennel, rosemary, asparagus, thyme and mint abound.

As we quietly stuffed ourselves, drinking local vino, we were called to lunch. We were greeted by colorful plates of grilled and roasted vegetables, crunchy fried cardoons (wild artichoke), assorted olives, breads. Then fresh-shaved bulb fennel with orange, olive oil and anchovy (just enough to add a salty touch), caponata with lots of young celery, green olives and fresh capers, sweet onions and peppers agrodolce made its way to our tables. The pasta, now vying for attention, tiny, durum twists tossed with olive oil, sea salt and a medley of artichokes, peas, favas cooked in their own juices, then finished with wild fennel. Gnochetti, a small shell-style pasta speckled with peas, mint and cacciavvalo cheese and toasted almonds. And yes, Sugo con Carni, a rich yet light tomato and meat sauce, with grated ricotta salata.

A carnivore’s dream arrived onto our culinary landscape: huge platters of olive wood grilled
Aignello (two- to four-month-old lamb chops); lithe, charred links of local sausage and barbaresco braised pork shoulder (made with the local black-footed pigs); complemented with fresh yellow potatoes whipped with olive oil and roasted with rosemary and onions.

We took a break from this never-ending buffet to walk the grounds, view the herbs, converted stables -- now guest quarters -- and hedge maze. As we made our way back to the terrace, dessert had been served; some cut their tour short to get a head start on the homemade lemon and orange cellzos. The rustic table, with ferula legs, was once again overflowing with food -- almond tart, pistachio biscotti, espresso flan, panna cotta, chocolate torte, fruit granitas and, of course, cassada and cannoli.

The meal itself, overflowing with fresh produce and simply prepared dishes, illustrates the wealth of cuisine in this region. I left this beautiful land with the feeling that I had barely scratched the weathered surface of Sicily and what its cuisine and people treasure. Their history and environment have shaped them, and they have managed to hold all of what is good. The seemingly unforgiving landscapes give way to the richness of their mingled cultures. Cuisines formed through necessity and availability; gained strength with every conqueror. Sicilians have mastered their land and learned how to best utilize it; theirs is a cuisine of terrain, history and environment; best in simple terms, always fresh, never heavy-handed. Truly a cuisine of the people.

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