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August 07, 2008

Six Days in Sicily

By Kathryn Conrad



Giant lemons, multicultural pasta, and a fountain of snails -- the world is truly full of wonders.

This April I joined a delegation of food professionals in Sicily to study the Mediterranean diet and to experience the island's food culture first hand. The symposium was sponsored by Oldways, a non-profit "food issues think tank" devoted to promoting delicious, healthy foods and a sane approach to eating them.



Among their many accomplishments, Oldways introduced the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid in 1993 as a healthful alternative to the trendy no-fat diets of that decade. These folks are passionate about the message that "eating healthy is about management, not banishment," a kindred philosophy to the *Cooking Light* motto: Eat Smart, Be Fit, Live Well.

A Tasty History...

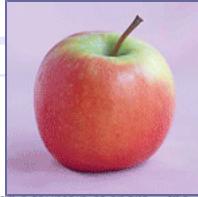
The largest island in the Mediterranean, Sicily is *not* Italy. It is an autonomous region of Italy (*Regione Autonoma Siciliana*) with its own language (a cocktail of French, Arabic, Spanish, and Italian), 620 miles of coastline, and more than 9,000 inland miles of tall, rolling mountains.

In its 3,000 plus year history, Sicily has been home to Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Spanish, French, and Italians. This intense multiculturalism is evident in its architecture and certainly its food.



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A trickle-down effect of history created this dish (above right) of handmade pasta (ushered in by Romans and Arabs) tossed with local olive oil (introduced by ancient Greeks), garlic, and two distinctly Arabic-influenced additions: mint and roasted almonds.



Simple, shockingly good Nzalata d'Aranci (above, left) combines sweet oranges (originally brought by Portuguese Crusaders), extra-virgin olive oil, salt, pepper, and fronds from indigenous wild fennel. Two personal favorites (above, right) are ricotta-filled cannoli with candied orange (thanks, early Saracens!) alongside local melon sorbetto (Arabic) with chopped chocolate (brought by the Spanish).

Location, location, location...

With the sea on all sides, a Mediterranean climate, and fertile earth, Sicily produces a cornucopia of intensely flavorful seafood, fruits, and vegetables. Many ingredients are worthy of mention and important to the cuisine. Here are only a few:

Iconic to Sicilian cuisine is meaty bluefin tuna. Though over-fishing and public sentiment have almost done away with *mattanza* (a ritual harvest of tuna performed by netting the giant fish and then beating them to death at sea), *tonno* remains a star of the Sicilian table. Favorite preparations are grilled, breaded and pan-fried, or raw with olive oil, salt and lemon. *Bottarga di Tonno* (dried tuna roe) is a popular topping for pasta.



The crown jewels of Sicilian cuisine are its gorgeous lemons (this gigantic strain at the Masseria Sgadari was the result of perfect climate plus rich volcanic soil, according to the owner). Lemons find their way into every course: fresh lemon preserves at breakfast, a fresh wedge squeezed over grilled squid, icy-tart lemon granitas, and the molten sunshine of the lemon liqueur Limoncello.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of olive oil in Sicily. Cultivated since the 7th century B.C., olive oil has been used by Sicilians for all methods of cooking from poaching to deep-frying. It is drizzled over fruits,

vegetables, salads and meats, and even rubbed into the skin as a moisturizer.

Just like wine, different areas and different production methods result in very different olive oils as I found at an olive oil tasting. Sicilian olive oils range from mild to floral to fruity, nutty to peppery and sometimes downright spicy-hot.



No Fad like Tradition...

In Sicily, the everyday use (in restaurants and homes) of fresh, seasonal, local, non-processed ingredients is just that — everyday. Common. Not an idea limited to gourmets and co-ops, but a standard way of operating. Local and lovely means great fruits and veggies but also treats such as freshly made sheep's milk ricotta (above, left) eaten warm (a little bowl of heaven) or chilled and made into cannoli filling, tucked into ravioli, or slathered between sheets of pasta for lasagna. Thick-crusted loaves, often studded with sesame seeds (but not preservatives) are familiar additions to every table, served alongside olive oil for dipping in lieu of butter.



Large outdoor markets offer the freshest fruits, vegetables, meats, fish such as these fat sardines (above, left) and even snails. This (above, right) is my favorite piece of low-tech advertising ever. I have dubbed it the "snail fountain," and it is pure genius. The snails crawl up (thereby demonstrating their freshness) and eventually fall back into the basket at the base of the "fountain." This continues until they are bought and go on to an olive-oil-and-garlic heaven.

If it ain't broke...

While there are intricate recipes in Sicilian cuisine, the vast majority of what I ate there reflected my favorite ways to cook and eat: great ingredients prepared simply.

A perfect example is this popular dish (right) of bitter greens sautéed in olive oil with garlic and fresh lemon.

When foundation ingredients are so good the simplest treatments let them shine.



Make a joyful noise - with your fork

It should be stated that the Sicilian attitude toward eating may be the finest seasoning. Meals are shared, lingered over, and passionately discussed. Pizza becomes an event.

If you order a glass of wine, it is typically served with a simple snack or two, on the house, with the assumption that you will linger, sip, enjoy the drink and the conversation.

Empirical evidence...

There are many studies pointing out the benefits of the Mediterranean diet. I recommend checking out the Oldways website for more detailed information. Based on my six days eating the typical Sicilian diet — loads of fresh produce, fish, pasta, beans, olive oil, cheese, wine, a few sweets, and a little red meat — I came home feeling remarkably fit. I also returned with a renewed interest in the variety of Sicilian products available in America (amazing olive oils, olives, and more), a reawakened appreciation for enjoying every meal, and an eagerness to seek out the best of local and seasonal goods in my neck of the woods.



Posted at 08:00 AM in Musings on Food | Permalink



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Beautiful tour Catherine...well articulated and I felt I was there! Keep the blogs a coming!

Posted by:Kam | August 01, 2008 at 10:11 PM

Will do! And thanks so much for the feedback- KC

Posted by:Kathryn | August 01, 2008 at 10:13 PM

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