

Seeing and Believing in Sicily, Part I: the Tour Begins

Chef and author **Faith Willinger** moved to Florence more than 25 years ago. Since then she has been traveling back-roads of Italy in search of artisans making the best food, wine, and goods. She writes about these people and their products. Among her cookbooks is the best selling guidebook **Eating in Italy**, the cookbook **Red, White, and Green**, and the recipe and travel compilation, **Adventures of An Italian Food Lover**.



Wine estate, Valle delle Acate

“Sicily. It’s a continent,” a friend explained. It’s a great approach to this vast, self-contained island, layered with more than 28 centuries of history and traditions, influenced by practically every civilization that passed through the Mediterranean. I never tire of exploring.

I’d been invited on a press trip, Sicilia en primeur, to taste the latest vintage from many of the region’s best wineries. I planned to stick around after the trip, working my way around the island, winding up on Etna for another wine event. My husband Massimo would join me, participating in some but not all activities.

Journalists were split into groups—I went to the Ragusa area. Our driver (no Vito) had a difficult time locating the venue in **Vittoria** for our opening dinner, sponsored by the **Cerasuolo Consorzio**, with all members presenting their wines. I was pleased to see my friends Giusto and Arianna Occhipinti, Gaetano Jacono, and the Planeta family, who I’d be visiting in the next few days. We were welcomed by President Francesco Ferreri at the consortium’s enoteca in a 17th-century castle, restored after a brief period as a prison. It’s open from Thursday to Sunday evenings for tastings and by appointment. Finger-food was prepared by Domenico Colonna and Francesco Patti, young chef-owners of **Coria**, a new restaurant in **Caltagirone**, a town known for its ceramics and an incredible tiled stairway. Tables were decorated with attractive ceramics from their favorite artisan. The food was delicious, divided between fish—raw, marinated, smoked, deep-fried tiny fish, meat and vegetables—local pork with wild greens, stuffed rabbit loin with sweet and sour vegetables, caponata, tiny frittata with wild asparagus, eggplant parmigiana and classics tiny arancine and focaccine. Of course there were cannoli for dessert, along with cassata and white chocolate and strawberry gelo (gelatin). Wines from all producers were offered, including a highly unusual sparkling Frappato by **Avide**.



After dinner we went to Planeta's winery **Dorilli** (photo above), to spend the night in their most comfortable rooms, soon to open for the general public. I shared a final glass of Cerasuolo with Francesca and Alessio Planeta and two friendly journalists, Herbert and Greg from **Snooth.com**.

Our next day was typical for a press trip—visits with Cerasuolo producers, touring the vineyards, tasting the wines. We were on time for our first visit since it was at Dorilli. I was impressed with the wines, well-made, true to varietal, well-priced.



We were late for our next appointment, **Valle delle Acate**, where owners Gaetana Jacono and Francesco Ferrara showed us our first palmento of the day, traditional stone troughs for crushing grapes (photo above). We had a Cerasuolo tasting in the cellar, surround by big barrels. I was falling in love with Frappato and Nero d'Avola wines.



Our driver got very lost on the way to **Arianna Occhipinti's winery**. We tasted from tanks in the cellar (that's Arianna in the photo above), wines in progress, and ate a simple lunch paired with her wines at a large table in the living room of her farmhouse, palmento in the back of the room. Love the SP68 white and red!

We were behind schedule for our final winery of the day, **Terre di Giurfo**. It was too dark to visit the vineyards; we rushed through a tasting while owner Achille Alessi talked about his wines and the estate's nearby Villa Remigia, beautifully restored, with fantastic gardens and three bedrooms, rented by the week. We got really lost on the way to our hotel, the **Donnafugata Golf Resort** (international-golf-ish architecture, no sense of Sicily) for two days of conference and tastings. Is it an unwritten rule that the food served at golf resorts has to be terrible? Our buffet dinner confirmed this tradition, with chafing dishes of risotto, pasta, overcooked swordfish. Fabulous Sicilian wines from all the event's producers improved my mood.

Next: The conference, escape from conference, gala dinner, Ragusa theater, and finally on our own program.

Photos by Faith Willinger

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Seeing and Believing in Sicily, Part 2: Beyond the Golf Club

Chef and author **Faith Willinger** moved to Florence more than 25 years ago. Since then she has been traveling back-roads of Italy in search of artisans making the best food, wine, and goods. She writes about these people and their products. Among her cookbooks is the best selling guidebook **Eating in Italy**, the cookbook **Red, White, and Greens**, and the recipe and travel compilation, **Adventures of An Italian Food Lover**.

by Faith Willinger



Super fresh langoustines enjoyed after going rogue

After breakfast we listened to a presentation by **Professor Attilio Scienza** on Sicilian wine, genetic varietal improvements, eco-compatible winemaking. My favorite line of the morning: “The best way to know the future is to invent it.” It was followed by an open tasting with producers and their wines. I bumped into the **Tasca** family—Lucio, Giuseppe and Alberto, and tasted their delicious new white made with Grillo grapes from historic vineyards on the island of **Mozia**. I recognized Salvatore Geraci, who’d been on my flight from Florence to Catania (snappy dresser, cool carry-on luggage) and tasted his Palari **Palari Faro** DOC and Rosso del Soprano from the province of Messina. I’ve got to visit. **Elena Aiello** gave me a taste of her brother Alberto’s Graci Etna Rosso and Quota 600 Rosso and Bianco.

I couldn’t face another golf club buffet but didn’t have to since the village of Scoglitti, with three fantastic fish restaurants, was nearby. Massimo rented a car, and we were joined by renegade wine writers Herbert and Greg from **Snooth**. I adore **Sakalleo** but didn’t have enough time to do the restaurant justice. I’ve enjoyed **Viri Ku C’e** (no website), especially since there’s a warning sign at the entrance—the owner (Turi Giarratana, nicknamed u pazzu, the crazy guy) isn’t interested in journalists—he considers them scoundrels, and they’re not welcome. I dined anonymously, off season, sitting on a terrace overlooking an empty beach, on many many courses of super fresh fish, classic preparations, although the wine selection (no list, check the fridge) isn’t a thrill. I wanted to try **Fichera**, recommended by **Gaetano Jacono**. And wasn’t disappointed. We opted for the mixed appetizers, raw and marinated seafood with stellar raw red shrimp and langoustines drizzled with extra virgin (photo above), deep fried sardines (photo below) and the tiniest of squidlets called cappuccetti, skipped the pasta course but couldn’t resist the mixed grill, paired with an Etna Rosso from **Vivera**.



Herbert and Greg headed back for more tasting, I rested up for dinner. It was billed in our program as a gala, at the fine dining venue of the **resort**, with local star chefs preparing the food. Thoreau distrusts any enterprise that requires new clothes, I distrust any meal called "gala," but after my wonderful lunch I didn't really care about dinner. Which was a good thing since I encountered two of the worst dishes of my trip—beef tartar surrounded by a band of cold lard on a puddle of mustard sauce, topped with mustard gelato (photo below), and a complicated reinterpretation of an arancino with an inedible garnish that can only be described as baroque. The meal concluded with a golf-themed dessert—white chocolate golf ball suspended on a glass, flanked by a spoon subbing for a golf club—whack the ball with the spoon and the liquid filling should dribble into the glass. No one at my table succeeded. I had the great fortune to sit with **Fabrizio Carrera**, who knows all about Sicily, so the dinner wasn't a total loss. I checked out his website and was impressed.



Sicilia en Primeur concluded the next morning in Ragusa Ibla at the **Donnafugata Theater**, journalists in the audience questioning winemakers on stage, followed by a tasty rosticceria-type lunch—**scacce** arancini, panzarotti, sausage and greens, pasta timbale and, of course, cannoli and cassata for dessert.

Massimo and I were finally on our own program. We headed for the **COS Locanda**, settled into our room, and went to **La Piazzetta**, everyone's favorite local trattoria in nearby Pedalino, for dinner with **Giusto and Titta**, Arianna and Faustina.



I told them my plans for the rest of my trip. Giusto, claiming I knew more about Sicily than most Sicilians, begged me to create a culinary program for them. How could I refuse? I didn't.

Next stops: Gela, Licata, new hotel, unknown vegetable, an amazing cookbook, cookies, and the Planeta Foresteria

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Seeing and Believing in Sicily, Part 3: Taking the Slow Road on the Coast

Chef and author **Faith Willinger** moved to Florence more than 25 years ago. Since then she has been traveling back-roads of Italy in search of artisans making the best food, wine, and goods. She writes about these people and their products. Among her cookbooks is the best selling guidebook **Eating in Italy**, the cookbook **Red, White, and Greens**, and the recipe and travel compilation, **Adventures of An Italian Food Lover**. This is Part 3 on her recent travels to Sicily.

by Faith Willinger



The archeological site of Gela doesn't offer a great view but is impressive nonetheless.

Massimo had never seen the archeological site of Gela, overlooking a coast despoiled by oil refineries, or the fantastic **museum**, always empty, always impressive. And it was a perfect stop on the way to Licata to see Pino Cuttaia, the island's greatest chef, and dine at his restaurant **La Madia**. We took a slow road on the coast, far more attractive than the main, traffic-clogged route skirting the town. We checked into **Hotel Villa Giuliana**, a new hotel that Pino recommended, which instantly became my favorite place to stay in Licata, above the city, easy parking, great views, lovely service, inexpensive.

We got a coffee at a bar called Las Vegas—lots of neon, strolled around the city, admiring Baroque palaces, trying to ignore the urban sprawl surrounding them. Our dinner at La Madia was, as usual, fantastic, featuring lots of new dishes with traditional flavors, elegant presentations—rectangle of raw marinated anchovies topped with tomato, spaghetti with true wild clams, octopus with a crisp veil of its cooking liquid, boned but still whole red mullet, shrimp-stuffed artichoke. I never resist Pino's take on cannoli, a ricotta-filled pastry cornucopia. Pino, his wife Loredana and their sons Angelo and Alessandro joined us for lunch the next day at his friend Giacomo Cicatello's trattoria, **Donna Rosa**, where we dined on rustic home-cooking that inspires Pino's cuisine.

Our lunch included **sarde in beccafico**, meatballs in tomato sauce, short pasta with peas, artichokes and wild greens, stuffed beef roll. Giacomo showed me the wild greens from the pasta dish, called mazzareddi in Sicilian, a vegetable I'd never encountered, a member of the wild cabbage family (see how gorgeous it is in the photo below).



He invited Antonio Santamaria [to join](#) us for dessert, thought I'd be interested in Antonio's self-published (only one copy) cookbook "Licata a Tavola", with recipes related by patients when he worked at a health clinic. I was fascinated. As we departed, Vincenzo Corrente, La Madia's maitre d', gave us a tray of **ricci**, special almond cookies from the best bakery in nearby Palma di Montechiaro. We drove through a tunnel of ugly strip malls with Agrigento's beautiful temples in the distance at dusk, into the countryside and the **Planteta Foresteria**, our base for the next few days. Rooms, with terraces planted with herbs, views of vineyards and the sea, are beautifully decorated, bathrooms are luxurious, and the main salon is filled with interesting books about Sicily. The restaurant is wonderful, open only for dinner with a 5-course menu of innovative dishes prepared by chef Angelo Pumilia. There are three wine lists—all Planeta wines with all vintages (very reasonably priced), wines of friends (pricey), and the vault, special bottles (expensive) that can be ordered a day in advance.

We had big plans in the village of Sambuca. We visited the archeological site of **Monte Adranone** outside town, the polyvalent **museum** in the ex-monastery of Santa Catarina for Greek and Punic antiquities from the site, modern **fabric sculpture** by Sylvie Clavel, paintings (my favorite room) of **Fra Felice da Sambuca** (18th C.) and then stopped at the Carmine Church for a serious hit of Baroque. But the real reason for my visit to Sambuca was a pilgrimage to the **Pasticceria Enrico Pendola**, famous for minni di vergini, virgins' breasts (chastely called virgins' cookies in "The Leopard"). I bought three pairs for Sicilian friends.



We had dinner at **Ristorante Vittorio**, not far from the Foresteria, which had been totally restored since my last visit (see photo above), but the menu was exactly the same, as wonderful as ever, minimalist treatments, parsley and extra virgin garnish, local super-fresh fish and seafood. We feasted on sweet raw red shrimp, octopus salad, snails in tomato sauce (served with a wooden skewer to pry them out of their shells), spaghetti with sea urchins (photo, below), clams or mixed seafood, roast fish and drank a **Planeta Cerasulo di Vittoria**. Sicilian whites and Champagnes are displayed in refrigerator cabinets, reds in niches in the wall. No room for dessert.



We began the next morning with the **Cusa quarries** (looks like the 5th century B.C. masons stepped out for a break) and the **Museum**, with farm tools, Sicilian carts and documents that explain how the stones were quarried and taken to Selinunte. Thus prepared, we headed for my favorite **Greek temples** in Sicily, a vast archeological park overlooking the sea. Simply spectacular! Time for lunch at the nearby restaurant **La Pineta**, on the beach in the **Belice Reserve**—park your car at the gate and walk down the road towards the sea. The menu never changes and is always a thrill, super-fresh fish, the simplest of preparations. We planned an afternoon visit to Mazara del Vallo to the museum of the **Dancing Satyr**, one of the most moving statues I've ever seen, and bumped into a parade celebrating Italy's 150 Birthday, complete with marching band. The museum, on such an important festivity, was free of charge.



We dined with Alessio Planeta at the Foresteria, sampled a yet-to-be released sparkling wine from Etna (Carricante grapes) and the tastiest ravioli of the trip, green pasta, whipped cod filling, sauced with sea urchin and a hint of fennel. Dessert, in honor of Italy's birthday, was the colors of the Italian flag—raspberry sorbetto atop green pistachio cake, flanked by white almond milk mousse. I thanked Alessio for his hospitality with a gift, a pair of minni di vergini (like those shown above).

Next stops: Burgio, Caltabellotta, Sciacca, Castelvetrano extra virgin, Palermo, museums, and the neighborhood.

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Images by Faith Willinger

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Seeing and Believing in Sicily, Part 4: Mummies, Bubble Wrap, and a Favorite Sicilian Olive Oil

Chef and author **Faith Willinger** moved to Florence more than 25 years ago. Since then she has been traveling back-roads of Italy in search of artisans making the best food, wine, and goods. She writes about these people and their products. Among her cookbooks is the best selling guidebook **Eating in Italy**, the cookbook **Red, White, and Greens**, and the recipe and travel compilation, **Adventures of An Italian Food Lover**. This is Part 4 on her recent travels to Sicily.

by Faith Willinger



The cool newly restored vegetable store of Antonio Biondo.

I love Sicilian pottery (although there's quite a bit of unattractive stuff around) and wanted to visit the Ceramic Museum in Burgio. I hoped to indulge in a shopping spree with local artisans—I had examined some of **the Foresteria's** attractive pottery, written down the names of the producers inscribed underneath.

I'd been tipped off to the **Mummy Museum** (not in my detailed guidebook) in the crypt of the Capuchin monastery, next to the monumental cemetery. Monks mummified what looked like the village's most illustrious corpses (from the 18th to 20th century), judging from their elegant attire. We got lost on the way to the **Ceramic Museum** but admired the stone portals (over 100) in the medieval village. The museum was spectacular, beautifully displayed 16th -19th-century pottery and tiles, simply fascinating. I needed to shop and searched for the **Bottega di Giuseppe and Paolo Caravella** and **La Gioiosa**, the village's best artisans. Warning: Burgio's ceramicists have yet to discover bubble-wrap (bring your own) or shipping (arrange through your hotel). I schlepped, wrapped in laundry for the flight home.

We drove along a country road to Caltabellotta, known for its views, but the restaurant (with museum) where I wanted to have lunch, **M.A.T.E.S.**, (M.useo delle A.ntiche T.radizioni E.nogastronomiche S.iciliane) was closed. Next time.



So we skipped lunch and headed for Sciacca's port and a granita at the Bar Roma made by **Zio Aurelio**, always refreshing. I'm crazy about Giovanni Puccio's tiny enoteca **Nonsolovini** (photo above), with a fantastic and personal selection of Sicilian and Italian wines, great regional and Italian foods, and the possibility of a snack—oysters, salumi, cheese, a few tasty prepared dishes, along with a glass of wine. It tided us over until dinner, at the farm-olive oil mill Tenuta di Rocchetta with Pierluigi Crescimano, my favorite Sicilian extra virgin producer, his wife Antonella, daughters Gaia and Delia, sister Marilena.

Bottles of Sicilian single cultivar (Nocellara del Belice) and blends graced the table along with all mother-yeast pane nero (made with local cultivar tummania wheat) di Castelvetrano and Tenuta Rocchetta's cured olives. Marilena made pasta with shrimp and cherry tomatoes, master frantoiano (olive oil miller) Sergio Rizzo manned the grill fueled by olive wood, for sausage coils and meat rolls. Antonella brought a tray of pastries from a terrific bakery in Palermo; I presented my friends with a pair of minni di vergini. Extra virgin tastings can be arranged by appointment; a website is planned but probably won't be up for quite some time.

Our navigator (we were, after all, without **Vito**) directed us on a beautiful country road to Palermo instead of the superstrada and we arrived easily, without the usual traffic hassles, at via **Butera 28**, Nicoletta Polo's reasonably priced apartments for rent by the day or week, in Palazzo Tomasi di Lampadusa (owned by author of "**The Leopard**"). She's married to the author's **heir**. I wouldn't think of staying elsewhere and the neighborhood is undergoing gentrification, with recently opened wine bars, restaurants, shops, museums. We were meeting my new friend **Fabrizio Carrera** for lunch at **Piccolo Napoli**, my favorite restaurant in Palermo, checking out the Borgo Vecchio market before lunch.

Piccolo Napoli never disappoints—super-fresh catch of the day, simple Palermo-style cooking, deep-fried squidlets (below), lots of vegetable preparations and an attractive tile on the central table display of appetizers with the explanation "no buffet." We drank Catarratto from **Bosco Falconeria**, the organic farm of **Mary and Tonino Simeti**.



Fabrizio told me about a place I had to visit on our way to Etna. We went back to our apartment, then for a stroll in the neighborhood where we visited the **Galleria d'Arte Moderna**, housed in a respectfully restored ex-convent, and were awed by the dramatic displays of 19th and 20th-century sculpture and paintings.

The gift shop was tempting, I bought postcards, we stopped at the bar for an espresso and, since there was a museum restaurant, GourmArt, asked to see the menu. I was surprised and delighted to find out that the chef was my old friend Costantino Guzzo. Next trip. On the way back to the

apartment I spotted **Enoteca Cana**, checked out the wine selection (lots of natural wines) and the menu—salumi, cheese, simple meat dishes. Another reason to return. I showed Massimo the cool newly restored vegetable store of Antonio Biondo (via Torremuzza 32), perfect for those staying in Nicoletta's apartments, with its beautiful display of produce, a few prepared seasonal vegetables, and Sicilian cart-style painting over the entrance (photo op). And the most rustic and delightful Trattoria da Salvo (via Torremuzza), fish display and grill on the sidewalk, flanked by tables, tempted but we were invited for dinner with Nicoletta, her husband Gio, and brother-in-law Giuseppe. She's a fantastic cook, gives **special cooking lessons** with market shopping session and after-lunch tour of the palace and prepares banquets for visiting groups. I gave her the last pair of minni di vergini. She gave us the palace tour after dinner.

Next stops: Abedellis, Himera, gelato, Castelbuono, and manna

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Images by Faith Willinger

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Seeing and Believing in Sicily, Part 5: Enjoying a Hyper-Seasonal, Super-Local Dinner

Chef and author **Faith Willinger** moved to Florence more than 25 years ago. Since then she has been traveling back-roads of Italy in search of artisans making the best food, wine, and goods. She writes about these people and their products. Among her cookbooks is the best selling guidebook **Eating in Italy**, the cookbook **Red, White, and Greens**, and the recipe and travel compilation, **Adventures of An Italian Food Lover**. This is Part 5 on her recent travels to Sicily.

by Faith Willinger



Ruins of the Temple of Victory in Himera.

I had an appointment with **Francesco Pantaleone**, wanted to visit his contemporary art collection since I'm very interested in the work of **Francesco Simeti** and he has some fine pieces. But Pantaleone was called away to Catania and my visit was cancelled. Yet another excuse for a return to Palermo. We went to a trio of palaces in the neighborhood—**Palazzo Steri**, with an iconic Guttuso Vucceria painting among other thrills, **Palazzo Mirto** and **Palazzo Abatellis**, an old favorite newly reopened, 14th-century architecture, Carlo Scarpa restoration project, and a collection of Sicilian paintings, sculpture and decorative arts from the 12th to 17th century. Wow!

We checked out of Nicoletta's apartment and she told us we simply had to visit **Himera** on our way toward Etna. So we did. The part of the archeological site that can be visited, with the remains of the Temple of Victory, is quite small. The guard asked if we had a ticket, we didn't, it had to be purchased at the museum, but when we told him we planned on going to the museum he let us in. We strolled around the unkempt site, lots of columns in ruins, weed-filled fields of big stones. We had a difficult time finding the **Antiquarium** but were in total shock when we found it. It documents a massive 480 B.C. battle where Greeks defeated Carthaginians, 150,000 soldiers dead on the battlefield, and, in 409 B.C. the Carthaginian revenge when they completely wiped out the Greeks and eradicated Himera. It's the largest necropolis in Sicily and there's even a separate burial ground for horses that died in battle.

The Italian railway is doubling tracks that run through the site and, along with the Palermo Cultural Heritage Board, is financing the dig. But the most spectacular object in the museum is the **Phiale d'Oro**, a solid gold votive plate with three dimensional concentric rings of acorns, lotus flowers and bees (more about them later), etchings of grapevines, grapes and leaves. We were the only visitors in the place. **Fabrizio Carrera** had called a friend with a rural tourism farmhouse that he wanted me to visit, and given me a phone number. I called, and Fabrizio Russo met us at the museum to lead us to his property, which I found out was called **Terre di Himera** (below is one of the rooms there).



We were welcomed by his wife Maria Gambino. Their rural tourism (not an agriturismo because they don't sell their agricultural products) farmhouse-inn, all stone and wooden beams, is tastefully restored, reasonably priced. There's a large patio with shade from the Sicilian sun, with views of the sea and the Madonie Mountains. Each of the 6 rooms is unique, with old-fashioned Sicilian furniture, attractive linens on comfortable beds; all look out on the garden. We settled into our room, lounged on the patio until it was dark then adjourned to the living room. Maria explained that all the vegetables were from her garden, everything else from the area, including special honey made by **Sicilian black bees**, wines chosen by our friend Fabrizio Carrera. Our dinner was hyper-seasonal and local, beginning with deep-fried zucchini blossoms, zucchini, cardoons, and artichokes in featherweight batter, wild asparagus frittata (photo below), salami and cheese, followed by **stighirole**, which I love but they're not for the squeamish. Homemade pasta was sauced with fritella (or frittedda), braised peas, fava beans, artichokes and wild fennel. Dessert was a beautiful fruit tart, concentric circles of citrus--oranges, blood oranges and tangerines on light custard-topped pastry.



After a leisurely breakfast the next morning Fabrizio suggested an excursion to Cerda, to visit gelato master **Antonio Cappadonia** (in photo below with his father). Cerda is famous for its artichokes and Antonio makes artichoke gelato, but it wasn't available. I tasted spectacular pistachio, almond, lemon and coffee gelato. He explained all about the Sherbeth (paying homage to the original Sicilian name for Arab-derived sorbet) **festival** he organizes in September, inviting dozens of gelato-makers from all over the world. I must return.



We drove up a winding road with views of Madonie Mountains, looking decidedly Alpine, lots of

pine trees instead of palms, to the village of Castelbuono. Restaurateur-chef **Giuseppe Carollo** (we were going to his restaurant for dinner) recommended we stay at the Ypsigro (Byzantine name for Castelbuono) **Palace Hotel**, not really palatial but clean, reasonably priced and convenient. I had planned a visit to the **Francesco Mina Palumbo Museum** (local naturalist) but it was closed. I was interested in **manna**, a low glucose, low fructose sweetener (slightly laxative) made with sap from ash trees, a Castelbuono specialty. And found dozens of shops selling it. I had a taste and didn't feel I needed to take some home. And I knew I'd find manna on the menu at Hosteria Nangalarruni. The name looks unpronounceable, it means mouth harp in Sicilian dialect. The menu features rustic, well prepared and presented dishes based on local mushrooms, black truffles, wild greens, Black Nebrodi pork, all perfect reasons to drink red. And utilizes manna in a **semifreddo** dessert.

Giuseppe Carollo is passionate about wine, has more than 600 labels available, including older vintages of Sicilian wines, a real treat to find. Since we were staying nearby, a five minute walk, I drank big, and Giuseppe made me a member of his club, U.V.A., **Unione Voluntaria Alcolizzati**. I think it's an honor.

Next stops: Etna and Taormina

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LA CUCINA ITALIANA

Seeing and Believing in Sicily, Part 6: A Favorite Volcano and the Journey's End

Chef and author Faith Willinger moved to Florence more than 25 years ago. Since then she has been traveling back-roads of Italy in search of artisans making the best food, wine, and goods. She writes about these people and their products. Among her cookbooks is the best selling guidebook *Eating in Italy*, the cookbook *Red, White, and Greens*, and the recipe and travel compilation, *Adventures of An Italian Food Lover*. This is Part 6 and her final installment on her recent travels to Sicily.

by Faith Willinger



A toast with (from left) Turi Siligato, the owner of Nero d'Avola, and winemakers Alberto Graci and Girolamo Russo.

We were on our way to Mount Etna, my favorite active volcano. I was returning to the village of Linguaglossa—population 5000, 14 butcher shops, my kind of place. We'd be based at the delightful hotel **Shalai Resort**, contemporary décor in a restored 19th century noble residence with frescoed ceilings, animated by hospitable owners Leo and Luciano Pennisi, terrific restaurant with a great, mostly Etna wine list and a spa. (The spring onions wrapped in pancetta, below, are from Shalai.)



My previous visit had been inspired by a chance meeting with a winemaker from Etna—in San Francisco. I'd met Ceri Smith, who owns a wine shop, **biondivino** at a Chianti Classico roundtable in Florence, liked the way she spoke about wine and stopped by on a trip to the west coast. I was impressed with the shop and excited when she told me she was having a wine tasting with young producer **Alberto Aiello**, who I didn't know—I hadn't been to Etna in a long time. I tasted three crus of his Graci Etna Rosso and was hooked; he invited me to visit the winery. How could I say no? I was curious about the wines of the area. I stayed at the Shalai. **Vito** joined me. Luciano Pennisi told me I was lucky, since his father Rosario, a fantastic butcher, would be making frittole, a special treat, the next morning.

We had dinner at the Shalai restaurant, found the food tasty, somewhat trendy but the sophisticated diners from Catania were thrilled. I especially liked the fresh pancetta wrapped

around a spring onion, grilled, one of Rosario the butcher's specialties. We drank Etna Rosso from an impressive selection; Leo and Luciano arranged winery visits for us (and for any guest who asks). We wanted to see **Passopisciaro**, **Terre Nere**, and cult favorite **Frank Cornelissen**, three wineries that created the buzz about Etna wines. Alberto Aiello had invited me to visit his winery and stay for lunch, he'd grill some meat.

We strolled to the butcher shop with Luciano. Rosario was cooking frittola, pigs' ears, snout, skin and belly in their rendered **fat** in a large copper cauldron over a charcoal brazier in front of the shop. He chopped up a few pieces, then piled them on a golden, sesame seed-topped bun (MacEtna?). Delicious! And then showed me how he makes salsiccia al ceppo, pork energetically hand-chopped with a massive cleaver on a tree-trunk chopping block (ceppo). To complete the Pennisi gastronomic scene, Leo's brother Rosario has a bar pasticceria, **Simpaty**, between the butcher shop and hotel. I'm addicted to their nut cookies, soft and almondy inside, studded with pistachio, hazelnut or almonds, not terribly sweet by Sicilian standards. Individually wrapped nut cookies are available throughout the hotel and in the rooms—I always purchase a box to take home. Simpaty makes lovely breakfast pastries (all natural yeast) and snacks, and is always crowded with locals.

We went to Passopisciaro for our first tasting. The winery is owned by Andrea Franchetti (he also owns **Tenuta di Trinoro** in Tuscany), one of the new pioneers of Etna winemaking. He makes a series of cru from the contrade (one-time feudal estates that divided the region) since each zone has a different elevation and soil mineral content due to lava flows from diverse eruptions. It was easy to see from the tasting that Franchetti, who clearly has a French-influenced palate, gained respect for the native varietals and the volcano, and his wines have become more Etna-ish, less international.

We didn't have time for a real meal, but stopped in **Randazzo at Trattoria San Giorgio e il Drago** for a bite—an ample appetizer plate—salumi, cheese and vegetables, with a bottle of Girolamo Russo from the 'A Rina contrada. We had an appointment with Frank Cornelissen, who takes a cosmic view of winemaking, letting the land express itself with no interventions, no treatments. Etna is his driving force, exemplified by his logo, a minimalist brushstroke of the volcano. Frank's wines are fermented in terra cotta amphorae sunk into ground volcanic rock. We didn't have a tasting, but got a bottle of Rosso del Contadino, a blend of white and red grapes from different contrade that Frank describes as humble. It was and I liked it.

Alberto Aiello met us in Castiglione di Sicilia and insisted on driving us to one of his vineyards—the road was a black lava flow navigable only by 4-wheel drive. The vines were stubby, mostly pre-phyloxera, high-altitude, with no need for pest control, growing in lava-studded volcanic soil on ancient terraces with stone walls. Back at the winery, I met his mother and sister Elena, and then wine maker friends started to arrive. We had a glass of Alberto's delicious Etna white (Catarratto and Carricante) while we were waiting. **Giuseppe Russo**, **Ciro Biondi** and his wife Stefanie, **Michele Scammacco**, **Raffaello Maugeri**, a fantastic cheese-maker from Enna (he grows saffron for his amazing Piancentinu), master distiller **Giovanni La Fauci**. A long table was set up in the cellar and a meal appeared—salumi, olives, extra virgin, great bread, ricotta, a tray of baked cardoons made by someone's mother, grilled sausage, breaded beef rolls with bay leaves on skewers, and prickly pears for dessert, along with rivers of Etna Rosso from those present. I was in love, and then they told me about a yearly tasting, Le Contrade di Etna, where almost all producers were present and of course I promised to attend. So I did, returning to Etna to introduce Massimo to my volcanic friends.

I got a ride to the big event, held at the Passopisciaro winery. One huge room ringed with tables of producers and their latest vintage—get a wine glass at the entrance and taste at will. I met dozens of new wine-makers, tasted lots of wines including **Tenuta di Fessina**, **Terra di Trente**, **Fattorie Romeo del Castello** and **Pietradolce** and met restaurateur Turi Siligato (I wanted to eat at his restaurant in Taormina) and **Guido Coffa** who told me about big plans for his organic farm with heirloom fruit trees—more trees and, eventually, a 12 room rural tourism inn.



Massimo and I walked to the **Ristorante Boccaperta**, with a well priced wine list of all Etna producers, rustic cooking with regional flavors and seasonal vegetables, Rosario's meat-filled grilled lemon leaves (above), heirloom Etna apple baked with Etna Rosso for dessert. We were enthusiastic.

We had big plans in Taormina—a visit to the spectacular Greek amphitheater with Etna in the distance, shopping at a wonderful gourmet food shop where I purchased the Sicilian black bee honey that I'd heard about. I bought some Sicilian reproduction ceramic plates at Carlo Panarello (Corso Umberto 122, tel. 0942-23910) which they mercifully mailed home and, around the corner from the main drag clogged with tourists, had lunch at Turi Siligato's restaurant, **Osteria Nero d'Avola** (below). Alberto and Giuseppe Russo were our guests. We sat at a table in a tiny piazza and had a meal that was one of the best of the trip, accompanied by our guests' Etna Rosso. Raw tuna and its bottarga on a slice of sweet lemon, sea urchin bruschetta, a tangle of fried tiny fish and squidlets, spaghetti with sea urchin (I couldn't resist), artichoke and sweet lemon salad, amberjack with sweet and sour onions, concluding with Modica chocolate with a glass of **Marco di Bartoli Marsala**. No need for dinner.



I stocked up the next morning at Simpaty—those nut cookies, and the Pennisi butcher shop—pancetta rolled around spring onions and skewered meat-stuffed lemon leaves to be grilled. I had to expand my luggage for the trip home. I know I'll be back.

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