



THE WAY THEY

The bucatini con le sarde at La Cambusa, in Palermo. Opposite: Gangi, a medieval village in the mountains of northern Sicily.



Here in southernmost Italy, every dish is infused with love and tradition, reflecting generations of family and centuries of history. **STEPHANIE DANLER** eats her way across the island, savoring its humble, African-inflected cuisine and soaking up the wisdom of its women.

COOK IN **Sicily**

photographs by SIMON WATSON



Clockwise from top left: A student pits olives during one of Nicoletta Polo Lanza Tomasi's cooking classes at Butera 28, in Palermo; granitas at Colicchia, in Trapani; the nightlife scene at Vucciria market, in Palermo; the courtyard of the Gangivecchio estate; caponata at Gangivecchio; diners at Fritti e Frutti, in Palermo; *fichi d'India*, a prickly pear native to Sicily, at La Cambusa; the Piazza Mercato del Pesce, in Trapani. Opposite: The seawall in Trapani.



My sister, Christina, and I were sitting in a garden in Palermo,

a few sips into a mid-morning Campari and soda, when I began to feel fraudulent. The sea breeze fanned up from the port and onto the terrace as our hostess, Nicoletta Polo Lanza Tomasi, the Duchess of Palma di Montechiaro, recounted the history of the palazzo we were visiting, which was once owned by the Lampedusa family. It was on this very site, Nicoletta told us, that Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, the last of the line, wrote *The Leopard*, which chronicles the fall of an aristocratic Sicilian family in the late 19th century. "Which of course you've read," she added, "as you are a writer, and are writing about Sicily." I shot my sister a look that said, *Don't say a word.*

I hadn't read *The Leopard*, which is practically synonymous with Sicily. But I learned that Lampedusa wrote the novel after falling into a depression after his family estate was bombed during World War II. Following his death in 1957, the property was flawlessly restored by the Lanza Tomasi family. Today, Nicoletta oversees Butera 28, a collection of apartment-style guest rooms located inside the palazzo, in Palermo's once-dangerous, now-trendy Kalsa quarter. She also teaches cooking classes, leads market tours, and is a keeper of local culinary wisdom.

During previous visits, I had fallen in love with Sicilian gastronomy: the heirloom wheat

varieties, the recipes for caponata passed down through generations, the indigenous Frappato and Catarratto grapes. What sets the island apart is that, even more than the rest of Italy, it has been invaded and conquered for thousands of years. You can see this history in Palermo's Arabic and Norman architecture, in the crush of the *centro*, in the maze of markets catering to different ethnic groups. But most of all, you can taste it in the food, which bears the mark of the cultures that have ruled the island. I wanted to share the meals I'd had here with Christina, and so, on the eve of her 30th birthday, I brought her here, on a long-overdue sisters' trip, to appreciate the old and discover the new.

Over espressos at the airport in Rome, I'd prepped her: Get ready for lots of pasta courses. Bread courses. Fried courses. Don't ever say you're full. Don't turn down a glass of wine at lunch. Don't expect to sleep too much. We would be traveling without a guidebook, I explained, because although I have visited Sicily many times, I have never owned one. I just get bossed around by Sicilian women.

I had, however, brought a handwritten eating itinerary. Nicoletta looked at it and scoffed. "For tourists," she said, forgetting, perhaps, that that's what we were. She made us a dinner reservation at L'Ottava Nota, an example, she promised, of a place where a chef was using native Sicilian ingredients to make modern food.

As we were leaving, Nicole, the Australian front-desk assistant, stopped us. "You guys need to go to Vucciria and Aperitivo Alley," she whispered. "I'm off in ten minutes. I'll take you."

Nicoletta was eavesdropping. "Vucciria? No, no, no. All right, one *aperitivo*, fine. But please, please, do not talk to boys!"

The stalls at the legendary Vucciria market are closed at night, but a few bars, like the barebones Taverna Azzurra, open onto the street. Cool kids sat on the curb or leaned against the rolled-down steel grates of the stalls. "Well, we found the beards and tattoos!" Christina exclaimed. Vendors sold fried anchovies, *panelle* (chickpea fritters), *sfinzione* (thick-bread pizza), and *pani ca' meusa* (offal sandwiches) to soak up the wine everyone was drinking. Crumpled napkins filled the gutters. At the top of the street was an 18th-century religious statue done up in colored lights that Nicole called "Disco Jesus." "It's so Sicily," she said.

Apparently, so is missing your dinner reservation. Between the wine, the fried food, the bearded Sicilian men, and the Disco Jesus-gazing, it was nearly midnight before I checked the time. I cursed, but Nicole was unconcerned. (A general disregard for time also seemed to be



Cauliflower for sale at the Mercato del Capo, in Palermo.
Opposite: Giovanna Tornabene prepares lunch in her kitchen at Gangivecchio.

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White-chocolate-and-lemon *torta caprese* at Ciocolateria Lorenzo, in Palermo. *Opposite:* Ai Lumi Tavernetta, in Trapani, which specializes in fish couscous.

the low, square buildings in rosy neutrals, the beads hanging in doorways, the jasmine and bougainvillea that tumble down shaggy walls.

We planned a beach hike among the cacti, fruit trees, and flowering bushes of Zingaro Nature Reserve, 7½ pristine miles of protected coastline. Beach hikes demand picnic supplies, which is why San Vito has Salumeria Enoteca Peraino. The young men in striped newsboy caps behind the counter listened patiently as I attempted to speak to them in Spanish, pointing to hanging legs of prosciutto and rounds of cheeses and saying, “The *muy* salty and the *muy fuerte*.” We took *prosciutto dei Nebrodi* and a sharp, young pecorino to a secluded, white-pebbled spot for a swim and a siesta.

There is plenty of seafood to be had in San Vito, but for dinner we went to Bianconiglio, named after the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. Located just off the piazza, it specializes in dishes like braised rabbit and steak tartare with quail eggs and has a long list of sophisticated Sicilian wines, a welcome option in a beach town that has mostly *gelaterie*. The tablecloths and refined food were a lovely contrast to the kids playing soccer in front of the 15th-century church nearby. When the place began to empty out, Daniele Catalano—owner, maître d’, wine aficionado—chatted with us about the summer crush and all the different kinds of jasmine that grow in San Vito. It was past midnight when he left us to buy roses from some children in the street. I was so happy and sunburned it took me a minute to realize it had begun raining.

“so Sicily.”) To my embarrassment, she dialed Nicoletta. I prepared a speech: *I’m a fraud, I’m a failure, I’ve never read The Leopard...*

Within 10 minutes Nicoletta had secured us an outside table at La Cambusa, an understated restaurant beloved by Palermitans. Despite the hour, children still tore through the lush park in the Piazza Marina across the street. We spotted other Butera 28 guests, who joined us and sipped *limoncello* while I devoured a perfect *bucatini con le sarde*—the pasta firm, the wild fennel fragrant, the sardines liquescent. *Always* listen to Sicilian women.

BEFORE LEAVING PALERMO in the foggy early morning, we went to the Mercato del Capo for figs, bread, and wet balls of *burrata*—our version of road-trip fare. We were headed two hours west to San Vito Lo Capo, a place with gorgeous turquoise waters but none of the prestige of Taormina or the convenience of Mondello, and therefore none of those places’ English signs and inflated prices. There is a North African aura to

PEOPLE GO TO TRAPANI, a spit of land hanging off Sicily’s western coast, for two reasons: to catch a ferry or to eat fish couscous. Closer to Tunis than it is to Rome, it’s a showcase for the ways Sicilian cooking marries the cuisine of its former occupiers—in this case, Arabs—with its own. Here, North African spices and semolina grains, salt from the flats outside the city, and almonds from the hills appear in almost every dish.

At Nicoletta’s recommendation, Christina and I went to see Francesca Adragna at Ai Lumi, a bed-and-breakfast in a former palace off Corso Vittorio Emanuele, the main street. Of course Francesca knew where the best fish couscous was—it was at her place downstairs, Ai Lumi Tavernetta, once the palace stables and now a dark-wooded, rustic tavern that opens onto the Corso. We drank local beer redolent with orange blossom as the fish couscous came out in three parts: the puffy, airy couscous, the coral prawns, and a broth, essentially a mahogany-colored fish soup thickened with finely ground almonds and softened with cinnamon and saffron. It was true comfort food, and it (Continued on page 164)

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Hotels,
restaurants,
cooking classes,
and more,
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With its narrow pedestrian lanes and terra-cotta buildings set off against the startling blue of the Mediterranean, Trapani is built for a *passaggiata*, the evening stroll that is a sacred Italian pastime. Christina and I began ours with jasmine granitas at the famed Colicchia. These granulated ices flavored with fruit, nuts, or flowers are another example of a dish brought here by Arabs and perfected, in the centuries since, by Sicilians.

The waves sucked at the stones of the old seawall as we window-shopped the coral jewelry, listening to men and women call out to one another from the stores. Near Ai Lumi, we spotted a crowd outside a brightly lit shop. Inside, to my delight, I found wine barrels stacked in a pyramid, the grape varieties written on chalkboards. The wines were priced by the glass and the liter.

“What is this place?” I yelled to a man with a ponytail. He gestured to the spigots and glasses. There were Inzolias, Chardonnays, Nero d’Avolas, and Frappatos. I had decided to buy a glass of each when I saw, written in English on another chalkboard: VINO AMBRATO: ONLY FOR STRONG PEOPLE, illustrated with a drawing of a flexed bicep. I pointed to it. The man shook his head and sent over an English-speaking friend.

“It’s amber wine, oxidized. You won’t like it.”

“Like sherry,” I said, trying to display my wine knowledge. “I’m into sherry.”

“It’s not sweet,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Neither is sherry.”

We regarded each other until he gave me a glass of perfectly chilled, amber-tinted dry marsala-like wine. Though it had hints of caramel, it was bracingly sharp and salty on

the palate. For strong people, indeed. Christina ordered a glass of Catarratto, floral and lush. Outside, we passed through clouds of cigarette smoke and sat on the sidewalk. It was the final minutes of the *passaggiata*. Kids slept in strollers or in their parents’ arms. Pairs of dolled-up old ladies passed by in white kitten heels and jade-green blouses, their hair and lipstick perfectly set.

“That’s us,” I said to Christina as we went home, arm in arm.

The next morning, I gave Francesca a full report. “And then we found this amazing place across the street,” I said, “where the wine comes out of a barrel—”

“Oh yes,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “That’s my family’s wine. Our shop.”

“Tenute Adragna?” I asked, looking at the card I’d taken from the wine bar. She pointed to her business card. Francesca *Adragna*. Naturally.

THE DRIVE TO GANGIVECCHIO follows a narrow two-lane road that twists, harrowingly, through the Madonie Mountains, east of Palermo. As we climbed and the coastline became a memory, the air cooled and filled with the sweet scent of yellow flowering broom, pine trees, and wild herbs. I told Christina to keep her eyes open at each turn, because when the medieval town of Gangi appears, tumbling down a mountainside with Mount Etna smoking in the distance, it takes your breath away.

Gangivecchio, an estate built by Benedictine monks in the 14th century, lies just outside the village. Green and gold hills rise beyond its faded pink walls. In the courtyard, fig trees, potted cacti, and herbs compete for space. Pigeons roost in the abbey. There is no noise but the wind.

The property has been in Giovanna Tornabene’s family for five generations, but it only became famous in 1992 after the restaurant that Giovanna and her mother, Wanda, had opened years earlier was written about in the *New York Times*. This led to an award-winning cookbook, *La Cucina Siciliana di Gangivecchio*. Giovanna shuttered the restaurant after Wanda passed away in 2011, but she still offers cooking classes to

guests of Tenuta Gangivecchio, the property’s inn. I’d been fortunate enough to take one on a previous visit.

We arrived to find Giovanna selecting hazelnuts she had collected on the property. I asked if I could give Christina a tour before lunch. “You know the rules,” Giovanna said with a wave. She was referring to the menagerie she keeps separated in various areas of the property. I introduced Christina to the dogs, cats, and pigeons, shutting each gate firmly behind us.

We were heading back to the inn, giddy from the disheveled beauty of the place, when I noticed the front gate was open. Pedro and Dolores, two of Giovanna’s beloved dogs, were missing. Giddiness turned to nausea.

“You saw me shut the gate,” I said to Christina.

“You shut the gate.”

“I shut the gate!” I yelled.

Giovanna ran up, out of breath. “Pedro and Dolores are gone!”

As we drove the mountain roads, windows rolled down, screaming the dogs’ names, I said goodbye to our leisurely lunch and plotted my suicide. It was the only honorable course of action. Christina was in tears when Giovanna honked at us to pull over.

“Let’s go back,” she said firmly. “I will not cry for them yet. The caponata is waiting.”

The thing about Giovanna is, her dogs are her family, but she is also a professional. She would never let us go hungry. On the way to the kitchen, she grabbed a bottle of white wine. “We need this,” she said.

If anyone’s caponata can ease a tense situation, it is Giovanna’s. The dish is emblematic of Sicily, utilizing the island’s abundant eggplant, capers, and olives, all mixed into an *agrodolce*, sweet and sour. As Giovanna cooked, she shared one of its origin stories, how first it was part of a sauce for capon (hence, *caponata*), but the peasants, unable to afford chicken, used meaty eggplant instead.

Christina tore up green figs we’d picked from the trees outside and put them into a skillet with rendering pork belly. “This is for pasta?” she asked. “What’s in the sauce?”

“Fat,” Giovanna replied as the figs sizzled. (Continued on page 166)

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She rehydrated golden raisins and prunes for her Arabian chicken. Then we braised the chicken in cinnamon and butter until the kitchen smelled like a bakery.

To make room at the table, we moved aside plates of cheese and jars of hot-pepper jam. Giovanna served a small helping for herself and giant ones for me and Christina, insisting that we were young. We were so full by the time she brought out the *limoncello* that it felt like an act of mercy. The afternoon dwindled, coffee was poured, and reality set in again—it had been hours and the dogs were still missing. We were about to start walking the grounds looking for them when I heard Christina scream, “Pedro? Dolores?”

The dogs were sitting on the steps outside the inn, waiting for Giovanna and looking at the two American girls like they’d gone crazy.

WHEN WE RETURNED to Palermo, we first headed to the Politeama neighborhood to dine at Fritti e Frutti, one

of the places on my original eating itinerary, where we secured a table in the back garden. The small-plates menu begins with the *fritti*—fried things—and we began with *ragù*-stuffed *arancini*, the traditional deep-fried rice balls sold on the streets of Palermo. As the lights strung in the tree above us twinkled, we drank an organic Moscato by Arianna Occhipinti, a young natural-wine producer from southern Sicily, and watched as the restaurant slowly filled with chic parents wearing tortoise-shell glasses. “A little Brooklyn?” my sister asked.

I sighed and recalled dining with Giovanna on a previous trip at a restaurant she’d wanted to try. “Almost excellent,” she said. “But shut your eyes.”

I did.

“Where are we?” she asked.

I heard Rihanna playing.

“When I’m here, I want to feel that I’m in Sicily,” she had told me. “With all of my senses.”

I shut my eyes again, but at Fritti e Frutti I heard only soft conversation in Italian, scooters on the street, some

traffic noises. I kept checking in on my senses as we tasted our way through the *arancini*, a bowl of steamed shellfish, a plate of salt cod. The manager smoothly refilled my glass of Moscato and complimented me on my choice. I felt very much that I was in Sicily.

On our last night, Christina and I again found ourselves under the watchful gaze of Disco Jesus, this time at a place Nicoletta had recommended, the rooftop bar of the La Rinascente department store. We drank perfect negronis while across the piazza the Vucciria filled up and music began playing. Palermo’s rooftops turned lavender as the wind came up off the sea and loosened dust from the buildings. My feeling of fraudulence had faded. I understood now that what makes Sicily irresistible is the juxtaposition of the decaying and the eternal, of what Nicoletta calls “the horror and the beauty.”

I looked down at the kids in Vucciria and raised an eyebrow at Christina. “We should go for one, right?” And so we went, arm in arm, for one final *passaggiata*. ■



(China, continued from page 159)

longer seen as a threat by the authorities. As time passed, the Naxi way of life, like that of many other minority groups, grew to be seen as a relic, or a ready-made tourist attraction. These traditions are one reason why international tourism is booming in Yunnan. Along my route from Lijiang to Shangri-La, high-end chains like Aman and Banyan Tree have opened resorts—so now this dramatic trail can be traveled in easy luxury.

A variety show about Naxi culture called *Impression Lijiang* takes place daily in a theater below Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, an extravaganza created by the film director Zhang Yimou,

who made *House of Flying Daggers*. Five hundred actors perform sketches involving horses and drums against the backdrop of the sacred peak. Kitsch and bombast—the very image of what the historian Eric Hobsbawm termed “the invention of tradition”—do not detract from the sweetly moving relationship between the cast and the audience, who waved at each other throughout, and joined at the end in a mass wish for peace and harmony.

After the show I had lunch with a Naxi family known to my guide, whose members offer traditional cooking in a small courtyard house. At a table beside a pomegranate tree over sumptuous pork and eggplant, peppers and potatoes, the father of the family, Li Bo Wei, a farmer’s son who sold his land for development, decried the school system that occupies his 15-year-old son from 6 a.m. until 11 p.m. each day, leaving him no time to memorize Dongba pictographs. “He says he wants to put us into an old people’s home!” laughed Wei. “I hate Chinese education.”

An hour or so away in the Wenhai valley, on the south side of the mountain, we sat with a shaman, Hong Zheng Yong, in the courtyard of his house—a place of deep tranquillity perched like an aerie in the heights. Yong has a book that allows him to interpret the cries of crows. He has a tiger fetish dedicated to the Yi god Wu Tu, inside which are divination sticks for fortune telling. There was nothing of the charlatan about him—Yong brimmed with goodness, sincerity, and fun. I asked him for a blessing. He leafed through a sheaf of papers bound to a stick. Then he began a chant, undulating from deep in his throat, an entrancing incantation from an ancient time. He said, “This blessing is for a traveler. That you will return safely, your family will have harmony, and your work will prosper.”

It was a comforting benediction for someone taking the road to Shangri-La. Over the dull gleam of the Yangtze, between the white peaks of Yu Long and Haba mountains, we drove, up→