

A glutton's guide

Sicily | The Val di Noto is doubly blessed – with beautiful Baroque

architecture and a thriving food and wine scene. By *Laura Rysman*

Over a farm table littered with tasting glasses, Arianna Occhipinti – a 34-year-old vintner working in the rangy south-east of Sicily – talked us through her career, her wines and the philosophy underpinning both. “Wine is something that binds you to a place,” she said, explaining that she had come here a dozen years ago, taking over a 19th-century farmhouse outside the town of Vittoria and planting her first vines. By then Sicily’s oenological renaissance was already in motion: turning their backs on the island’s famously cheap and robust table wines, winemakers began to grow indigenous varieties of grapes with new levels of care and rigour.

Occhipinti went further, creating some of the first wines made uniquely of the endemic **Frappato** grapes, with low-yield vines and organic methods that rely on naturally occurring plants to protect the grapevines. “The land gives you everything you need here,” she said. “We interfere with the grapes as little as possible so the wine will be a true expression of the land.”

Tipsy from the strawberry-noted **Frappato**, we sat enraptured as we listened to the story of a woman who symbolises the new vibrancy of her region’s agriculturally-inspired gastronomy.

Val di Noto, as Occhipinti’s part of Sicily is known, comprises a cluster of towns included on Unesco’s World Heritage list for their Baroque beauty: Ragusa, Modica, Scicli, Noto and a few more. But it’s the food and wine, produced in the surrounding countryside and served in the towns’ restaurants, that are providing a new impetus for visitors to this corner of the island. I had come with my husband and two friends, arriving from Milan and New York

respectively, to go exploring on a route delineated by restaurant reviews, chefs’ recommendations and tip-offs about promising wineries.

The following morning we struck out for Gulfi, a vineyard 15 miles north of Vittoria which, like Occhipinti’s, offers tastings and tours to visitors (as well as a small hotel). Though grapes may have been grown on the island before, serious viticulture was introduced by the Greeks in the eighth century BC. New crops and cooking styles followed as the Romans, Arabs, Normans, French and Spanish each dominated the central Mediterranean island in turn. Sicily, with its fertile soil and ideal climate, became the rich repository for a hybrid cuisine.

After a tasting at Gulfi, we drove towards the elegant white-stone city of Ragusa. It is becoming synonymous with the high end of the island’s cross-bred culinary arts and boasts a pair of restaurants with two Michelin stars each. The old part of town, Ragusa Ibla, looked like an impossible stack of buildings – all built atop each other and clinging to a hill. The city, like all of Val di Noto’s Unesco-protected sites, was razed by a 1693 earthquake and rebuilt in the following century, creating a series of towns that are an architectural time capsule of late Baroque style rendered in the region’s pale limestone.

Ragusa’s heart is dominated by the columned and curlicued church of San Giorgio. Tucked behind one of its flanks is an old baron’s palazzo where Ciccio Sultano, probably Sicily’s most famous chef, opened Il Duomo in 2000. Sultano serves what he terms “gastro-rural” cuisine, relying on the fertile land for delicacies such as wild herbs, almonds, and fresh ricotta – but he’s a man who believes most in his own talent.

“Cuisine is created by the chef, not by

the territory,” he told us, turning his back on the loamy hills behind his restaurant. His plates are as baroque as San Giorgio itself – flights of fancy that frequently clash fish with sweet flavours, combining almond milk and red mullet or topping a honeyed ricotta cannoli with raw shrimp.

Peering over Ragusa’s craggy outskirts is the Locanda Don Serafino, where chef Vincenzo Candiano won his second star in 2014. “Here we’re raised with the culture of eating well,” he said, calling his cooking style “nostalgic” – his signature dish is a classic spaghetti and sea urchin interpretation, which has been loaded with ricotta and squid ink. The restaurant is in an old cave carved out from the mountainside, and a single luxurious hotel room, with a private garden and jacuzzi, abuts the dining room. On the large stone terrace, with views over juniper-covered slopes, we enjoyed our second double Michelin-starred meal in as many days. In truth, though, the culinary acrobatics of both restaurants proved less fulfilling than the simple delights we would find in the coming days.

In 2015, Sultano opened a new restaurant, recognising the desire for more forthright cooking and a growing respect for Val di Noto’s traditional cuisine. A kitchen and bakery, I Banchi serves what he calls “high-end common food” and fresh bread from ancient endemic grains such as Russello wheat, used for a dark and delicious focaccia topped with organic tomatoes. Located near the lovely Antico Convento, a monastery newly transformed into an airy hotel, the restaurant sits in a stone-walled stable converted into a long dining room filled with old animal hitching hooks and contemporary art.

In Modica, we sought out the Locanda

del Colonnello, where 28-year-old Francesco Mineo produces simple but sensational cooking grounded in the typical produce and recipes of the region – octopus with potatoes and oregano, for example, or stuffed gnocchi with lemon ricotta and cucuzza squash. “We’re guided by our past and our memories – combined with a touch of innovation so we don’t get bored,” Mineo



said, leaning on the traditional checkerboard tiles that line the restaurant walls.

Modica is composed of a more ferrous limestone than Ragusa, giving it a rosy hue. The city spreads upwards from a valley to the hilltop, where a little outpost called Casa Belvedere ferries trays of local specialities to tables with a glorious view. There we ate *arancini* – deep-fried, saffron-laced rice balls stuffed with ragù – and *scacce Modicane* (a layered, tomato-filled flat bread), washed down with an earthy white wine and local Minchia beer (a name too vulgar to translate here). As we enjoyed our aperitivo, the setting sun turned the town a deeper pink – it was enough to make us start studying local house prices.

On Modica’s Corso Umberto we indulged in sweeter treats. Latteria Caffè Storico serves *granitas* (a sort of sorbet) in classic flavours of lemon,

mulberry, coffee, almond, and crowd-pleasing pistachio – even more delicious when scooped up, in true Sicilian style, with a soft brioche. Most of these flavours arrived with the Arabs who ruled Sicily in the 10th and 11th centuries. Chocolate, however, arrived from Mexico with the Spaniards in the 16th century. Five hundred years later, Mod-

ica’s chocolatiers still hew to the original recipe: freshly ground beans and sugar, heated and mixed at no more than 45C. The result is a rich, grainy bar that retains a range of cocoa flavours lost in regular high-heat chocolate production. Family-run Bonajuto has been making chocolate since 1880 and sells antique flavours such as jasmine, cinnamon and vanilla as well as new introductions such as salt and seaweed. We gorged on enough of its freshly made chocolate to preclude dinner that evening.

From Modica we headed closer to the sea, to Scicli, where the buildings are a warm coppery pink, and the central, smooth-cobbled pedestrian drag is jammed with amblers in the evening. The Scicli Albergo Diffuso, which opened in 2012, has rooms throughout Scicli’s centre, in converted palazzos, apartment buildings and even *dammusi* – stone dwellings that are holdovers

from the Arab reign. Our room was in the Palazzo Favacchio Patané, a grand villa turned art gallery with four elegant rooms for guests and a cozy courtyard where we relaxed with a bottle of our Occhipinti wine.

Leaving Scicli, we drove through a landscape of sun-dried pastures tufted with carob trees and Aleppo pines until we reached Casa Salina, a stone farmhouse newly converted into a four-bedroom holiday rental, with a salt pool and jacuzzi by the olive grove garden.

For us, though, the USP was its chef-for-the-day service, with Ragusa-native Laura Giunta arriving to prepare exquisite versions of classic Sicilian dishes. Arrayed in Eames chairs around the wood slab table, we caroused our way through her lunch of swordfish-stuffed eggplant, anchovy tarts, vinegar-cured ray, Ragusano cheese drizzled with saffron and honey, and plenty of Valle dell’Acate’s flowery Zagra wine. Still in our swimsuits, we struggled to polish off the final delight – Giunta’s freshly filled, chocolate-dusted ricotta cannoli.

i / DETAILS

Occhipinti wines:

agricolaocchipinti.it; **Gulfi:**

locandagulfi.it; **Il Duomo:**

cicciosultano.it; **Locanda Don**

Serafino: locandadonserafino.it

(suite from €350); **I Banchi:**

ibanchiragusa.it; **Antico Convento:**

anticoconventoibla.it (doubles

from €99); **Locanda del Colonnello:**

locandadelcolonnello.it; **Casa**

Belvedere:

casabelvedere.oneminutesite.it;

Latteria Caffè Storico:

facebook.com/LatteriaCaffeStorico

Bonajuto: bonajuto.it; **Scicli**

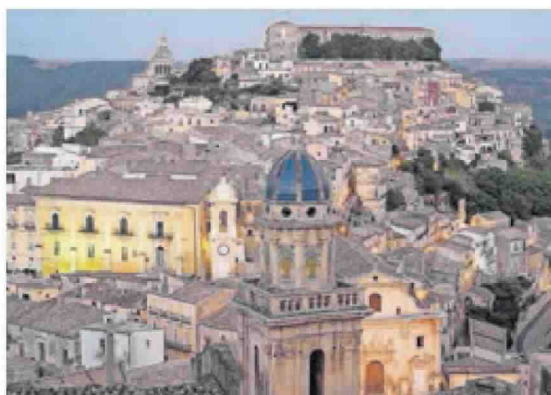
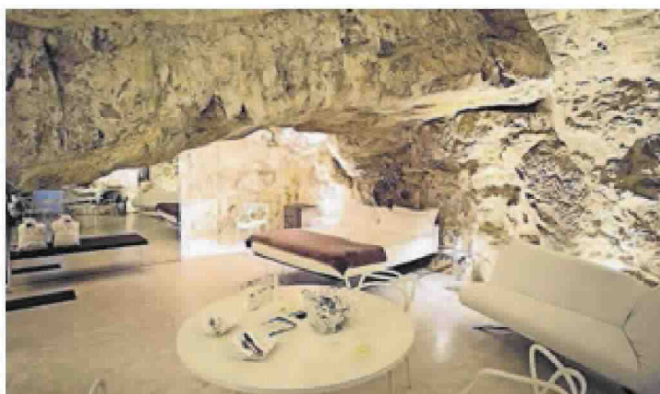
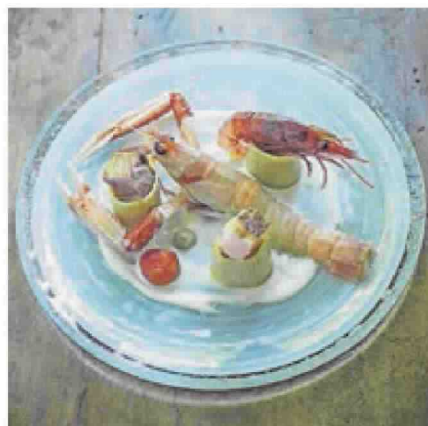
Albergo Diffuso:

scicli.albergodiffuso.it (doubles

from around €80); **Casa Salina:**

casasalina.com (villa from around

€250 per night)



Clockwise from top left: the Church of Santa Maria La Nova in Scicli; a dish at Il Duomo; the single suite at Locanda don Serafino; San Pietro church, Modica; winemaker Arianna Occhipinti; Ragusa; Ciccio Sultano in the kitchen at Il Duomo; harvesting at Gulfi vineyard; one of Locanda del Colonnello's desserts — Gaetano Mallia

