

The Island in the Sun Part II

Charles Scicolone (May 04, 2008)



The new and the old come together in Sicily and today's tourist is attracted by the food, wine and culture.

The restaurant scene is changing in Sicily. In the lower part of Ragusa know as Ragusa Ibla (the ancient part of the city rebuilt in the Baroque style after the earthquake of 1693) there are not one, but two, restaurants with Michelin stars. Locanda Don Serafino is a restaurant, hotel, enoteca, and cigar lounge. The very large restaurant has a member of rooms and a wine list of about 1000 bottles. It has one Michelin star. Less then 100 meters away is Il Duomo, a smaller restaurant whose chef worked in Felidia Restaurant in New York. It has a large wine list and two Michelin stars. Both



use Sicilian ingredients with a very modern twist. It was a pleasure to find such high quality, elegant restaurants in Sicily.

There are two restaurants in Palermo that serve traditional food. One has a very interesting name, Piccolo Napoli. It makes two of my favorite pasta dishes, linguine con nero di seppie, linguine with cuttlefish ink, and bucatini con le sarde, thick spaghetti with sardines and fennel. They also make perhaps the best caponata di melanzane I have ever tasted. It is in the Borgo market and is closed more than it is open. The other is the Antica Focacceria San Francesco around the corner from where my grandmother was born. They make some of the dishes I grew up with, panelle (fried chickpea fritters), arancini (rice balls) and vastedda (rolls filled with spleen, ricotta and caciocavallo) which we ate for a snack on New Years after midnight. They also serve brioche filled with gelato!

About one hour east of Palermo is the mountain town of Castelbuono, and one of our favorite restaurants, Nangalarruni. The food served here is referred to in Palermo as "mountain food". One of my favorite dishes is the stinco di maiale al vino rosso e miele di Castagno, pork shank cooked with red wine and chestnut honey. The wine list is very interesting. There are wines from Sicily as well as from other parts of Italy and some from other countries. When we were last there we had the 2004 Faro from Palari (\$75) made from Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio, Nocera and other local grapes. It has a rich aroma of red fruit and on the palate the red fruit is very intense with a long finish and great aftertaste. It is an elegant, well balanced wine that was the perfect combination with the stinco.

Our first trip to Sicily was in 1970 and in those days, finding a good hotel was almost impossible. Happily, this also has changed.

We stayed in a very nice hotel in Siracusa, the Hotel Des Etrangers. The rooms were spacious and comfortable and the glass-enclosed dining room on the top floor has a spectacular city view.

One of the best hotels in Sicily is the Villa Igiea e I Florio, about ten minutes from the center of Palermo. Hilton has taken it over and restored it, retaining all the old world charm. Having drinks on the terrace looking at the sea with the piano music in the background is magical and made me not want to leave. My great grand father met my great grand mother here, but that is another story.

The name Florio is connected both with the Hotel Villa Igiea e i Florio and Marsala wine. Vincenzo Florio, who was originally from Calabria, might have been Sicily's first real entrepreneur. He made a fortune in the shipping business along with his son Ignazio. In 1833 Florio built his winery in Marsala between those of Woodhouse and Ingham and was the first Italian to own a winery there. Meanwhile, Ignazio brought a private villa located just outside Palermo from an Englishman and named it Igiea after his daughter. The Villa Igiea e I Florio became an instant hit with the high society at the beginning of the 20th century.

Marsala in Arabic means the port of God and recently we returned to visit the Cantina Florio (for the fourth time). The winery is being restored to make it as it was when first built.



Marsala wine was the invention of an Englishman John Woodhouse quite by accident. While sailing to pick up cargo he was blown into the port of Marsala. Not wanting to go home empty-handed, he filled the ship with local wine. As was the custom of the time, he added alcohol to preserve the wine. In England, he sold the wine at a high profit and Marsala wine was born. The Royal Navy became Woodhouse's biggest client. Admiral Lord Nelson made it the official wine ration for the British navy.

Benjamin Ingham also made a fortune in the Masala trade as did his nephew Joseph Whitaker. Marsala became popular in Australia and America.

Marsala has suffered over the years as producers began to use any grape variety and add different ingredients to flavor the Marsala. Many people came to believe that Marsala was a cheap wine only good for cooking.

This has slowly changed over the last 20 years. Most Marsala is made from white grapes: Grillo, Catarratto and Inzolia. It can only be made in Trapani (excluding Alcamo) and on the islands of Egadi and Pantelleria. The wine must be aged in oak or cherry casks, Fino for one year, the Superiore for two and the Vergine for five. If it is labeled riserva, the aging time is doubled for each one. It must be at least 18% alcohol.

Marsala is a fortified wine. Sifone (grape must with 18% alcohol added to it), mosto cotto (caramelized cooked must) are added to the base wine in proportion to the type of Marsala. Marsala Vergine is 80% of the base wine with 20% pure alcohol added.

This can become very confusing as there are types based on style Fino, Superiore, Superiore Riserva, Vergine, Solera (a system like sherry where younger wine is added to older) and Stravecchio. It can also be classified by sweetness: secco (dry), semisecco (semisweet) and dolce (sweet) and color Oro, Ambra and Rubino (made from Nero d'Avola, Pignatello and Nerello Mascalese, red grapes). Labels can also have information about production methods and marketing. For example, London Particular (L.P.), Superior Old Masala (S.O.M.), Garibaldi Dolce (G.D.) and Old Particular (O.P.)

One of my favorites is the Marsala Superiore Vigna la Miccia from DeBartoli -- \$50. It is made from 50% Grillo and 50% Inzolia grapes and is aged in small oak barrels for five years. It is very aromatic with hints of prunes, figs and a nutty flavor. I like it with Sicilian almonds. For an interesting combination try it with foie gras.

Marsala can be served as an aperitif or with dessert. Florio makes very good Marsala but only the cooking wine is brought into this country.

We had lunch at the Planeta winery between Menfi and Sambuca di Sicilia. This winery produced its first wine in 1995 and became an instant success. Sicily has been called the California of Italy and this winery makes very modern style wine. Many of their wines are highly rated by Gambero Rosso.



With lunch we had three wines:

2007 La Segreta Bianco IGT made from 50% Grecanico, 30% Chardonnay, 10% Viognier and 10% Fiano (\$15). Aromatic and fruity with hints of apple, citrus and tropical fruit, it was fresh and fruity on the palate with good acidity.

2006 Cerasuolo di Victoria IGT made from 60% Nero d'Avola and 40% Frappato (\$21), a very aromatic grape. The wine has red berry flavors, cherry and strawberry with a fresh red berry notes on the palate.

2006 Santa Cecilia IGT made from 100% Nero d'Avola (\$40) is a well balanced wine with hints of prune, pomegranate and fig. On the palate there is prune and strawberry with a long finish. They now use a screw cap on their La Segreta and Rose wines. The Rose is made from 100% Syrah.

Olives were brought to Sicily in the 5th century B.C. by the Greeks. The olive oil became so famous that the many Greek city-states preferred it to their own. Sicily is also renowned for its eating olives. The Nocellara del Belice has a firm and somewhat crunchy consistency that makes it seem more meaty. It is grown in the Valle del Belice not far from the Greek ruins at Selinunte.

After visiting this spectacular site, we stopped for lunch at Tenuta Mandranova, a resort in a restored farmhouse and railroad station, in Palma di Montechiaro (where my father's family originated). Lunch was served al fresco among the olive trees. We tasted their excellent olive oil made from the Nocella del Belice olive. It made everything we put it on taste better.

We also tasted a number of olive oils from several other producers. The Primo green label from Frantoia Cutrera in the Iblei mountains in Southern Sicily was our top pick. It is made from the Tonda Iblea olive and has aromas of herbs and grass.

After our trip, we went to D. Coluccio & Sons in Brooklyn to stock up on imported Italian products. We were very surprised to see this olive oil on the shelf! (718-463-6700). The Baglio Seggio Fiorito green label made from 70% Nocellara del Belice, 30% from Cerasuola and Biancolilla olives and the Tenuta Rocchetta from Azienda Agricola Angela Consiglio made from Nocellara del Belice olives were also very good.

On one of the last days of the trip it rained. It is not always sunny in Sicily and they can always use rain. We stopped at the Azienda Agricola Fontanasla for a lunch of Sicilian specialties and olive oil tasting. Dr. Maria Catherina Burgalrella spoke about the process of making olive oil and the different type of olives she uses. She said that Cersuola olives have aromas of herbs, tomatoes, and lemons with low acidity. The Nocellara del Belice olives have a more fruity, spicy flavor. The choice of olive oil depends on what you are eating.



Minuta olive from the Valle del Naso in the provincia di Messina is a rare and ancient Sicilian olive. It grows on the highest hillsides of Monti Nebrodi. The olives are all hand harvested from mid-October through mid-December. The oil has a very delicate flavor with a fruity aroma and a touch of bitterness and spice on the palate.

A while ago, it was reported in the New York Times that the extra virgin olive oil from several factories contained sunflower and soybean oil. This investigation has been going on for some time now and seems to be never-ending. When I asked a producer in Sicily how you can tell if oil is purely extra virgin olive oil, his answer was: you have to watch the olives going in and the juice coming out to be sure. When you buy extra virgin olive make sure it is from a reputable producer.

Speaking of scandals, it seems that the buffalo mozzarella one is over. It was the larger producers in the northern part of Campania that were having the problems. Mozzarella from the artisanal producers (made by hand) was not involved.

The latest Italian scandal concerns Brunello di Montalcino 2003. The wine of some producers was confiscated by the government because Brunello must be made from 100% Sangiovese (Sangiovese Grosso) and the government said that these producers were putting Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot into there wine. Others were letting these foreign grapes grow in the vineyards alongside the Sangiovese. Others were accused of producing more Brunello then the law allows. The issue has not been resolved.

Last week I went to a Chianti Classic tasting which was very informative and will report on it soon.

Next week I am off to Alba in Piedmont for a tasting of Barolo and Barbaresco and will report on this trip.

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