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A history lesson on a plate

If you want to understand Sicily's colourful past, just immerse yourself in its cuisine. Food writer Matthew Fort goes on a culinary odyssey

Matthew Fort
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Say cheese ... Sicily boasts countless food markets, many of which Matthew Fort visited on his Vespa. Photograph: Hubert Stadler/Corbis

'Extra virgin olive,' read Nato Sanguedolce's recipe for salmoriglio sauce, 'lemon juice, oregano and salt.' Then, as a coda: 'The extra virgin olive oil should be from Sant'Agatese olives, the lemons from Pettineo, and the wild oregano from the Nebrodi. And brush it on to the pork chops after they have finished cooking.'

So that's the secret, I thought, remembering the sweet, sinewy meat, gilded with the heat of the barbecue, its delicate, almost languorous flavour pointed up by the singing salmoriglio. I knew that no matter how hard I tried, my pork chops would never taste the same.

Lunch had started at midday. Nato and his wife and their children, with several friends and their children, were gathered in a building that consisted of a room with a table, plus a kitchen and a store room, in the middle of an olive grove just outside Pettineo, a town high in the Nebrodi, a mountainous area with thick forests of oak and cork trees in the north-east of Sicily. I had met Nato at a honey tasting near Siracusa. Give me a call, he had said, when you reach the Nebrodi. I had taken him at his word.

Lunch was maccheroni con ragù di vitello (pasta with veal and tomato sauce), juicy slices of aubergine grilled over embers, fruity roasted corno di toro peppers with potatoes, a miraculous courgette stew, San Giuseppe sausages, and cured black olives. Nothing fancy or done to impress, but each mouthful had flavours of intoxicating vitality. It was as if the intense history of the island was packed into the dish. Perhaps it was.

At 4.40pm I lay back beneath an olive tree, head resting on a convenient root. Sunlight filtered through the leaves. I could still hear the laughter and conversation as I fell asleep. When I woke and rejoined the party, I was startled to see Nato uncoiling lengths of sausage and emptying what appeared to be a good part of a pig out of a bag, ready for grilling. That was what I had come back to discover, and put into a book if I could.

I had first come to Sicily in 1973, with my brother Tom. Neither of us knew much about the island - it just seemed like a good idea at the time. Sun-drenched. Wine. Food. We hired a car and spent our first night in Taormina, following in the footsteps of such diverse figures as Edward VII, Rita Hayworth and Truman Capote. On our first morning

I pushed back the shutters on to a dazzling azure sea and a sky the colour of hydrangeas. There was a sweet warmth and perfume to the air. On the far horizon was a small cloud, like the head of a dandelion. After that came day after day of blue skies, sparkling seas, churches, temples, ice creams, shellfish and salads, pastries and puddings.

I can recall the caramel marine sweetness of grilled prawns, the soft chewiness of squid in batter as light as a butterfly's wing, the charcoal-burnt edge just shading the delicate, flaking flesh of grilled sea bass. I remember the sausage epiphany I had in Erice, just two salsicce on a plate, plain and unadorned, that tasted more of pork than any sausages had a right to. The searing, brain- and tongue-tingling shock of lemon or coffee granitas, the soft, cool seduction of pistachio, chocolate, strawberry or melon ice cream. There were salads, crunchy and slightly bitter, tomatoes that exploded in your mouth like flavour grenades, and fruit - the sweet, perfumed trickle of peach juice down the chin, the apricots, the melons. By the time I returned in 2006, I wondered if it was just the honey of memory that made those recollections so dazzling.

As I rode my Vespa across the island, I realised that Sicily was more fascinating, delicious and paradoxical than even memory allowed. It has greater architectural and artistic riches than any area of comparable size, reflecting the march and counter-march of all the great Mediterranean cultures - Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Moorish, Spanish - and some non-Mediterranean ones - Normans, and Swabians from Germany. All have left their mark; in that sense it is a museum of Mediterranean cultures.

It's easy to trace their influence through physical remains: the temples, cathedrals, palaces and mosaics. But they are there, too, in place names, language, social attitudes and, above all, food. If ever there was a country whose history is written in its food, it is Sicily, in methods, ingredients, even agricultural techniques.

Just as history has been a continual assault on Sicily, so Sicilian cooking is an assault on the taste buds. Some dishes owe their origins to the Greeks; others to the Moors, to Rome or Byzantium. You could spy out the Spanish love of embellishment and theatrical gesture, the French insistence on structure and technique, and even trace shades of England and Germany here and there.

I explored Sicily's history on the plate rather than studying its artistic forms: from the epically sweet cannoli of Corleone to grilled mackerel with bitter chicory in Palermo; from sublime pastries in Enna to the eloquent, seductive softness and intensity of almond ice cream in Noto. Not forgetting the breakfast of coffee granita with cream and brioche at the famous Irrera cafe in Messina, sweet honeys of the Nebrodi, bitter lemons of the Conca d'Oro valley, lessons in bread- and pasta-making followed by another Lucullan lunch with the delicious Cesarina Perrone and her family, and on and on...

I feel sorry, really, for those who go to the island only to pass from Greek temple to Roman theatre, from baroque cathedral to opulent palace, who never explore the great sweep of central Sicily, the lesser-sung glories such as Modica Bassa and, above all, its gastronomic byways. Eating history is at least as much fun as looking at it - and rather more digestible.

• Matthew Fort's 'Sweet Honey, Bitter Lemons: Travels in Sicily on a Vespa' is published by Ebury Press, price £10.99. To order a copy for £9.99 with free UK p&p go to observer.co.uk/booshop or call 0870 836 0885.'

Four more foodie Mediterranean breaks

Seville, Spain

Often considered the tapas capital of Spain, Seville is the perfect place to get to grips with Spanish cuisine. Tasting Places has three-day and week-long cookery courses, encompassing everything from charcuterie plates to chilled soups, meat, fish and puddings, taught in a studio that overlooks the stunning cathedral and Giralda tower. There are also visits to olive oil, ham and sherry producers, with accommodation at the elegant Hotel Las Casas de la Juderia.

From £700 for three nights through Tasting Places (020 8964 5333; tastingplaces.com) including accommodation, transfers, all food, wine and tuition, but not flights.

Istria, Croatia

My Croatia creates bespoke itineraries that provide a glimpse of the authentic country. A week-long gourmet holiday explores the Italian-influenced Istrian peninsula, famed for truffles, oil and wine. There are two full-day tours, with wine and olive oil tastings and traditional lunches at rural restaurants. One- or two-day cookery courses can involve trips to the farmers' market at Pula and to organic smallholdings.

From £895 with My Croatia (0118 961 1554; mycroatia.co.uk) including B&B accommodation, car hire, two day trips with lunch and wine tastings, and gourmet notes, but not flights.

Eastern Crete

Often dismissed as rather monotonous, traditional Greek cuisine can be diverse and delicious - lots of fresh herbs, tender lamb and mountain cheeses. Cretan food has a particularly strong heritage and Cachet Travel is offering two themed weeks (3-10 June and 7-14 October) with accommodation at the Vilea Village resort in eastern Crete. The week includes herb-gathering walks, wine tastings, a demonstration of Cretan pie-making and dinners at tavernas specialising in local cuisine.

From £795 with Cachet Travel (020 8847 8700; cachet-travel.co.uk) including flights, B&B accommodation, some dinners, day trips and cookery demonstrations.

Puglia, Italy

Puglia is still relatively undiscovered, and a week at the elegant Casino Pisanelli, a former hunting lodge in the heart of the Salento region, is a chance to explore a less familiar Italian cuisine. There are five cookery lessons, focusing on specialities such as stuffed aubergines, orecchiette with anchovies, and lemon and almond tart, plus visits to producers, wine tasting and a guided tour of atmospheric Lecce.

From £1,599 with Flavours Holidays (0131 625 7002; flavoursholidays.co.uk), including flights, full-board accommodation, visits and lessons.

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