



## **TEATRO LUDOVICA RAMBELLI**

This is the link to one of the short videos of the *Teatro Ludovica Rambelli* of Naples, who have gained a wide reputation for their unique *tableaux vivants* of the great paintings of Caravaggio. Ludovica Rambelli herself died at an early age in 2017; but the theatre company continues in her name and memory.

<https://cctm.website/ludovica-rambelli-italia/>

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Franco Maria Ricci, Milano, 2007

### **SICILIAN CUISINE**

*Nigel McGilchrist*

Sicilian cuisine is perhaps the most complex regional cuisine of the Mediterranean basin. Historically, it is not one, but many cuisines. It reflects the extraordinary fertility of the island, the antiquity and complexity of its history, the deeply rooted ritualism of its culture, and the inveterate propensity of its people for magic and alchemy. Often more poetic than practical, it makes the foods of mainland Italy seem sometimes prosaic by comparison. Bold and operatic in its strongly contrasting flavours and colours, whilst firmly rooted in the essential products of a very ancient agricultural and marine culture, it is like the Cathedral of Syracuse, an exhilarating baroque edifice which has evolved within the austere beauty of an ancient, pagan framework. At times, it is its elemental simplicity that delights; at others, its unashamed artifice which amazes. No ingredient, no idea, no technique of preparation was brought by settler or invader over 2,500 years of history that was not rapidly assimilated and transformed by the creativity of the Sicilian genius, and adapted to the prodigious fertility of the island. Salt, sugar, rice, citrus fruit, pistachio, almond, aubergine, sardine and tuna - all find their most versatile (and sometimes their first) gastronomic expression in the food of Sicily.

In technical terms, it is a cuisine of combination, rather than of synthesis - 'paratactic' in method rather than 'syntactic'. In this sense it lies at the opposite end of the gastronomic spectrum from traditional French cuisine. Its emphasis is on the often startling addition and combination of strong, individual flavours (as for example in the classic *caponata*), rather than the subordination of elements to a greater, unified whole as in the best tradition of French and North Italian dishes.

Visually, too, it is perhaps the most courageous cuisine in Europe; not just because of the surprising combinations of colours and textures (for example, *cassata*), or the intricate forms of its sweets, but for the sheer *bravura* of its foods for festivals - the famous and astonishing votive creations in bread for the saints' feasts.

### Antiquity and the early Christian era:

Accounts of Sicilian food in antiquity abound. Already from Homer's vivid picture in the *Odyssey* of the fertility of the island as it appeared to 8th century BC Greek eyes we have a valuable image of the basic agriculture of the island - its irrigation, its fruits, vines, raisins and its fresh, sheep's cheese. But it is in classical times, once the Greek colonies of Sicily were well established, that we hear of gastronomy proper:- of the school for professional cooks run by Labdacus in Syracuse, of the lost 5th century BC text, *The Art of Cooking* by Mithaecus of Syracuse, and of countless references to other lost works on food. The fame of Sicilian cuisine in Antiquity was so great that the extravagant *coquus siculus* became a frequent and familiar caricature figure in the works of later classical comedy writers. In one fragment of Alexis of Tarentum, for example, we find: "I learnt to cook in Sicily so well that I will cause the banqueters to bite the dishes and plates for joy." But this same hedonism was often viewed with distaste, however, by some of Sicily's more illustrious visitors, such as Plato.

Most thoughtful and illuminating of all are the poetic writings (in Hesiodic hexameters) on food by Arcestratos of Gela (mid 4th cent. BC), preserved in fragmentary form in a later, rambling text - the *Deipnosophistai* of Athenaios of Naucratis. Arcestratos is more a connoisseur of ingredients and of their flavours, than a cook: he praises simplicity, quality and moderation, and is a man of great refinement and encyclopaedic knowledge. For him, fish takes precedence over meat, and every product or ingredient has its ideal place of origin, where its quality is finest:- swordfish from the straits of Messina, tuna from Tindari or Cefalù, lobster from Lipari, and so forth. With his eye unerringly on quality more than artifice, he often recommends simple, minimal roasting, with herbs, good olive oil and salt to enhance the essential flavours of fresh foods. Although writing in a period of frightening turmoil in Sicily, Arcestratos gives us a unique vision of dining as a sophisticated, almost sacramental art, always to be performed with gratitude and in moderation - a precarious and vulnerable vision which was soon to be lost for ever in Europe.

Where the Greeks may have moderated the luxury in food which Sicily's riches naturally invited, the Romans encouraged it. So many of the ingredients (pistachios, pine-nuts, artichokes, raisins, fish sauce, etc) used by Apicius, Imperial Rome's collator and writer of recipes, originate in Sicily; and the elaborate combinations and preparations we find in his writings give us a glimpse of the traditional excesses of sophistication to which Arcestratos had been so opposed almost 600 years earlier.

In Sicily it seems that pagan traditions rarely died, but were instead transformed; and with the advent of Christianity, ancient pagan, ritual foods were adopted by the new religion. The pagan *panspermia*, a ritual gruel, prepared from boiled, unmilled seeds, in honour of Apollo at the winter and summer solstices, reappears as the *cuccia* or spelt pudding (often served with a reduced wine sauce, *vino cotto*, which was one of Apicius's most frequent condiments) at St Lucy's feast, which likewise falls on the shortest day of the year. Similarly, Athenaios cites the sesame and honey cakes called *mylloi* which were moulded into the shape of the female pudenda as tokens of fertility, during the pagan festivals in honour of Demeter and Persephone. Here we perhaps see the origins of so many bizarre forms of later Sicilian pastries and breads:- the similarly shaped *pasti ri meli* of Syracuse and Noto, *minni di virgini* (in the form of St. Agatha's breasts), and biscuits such as Palermo's *strunzi d'ancilu* (literally, "angels' turds")- if not also the potato croquettes so delicately called *cazzilli*.

### Arab and Norman occupations:

The Arab invasions of the 9th century changed Sicilian food for ever, bringing rice, which was cultivated in paddies near Lentini; citrus fruits in plenty; the exotic aubergine; and sugar cane, which provided the first neutral sweetener in cooking and replaced honey from Erice and *vino cotto*, thereby radically transforming the confectioner's art. Nor is it unlikely that pasta was introduced into Italy through the Sicilian Arabs, who in turn may have brought it from further east in Persia. The making of *vermicelli* in Sicily, near to Palermo, is described by the 12th century Arab geographer, Al-Idrisi, a couple of generations before the journeys of the young Marco Polo. At first, pasta was a rich person's dish; it cost much more than bread. Eaten with broths, and with small fish, seasoned with wild fennel and raisins in these early times, pasta was to have to wait almost 500 years before its long-awaited betrothal to the tomato.

The more sophisticated Arab techniques of irrigation transformed and intensified agriculture on the island, in particular the cultivation of fruit, which, to the oriental palate, was not purely an element for sweet dishes:- different varieties of oranges were combined in spiced salads with onions, with fish (in *sarde al becafico*), or with artichokes; and perhaps Sicily's most quintessential salad is that of fresh lemons, mint, garlic, salt and a very little *vino cotto* (reduced wine). Nonetheless, the Arab settlers are most famous for creating the cold sherbets and granitas which were based on these citrus fruits, and which built upon the Ancient Roman habit of using snow from Mount Etna which had been stored underground as ice until the summer came. Of these, the *granita di scurzumera*, made from the flower of the jasmine, evokes more directly than any the luxury of the orient and of the *harem* from which it derived.

The *harem* is traditionally in the Islamic home where the delicate artistry and preparation of the exquisite sweetmeats - so important to Arab hospitality - took place. Once Sicily became Christian again under the Normans and Angevins, it was in the similar forced enclosure of the nunnery that those arts of the *harem* were perpetuated. The most famous example of this was the *frutta di Martorana* of Palermo's Martorana convent, where *pasta reale* (almond paste) from the island's innumerable almond groves was exquisitely moulded and coloured by the nuns into the forms of fruits, to the delight and incredulity of visitors and natives, at the time of the feast of All Souls. Oriental in their delicacy and ingenuity; pagan in their memories of ancient votive offerings; these fruits delighted both palate and eyes, and reminded the attentive spirit of the triumph over death - *they*, unlike real fruit, did not decay.

Such sweets were not just the prerogative of the Martorana; the *cuscus dolce* of almonds and pistachios of the closed nuns of the Sacro Cuore in Agrigento, or the almond paste *dolci di riposto* of the nuns of Erice, as well as the creations of many other convents were equally renowned. Close in nature to these, and yet more oriental in colour and appearance, is their extravagant 'lay' cousin - Sicily's famous *cassata*, named from the Arabic word *quas'ab* for the terracotta bowl in which it is moulded, and which incorporates beneath its spectacular exterior a core of sweetened ricotta - an element which might not have been that unfamiliar even to Odysseus, over two thousand years earlier.

### From the Middle Ages to modernity:

The unmistakable characteristics of Sicilian food were laid down by this rich but improbable combination of ancient Greek and Arab ideas. Once these two strains are fully integrated by the 13th century, the fundamentals of Sicilian cuisine are in place and the subsequent centuries bring only modifications, refinements and variations upon this same productive theme.

But the following centuries of French and Spanish domination saw a decline in agricultural management, and were all too frequently punctuated by repeated and appalling famines, to which Sicilian popular song bears ample testimony. As a consequence of famine, bread, which to pagan Greeks, Christians, Jews and Moslems alike, had a primary and ancient sacramental quality, became seen even more than before as an instrument of God's beneficence and punishment in this world. Every aspect of its preparation and its consumption was hedged about with Christian ritual and similes, exhortations and prohibitions. Bread in Sicily was considered, and was treated as an icon of divine grace, and it took through the Sicilian imagination an infinite variety of forms, for every occasion, every festival, every act - whether propitiatory, votive or celebratory. The power and visuality of these Sicilian religious feasts (as expressed in particular by the *altari di S. Giuseppe* or 'altars to Saint Joseph' of the Valle del Belice area) are renowned. In few other places in the world is bread used theatrically, architecturally, sculpturally and gastronomically at the same time. And almost every community in Sicily has its own individual forms and ingenious symbols in bread for its own particular festivals.

Bourbon Spanish domination in the 17th Century brought with it new exotica:- cocoa, the tomato, and the red chili-pepper (which had been first introduced into Spain from South East Asia by the Portuguese) - elements of great interest, but which only added to the variety of existing dishes rather than really transforming methods of cooking. In Sicilian cuisine they remain always pleasing afterthoughts, whereas in mainland Italian cooking they are often centre stage. At times they distracted Sicilian cooks from their ancient and great tradition. Can the *salsa di S. Bernardo*, made from almonds, sugar, breadcrumbs, anchovies, steamed with bitter chocolate and vinegar, really have been a happy complement to a dish already as vigorous and complete as Sicilian *caponata*? In 18th century Palermo it was thought that it was. The tomato, on the other hand, enhances some of Sicily's most famous modern dishes: Catania's *pasta alla Norma*, named after Vincenzo Bellini's opera of that name, shows how two ingredients, the tomato and the aubergine, one from far in the East and the other from far in the West, were united in a Sicilian marriage - a union which the world would have been a far poorer place without.

Bourbon links with Naples brought the fashion for things French; the theatrical, French (or French-trained) chef in a well-stocked kitchen became a vital status symbol for the well-to-do; and with the chef - or the *monzù* ("monsieur") as he came to be known in Sicily - came butter and cream, and a wholly different concept of food and its preparation. The banquets described by Lampedusa in *Il Gattopardo* give a vivid picture of the *monzù*'s art. Refined, essential and quintessential sauces, such as *essenza di cipolla* (a slowly cooked essence of onion which was henceforth to substitute the humbler garlic) and *velouté* sauces of aubergine, were the new fashion. The *monzù*'s art was a combination of virtuosity and extreme delicacy, as for example in the preparation of *scuma*, a very fine pasta, boiled rapidly, then gilded with eggs and fine breadcrumbs, and fried in very hot lard; this could serve as a casing for some delicacy or it could be moulded into weightless

baskets for some refined fish or mushroom filling. Short pastry also arrives with the *monzù*, and was used to encase oven-baked *timbali* of pasta or *pasticci di verdura* in a gilded crust. The effect of such influences, however, was to alter the emphasis of Sicilian cuisine: appearance now begins to prevail over substance

### Conclusion:

The geography of Sicily varies so dramatically from area to area that it is only natural that different cuisines have evolved in different regions of the island. Its tiny, offshore islands have based their dishes on the intense flavours of the capers, oregano, and *nepitella* (calamint) which grow there; the currants and the *malvasia* grapes which they produce; and the cactus fruits and miniature lentils which survive in their dry and rocky environment. Both these islands and the coastal cities have obviously always prized their abundance of fish:- Lampedusa, its *cernia* (sea-perch); Trapani, its tuna, and Messina, its *stocco* and sword-fish, intercepted in shoals at the yearly periods of migration.

The salt pans of Trapani, so jealously husbanded by the ancient Romans, and profitably used by the Florio family in the 19th Century, meant that Trapani's tuna could be salted, preserved and exported widely; likewise the island's sardines and anchovies. But the cuisine of Trapani shows also the many influences that a rich, maritime port would be expected to have:- the influence of Andalusian *gaspacho* on the Trapanese *ammogghiu*, of French ideas on its *anguilla alla matalotta*, and of the Maghreb in the ubiquitous regional *cuscus*. Messina's Easter soup, *'U sciuscieddu*, similarly shows such outside influences - in this case French - as also with its *impanata di pesce spada*, a magnificent envelope of short-crust pastry containing the sword-fish and its accompaniments of olives, zucchini and capers.

Inland, at Caltanissetta and Enna, we find the sheep's cheeses first mentioned by Homer; *tuma*, *primosale* and *pecorino*, often with the addition of black peppercorns or coriander seeds, and even (in the province of Enna) of saffron. Here, too, are the finest beans and pulses, essential ingredients in dishes such as the *minestre di ceci* (chickpea potage) or *maccu di fave* seasoned with wild fennel. Though the soil is good in central Sicily, no area can compare with the Catanian hinterland, whose rich volcanic soil and sunshine gives an intensity to the fruits and perfumes of its orchards. This lies behind the huge success of its ices and sorbets, and its citrus summer salads. In fact, a healthful simplicity informs the food of this area, so much of which is based upon the household bread-oven: *schiacciate*, richly filled *focaccine*, vegetables roast over charcoal, and fish and seafood wrapped in fig or citrus leaves and then roast over the coals.

Of the Ancient Greek roots, in particular, of Syracusan and Ragusan cuisine, and of the Arab influences and courtly nature of Palermitan cuisine, sufficient has been said above. Fortunately, however, for all this diversity, Sicily is small enough for each area to have felt the influence of all the others; and it is this that has been the key to its unequalled gastronomic richness.

In mainland Italy, the vital continuity with Antiquity had been broken by the repeated barbarian invasions; but not so in Sicily. In this way, both through the forced emigration of many Sicilian Jews in the late 15th century and through trade in primary ingredients with Genoa and Venice, Sicily was able to export its precious, historical legacy in food back to the growing cultural centres of the Italian peninsula. Renaissance food in

continental Italy owes a great debt to Sicily and, through her, to Antiquity. Indeed, without Sicily, Italian food could never have become what it now so splendidly is.

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