

BRILLIANT SICILIAN

This Italian island offers some of the country's most diverse cuisine, with wine to match.

BY NILS
BERNSTEIN

PHOTOS BY
AARON
GRAUBART

“I think Sicily is probably the most interesting place in Europe,” says Celestino Drago, the LA restaurateur behind Drago and il Pastaio. Drago hails from Messina, in northern Sicily.

“Look how it’s situated geographically: Everyone stopped there, and everyone brought something. Even today, you see the Arab influence on the west coast and the Greek influence in the east.”

Sicily also offers some of Italy’s most diverse cuisine. Even its most traditional dishes will vary from chef to chef and home to home. It provides an incredible range of options for an island that’s a mere four-hour drive from end to end.

“Anyone who wanted to control the Mediterranean needed to control Sicily,” says Gary Portuesi, president of the travel company Authentic Sicily. “Conquerors came and went for thousands of years, including the Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Spanish, Austrians, French, Germans and others, all bringing with them their ingredients: wheat, almonds, figs, eggplant, tomatoes, chocolate [and] peppers.” The following recipes are a taste of these varied flavors.





Pesto Trapanese

This tomato-almond pesto is as versatile as the standard basil-pine nut version. Cherry tomatoes are the best year-round substitute for the island's intensely flavorful sun-ripened tomatoes. In Sicily, this sauce is almost always served with busiate, a spiral-shaped pasta. You can coil your own fresh by winding thin strands of pasta dough around a skewer into a telephone-cord shape, or you can use fusilli or gemelli.

In mortar and pestle or food processor, grind ½ cup **toasted almonds**, 2 **cloves** garlic, ¼ cup loosely packed fresh **basil** and/or **mint** and 2 tablespoons extra-virgin **olive oil** into coarse purée. Add 1 pound halved **cherry tomatoes** and drizzle in another ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil. Process until pesto is creamy, but not completely smooth. Salt generously to taste. Toss with **pasta** and a little pasta-cooking water. Top with toasted **breadcrumbs** or grated **pecorino**. Serves 4–6.

PAIR IT

Benanti 2012 Pietramarina Bianco Superiore (Etna)

"Carricante is Sicily's noble, indigenous white varietal, producing a range from simple, everyday wines to ageworthy whites the equal of Grand Cru Chablis," says Josh Nadel, wine director of Leuca in Brooklyn, New York, which specializes in Southern Italian food and wine. "Benanti's Pietramarina, sourced from an 80-year-old vineyard on the eastern side of Mount Etna, is 100% Carricante, and irrefutably one of Italy's greatest white wines."



Panelle

Panelle are fritters made from chickpea flour cooked into a polenta-like consistency and then fried. Chickpea flour is available at large supermarkets and Italian or Middle Eastern groceries.

In heavy saucepan, whisk 2 cups **chickpea flour** with 3 cups water and 1½ teaspoons **sea salt** until smooth. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until thickened and pulling away from sides of pan. (You can stir in chopped fresh **parsley**, **sage** or **rosemary**, if you like). Pour onto oiled rimmed baking sheet. Spread mixture about ¼ inch thick, and smooth with oiled hands. Cover with plastic, and cool from 1–24 hours (refrigerate if more than 1 hour). Cut into rectangles or triangles, and lift from pan with spatula. In wide pan, heat ½ inch **olive oil** to 375°F. Fry panelle, turning once, until crisp, about 2 minutes per side. Serve immediately, or keep warm in 250°F oven. Serves 4–6.

PAIR IT

Tasca d'Almerita 2011 Almerita Brut (Contea di Sciafani)

"Made from all Chardonnay with lots of lees contact, this Champagne-ish bottle delivers dense fruitiness, buttered brioche and a little almond note," says Casper Rice, wine director for Gruppo Fabio Trabocchi in Washington DC. "I've always been trained to drink Champagne with fried things, and Almerita Brut is a fantastic, off-the-beaten-path parallel. The lemony, crisp acidity in the wine does a great job of cleaning a palate of fried deliciousness."

Caponata

“Like apple pie in the U.S., *caponata* is a dish where every family has their own recipe and varies from town to town,” says Portuesi. “Some parts of the island include peppers, while others top it off with chocolate. This is my mother’s recipe, from Castellammare del Golfo on the Northwest coast.”

Courtesy Gary Portuesi, president, Authentic Sicily

- 1 large eggplant, cut into ½-inch dice
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 celery stalk, cut into ¼-inch dice
- 1 small red onion, minced
- ½ pound pitted, halved green olives
- 1½ tablespoons rinsed capers
- ½ cup tomato purée
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- ½ cup red wine vinegar
- Kosher salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- Basil leaves, for garnish (optional)
- Toast, for serving (optional)

Place eggplant in bowl of cold, salted water. Let soak 90 minutes. Drain and pat dry with paper towels.

Heat 2 tablespoons olive oil in large skillet over medium heat. Add eggplant and celery. Cook 15 minutes, or until golden brown.

In separate skillet, heat remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil over medium-low heat. Add onion, olives, capers and tomato purée. Cook, stirring often, until mixture thickens, about 15 minutes. Add eggplant mixture. Cook another 5 minutes.

Raise heat to medium-high. Add sugar and vinegar, and salt and pepper to taste. Cook 3 minutes to thicken and blend flavors. Serve cold or at room temperature with toast (if desired), garnished with basil leaves. Serves 4–6.

PAIR IT

Frank Cornelissen 2014 Susucaru Rosato (Terre Siciliane)
“Not typical, natural and lots of skin contact make this rosé super fun to sip on its own, but surely jumps out of the bottle even more with some great food,” says Rice. “This wine can stand up to the vibrant acidity in caponata, while also highlighting the delicate flavor of the vegetables.”

Arancini di Riso

“When you think about Sicily, you think about *arancini*,” says Drago. “When we would cross from Calabria back to Sicily, we’d run to the bar upstairs on the boat, because if you were a little late, there were no *arancini* left.” The name for these fried risotto balls means “little oranges,” though they can come in other shapes. The cone-shaped *arancini* of Catania are meant to represent Mount Etna. The flour slurry they’re dipped in is called *pastella*, and it ensures a crispy coating.

Courtesy Celestino Drago, executive chef/owner, Drago, Los Angeles, and il Pastaio, Beverly Hills, CA

- 2 cups panko breadcrumbs
- 8 cups chicken stock (preferably homemade)
- ¼ teaspoon saffron threads
- 3 tablespoons butter
- 3 tablespoons olive oil, plus more for frying
- ½ medium white onion, minced
- 2 cups Arborio rice
- 1 cup flour
- 1 egg
- Kosher salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- ¾ cup small-diced provolone

Grind breadcrumbs in food processor. Set aside.

Heat stock to simmer, and crumble in saffron. Keep warm over low heat.

In wide, deep pot over medium heat, melt butter with oil. Add onion and cook until golden, about 5 minutes. Add rice, and stir 1 minute. Add stock 2 cups at a time, stirring constantly. Let rice absorb stock before adding more. Cook until rice has loose, creamy texture (you may not need all broth), about 20 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Pour into rimmed baking sheet. Let cool completely.

In shallow bowl, beat flour and egg with 1½ cups water until smooth. Set aside. With wet hands, scoop ¼-cup rice ball into palm. Using thumb of other hand, make large hole in the center. Add 2 teaspoons provolone or other filling and enclose with rice, maintaining round shape. Coat in flour mixture, letting excess drip off. Coat with breadcrumbs.

Fill wok or deep pot with 4 inches oil, and heat to 350°F. Fry *arancini* in batches until golden brown, turning to cook evenly, about 4 minutes. Dry on paper towels, and serve hot. Serves 4–6.

GET YOUR FILLINGS

The most common *arancini* filling in Sicily is *ragu* (meat and tomato sauce) with peas and cheese. Other popular fillings include minced mushrooms, prosciutto, eggplant, tomato and pistachios, always with a few bits of diced provolone dolce or mozzarella.

PAIR IT

Valle dell’Acate 2015 Il Frappato (Vittoria)
Bright, easy-drinking and lightly chilled Frappato is a great match for these addictive bites. This bright and savory bottle opens with enticing aromas of wild berry, fragrant blue flower, rose and a whiff of exotic spice. The silky palate offers succulent Marasca cherry, black raspberry, white pepper and a hint of clove alongside the tannins and fresh acidity.



Farsumagru

The name of this dish translates to “fake lean,” though it’s plenty rich. Serve on its own as a main dish, or as part of a buffet.

Adapted from Flavors of Sicily, by Ursula Ferrigno (Ryland Peters & Small, 2016)

- 6 ounces ground pork**
- ½ pound Italian-style pork sausage, casing removed**
- 1 onion, sliced and divided**
- 1¾ pounds boneless beef sirloin, cut into ¼-inch slices**
- 2 hard-boiled eggs, sliced**
- 3 strips bacon**
- ¾ cup grated Pecorino cheese**
- 2 garlic cloves, minced**
- Kosher salt, to taste**
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste**
- Olive oil, for pan**
- 1 cup dry red wine**
- 2 cups beef or chicken stock**

In large skillet over medium heat, sauté pork, sausage and ½ onion 10 minutes. Set aside.

Lay out beef slices on work surface, overlapping slightly, to make a 9-inch by 12-inch rectangle. Top slices with sausage mixture evenly. Add eggs, bacon, Pecorino and garlic. Season with salt and pepper. Roll up and tie with kitchen twine.

Coat deep skillet or Dutch oven (large enough to hold meat) with olive oil over medium heat. Add remaining onion. Add beef and brown very well on all sides. Transfer to plate. Add wine to pan, and scrape up browned bits. Cook until wine is almost evaporated. Return beef to pan. Add stock and reduce heat to low. Cook for 1 hour, turning occasionally.

Remove beef, and set aside. Boil sauce, if necessary, until it thickens like gravy. Serve in thick slices, warm or at room temperature, with a little pan sauce. *Serves 4–6.*

PAIR IT

Biondi 2014 Outis Rosso (Etna)
 “Nerello Mascalese excels on the slopes of Mount Etna, yielding just the sort of savory, crisp, medium-tannin reds that pair well with this traditional dish,” says Nadel. “They have enough texture to complement the meat without clashing with the bold flavors of garlic and Pecorino.” This wine offers smoky and herbal notes, with polished tannins and fresh acidity in perfect balance.



Cannoli

Cannoli are ubiquitous in Sicily. But with apologies to the many fantastic *pasticcerias*, they’re always best made at home, as pre-filled cannoli shells can turn soggy quickly. In Sicily, dough is rolled around metal cannoli forms and deep-fried into shells, but this version adopts a technique from Central Italy, where delicate baked discs are rolled around wooden spoon handles.

Adapted from Flavors of Sicily, by Ursula Ferrigno (Ryland Peters & Small, 2016)

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter**
- 1 egg white**
- ¼ cup superfine sugar**
- 2 tablespoons 00 or all-purpose flour**
- 1 teaspoon cocoa powder**
- Filling (see recipe below)**
- Powdered sugar and cocoa powder, for dusting**

Preheat oven to 375°F. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.

Melt butter and let cool. Set aside. In bowl, whisk egg white until stiff, then fold in sugar. Sift flour and cocoa powder over egg mixture, and fold in. Trickle butter around sides of bowl, and fold in. Put 1 tablespoon of batter mixture onto prepared baking sheet, and spread into 4-inch circle. Repeat with remaining batter, making four circles on each baking sheet.

Bake 7 minutes, or until firm to touch. Slide off-set spatula under each circle. Working quickly, wrap circles around greased wooden spoon or whisk handles (or anything else ½–¾ inch in diameter). Let cool. Ease shells off handles. Continue to cool on wire rack.

Affix pastry bag with plain round tip just narrower than shells. Add filling, and squeeze into cannoli shells.

Place cannoli on a serving dish and dust with icing or confectioners’ sugar and cocoa powder. Serve immediately. *Serves 8.*

PAIR IT

Marco de Bartoli
 NV Vecchio Samperi
 Ventennale
 “This is top-shelf Marsala,” says Rice. “This fortified wine is far beyond typical, with notes of intense spice, toffee, candied orange and roasted nuts. This wine pairing is far more savory than most might try, and might change your life.”

Filling

- ¼ cup ricotta cheese**
- 1 tablespoon superfine sugar**
- 1 ounce grated dark chocolate**
- ¼ cup finely chopped pistachio nuts**
- ½ tablespoon finely grated lemon zest**
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract**
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon**

Beat ricotta and sugar until smooth. Stir in remaining ingredients.