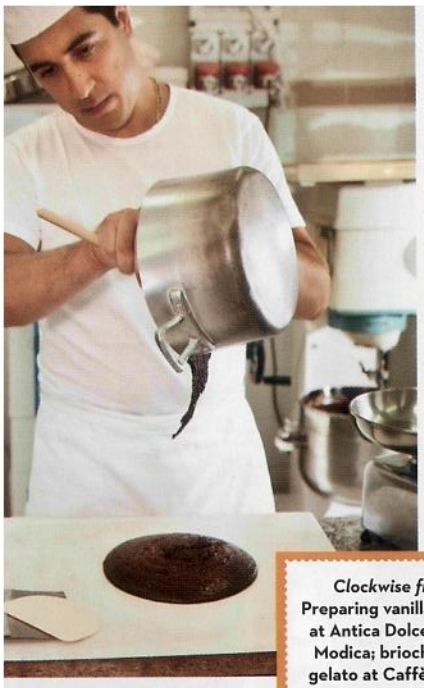
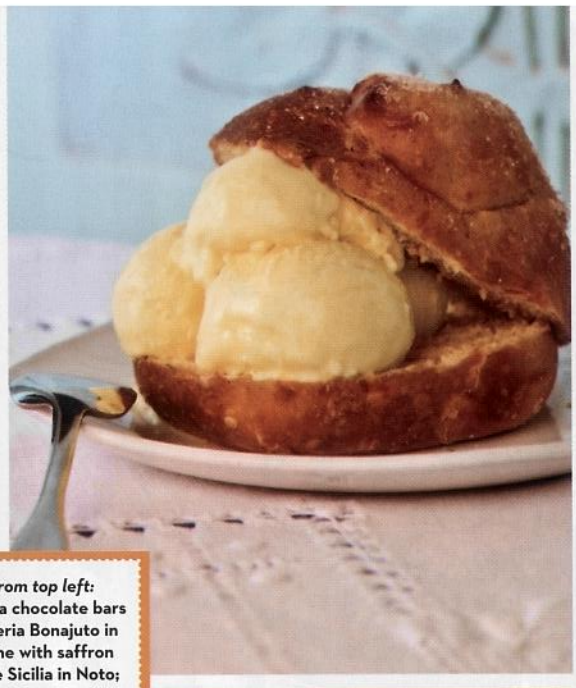
LA DOLCE SICILIA

In search of a mythical cake he once read about, **Andrea di Robilant** crisscrosses the island of Sicily, tasting all manner of cannoli and biscotti, cakes and cookies, chocolate, candied fruit and marzipan in the shadow of Mount Etna.

photographs by **MANOS CHATZIKONSTANTIS**

The Sicilian town of Noto; traditional candied fruit (opposite).





Clockwise from top left: Preparing vanilla chocolate bars at Antica Dolceria Bonajuto in Modica; brioche with saffron gelato at Caffè Sicilia in Noto; a newsstand in Catania; wild strawberry tarts at Catania's I Dolci di Nonna Vincenza; Bonajuto's salty chocolate bar; fresh Sicilian almonds.

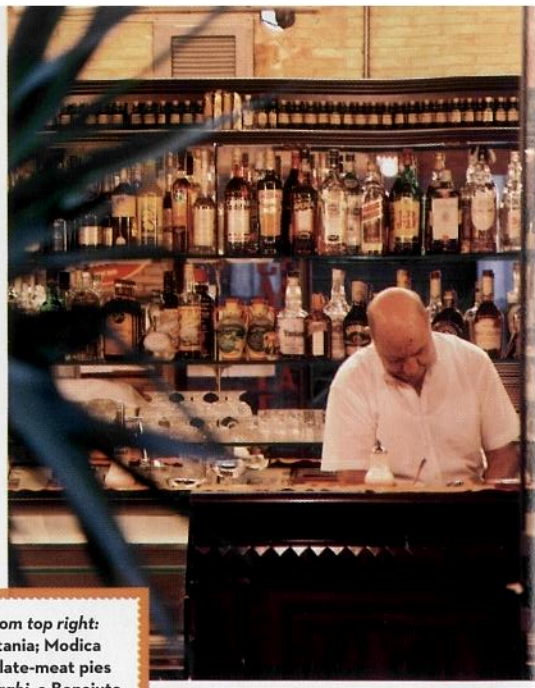
n a memorable ballroom scene in *The Leopard,* Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's 1958 novel set in 1860s Sicily, a weary Don Fabrizio, prince of Salina, leaves the dance floor and wanders over to the dessert table. As he surveys the lavish display of sweets, biscuits and ices, his eyes fall on a *trionfo di gola*—an extravagantly rich cake covered with candied fruit and sprinkled with pistachios. The prince (played by Burt Lancaster in Luchino Visconti's 1963 film version) pauses briefly and then, alas, moves on another dessert farther down the table.

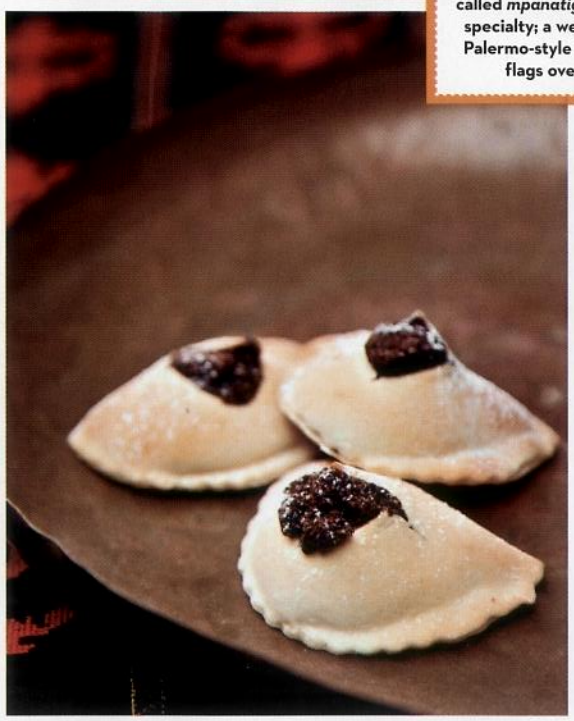
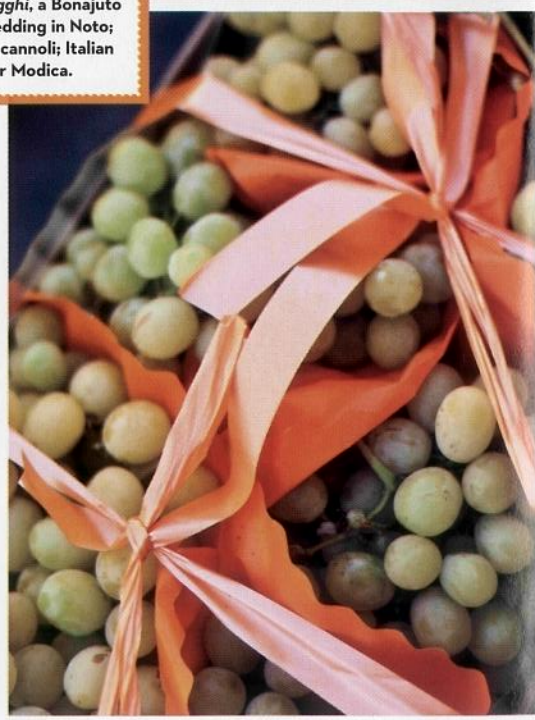
That tantalizing glimpse of the *trionfo di gola,* which I translate ere, inadequately, as "triumph of the palate," lingered in my mind ng after I read *The Leopard* as a teenager during a trip to Sicily. he name alone evoked a sensuous, vaguely sinful creation of such ıpreme delight that I found it impossible to forget.

Over the years on return trips to Sicily, I often asked about it, only to receive vague, disappointing replies. Few people had heard of the *trionfo di gola,* and those who had had never actually seen one, let alone tasted it. I came to wonder whether it was simply a literary invention. On my latest visit to Sicily, last spring, I gave myself a week to unveil the mystery. My quest became a fascinating journey into the world of Sicilian desserts.

Sicily has always been the land of sweetmeats. The ancient Greeks, who first colonized the island, made delicious pastries with almonds and honey. In the early Middle Ages, the Arabs introduced sugarcane—a pivotal innovation—as well as a taste for sherbets and ices. The Spanish brought cacao paste from the New World. Later, the Swiss and French pâtissiers employed in the great Sicilian houses contributed their creative panache. But it is hard to imagine how all these disparate strands would have come together so harmoniously if not for the cloistered nuns in countless convents who perfected the art of dessert-making over the centuries.





Clockwise from top right: **A café in Catania; Modica grapes; chocolate-meat pies called *mpanatigghi*, a Bonajuto specialty; a wedding in Noto; Palermo-style cannoli; Italian flags over Modica.**

I started my weeklong tour by driving almost 200 miles from Palermo, on the north coast, to Noto, in the southeast, to meet Corrado Assenza, the owner of Caffè Sicilia and arguably one of Italy's best pastry chefs. In Noto, a beautiful baroque town overlooking the Ionian Sea, the façades of the churches and palaces are so rich, they seem to be carved out of sponge cake. Caffè Sicilia sits on the shady side of the Corso, facing the steps that lead up to the Cathedral of San Nicolò, and just inside stands a vitrine filled with gorgeous pastries. These are Assenza's jewels—a mix of tradition and innovation. I recognized the *faccioni,* the typical biscotti in the shape of an angel face, and the rosy *conchiglie,* marzipan scallop shells with a citron filler. But the other pastries looked unfamiliar, even a little exotic.

Assenza, who studied entomology at the School of Agriculture in Bologna before returning home to take over the family pastry business, emerged from his workshop in the back of the café wearing scrubs and clogs, like a scientist taking a break from the lab. A slight man with a shock of salt-and-pepper hair over dark eyes, he had the affable manner of someone who is happy doing what he does.

Though I hadn't met Assenza at the time, I had been to Caffè Sicilia 15 years earlier and had tasted an almond granita so delicious that its bittersweet fragrance went straight to my brain, crowding out the street bustle, the smell of fresh coffee and buns, the shuffling of waiters among the tables. When I described this vivid memory, Assenza replied that, in fact, his almond granita had evolved since then: He had improved his almond-grinding technique and was able to produce a much finer paste. "I am always pushing the boundaries of what we can accomplish here, using our knowledge and skills to bring out the most from raw materials we gather locally: almonds, of course, but also honey, jasmine, oranges, lemons, citrons, pistachios, mulberries and, in the summer, peaches and apricots," Assenza said. "I want to bring my customers and my ingredients in the closest possible contact, even as I become invisible."

CONTINUED »

"THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE OFTEN MIX WHEN IT COMES TO SICILIAN PASTRIES."

– PAOLO PISTONE, BAKER

Ingredients for chocolate-meat pies at Bonajuto; *minne di Sant'Agata*, or "breasts of Saint Agatha," at I Dolci di Nonna Vincenza (opposite).

Sicilian Cassata

ADAPTED FROM A RECIPE BY FABRIZIA LANZA

10 to 12 servings

Sponge cake
6 large eggs, at room temperature
2/3 cup sugar
1 tsp finely grated orange or lemon zest
1/2 tsp salt
1 cup cake flour, sifted

Syrup
3/4 cup warm water
5 tbsps sugar
2 tbsps Grand Marnier

Filling
1/4 cup sugar
12 ounces fresh ricotta cheese (about 1 1/2 cups)

Marzipan
Green food coloring or gel
One 7-ounce tube marzipan

Icing
2 cups confectioners' sugar, sifted
2 to 3 tbsps fresh lemon juice
1/2 tsp pure lemon extract

Candied fruit, for decoration

Make the sponge cake: Preheat the oven to 350°. Butter and flour a 9-inch springform pan. Put the eggs in the bowl of a mixer and beat at medium-high speed for 5 minutes. Add the sugar, zest and salt and beat at high speed for about 15 minutes, until the mixture forms a ribbon when poured. In two or three parts, gently fold in the flour. Pour the batter into the springform pan and smooth the surface. Bake the cake for 25 to 30 minutes, until a cake tester inserted into the center comes out clean. Let the cake cool completely on a rack.

Make the syrup: Pour the water into a small bowl. Add the sugar and Grand Marnier and stir to dissolve the sugar.

Make the filling: In a medium bowl, stir the sugar into the ricotta cheese.

Color the marzipan: Wearing rubber gloves, knead a small drop of the food coloring into the marzipan until it is evenly colored pale green.

Assemble the cassata: Line a 9-inch deep-dish pie plate with plastic wrap. Divide the marzipan into thirds and roll each piece into a 3-by-11-inch strip, about 1/4 inch thick. Line the side of the pie plate with the marzipan strips. Press them against the sides to form a smooth layer. Unmold the cake and trim off the crust. Cut the cake vertically into 1/2-inch-thick slices. Put a layer of slices on the bottom of the pie plate and brush with 4 to 5 tablespoons of the syrup. Spread evenly with ricotta filling. Carefully place another layer of cake slices on top and brush with the rest of the syrup. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 1 hour or overnight.

Make the icing: Sift half of the confectioners' sugar into a bowl. Add half of the lemon juice and all of the lemon extract and stir, breaking up any lumps. Sift the remaining sugar into the bowl and add the rest of the lemon juice. Thin the icing with a little water, if necessary, until it is smooth and shiny and can be spread easily.

Ice the cassata: Remove the plastic wrap on top and invert the cassata onto a platter. Carefully peel off the plastic wrap. Gently spread the icing over the top of the cassata in an even layer, spreading it just to the edge of the marzipan. Refrigerate uncovered until the glaze is set, about 15 minutes. Decorate the top with candied fruit.

Assenza walked me over to the vitrine and drew my attention to some of his newest creations. "This one I've named *equilibrio dinamico* ['dynamic balance']," he said, pointing to a multilayered concoction of cream, hazelnut sponge cake, pumpkin puree, white-peach marmalade and a sprinkling of dark chocolate. Sometimes Assenza is inspired by the ingredients at hand; at other times, he is driven by an idea. He invented *tempo del riposo,* or "resting time," as an ode to relaxation. It is made of three elements: a jasmine gelée, black rice dressed with a light almond cream and a *bancha* green-tea gelée. Assenza has been traveling to Japan regularly since the 1990s. "After a long day at work, I would return to my hotel room and rest with a cup of *bancha,*" he says. "I wanted *tempo del riposo* to recapture that experience."

The more he delved into the intricacies of contemporary Sicilian pastry-making, the more I felt my quest for the *trionfo di gola* was vaguely anachronistic. When I finally brought it up, he stared at me blankly. "*Trionfo di gola*? I've never heard of it. Perhaps in western Sicily…." he suggested rather unconvincingly.

The next morning, before leaving Noto, I stopped by Caffè Sicilia for a taste of Assenza's ultimate almond granita. "It is the perfect way to start the day," he told me. "Salts, minerals, water, proteins and no cholesterol." Following his advice, I ordered a brioche to go with it. In the early morning light, the ochre of the baroque façades stood out starkly against the deep blue sky. I tore off a piece of the brioche and dipped it into the cool, softly melting nectar. If the gods have breakfast, I thought, this surely must be it.

The 25-mile road west from Noto to Modica, my next destination, wound gently through the open countryside. There were no garish billboards or ugly houses—just old farmsteads set among citrus and almond groves and gnarly carob trees.

Modica, the capital of a large county under Spanish rule from the 16th to the 18th century, is another gem in a string of splendid baroque towns in southeastern Sicily. Narrow, winding streets lead to little squares with pretty churches and wide vistas of the town. The scent of jasmine is everywhere.

Modica is famous for its chocolate. The Spaniards ground cacao beans on a curved stone called a metate and made bars of cacao paste that were then grated over food or liquefied and consumed as a beverage, in the Aztec fashion. In Modica, until recently, the *ciucculattaru,* or chocolate man, still made the rounds with a metate, grinding cacao beans for customers as well as selling bars of pure cacao.

At the Antica Dolceria Bonajuto, in front of Modica's Chiesa Madre di San Pietro, Franco Ruta and his son, Pierpaolo, carry on the family chocolate business started by their forefather, Francesco Bonajuto, in 1880. Today they import most of their cacao paste from West Africa, but they have placed an antique metate at the entrance of the shop to remind customers of the age-old link to the New World. Modica chocolate has a granular texture. Because the cacao paste is heated at a temperature as low as 45 degrees Celsius instead of the standard 90 degrees Celsius, "the sugar crystals don't dissolve," Pierpaolo Ruta told me, "which gives our chocolate its natural crunchiness. The low temperature also enables us to preserve aromas of the cacao bean that would otherwise be lost." Leonardo Sciascia, the great Sicilian author, once wrote that after eating Modica chocolate, one has the impression of having tasted "the archetype." All others pale in comparison.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 242 »

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 216

At Bonajuto the chocolate is 65 percent cacao paste, 34 percent sugar and one percent spice: orange, lemon, cardamom, marjoram, nutmeg, chili pepper, white pepper or salt from the ponds on the island of Mozia, off Sicily's west coast. After my sugar binge at Caffè Sicilia, I left Bonajuto with a single salt-flavored bar and headed two hours northeast to Catania. On the road, I took a bite and thought of Mozia's blinding white saltworks.

On All Souls' Day, the pastry shops in Catania, the port city at the foot of Mount Etna, on Sicily's east coast, sell large amounts of *ossa di morti,* or "bones of the dead," cookies made with almond flour, cloves and honey. As far as devotional pastries go, the *minne di Sant'Agata,* or "breasts of Saint Agatha," are even more macabre. Saint Agatha, Catania's patron saint, was a Christian martyr whose breasts were cut off. Made from sponge cake, almond paste and ricotta, the *minne* are shaped like breasts, with a candied-cherry nipple on top.

Vincenza Lo Faro, known as Nonna Vincenza, is the most popular pastrymaker in town. She learned to make pastries from a nun in her hometown of Agira, in central Sicily; after she married, she moved east to Catania, where she continued to bake for family and friends. On the day she buried her husband, 20 years ago, she decided to open a shop in an old candle store behind the cathedral. Now 79, she still puts in a full day of work, but her son, Paolo Pistone, runs the business. He sells more than 30,000 *minne* a year, mostly on Saint Agatha's feast day, February 5. "The sacred and the profane often mix when it comes to Sicilian pastries," Pistone said with a knowing smile.

I thought again of the scene in *The Leopard.* After eyeing the *trionfo di gola,* the prince's gaze moves down the dessert table "to those shameless cakes...that profane caricature of Saint Agatha's mutilated breasts," Tomasi di Lampedusa writes. The prince asks for a serving, then wonders why the Holy Office hasn't yet banned them. "Sold by convents, devoured at dances...What is one to think?" the book continues.

What, indeed. Inevitably, one wonders what those cloistered nuns were up to, kneading and baking such explicit pastries. It was, to be sure, one of the few ways they had to make money. But was the making of sweetmeats also a way to satisfy other, unfulfilled appetites?

On the drive northwest from Catania back to Palermo, I stopped about halfway at Tenuta Regaleali, a wine estate in the rolling hills of central Sicily, where chef Fabrizia Lanza runs the Anna Tasca Lanza Cooking School, named for her mother, who started it in 1989. My visit coincided with Lanza's birthday, which she had decided to celebrate by inviting a few friends for lunch. At the end of a merry meal, she brought out a splendid cassata and set it on the table with a smile of satisfaction.

The cassata is the noblest and best-known Sicilian dessert. Some say the name comes from *qas'ah,* an old Arab word for a terracotta mold; Lanza traces the word's origins to *caseus,* the Latin word for cheese. Thought to date back at least a thousand years, it's made with fresh ricotta, sponge cake, marzipan and candied fruits. Lanza learned her version from her mother (see "Sicilian Cassata" for the recipe), who learned it from a friend. "The freshness of the ricotta is key," she said, "but we also hold back on the sugar and add lemon juice to the icing for an extra touch of acidity."

I asked Lanza if she knew anything about the *trionfo di gola.* To my surprise, she did. "I remember the older generations used to order it at the Monastero delle Vergini," she said, referring to one of the historic convents in Palermo. "You should ask my friend Mary Taylor Simeti. I know she tasted one years ago." At last, a clue. The next morning, I drove off.

Simeti, an American expat and the author of *Pomp and Sustenance,* the classic English language book on Sicilian cooking, first came to Sicily in the 1960s. Today she and her husband live on a farm near the town of Alcamo, among the vineyards and orchards of northwestern Sicily, about half an hour away from the beautiful ruins of the Greek temple of Segesta.

Over a light lunch of cheese, fava beans and artichokes, I listened to Simeti reminisce about her experience with the *trionfo di gola.* "I believe no one makes it anymore, but 20 years ago, the nuns at the Monastero delle Vergini still did," she said. "It came in the shape of a cone, with an apricot planted on top. I was surprised at how clumsy it looked, but the balance of flavors was perfect." As far as she could remember, it had five layers of sponge cake, each separated by a layer of blancmange; it was covered with candied fruit, sprinkled with pistachios and had a faint scent of jasmine. "It reminded me of an Arab-Norman chapel," she said, "with its rich light and colorful mosaics."

Back in Palermo, I walked over to the Monastero delle Vergini. In its heyday it was one of the richest convents in Sicily; the important families of the city sent their unmarried daughters there with generous dowries. Today the large grated windows make it look like an abandoned fortress, or a prison.

Sister Ida, a small, wizened nun, came to the grate. "No, we no longer make pastries," she said. "There used to be at least 50 of us here. Of those, 15 would make pastries and cakes to be sold to outside clients. Today there are just three of us left, and we are all over 80." I mentioned *trionfo di gola* and Sister Ida's wrinkled face brightened. "Sister Margherita invented that cake after the war. We used to sell plenty." I asked her if she had the original recipe. "Oh no, Sister Margherita never told us. She always said the *trionfo di gola* had to die with her."

I thought I had finally resolved the mystery, but Sister Ida had unwittingly introduced a new one. If *The Leopard* was set in the 1860s, how could it have featured a cake invented after the Second World War? I came up with two possible answers: Either Sister Margherita's recipe was the last version of a much older dessert; or Tomasi di Lampedusa, having himself tasted *trionfo di gola,* could not resist including it in his great work of fiction.

As for me, I realized with a pang of regret that the small place I had left in my stomach for this legendary cake would remain empty after all. ■

THE ADDRESS BOOK

Anna Tasca Lanza Cooking School
Courses start at $200; Tenuta Regaleali, Sclafani Bagni; 39-380/754-1365; annatascalanza.com.

Antica Dolceria Bonajuto
159 Corso Umberto I, Modica; 39-0932/941-225; bonajuto.it.

Caffè Sicilia 125 Corso Vittorio Emanuele III, Noto; 39-0931/835-013.

I Dolci di Nonna Vincenza 7 Piazza San Placido, Catania; 39-095/715-1844; dolcinonnavincenza.it.