



THE  
ATHENÆUM  
PALL MALL LONDON

# WINE LUNCH

to be held on  
**Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2022**  
at 12:30pm

*The food and wines of  
regional Italy - Sicily*

Speakers:  
**Professor Stephen Bayley**  
and  
**Dr Jonathan Punt**

Introduced by:  
**Professor James Crabbe**

# SICILIA

# MENU

## Aperitivo

Cantine Florio, Terre Arse Marsala Vergine Secco  
DOC, 2004, 19%




## Caponata

Azienda Agricola COS, Pithos Bianco, Terre Siciliane  
IGP, 2020, 11.5%



## Pasta con zucchini fritti

Benanti, Etna Rosso DOC, 2019, 13.5%



## Involtini di vitello Siciliani

Azienda Gulfi, Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG, 2020, 13.5%



## Minni (di Vergini)

Azienda Agricola Solidea, Passito di Pantelleria  
DOC, 2018, 14.5%



## Caffe



# Non c'e megghiu sarsa di la fami

Hunger is the best sauce



**Taverna Azzurra, Palermo.**

Lazy travel-writing hacks would begin by saying: “Sicily: land of contrasts”. It’s more nearly a land of paradoxes.

The most famous Sicilian paradox is Lampedusa’s “if you want things to stay the same, they must change. This appears in *The Leopard*, his novel posthumously published in 1958. The words are spoken by a fatigued prince looking at his crumbling estates, contemplating the erosion of his status as the old feudal hierarchy gives way, ever so slowly, to modernisation. This, as every visitor to Sicily knows, is a process by no means yet complete.

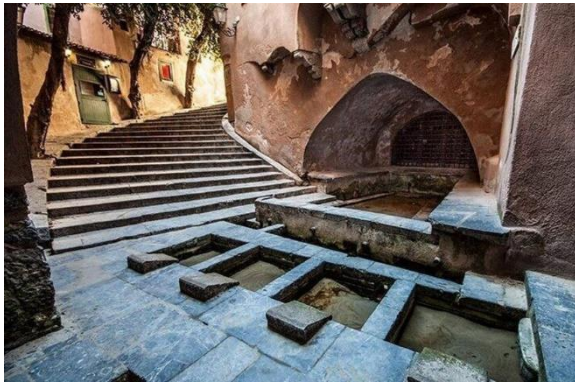
And the infamous *mafia* is another Sicilian paradox. Depending on your point-of-view or circumstances, it is, or was, either a mutual-aid society for the dispossessed, bound by noble concepts of honour and family, or a ruthless mob of bloodthirsty, kleptocratic psychopaths.

Norman Lewis caught the paradox nicely in the characterisation of Salvatore Giuliano in his 1964 book *The Honoured Society*. No reader can be certain whether Giuliano was a brave and principled rebel, lashing out against cruel authorities, or a cynical and violent bandit. This being Sicily, perhaps both are true. What's definite is that five years after *The Honoured Society*, Mario Puzo reinterpreted the true-life story as *The Godfather*.

Anyone who likes Italy will love Sicily. It is the triple distillation of the Italian spirit. The sun is brighter, the shadows darker, the wines stronger, the sweets sweeter and the baroque more baroque. All that is wonderful about Italy is even more wonderful in Sicily. And all that is dismaying, is more dismaying. Rubbish, for instance.

The depth of Sicilian culture is extraordinary. It was once Magna Graecia, which is to say Greater Greece where Pythagoras had his theorems. Successive conquests by Romans, Arabs, Normans, Spanish, French and, very briefly the British, have left layers of meaning as rich and rewarding as a *cassata* with marsala syrup

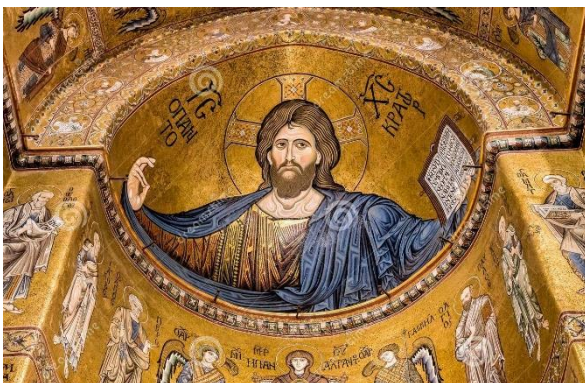




**Villa Palagonia, Bagheria**



**Santa Caterina, Palermo**



**Christo Pantocrator, Monreale**

Consider, for example, the extraordinary range of expression between Monreale's superb and divine Byzantine mosaics and the grotesque monsters of the Villa Palagonia at Bagheria: extremes of the humanoid form. But with every successive invasion, new cultural imports found a richer expression on Sicily's fertile volcanic soil.

The food, of course, betrays the alphabet of influences. Palermo's great food markets are Vucciria and Ballaro. The latter a mere thousand years old, the former dating from the Roman era. Even today, these markets have an almost pre-historic, at least medieval, feel: there are thieves and cut-throats, smoke, flames and deafening din. They are almost African in spirit and, apart from scales with digital read-outs, betray very little influence of the twenty-first century.

The abundance of produce is mesmerising. And some of the street food is alarming.

Typical is *frittula*, comprising processed calves' meat boiled to a pulp in vast barrels, then dried and pressed into dense briquettes in which unappetising form it can last indefinitely. At least, that is, until it hits the streets.

Here it is the job of the *frittularu* to revive the stuff which he does by frying in lard or, if you are lucky, oil, dressing the hot and greasy result with bay leaves and pepper, serving it either alone on waxed paper or as a sandwich of *focaccia*. Once described as "oil fried fat and cartilage" It is as reliably disgusting as the Florentine *lampredotto* which is made of sheep's intestines or the Greek *kokoretsi* which is made out of anything organic and disgusting they can find.

Withal, it is a general truth that Northern Italian cooking tends to be white, *risotto* and veal, for example, while the cooking of the South where Sicily is the best exemplar, is more colourful, both actually and metaphorically.

There are Arab influences in the use of apricots, lemons, saffron, raisins, cloves pine nuts and pepper. The small Jewish community introduced garlic fried in oil while the Spanish brought New World produce, notably tomatoes and cocoa. In Eastern Sicily, Catania's fish cooking reveals a connection to Greece while in the West at Trapani, couscous reminds you that Sicily is south of much of the North African coast.

Anyway, hunger being the best sauce, tonight's menu comprises Sicilian classics.

**Caponata** is a rich aubergine stew whose agrodolce taste is another Sicilian paradox, this time inspired by the sweet-sour mixtures of Roman and Arab cooking. The first recipe was published in 1790 and it was assumed the high volume of vinegar suggested this was a dish used by sailors on their travels, vinegar having a preservative quality. The origin of the name is unknown. Sometimes, in a Spanish baroque touch, cocoa is added. It is also occasionally served with flaked bottarga, the dried roe of tuna.

**Pasta con zucchini fritti** pasta with gently fried courgettes, dressed with garlic, parsley, pepper and cheese.

**Involtini Siciliani** veal rolls on skewers, stuffed with breadcrumbs, raisins, pine nuts, onion and bay leaves. The cut of meat used is often the *tasca*, or flank steak.

**Minni (di Vergini)** almond *pasta frolla* with *biancomangiare*. It was the custom of convents to distribute pastries, so much so

that by the late nineteenth century the Convento delle Vergini had virtually become a *pasticceria*. Lampedusa describes the martyrdom of Sta Agatha whose breasts were sliced-off and whose sacrifice is immortalised in this pudding. Sometimes, for the avoidance of doubt, semantically speaking, a red cherry is added to complete the mammary facsimile.

You leave Sicily not sure whether you have had a pagan or a Christian experience. You have probably had both....and simultaneously.

But a visit to the church of Santa Caterina in the Piazza Bellini helps clarify things. This is extreme baroque with demented effects of abundance in the plaster, marble, gilt and paint.

Vincent Cronin describes it well in his 1954 guide to Sicily, *The Golden Honeycomb*:

“One experiences the absolute satisfaction together with a penumbra of bewilderment which only a perfect work of art can give. Every square inch of this vast building .... Has been cultivated to add its yield to the harvest of beauty”.

Cherubs and trees mingle chaotically In Santa Caterina.. Like the food, it is above all, a celebration of Nature.

**SB/17v22**



# WINE REGIONS OF SICILY

- 1. Alcamo or Bianco of Alcamo
- 2. Cerasuolo of Vittoria Docg and Vittoria
- 3. Contea of Sclafani
- 4. Contessa Entellina
- 5. Delia Nivolelli
- 6. Etna



- 7. Etna
- 8. Faro
- 9. Malvasia of Lipari
- 10. Marsala
- 11. Menfi
- 12. Noto
- 13. Moscato of Pantelleria
- 14. Moscato of Siracusa
- 15. Sambuca of Sicilia
- 16. Santa Margherita of Belice
- 17. Sciacca
- 18. Monreale
- 19. Riesi
- 20. Mamertino of Milazzo
- 21. Erice
- 22. Salaparuta

# WINE AREAS OF SICILY'S THREE VALLEYS



# SICILY WINE FACTS

- Italy's largest wine region at 98,000 hectares of vineyards
  - More than 65 native varieties
  - 64% of plantings are white varieties
  - Most planted grape varieties
    - Catarratto
    - Nero d'Avola
  - Best known grape varieties
    - Carricante
    - Grillo
    - Catarratto
    - Nerello Mascalese
    - Frappato
    - Nero d'Avola
- 24% mountainous - vineyards up to 1,200 metres above sea level
- 3 historic regions - the Three Valleys
    - Val Di Mazara - West and East
    - Val Demone
    - Val Di Noto
  - Classified wines
    - 1 Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG)
    - 23 Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC)
    - 7 Indicazione Geografica Tipica (IGT)

# Cantine Florio, Terre Arse Marsala Vergine Secco DOC, 2004, 19%



100% Grillo from vineyards facing the sea, near the beach in the Birgi and Spagnola areas of the coastal strip North of Marsala. Grown on bush-trained vines with density of at least 5,000 plants *per* hectare. The soil is siliceous-calcareous.

Harvested manually during the last week of September, grapes with high sugar content are fermented at controlled temperature. Maturation for a minimum of 10 years in old oak barrels is followed by addition of wine spirit before ageing of at least

two months in bottle. The resultant wine has a limitless life span if kept in a cool, dark cellar without excessive humidity.

The wine is gold in colour with a bouquet of bitter almonds and burnt honey. On the palate it is very dry with flavours of vanilla and liquorice root.

The wine can be served as an *aperitivo*, or to accompany smoked fish, *cuscusu di Trapani*, or hard cheeses such as Pecorino Siciliano or sun-dried mature Ricotta Infornata.



## Azienda Agricola COS, Pithos Bianco, Terre Siciliane IGP, 2020, 11.5%



100% Grecanico from vines of average age 12 years, grown in Fontane in the Vittoria region of South-East Sicily. Grown on the Guyot training system with density of 5,000 vines *per* hectare at 230 metres above sea level. The red soil is limestone-siliceous in nature, interwoven with compact layers of fresh clay and siliceous sand.

The agricultural methods employed are along biodynamic principles.

Fermentation is in terracotta amphorae, on the skins with indigenous yeasts. Ageing is in amphora, where the wine spends eight months on the skins, followed by time in bottle.

The wine is deep yellow in colour with copper tones. It releases floral notes that meld into white, yellow stone fruits, and peaches on the nose. On the palate it is supple with flavours of spices, savoury herbs, lemon oil and fennel.

A wine that is equally comfortable with vegetable dishes, fish and white meat.

## Benanti, Etna Rosso DOC, 2019, 13.5%

A blend of Nerello Mascalese (80% to 85%) with Nerello Cappuccio (15% to 20%) selected from vines ranging from 10 to 60 years of age, from vineyards on the Northern, South-Eastern and South-Western slopes of Mount Etna, at levels from 450 to 900 metres above sea level. The soil is sandy, volcanic and rich in minerals. The climate is humid and rainy in cooler seasons, but ventilation and sunlight are good with a diurnal variation. The vine density is 6,000 to 8,000 *per* hectare: a mixture of bush-trained and spur cordon systems is employed.

Harvested manually in October, the two varieties of grape are de-stemmed, soft-pressed and vinified separately with indigenous yeasts in stainless steel at controlled temperature. 80% of the Nerello Mascalese is matured in stainless steel and 20% in French oak *barili* for eight to 10 months. The Nerello Cappuccio matures in stainless steel. Following blending, the wine matures for three months in bottle.

A pale colour belies an intense aroma of red fruit, and an elegant, dry, fruitiness with some minerality.

The wine can pair dishes of fish, white and red meat and cheeses. It will age well for up to a decade.



## Azienda Gulfi, Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG, 2020, 13.5%



Cerasuolo di Vittoria is Sicily's only DOCG wine, and in this vintage it is a blend of Nero d'Avola (50%) and Frappato di Vittoria (50%) grown in the Vigna Stidda on Monte Iblei, Ragusa, in South-East Sicily. The vineyard is at 420

metres above sea level, on limestone clay soil, enjoying Mediterranean temperatures. The vine density is 8,300 *per* hectare.

Harvesting is in the first week of October. The two grape varieties are vinified separately. Following one week of maceration on their skins and the end of alcoholic fermentation, the two varieties are blended and matured on their lees in stainless steel for seven months. The wine spends a further one to two months in bottle before release to market.

Cherry-coloured with violaceous or red-brown tints, the wine yields a nuanced flowery aroma of morello cherry. On the palate it is full and elegant.

This wine is equally at home with tuna or swordfish, and as it is with white meat.



# Azienda Agricola Solidea, Passito di Pantelleria DOC, 2018, 14.5%



100% Zibibbo grown on sandy volcanic soil on the Island of Pantelleria at 100 to 300 metres above sea level. The vines are trained to a low bush style and even within

low stone enclosures to protect them from the winds.

Following manual harvesting in the first week of August, the grapes are destemmed and laid out under awnings to dry out for a month, following which they are pressed and fermented. Maturation is in steel tanks and then in bottle.

The wine is gold, even amber, in colour with aromas of dates, raisins and acacia honey. On the palate, it is soft and sweet with great length.



Well suited to accompany Sicilian *dolci*, the wine can match aged or Sicilian cheeses such as Canestrato and Maiorchino, or herb-fragranced ones such as Vasteddu del Belice. Alternatively, it makes a fine *vino da meditazione*.

**JP/2022**



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