

THE FOOD OF SICILY

Sicily, that large island off the toe of Italy, has been described as almost a mini-continent in itself, because of its elements of geography and history that are not found anywhere else in Italy. Located in the southern Mediterranean, near the coast of North Africa, Sicily became a crossroads of the world.

The original Bronze Age culture was followed by the cultures of ancient Greece, Carthage, Rome, the Byzantine Empire, Normandy, France, Spain and finally modern Italy to make what is today's Sicily. This cultural variety can also be seen in their food, which includes everything from lemons and oranges and pistachio nuts from Africa to the salted cod of northern Europe.

Raisins are popular in Sicily's hot, dry climate, and the aromas of garlic, bay leaves, aniseed, mint, cinnamon and cloves are redolent throughout Sicilian cooking. Sicily is where the dish of fresh sardines stuffed with raisins and pine nuts originated. Try marinating some swordfish steaks in some white wine flavored with chopped garlic and fresh rosemary. Grill the steaks or coat them with a mixture of breadcrumbs and chopped capers and fry them in olive oil. Serve with lemon wedges.

One of the most famous Sicilian dishes is *arancini*, which literally means "little oranges", so called because of the way these golden-fried rice balls appear when cooked. They are a favorite Sicilian street food, eaten out of hand at *rosticcerie* all over the island. Every Sicilian grandmother or *nonna* has her own recipe, but here's the basic idea.

To make *arancini*, you first have to cook some short-grain rice in some chicken broth, flavored with salt and pepper and some saffron. When the rice is cooked, it is mixed with a marinara sauce and some grated Pecorino Romano cheese and set aside to cool.

Meanwhile, the meat filling is made. A half pound of chopped chicken or pork or a mixture of the two is sautéed in some olive oil with some chopped onion, and then some more marinara sauce is added and the mixture is cooked for about an hour. At the end of cooking, some fresh or frozen peas are added. When the rice and tomato mixture is cooled, a couple of hard boiled eggs are chopped into it. The cook makes a thin patty of the rice mixture on the palm of his hand and puts a couple of tablespoons of the meat mixture in the middle. The rice patty is then carefully closed around the meat mixture and the mass is carefully shaped into a round ball with both cupped hands. This process continues until all the rice and meat is used up. Sometimes cheese, like mozzarella, is used as the filling instead of the meat mixture or in addition to it. Nowadays other ingredients are put in the *arancini*, like mushrooms, spinach, or even salmon.

The balls are then rolled in some beaten egg and then some breadcrumbs and are deep fried until they are a deep golden color. A traditional first course, *arancini* are also great for lunch with a green salad, or simply as a snack on your way to school or work.

Sicilians are also famous for their desserts, as befits the people who invented pastry-making. Perhaps the most famous is *canoli*, which are tender crunchy pastry shells stuffed with a creamy filling made from Ricotta cheese, chopped candied lemon or orange peel, cream, semi-sweet chocolate and some orange liqueur and decorated with chopped almonds or pistachios. There's also *cassata*, which is a basic yellow cake filled with a filling similar to that for *cannoli*, and eaten at Easter time.

Then there's my favorite, *Minni di Sant'Agata*, which with the irreverent Sicilian sense of humor translates to "St. Agatha's Nipples". St. Agatha is the patron saint of Catania, a beautiful university city on the east coast of Sicily. St. Agatha repelled the amorous advances of a Catanian noble who reacted by having her breasts cut off. *Minni di Sant'Agata* are little pastry cookies, filled with pastry cream flavored with chocolate and chopped candied orange peel, and topped with a dollop of meringue with half a maraschino cherry in the center before being baked—hence the name. The legend's a little gruesome but the cookies are simply delicious.

As Italian food is my favorite of the European cuisines, listen for more Hometown Kitchens over the next few months that feature the food and cooking of different parts of Italy. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.