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Why You Need To Learn About Sicilian Cooking If You Love Italian Cuisine



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Travel



Pasta with wild greens. PHOTO BY ELKE TALBOT, COURTESY OF ANNA TASCA LANZA

Even with Italy's rich diversity of regional cooking styles, the cuisine of Sicily, reflecting a remarkable range of influences reaching from ancient Greece to Bourbon Spain, stands out. A great way to enjoy Sicilian cooking is, of course, to visit the island; a great way to learn about its exceptional food is to visit (virtually now, in person when travel returns to normal) the influential [Anna Tasca Lanza](#) culinary center, where a series of new [cooking classes](#) and a just-launched [program](#) offering in-depth food culture experiences, are now available online.



Fabrizia Lanza at Case Vecchie. PHOTO BY ARIANA GLAVIANO, COURTESY OF ANNA TASCA LANZA



The exterior of Case Vecchie, a 19th-century farmhouse, where the cooking classes are held. PHOTO BY NATALIE KENNEDY, COURTESY OF ANNA TASCA LANZA

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“Yes, indeed, Sicily has become very much a destination,” says Fabrizia Lanza, director of the center, which is devoted to preserving and promoting Sicily’s food heritage. It is named after her mother, Anna Tasca Lanza, the marchesa who became a pioneering culinary doyenne and established the cooking school in 1989 to help better acquaint the world with the marvels of her region’s cuisine. Lanza attributes the ever-growing interest in culinary traditions and the desire to take part in farm-to-table dining experiences as reasons why Sicily’s food and wine culture has become an increasingly strong lure for visitors.



Preparing tomato paste. COURTESY OF ANNA TASCA LANZA

While taking in the Baroque beauty of Noto and soaking up the sun in Taormina are out of reach for many because of the ongoing pandemic, you can still learn about and enjoy Sicily's food from afar. The cooking school's upcoming round of [online classes](#) runs from November 7 to December 7, and includes lessons devoted to preparing hearty seasonal fare like involtini di carne (beef rolls with cheese); pasta e fagioli (the course description says "Sicilian cuisine is built on beans and we want to

demystify them”); a lasagna sourced from a local nonna; autumnal fennel recipes, and such Christmas-centric sweets as cassata infornata made with ricotta and chocolate, and buccellati cookies.



Lemons and oranges at a Sicilian market. Citrus plants were brought to the island during a period ... [\[+\]](#) GETTY

A Sicilian cooking class can show you how to look at Italian cuisine from a new perspective, and serve as a remarkable history lesson too. Resident chefs Anna Feldman and Mattia Gianfranco Marino, who with Fabrizia Lanza, teach courses at the center, say what makes Sicilian cooking distinct from other Italian regions is how the epoch-spanning cultures that flourished on the island—in addition to Greece and Spain, Sicily had other colonizers, including Norman and Arabic overlords—enriched local culinary offerings. So when learning to cook Sicilian style, be prepared to experiment with techniques not typically found on the mainland, like working with various agrodolce (sweet-and-sour) sauces, which are frequently used with vegetables, fish and in pasta sauces; and with strong bitter flavorings that come with the seasonal cultivation of such foods as wild greens, cardoons and artichokes, according to Feldman and Marino. You'll also learn how Sicily's chefs maximize the bounty of local foods that form the basis of their cuisine—the island can draw on a lush variety of

produce like swordfish, tuna, anchovies, sweet olives, tomatoes, capers, fennel, legumes, oranges, almonds and pistachios, and various cheeses including fresh and salted sheep's milk ricotta.

Not surprisingly Sicily has its own take on pasta, Italy's enduring temptation that seems to be even more seductive here, whether you're trying a variety particular to the island, like busiate, described by Feldman and Marino as long curled pasta formed by wrapping dough around a knitting needle, or pastas with the region's special sauces like *pasta con le sarde* (an agrodolce treatment with sardines and currants), or pasta alla Norma, made with eggplant and ricotta salata.



Sorbetto di mandorle (almond sorbet). PHOTO BY ELKE TALBOT, COURTESY OF ANNA TASCA LANZA

The island's history of lavish religious celebrations rooted in its Spanish past helped to foster a taste for elaborate desserts, according to Fabrizia Lanza. "The idea is that there are layers of flavors, since in Sicily more is more," says Lanza, who describes the classic and intricately prepared cassata as a "triumph of beauty and sweetness." Well-known sweets like cassata and cannoli were produced in convents in the 19th-century to raise funds, "a common practice until about 30 years ago," she notes.



A recent five-day workshop that focused on olive oil coincided with the olive harvest. PHOTO BY SAM MCKEOWN, COURTESY OF ANNA TASCA LANZA

For those wanting a close look at some of the essentials of Sicilian cooking, Anna Tasca Lanza offers (depending on the season) two-day classes “that go in-depth on one ingredient, like tomato or eggplant,” says Aleeshia Tozzi, the center’s hospitality and communications manager. “They have been very popular, selling out almost instantly.”

Another opportunity to do a deep culinary dive is with the center’s [Patreon](#) series, launched on October 8. Participants take part in virtual tours to learn more about the foods that form the cornerstone of Sicilian cuisine with behind-the-scenes visits to producers and lessons on how to master authentic recipes. (Subscription fees for the series support the center’s Food Heritage Association, a non-profit research initiative.)



The Sicilian pasta busiate. GETTY

When travel restrictions are lifted, you can visit the school directly for lessons that include luncheon classes and weeklong culinary workshops. (There is also a two-month long immersive course in winter, and academic and creative residencies for three to twelve months.) All lessons take place at Case Vecchie, a 19th-century farmhouse located on the family's Tasca d'Almerita Regaleali wine estate, reachable in about two hours by car from Palermo or Catania. (When Anna Tasca Lanza founded the cooking school more than 30 years ago, it was at Case Vecchie, on property given to her by her father.)



A bedroom at Case Vecchie. PHOTO BY PIETRO LEONE, COURTESY OF ANNA TASCA LANZA

Tozzi says that while the center remained open to European visitors since the summer, it looks forward to welcoming the American, Canadian and Australian travelers who had to rebook for 2021 because of the health crisis. “Even with the return to more in-person experiences, connecting digitally will be a part of our programming going forward,” she says. “The outpouring of support we received with our online lessons spurred us to create an interactive online community where people can directly support our varied work, as well as venture to Sicily from the safety of their own kitchen.”

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