

# Sunday Travel

A 17th-century villa in Sicily is the idyllic setting for an Italian food course, writes **Arlene Harris**

It's Monday and we'll probably be having pasta later – sounds boring, doesn't it? OK, how about it's Monday and we'll be having pasta in the stunning 17th-century Villa Aragonese near Modica on the south coast of Sicily? By then we will have learnt how to make it expertly from scratch, refreshing ourselves with lovely local prosecco along the way.

The week-long Sicilian cookery course in Modica, an hour's drive from the airport at Catania, is a world away from the usual weekly kitchen routine where pasta comes from a plastic packet and is served slathered in a sauce that takes about 10 minutes to prepare.

On arrival the previous evening, my husband and I were greeted with the first of many glasses of local fizz by our cooking maestro, Carla Zanardi, and our bubbly host,

Rosa Calvo, in a setting that was both luxurious (almost decadent) and homely. Dinner was fried sea bream with aubergine caponata, and a Sicilian fruit cake with lemon cream for dessert. This was followed by homemade limoncello liqueur in the lounge.

Tuition kicked off the next morning after breakfast at a vast wooden table. Our first lesson involved making fresh ravioli, with Rosa translating Carla's rapid-fire instructions.

We pummelled and pounded our dough, hoping to earn a *fantastico* from the watchful Carla and her expert fingers. Once the pasta was pummelled to perfection and rested, we rolled it out until it was almost translucent and cut it into strips. Small dollops of freshly



## Cook like a don on the island of plenty

made ricotta cheese and marjoram were placed at equal intervals along the pasta, then it was gently folded over to make the ravioli pockets. The offcuts were recycled into tagliatelle for lunch.

Next up was ragu, which proved trickier to master. This

**Harris learnt how to make ravioli and went to local markets, above**



pork and tomato sauce needed a fair bit of preparation, but by the time it was simmering in a pan its mouth-watering aroma filled the villa. Carla then pronounced it *prosecco* time. I'm usually not one to indulge during the day – but when in Rome.

We had the afternoons free so took the opportunity to find a secluded spot in the grounds of the villa, which also has an its own outdoor pool.

Cooking for seven mornings straight can be hard work, especially when you have Sicily outside the door, but the afternoons also featured local foodie excursions.

On day two we were driven to Syracuse, in the southeast corner of Sicily, with Rosa providing a running commentary on the sights along the route.

When we arrived in the ancient Greek city, birthplace of mathematician

Archimedes, our guide took us through the throng of tourists and locals, past many tempting market

stalls where the smells, sights

and sounds were enough to drive us to distraction. Visiting a market with someone in the know is always better than trying to gauge which stall has the tastiest fried fish or which vendor can be trusted to offer the best prices on local cheese – and, crucially, they can point you in the direction of the best sandwich in town.

At the end of the street, we stopped at Caseificio Borderi ([caseificioborderi.eu](http://caseificioborderi.eu)), a tiny delicatessen that had a queue of people snaking out of the door. Some were there simply to witness the theatrics of the sandwich makers assembling the simple lunchtime meal.

In an elaborate choreography worthy of a fringe theatre performance, they chopped and sliced salad

leaves and vegetables, tenderly preparing pieces of marinated cheese and meats, drizzled with local oil and sprinkled with fresh herbs.

It was a mouth-watering performance and, as a reward for our patience while queuing, the deli's owners gave us tasty morsels of mozzarella, spicy pepperoni, and even samples of local wine.

Later, Rosa took us on a guided tour of the town. It even has a Caravaggio. The burial of St Lucy, which is on display in the church of Santa Lucia, on the Piazza Duomo. But we were here for the food culture, not the fine art, so we headed to lunch in ristorante Il Vellero

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([www.ristoranteveliero.it](http://www.ristoranteveliero.it)).

We devoured swordfish croquettes, followed by a selection of fried fish and caponata plus steaming bowls of yet more fresh tagliatelle with shellfish. This was topped off by some bracing espressos before we headed to Noto, a baroque town built in the wake of a 17th-century earthquake, to try its gelato.

The next days followed a similar educational – if calorific – pattern with excursions to a vineyard and a couple of other beautiful villages and towns.

Back at the villa, we were shown how to make cavatelli (small pasta shells), Sicilian meatballs, caponata (the ubiquitous aubergine-based salad), scacce (a focaccia-like stuffed bread), and several meat and fish dishes, as well as a few more desserts.

Emphasis is placed on using good local ingredients, treating each dish with respect and, crucially, enjoying the end result.

You don't have to be great in the kitchen to enjoy a Sicily cookery class, but you do need to love your food and be happy to spend several hours every day preparing, eating and relaxing – just like a true Italian. *Mangiare e vivere.*

Seven-night Italian cooking holidays in Sicily are priced at €1,890 per person (with no single supplement). This includes en-suite accommodation, meals and wine, lessons, visits to local towns as per the itinerary and transport throughout; [flavoursholidays.co.uk](http://flavoursholidays.co.uk)



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