



TRULY SICILIAN

Unusual treats and robust
flavors are the key to Palermo's
thriving street food scene, finds
Laura Holt

Stall at the feast of Santa Rosalia

IMAGE: GORNER



There's a whisper of North Africa about Palermo. It's there in the city's narrow alleyways, looped with washing lines and tangled with telephone wires. In its palimpsest-like buildings and its animated, unapologetic locals. But never more so than in its trio of labyrinthine markets where sinuous souk-like streets run past awning-covered stalls selling everything from snails to spices.

I'm here to explore these open-air emporiums with Marco Romeo, a local Palermitan guide who runs Streaty tours — half-day incursions into the bowels of Ballarò, Capo and Vucciria markets.

Marco, it becomes immediately apparent, is refreshingly honest. "There are no restaurants on this street-food tour. And no toilets either," he deadpans. "The toilets smell — and not of roses. The food will be fried, greasy and fatty. And if you leave

Palermo without trying a spleen sandwich, you haven't visited the city."

Pep talk over, we plunge into the cacophonous streets of our first market: Capo — so-called for its sea-surveying position at 'the head' of the Sicilian capital. Vendors bellow back and forth, bartering with customers and bagging up produce, cigarette smoke spiraling through the air. It's a parade of color and chaos.

Gathering pace, Marco continues his pull-no-punches punditry: "If you see people eating cannoli at this time of year, they're tourists," he nods, as we pass a hole-in-the-wall bakery. "All the best pastry shops close during July and August, because they don't want to deal with the heat. Cannoli are a seasonal desert, best served in spring or autumn."

Moving on, I make a mental note not to be seen dead near a piece of pastry for the

rest of my trip. Still, it's insights like these that make this tour so priceless. It's also why traveling chefs — everyone from Rick Stein to Paul Hollywood — have all called upon Marco to share the secrets of Sicilian cuisine when in Palermo.

However, to really understand the city's food culture, you need to understand Palermo's past. This is a city that spent more than 250 years under Arab rule as part of the Emirate of Sicily — "when Capo was an Arab market and the locals had dark hair and dark eyes," Marco says.

Indeed, everyone from the Saracens of North Africa to the Normans of France tried to put their mark on Sicily, thanks to its position at the continental crossroads of Europe. But it's these waves of centuries-old occupation that make Palermo's cuisine so diverse today — every dish a faded fingerprint of people long past.

IMAGES: 4CORNERS



From left: *Il Capo Market*; stall selling olives at *Ballarò Market*

// FOUR TO TRY

1 Pasta con le sarde (sardine pasta)

To eat like a local, order this typical Palermitan dish. *Bucatini* (spaghetti-like pasta with a hole through the center) is best and the sauce is made of onion, pine nuts, raisins, wild fennel, and sardines.

2 Involtni di pesce spada (swordfish roll)

These delicious rolled fish fillets are the perfect pairing for crisp Sicilian *catarratto* wine and one of the few local dishes that's baked and not fried.

3 Couscous di pesce (fish couscous)

A remnant of the island's Arab rule, this dish is strictly cooked with fish. Sicilians don't buy pre-made couscous, so the semolina is worked by hand. San Vito Lo Capo, a coastal town to the west of Palermo, is especially renowned for it.

4 Forst (beer)

Forget typical Italian beers like Moretti or Peroni when in Sicily. Forst owns a historical beer-bottling factory in Palermo, making it the most widely distributed in town — second only to *Sangue* for a Sicilian thirst-quencher. >>



“ONE MINUTE PALERMO IS THE DIRTIEST, STINKIEST CITY IN THE WORLD; THE NEXT IT’S THE MOST ROMANTIC”

Clockwise from top left: Fresh fish at one of Palermo’s markets; looking beyond the city to the mountains; street vendor dishing up a spleen sandwich; Caletta Sant’Elia

“In the market, you have to build up relationships with the vendors in order to get the best treats,” explains Marco, as we continue our march onwards. “Your fishmonger, for example, is like your priest: you go to him, confess your problems and he helps you. However, Monday isn’t the day to buy fish, because the fishermen don’t go out to sea on Sundays.”

Instead we plow on past *tenerumi* (zucchini flowers) — used by Sicilian nonnas to make pasta — bags of salt crystals harvested in nearby Trapani and buckets of *babbaluci* (snails), that are distant relatives of the French escargot, traditionally cooked in garlic, parsley, and olive oil, and sucked unceremoniously from the shell.

We pause at Antica Drogheria di Dainotti at the north end of the market, where the titular Dainotti family owns a duo of streetside stalls on Via Porta Carini, fringed by fuss-free plastic tables. It’s the kind of fairly anonymous-looking place you might walk right past, unless you were with your trusted local friend.

Here, we try *arancina*, which street-food enthusiasts in the west of Sicily (not least Marco) insist is spelled with an ‘a’, as opposed to the more received ‘*arancini*’, thanks to the fried rice balls resembling an orange (*arancina* in Italian). Whatever the truth, the taste is undeniable: this is the only place in town to serve the original

recipe of minced veal, carrots, peas, and onions, flavored with saffron instead of the more typical tomato sauce.

I stick my head around the door of the kitchen to see the crispy, breaded balls being given the Midas touch to turn them lightly golden. “When we eat too much in Sicily, we say we feel like walking *arancina*,” Marco jokes, as the next delicacies rush past us in the direction of our table.

These *panelle* (chickpea fritters) and *cazzilli* (potato dumplings) come from the same delicious fried family of food and are sometimes served together in a sandwich — just in case you need more carbs. The former is sweet to taste and pancake flat, but used to be shaped like fish and called *piscipanelle* for those poor Palermitans who couldn’t afford real fish. The latter — a classic soccer-stadium snack — does indeed resemble its namesake. Marco had, of course, warned me that this wasn’t going to be a fine-dining occasion.

Nor, it turns out, a fine-drinking one. As we snake into Vucciria market, we swing by Taverna Azzurra, the oldest bar in Palermo, open since 1896. “Welcome to the most horrible bar in Italy!” announces Marco, as we step through the namesake blue doors, past locals propped outside, drinking beer on benches. There’s one particularly ebullient patron who’s serenading the crowd.

TOP RESTAURANTS



Bisso Bistrot

What started as a humble street-food spot in Vucciria market, now stands at the city’s centerpiece Quattro Canti crossroads, after the Bisso family were forced to move premises due to Mafia intimidation. Like many restaurants in the city, it now proudly brandishes the ‘*Addiopizzo*’ sticker, signaling a refusal to pay *pizzo* (protection money). The new spot is a roaring success — Rick Stein raved about it when he came and many mere mortals consider it the city’s best restaurant. The homemade pasta is the thing to go for and the informal interiors are, in equal measure, refined and raucous — much like Palermo itself.

Trattoria Altri Tempi

Heritage Palermitan cooking is on the menu at this old-school trattoria, where recipes have been passed down from father Sebastiano to son Luigi over the generations. The prices are fair and the atmosphere is easy. Try the *pasta chi uruocculi arriminati* — a delicious mixture of bucatini, cauliflower, anchovies, saffron and pine nuts.

Osteria Mercede

This unassuming restaurant near the altogether grander Teatro Massimo opera house is the place to go to sample the ample spoils of Sicily’s 922-mile coastline. Like all good fish restaurants, it’s always closed on Mondays, guaranteeing only the freshest squid, clams, and prawns are served throughout the rest of the week.

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// ESSENTIALS



When to go: Like most European cities, Palermo gets hot and busy in July and August. However, the weather is ideal for visitors from March right through until November, when the days are mostly bright and it hardly ever rains, even in the winter months.

Currency: Euro. \$1 = €0.87

Language: Italian.

Getting around: Two feet are best in Palermo, especially in the markets, but the bus network also takes you to the main sites, plus Monte Pellegrino for panoramic views, the beach town of Mondello and the cultural commune of Monreale on the slopes of Monte Caputo. Tickets are sold at AMAT kiosks, most *tabaccherie* (tobacco shops) and newsagents. You can also grab an *ape*: tuk-tuks, named after the Italian word for 'bee'. To explore further afield on the island, it's best to hire a car.

"The more people yell in this bar, the more they're joking," Marco shouts, as we sidle up to order, surrounded by spirited chatter and Sicilian music.

White-haired Toto — or 'the boss', as Marco calls him — has been serving punters here for the best part of 40 years. For us, he lines up *Sanguè*: the blood-red 17%, fortified wine, similar to marsala wine, which Sicilians drink as an aperitivo — yours for €1 (\$1.12) a glass.

Dutch courage done and dusted, it's time, reluctantly, to try *pani câ meusa* (the spleen sandwich). We head out of the bar to a nearby push-cart stall where Palermo's signature street-food dish is duly being boiled and cooked in lard by a man named Pippo, who's been dishing up this specialty

since 1952. To serve, he layers the spleen into a bread roll and douses it in lemon juice to cut through the richness. However, much as I admire Pippo's 67-year-long commitment to this trademark dish, I find it, shall we say, an acquired taste.

Luckily, salvation arrives in the form of *Lucchese*, an ice-cream parlor where *broscia* (a gelato sandwich in a brioche bun) is the order of the day.

"One minute Palermo is the dirtiest, stinkiest city in the world; the next, it's the most beautiful and romantic," Marco says, as we sit marveling at Piazza San Domenico and its majestic baroque-fronted church. After shifting through the gastronomic gears, from spleen sandwich and sweet treat, I can certainly see what he means. □



Coffee stall

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