Sicily’s cuisine is clearly marked as Mediterranean – it’s based on fresh seasonal produce, olive oil, wine, and wheat. Just as modern Sicily is a palimpsest of the cultures that dominated the island in centuries past, modern Sicilian cuisine bears the marks of those who struggled for control of the island as a colonial outpost, breadbasket, gateway to the European continent, or jewel in the crown. The Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, their gods and goddesses, Arabs, Normans, Angiovins, Spaniards, Habsburgs, and finally the modern Italian state have all left their mark on Sicily, and the gastronomia of the island reveals this storied past. This is Italian food like you’ve never tasted before. We’ll make a gastronome’s journey across the island, visiting cultural splendors along the way, and meet the producers, artisans, and Renaissance men and women of the East. These are the creative souls who are keeping tradition alive, not by faithfully reproducing old recipes, but by intelligently enriching their inherited tradition to carry it into the future. We’ll taste traditional materie prime (ingredients) as they have been produced and used for millennia in the West. And in between, experience the duality of the interior’s rugged landscape and noble culinary tradition.

Day 1: Friday, May 2 (Catania) Upon arrival into Catania’s Aeroporto Fontanarossa, you will transfer to the Hotel Katane Palace in Catania centro. We will meet late afternoon for introductions and an orientation. And just to get your feet wet, we’ll have our first Sicilian dinner at la Siciliana in Catania’s centro storico (historic center) where the La Rosa family will prepare and serve traditional dishes of the East. Hotel: Katane Palace, D

Day 2: Saturday, May 3 (Catania) In the morning we’ll be off for a special treat – a visit with Carmelo Chiaramonte, a creative soul who devotes his mighty powers to the culinary world. He will take us through Catania’s uproarious market to meet his vendors and talk about tuna, a mainstay of Sicilian cuisine from day one, and a passion for Carmelo. His thirst for knowledge unlocked the secrets of ancient techniques, which he wrote about in his excellent book, A Tutto Tonno. Carmelo is also passionate about the natural gifts of Mt. Etna, and he’ll talk about them as he prepares a seasonal lunch for us at his restaurant, Il Cuciniere. After lunch we’ll go right onto the volcano (very active and likely to be blasting vapors) to visit a vineyard producing intense wines in the crumbly black volcanic soils. We will taste the altitude and volcanic soil in crispy whites made from Carricante and Cataratto grapes, and in complex reds from Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio. Your evening will be free and dinner will be on your own in Catania. Hotel: Katane Palace, B, L

Day 3: Sunday, May 4 (Catania – Ibla) Amonì – dialect for Andiamo, “Let’s go!” In the morning we’ll strike out to Sicily’s southeast corner, the Val di Noto of Arab dominion and modern day province of Ragusa. There the soil is red, a strata of white limestone supports scrubland vegetation and hearty grape vines, and drystone walls mark the confines of the fields. The air smells of the minerally soil, wild herbs, and carob trees, and villages are terraced into the bluffs of steep gorges formed by ancient river courses. Our homebase for the next few days will
be Ibla, originally settled as Hybla Heraia by the indigenous Siculi as they fled the Greek invasion. The village was destroyed in the 1693 earthquake, and while half the town chose to relocate on the flat plain nearby (modern day Ragusa), the other half chose to rebuild their hometown on the bluff and remained as Ibla.

Ragusa’s cheese, caciocavallo, is famous throughout the world. Cheesemaking and the preparation of traditional recipes from the region are being preserved thanks to Corfilac, the consortium of cheese makers working in concert with local chefs to preserve the foodways of the region. At the consortium we’ll have a lesson in cheesemaking, followed by a demonstration of local recipes and lunch; their schiacce (filled focaccia) is a treat. The Spanish Counts of Modica reaped the benefits of the property they held here for centuries and we’ll taste the influence of Spain’s world exploration in the sweets of the region (chocolate straight from the Aztecs!). Modican pastry maker Elvira Roccasalva will demonstrate her dedication to the region’s indigenous and historical ingredients.

On the high plain near Vittoria and Acate, we’ll literally taste the flavors of the air, sun, and earth in the wines at COS. Giusto Occhipinti and his partners (they are trained as architects) work biodynamically – beyond organic and in tune with the earth, sun, and moon – to produce some of the most impressive wines found on the island. We’ll visit their new amphoraia where they age their wines in large earthenware amphorae like the ancients; taste their range of wines made from indigenous grapes; and learn their philosophy toward production. Dinner will be at Ristorante Duomo, and Chef Ciccio Sultano will make it obvious why he’s the only chef on the island with two Michelin stars. His days as hot new chef have segued into steady “best-of” votes all the way around. He demonstrates his creative view of classic preparations served in comfortably elegant surrounds. Hotel: il Barocco, B, L, D

**Day 4: Monday, May 5 (Ibla – Noto – Siracusa – Ibla)** In the morning we’ll head to Noto, the most lively of southeast Sicily’s Baroque towns. Destroyed in the earthquake of 1693 and totally rebuilt on a new site, Noto’s successful urban plan makes the town a pleasant space to visit and to live. It has Gagliardi’s masterpiece, San Domenico, a lively passaggiata, and the best pasticciera (pastry-maker) in all of Sicily in Corrado Assenza. Corrado is the patriarch of the food Renaissance taking place in the southeast, makes the most delicate granita you’ll ever taste, and can do more to an oyster than you ever imagined. After an intense morning, you’ll be on your own for lunch and an afternoon visit to Ortygia, the small island that is the historic center of Siracusa. First settled by the Greeks over 2,500 years ago, Ortygia is a layer cake of history. Together we’ll have a guided tour of Neapolis, a vast area of the ancient city that has been excavated and is now an enormous archaeological park. In the evening we’ll dine on a spread of traditional countryside dishes at a family restaurant in the Ragusano. Hotel: il Barocco, B, D

**Day 5: Tuesday, May 6 (Ibla – Regaleali)** Moving into the island’s mysterious interior, we’ll go to a wide and fertile valley just down the slopes of the Madonie mountains – the land of bandits, mafia hideouts, gorgeous valleys, Norman castles, and vineyards galore. We’ll visit the noble Tasca d’Almerita family’s estate, Regaleali, one of the first Sicilian vineyards to produce world-class wines. We’ll enjoy a luncheon class with Anna Tasca Lanza and her daughter Fabrizia, and a demonstration on the complicated recipes that entered their family culinary history through their Monsù – their private French chef. You’ll have time to stroll through Anna’s gardens, take a country walk, or enjoy the restful views of the surrounding countryside. Dinner will be light, with a tasting and wine class at the winery. **Overnight: Regaleali Estate, B, L, D**
Day 6: Wednesday, May 7 (Regaleali – Palermo – Trapani) The Regaleali estate’s shepherd will be up early milking sheep and making cheese and ricotta. He will do a cheese-making demo and a taste of just-curdled ricotta for the early risers. Next we’ll head to Palermo to arrive in time for a market visit, and make our way through the Albergheria neighborhood. There the market takes over the streets with overloaded tables and stands selling snack foods, fresh produce, and still wriggling fish. We’ll taste arancini, panini con le panelle, fried eggplant, roasted onions, and amazing bread. Lunch will be a casual meal at Palermo’s famously well-stocked wine bar. Coming out of Albergheria at the Quattro Canti, the city’s main crossroads, our guide will give us a tour from the Palazzo Pretoria (modern town hall) to la Kalsa (the center of government during Arab dominion). Late in the day we’ll make our way to Trapani on the far west coast, our homebase for the rest of the week. The ancient city bustles with modern life as a port of call and provincial capital. For dinner, we’ll feast on Trapanese classics, like spicy almond and garlic pesto or couscous, Sicilian style, with fish. Hotel: Alle Due Badie, B, L, D

Day 7: Thursday, May 8 (Trapani) In Erice, founded up on the high peak above Trapani, we’ll meet author Mary Taylor Simeti, the American perhaps most informed about Sicilian cuisine and culture. She’ll show us around Erice and introduce us to her pastry chef friend, Maria Grammatico. Mary and Maria will educate us on the tradition of pastry-making in Sicilian convents, and offer us a taste of the beautifully decorated dolci. Next we’ll tour an olive grove and custom-designed mill, get a taste of the oils, and have a “light” lunch of typical Sicilian fare. After lunch we’ll walk through what must be the most romantic ruins in all of Sicily. The Doric temple of Segesta rises isolated on a gentle slope, while its ancient theater offers spectacular views. The afternoon and evening will be free for you to explore Trapani’s charming and manageable centro with nice shops, artisan bottegas, wild Baroque buildings, and seaside walks. Hotel: Alle Due Badie, B, L

Day 8: Friday, May 9 (Trapani – Selinunte – Castelvetrano – Trapani) If overnight conditions have been favorable, we will go to the early morning fish asta (auction) at the porticello in Selinunte. The lovely fishing village, adrenaline-filled atmosphere, good coffee shop, and local bakery make it worth the early rise. The evocative ruins of ancient Selinus, now Selinunte, loom high on a promontory above the sea. Named for the selinon (wild celery) that still grows in the area, Selinus enjoyed centuries of prosperity before being reduced to rubble during the First Punic War. Vast remains of the residential and commercial sectors speak to the prosperity of the city; and solid, graceful Doric temples stand out against the bright blue sky and wine-dark sea, offering a glimpse of its former grandeur.

One of the bidders from the morning’s auction will host our seaside lunch. We will eat what they bid on at the market, after its expertly prepared and served on tables set right in the sand. Nearby Castelvetrano, with its maze of streets and hidden courtyards, will be our next stop. It’s a center of production for olive oils and table olives, but we’ll be there for the bread. Enthusiastic Tommaso Rizzo will show us his ovens (fired with bales of olive branches). He’ll explain how he bakes with various wheats from that tasty, spicy, Sicilian durum wheat, to the ancient tumminia strain he uses for his famous pane nero (black bread). On the way back to Trapani we’ll stop at a rustic trattoria near Salemi for dinner. Hotel: Alle Due Badie, B, L, D
Day 9: Saturday, May 10 (Trapani) Trapani has one of the most interesting fish markets. It’s not the near-overwhelming spectacle of Catania or Palermo, but the wealth of the catch is impressive and the vendors love to show off their wares and chat. So if you’re up for an early morning stroll, we’ll weave through the market loggia before heading to Collicchia for a breakfast cannolo. Heading out of town to the south, our first stop will be the salt pans founded on the coast by the Phoenicians. Using the power of the sun and wind, and some physical labor to break up the crystals, they’ve been gathering sea salt this way for millennia. For a taste of wines from the sun-baked Marsala region, we’ll enjoy a luncheon tasting at the de Bartoli estate. Marco and his sons cultivate autochthonous grapes to produce award-winning wines which remain faithful to the traditions of the area. Our farewell dinner will be at the Taverna Paradiso, in their cozy dining room just off the lungomare (boardwalk). The chef will offer us a dinner of Trapanese classics and his perfectly prepared fresh fish. Hotel: Alle Due Badie, B, L, D

Day 10: Sunday, May 11 Departure. There are transfers to Palermo’s Punta Raisi airport (or Trapani’s Birgi airport).

This itinerary is subject to changes and adjustments due to the whims of Italy and Italians, and to include new products and producers as we discover them.

CULINARY EDUCATOR:

Elaine Trigiani is from the U.S.A. and has been living in Italy for over seven years (first in Sicily, now in Tuscany) learning about olive oil and Italian culinary traditions from local producers, farmers, home cooks, and chefs. Following the local culinary tradition, she cooks with fresh ingredients, always using the spicy, green olive oil to enhance the flavors of simple yet flavorful foods. Elaine is the author of Top Ten Sicily (DK, 2002, 2005, 2007), designs and leads culinary travel programs in Tuscany and Sicily, develops recipes, writes, and teaches olive oil tasting seminars and cooking classes in Italy and the United States. She has a masters’ degree in art history, speaks fluent Italian, and is certified as an olive oil taster by the region of Tuscany.