



Antica Focacceria S. Fr

1834

cucina obilmono

EAT*DRINK*SHOP*COOK*STAY

Palermo

Food rules in this Sicilian port – from the street vendors selling oranges and bread, to the traditional trattorias offering cheese, salami, wine and octopus Words and photographs CARLA CAPALBO

Hospitable, colourful and compelling, Palermo has a unique character that's part Italian, part Arab, all Sicilian. It is a key Mediterranean port, with its Saracen towers, Baroque churches, Gothic palazzi and medieval markets. However, Palermo suffers from the clichés that surround it – its faded grandeur, bomb damage, air of danger and Mafia stranglehold. All of this is true, of course, but there's so much more to this elegant city.

In Palermo, the streets, whether noble or crumbling, are fragrant with the smell of cooking. At crossroads, vendors hawk oranges from customised carts and bikes, or sell daily loaves from the boots of their cars. Explore the narrow streets behind the Norman cathedral and you may see a woman lowering a basket from her balcony to receive a bundle of fresh anchovies from a passing fishmonger she has hailed – here, food has not yet been relegated to impersonal supermarkets. Shopping for lunch and dinner is a daily quest, and an important part of people's social lives.

'I could make my morning coffee at home,' explains my friend Elena, who lives in Palermo, 'but I'd rather cross the street and have it at the pasticceria. That way I can catch up on the local news.' The Italians drink their coffee standing at the bar, downing the hot nectar in a few searing sips. 'From there, I go to the market to get what's in season.' In winter, that might be the green cauliflowers the Sicilians call broccoli, that go so well with pasta; in

summer, it might be figs and rough-skinned yellow melons. Local farmers come with whatever is ripe.

The best restaurants here are often the least fussy – Palermo doesn't have a sophisticated chef culture. Traditional trattorias produce quality home cooking while a younger generation of cooks has lightened traditional dishes without losing its Sicilian identity. Palermo comes alive at night, in atmospheric wine bars and restaurants that celebrate the island's foods and wines. In some, you can taste Sicily's great olive oils and cheeses, and shop for foods to bring home. If you have time, visit a winery outside the city – there are several within an hour's drive.

Street food is irresistible in Palermo. Go to Piazza della Kalsa, once the heart of the Arabo-Norman city, with its palm trees and baroque church, to the little stand on the corner of Via Butera. It has no name or number, is almost always open, and serves chickpea pancakes (panelle) and the most delicious potato crocchè in Palermo. These little croquettes are flavoured with mint, then fried golden and crisp in a giant cauldron. Try them in a sesame roll with fried aubergine slices for an exotic version of a chip buttie.

The crocchè reflect Palermo's multicultural roots. Croquettes were imported into Sicily by the Monzùs – French chefs brought to Palermo to cook for the baronial families in the 19th century. Anna Tasca Lanza, who runs a cooking school from her country wine estate, Regaleali, was raised in Palermo palazzi where Monzùs still prepared timballes and béchamels. 'The mint in my street crocchè is a Saracen legacy,' she says, 'as are the island's citrus fruits, couscous and sorbets.'



THE SICILIAN MECCA

Noble Palermo families summered at Mondello, a picturesque fishing village just 11 kilometres north of the city – they built an Art Nouveau bathing pier there

(now home to the Charleston restaurant, above) and villas with verdant gardens. Mondello remains a favourite holiday mecca with its long beach and pretty fishing boats. Fish stars on every menu

– boiled octopus is served from the pot, dressed only with a squeeze of lemon; sea urchins are cracked in half; the roe eaten or tossed on hot spaghetti. It's worth a trip to Mondello to taste them.

■ **THE BEST SEAFOOD** Family-run Trattoria Da Nicolò e Figli overlooks the central piazza of Mondello, with an outdoor terrace. Specialities are sea urchins and fish couscous. £24. Piazza Mondello, 44 (00 39 091 453489).

■ **THE BEST OCTOPUS** On Mondello's sea front, Calogero offers a colourful street bar for tasting octopus, and a restaurant overlooking the sea upstairs. £25. Via Torre, 22 (00 39 091 16841333).

■ **THE BEST LOCATION** Charleston is situated in the middle of the sea and has great traditional dishes. £33. Le Terrazze

WHAT TO ORDER

• **Arancino** Orange-sized fried rice balls stuffed with meat or cheese

• **Bottarga** Dried tuna or mullet roe

• **Brioche** Large airy bun, served with gelato for breakfast

• **Caponata** Cooked aubergine, celery and olives

• **Cassata** Ricotta-filled cake topped with marzipan and candied fruits

• **Crocchè** Potato croquette flavoured with parsley or mint

• **Frutta martorana** Marzipan fruits

• **Involentino** Sliced meat, fish or vegetable rolled around a filling

• **Melanzane** Aubergine

• **Panelle** Deep-fried chickpea-flour pancakes, often served in a roll

• **Pani con meusa**

Sandwich of braised beef lungs and spleen

• **Pesce spada** Swordfish

• **Polpette** Meat or fish balls

• **Polpo, polipo** Octopus

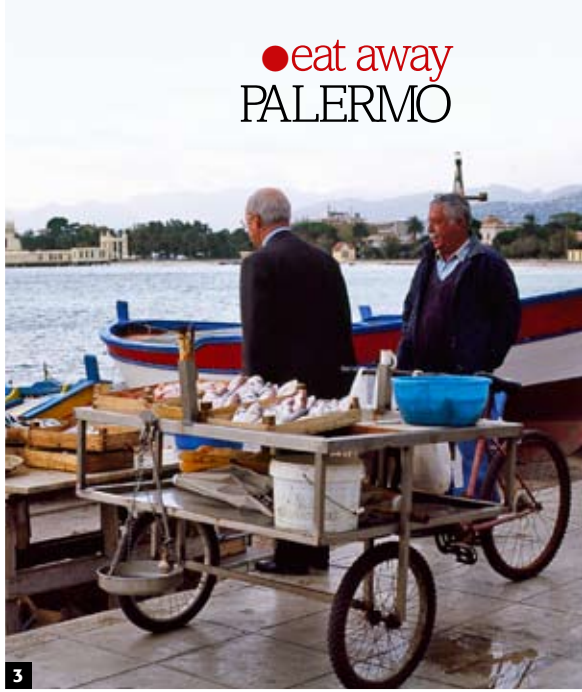
• **Ricci** Sea urchins, best spooned from the shell or with pasta

• **Sfinciuni** Sicilian pizza topped with onions or tomato and anchovies

• **Triglia** Red mullet 

• **Opposite: Mondello life (1, 3, 4), spaghetti with sea urchins at Trattoria Da Nicolò (2), take home salume from Pizzo e Pizzo (5), cannoli Siciliani, pastries with sweet ricotta (6)**

■ **DON'T MISS: SUNDAY BRUNCH AT LA CUBA, £22** ■ **CROCCHÈ SANDWICH IN PIAZZA DELLA KALSA, £1** ■ **A GLASS OF WINE AT ►**





Left: Antonino Costa from Pasticceria Costa with his marzipan fruits and biscuits (below). Right: Don't go home without trying octopus salad

■ HISTORIC FOODS

Antica Focacceria San Francesco has been selling street and other traditional food since 1834, but has recently expanded to include a restaurant and outdoor tables in the pretty piazza. Via Paternostro, 58 (00 39 091 320264; afsf.it).

■ **MODERN SICILIAN** A modernist approach to traditional recipes makes **Ristorante Santandrea** a lovely place for dinner, in a tiny piazza in the city centre. £30 evenings only. Piazza Sant'Andrea, 4 (00 39 091 334999).

■ PASTRIES AND MARZIPAN FRUITS

One of the finest pasticcerie in the city, **Pasticceria Costa** has a startling range of cakes. Don't miss the beautiful frutta martorana – marzipan fruits hand-crafted by one of the last masters of the genre. Via D'Annunzio, 15 (00 39 091 345652; pasticceriacosta.it)

■ ARTISAN CHEESES

Handmade cheeses are the focus at **La Dispensa dei Monzù**, a relaxed bar a formaggi, which also serves dinner. Fine wines, an outdoor terrace and friendly staff complement the food. Evenings only. Dinner £20. Via Principe di Villafranca, 59 (00 39 091 6090465).

■ APERITIVO AND SUNDAY BRUNCH

A gazebo in a small park within a central residential area, **La Cuba** has a good atmosphere, offers a daily cocktail hour and an all-you-can-eat Sunday brunch. £22 for brunch, wine included. Viale Scaduto, Parco Sperlinga (00 39 091 309201; lacuba.com)

■ ART, MUSIC AND FOOD

Palab is a newly converted modernist multi-cultural space with delicious food, live music and outdoor wine bar. Via Fondaco (00 39 091 6538204; palab.org)

■ ICE CREAM

Located within the walls of the sea front, **Gelateria Ilardo** has some of the finest gelati in Palermo. Try the citrus flavours. Foro Italico Umberto I, 6 (no phone).



DRINK

■ Sicily is one of Europe's main citrus-fruit sources – it grows everything from clementines to exquisite blood oranges, and freshly squeezed orange juice, una spremuta di arancia, is a real treat here. In the heat of summer, try a glass of latte di mandorla, literally, almond milk, a fragrant concoction of ground almond paste and sugar, or refreshingly minty acqua e menta. Sicilian wines are Europe's answer to the New World, its sun-ripened grapes produce pleasurable, fruity drops. The most interesting come from native grapes – cataratto, inzolia, grillo and zibibbo for whites; nero d'avola, frappato and the recently rediscovered, elegant, nerello mascalese for reds. The latter grows on Mount Etna, Europe's largest active volcano. Among the best wineries are Regaleali, Marco De Bartoli, Spadafora, Benanti, Terre Nere, Gulfi, Cos, Firriato, Donnafugata, Biondi, Planeta and Baglio di Pianetto. Explore their wines at Enoteca Vinoveritas (Via Sammartino, 29; 00 39 091 6090653), and Mi Manda Picone (Via Paternostro, 59; 00 39 091 6160660), which has hundreds of labels and also serves dinner.



EAT

Don't expect dinner at 6pm in Palermo – that's when the locals are setting out for la passeggiata, a leisurely stroll of window-shopping before dinner, which is eaten any time from 8.30pm to 10pm. Have a pre-dinner aperitivo at **Bar Spinnato** (Via Principe di Belmonte), located in Palermo's homage to the Ramblas. If you don't want to drink, try local non-alcoholic aperitif, analcolico. Prices below are for dinner without wine unless otherwise stated.

■ SPECTACULAR LOCATION

Wine bar, restaurant, bookstore, even travel agent, **Kursaal Kalhesa** is one of the liveliest places in town to drink, read and eat. Located inside the grandiose walls of the 16th-century Porta dei Greci, it spills out into terraced gardens in summer. Live music at night, open until 1.30 am. A must. £35. Foro Umberto I, no. 21 (00 39 091 616 2282; kursaalkalhesa.it).

■ FRESH SEAFOOD

In a side street near the wholesale fruit market, **Trattoria Ambasciata** is a family trattoria that serves Palermo's freshest fish in authentic recipes. Closed only when the weather's too bad for fishing. £40 or more, depending on the fish. Via Ruggero Loria, 2/C (00 39 091 362525).

PIZZO E PIZZO, £2.50 ■ A COCKTAIL AT KURSAAL KHALESA, £3.75 ■ A



SHOP

■ For the best selection of artisan foods to bring home – including vacuum-packed cheeses and salami – Pizzo e Pizzo is a gastronomic treasure trove. Its list includes salted capers, pasta, sauces, olive oils and wine. Eat and drink after you shop at the attractive wine bar. Via XII Gennaio, 1 (00 39 091 6014544)

■ Traditional Sicilian pottery is still made in several towns around Sicily, but Casa Merlo presents them all in one place, handpicked by Vincenzo

and Adele Merlo. Via Merlo, 44 (00 39 091 6230647).

■ Palermo's markets have long amazed travellers with their almost Dickensian characters and atmosphere. The two most central and spectacular food markets are La Vucciria (between Corso Vittorio Emanuele and Via Roma) and Ballarò, which sprawls around Piazza Ballarò. Street markets are usually open until 1pm. Piazza Marina hosts a Sunday morning flea market, which is less touristy than the official one by Piazza Papireto. 🐢

Above: Piazza Santa Maria La Nova. Below: Palermo Cathedral



TRAY OF PASTRIES AT PASTICCERIA COSTA, £8.50 ■ SLICED OCTOPUS PLATE AT DA CALOGERO, £4 ■ MANDARIN GELATO ►



COOK

Fennel and orange salad with herring

15 minutes ■ EASY

Sicilian fennel and orange salad is very refreshing as a starter or at the end of a meal. In Palermo, 'aringhe', lightly smoked Syracuse herrings, which are similar to northern kippers, are sometimes added.

fennel bulbs 2 large (about 700g)
sweet oranges 3
extra-virgin olive oil 6 tbsp
lemon juice 2 tbsp
spring onions 3, sliced
kipper fillet, 1, cut into small strips (optional)

■ Slice the fennel bulbs and stems thinly. Put in a shallow serving bowl. Cut the peel and pith off the oranges with a sharp knife. Slice into thin rounds. Stir into the fennel, adding any juice from the oranges.

■ Whisk the oil and lemon juice together. Season with salt and pepper, using less salt if you are going to add the kipper. Dress the salad, mixing well.

■ Sprinkle the spring onions over the salad and dot with the kipper pieces before serving. **Serves 4**

PER SERVING (no kipper) 231 kcs, protein 3.5g, fat 17g, saturated fat 2.3g, carbohydrate 17g, fibre 7g, salt 0.07g

SLEEP

- **Hotel Principe di Villafranca** Palermo's answer to a boutique hotel, with personalised rooms, attentive service and good location for shopping and restaurants in a quiet residential street. £140 Via G. Turrisi Colonna (00 39 091 6118523; principedivillafranca.it)
- **Excelsior Palace Hotel** Located on the elegant Via della Libertà, this grand old hotel in Liberty style has recently been comfortably modernized. £110. Via Marchese Ugo, 3 (00 39 091 7909; excelsiorpalermo.it)
- **Hotel Letizia** Occupying the first and second floors of a building by Piazza Marina, this hotel is young at heart, well located, nicely run and good value at £80 (no lift). Via dei Bottai, 30 (00 39 091 589110; hotelletizia.com)
- **Palazzo Gallo** and **Palazzo Scordia** are two well located apartments with kitchens and internet access. Each sleeps four. £275 per week per apartment. Via Guardione, 77 (00 39 3358452933; bontour.it; info@bontour.it)
- **MONDELLO**
- **Villa Esperia Hotel** Situated in the exclusive residential part of the village of Mondello, this 22-room hotel is within an easy walk of the beach and is in an Art Nouveau villa. Viale Margherita di Savoia, 53 (00 39 091 6840717; hotelvillaesperia.it)
- **Splendid Hotel La Torre** This authentic 1970s-decor hotel is situated in the centre of the village, right on the water (ask for a sea view) and has a pool as well as beach access, £90. (00 39 091 450222; latorre.com)



GET THERE →

- **Ryanair** (ryanair.com) flies from Stansted from £50, British Airways flies to Catania (ba.com) from £294 and Alitalia flies to Palermo and Catania via Milan or Rome from £120.

AT ILARDO, £1.60 ■ LIVE MUSIC AND PASTA WITH BROCCOLI AT PALAB, £8 ■ ASSORTED CHEESE PLATE AT MONZÙ, £11 🍷