

Dominique Rizzo's

**25 must-do food
and wine
experiences in
Sicily for over
50's.**



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25 must-do food and wine experiences in Sicily

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Why is Sicily the perfect place to visit when you're over 50?

Are you over 50 and love food and wine and looking to experience a new culture? Sicily is the ultimate destination for you! I find that the middle years inspire us to take things a little slower. To delight in the moment, and the people in it. It is precisely this philosophy which is the heart and soul of Sicilian life.

A place with its own culture and history, where you can truly savour the moment, in food and in life. The foods of Sicily are a journey within themselves. One can trace the hands of time through the recipes and flavours that grace the trattorias, cantinas, osterias and local street foods.

One thing I am passionate about with my tours, is getting off the beaten track while still enjoying the creature comforts which make a good holiday a great one. So how do you plan a holiday like that? My 25 best experiences in Sicily will give you the head start! These are experiences that you often only get to learn about on my tours to Sicily. Cultivated especially for the discerning food and wine connoisseur. If you enjoy culture and history, great food, great wine and authentic experiences, this is going to be your ultimate guide to Sicily!

A little about me and my Sicilia

At the age of 20, my father Vincent emigrated from Palermo, Sicily to Australia. He was the only one of his family to come. The connection to Sicily always stayed with him, and we visited regularly throughout my childhood. The first time I went to Sicily I was three. We stayed on my uncle's farm. It was here, I first recall seeing the process of the pigs being butchered and meat prepared. It was the starting point of my lifelong fascination with simple, fresh food, and specifically, a love of Sicilian food.

After high school I took a gap year and decided to spend it in Sicily. I lived with my family, while working in cafes over the year. I saw the local passion for fresh homegrown produce and taking great pains to make use of every part of the animal – we had tripe, goat's heads, pig's trotters, intestines, rabbit and more!



What also stuck with me, was the abundance and generosity of the people, despite having little themselves. From the kitchens of Zia (Aunt) and Nonna (Grandmother) I picked the vegetables, collected the eggs, rolled the polpetta, stirred the pasta, picked the cucuzza and arranged the fruits. I sat on a rickety stool, cleaning garden snails, peeling vegetables and washing wild greens.

The rustic land, peasant lifestyle and family filled eating extravaganzas sparked within me a love affair with Italian food. I was hooked. I came home and carved out a career in food. Over the past 20-plus years I have owned restaurants including Putia Pure Food Kitchen in Brisbane. I have written cookbooks, presented at food events, and appeared on national television and radio.

My philosophy is **“through the sharing of food we share life and one is never lonely or hungry.”**

Italy has stayed with me throughout my journey and I love to share my joy of Italy with those interested in learning about this simple, fresh way of eating and living. Not only through my cooking and recipes, but through my bespoke food, wine and cooking tours of Sicily. I guess a little selfishly, they allow me to return again and again to the place that will forever be part of my soul. I hope that it will become part of yours, too.

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25 must-do food and wine experiences in Sicily

1. Food, food, food in Palermo

Our food journey starts (as do many of my tours) with my homeland Palermo. The food here is amazing. The street foods are abundant and diverse, the people are salt of the earth. I love to dive into the Palermo food scene early in my tours, by visiting the heart of the amazing city. This is a true immersion day, where we explore with gusto the Sicilian tradition of cooking and food culture. It's something you won't get by following the guide books. It's about knowing the locals and the best places to visit. We head out on foot to visit one of the most vibrant and bustling markets: the centre of Palermo's food scene, bursting with the cries of the fish mongers, the local shoppers and the excitement that these markets are famous for.

In Palermo, there is nothing like going hands on with a local cooking class exploring the traditional Southern Italian way of cooking. Or enjoying a banquet lunch, and then a spot of relaxing before an informal Palermo-style dinner. Here, house specialties are served late into the night, along with plenty of wine and friendly atmosphere.





2. Palermo's Gagini Social

An amazing place I love to take my guests to dine in Palermo is Gagini Social. Situated in the former studio of a Renaissance sculptor, the restaurant owners and Head Chef are passionate about showcasing the best of organic, slow food in Sicily and surrounding regions. The convivial essence of the restaurant centres around the 'social table.' It allows diners from different corners of the world to dine together in the round. The soft glow of candlelight illuminates the 16th century stone walls, wooden doors and low arches of the venue, while on the menu, modern European influences blend with classic Sicilian flavours. An unforgettable experience with a menu that is unique and very much a must to enjoy while visiting Palermo.



3. Bars in Palermo

Sicilian nightlife is particularly lovely around Taormina and Palermo. In the bars in Palermo and Taormina the bartenders are so welcoming, giving complementary bowls of olives, bite-sized hot pizza and other spicy bar snacks to enjoy with your wine. There are a multitude of bars which offer the most gorgeous vistas out to Mt Etna and the ocean or blissful courtyards filled with amazing fruit trees.

4. Foraging on Ustica & lentils

Ustica Island is a tiny island off the coast of Sicily. You can get there by taking the ferry from Palermo. With 1200 inhabitants the island is a mecca of raw slow food with artisan products and a wealth of local wild produce. The locals are very proud of the longevity of life on the island, with many people living beyond 100. Towards the end of May there is a 15-day lentil harvest. The entire island community comes together to harvest the unique and sought after Ustica lentils. Their size and flavour attributed to the rich volcanic soil in which they are harvested. Laden with wild fennel, capers, oregano and wild garlic the Island of Ustica is a foragers dream. Fava beans, chickpeas, artichokes, peaches, prickly pears, grapes, quince, basil tomatoes, eggplant, olives and a type of broccolini are all harvested on the island sold in the local market stores and for private consumption.



5. Signora Maria Cristina's shop

On Ustica Island, Signora Maria Cristina has a wonderful little shop packed with jars of various sizes, filled with fruit preserves, jams, syrups, pasta sauces, cooked beans, soups, chickpeas, cooked tuna in oil, swordfish in oil, caponata, pates of olives, dried tomatoes, capers, fennel and chili and the list goes on. A woman with a passion for preserving some of the traditional recipes of sauces and condiments. Her stainless-steel production kitchen fits neatly beside her shop. She has even invented her own recipe for spiced chocolate lentil biscuits, using the famous Ustica lentils, flour, sugar, cinnamon, chocolate and eggs they are delicious. Her products would sit proudly in any gourmet city deli fetching top prices.





6. Trapani and the origins of Marsala

To explore the traditions of wine in this region on my tours, we travel to Marsala to visit the Cantine De Bartoli. This is a 200-year-old family house, where we discover the origins of the true Marsala wine and the Grillo grape variety.

Trapani is a perfect port and fishing village, set on a low peninsula stretching in an arc into the sea, with the housing of the city melting into plains of salt pans, valuable to the region's economy. Apart from its ancient trade in tuna, fishing and salt, Trapani also deals in olives and wine. At present, the province of Trapani produces more wine than Austria, Chile, Hungary and Tuscany.



7. Pani cunzata on Lingua

Head to the tiny coastal village of Lingua, on the Aeolian Islands. Here, you can sit right on the waterfront, chatting and enjoying the view of the turquoise waters. In this hidden gem, you can experience one of the island's most famous dishes, the "Pani cunzata." Pane Cunzata means condited or dressed. The cunzata come almost like a toasted focaccia about the size of a dinner plate and topped with a variety of ingredients such as ripe red cherry tomatoes, chunks of milky mozzarella, tuna, capers, olives, marinated eggplant, sun dried tomatoes and grated salted ricotta. These are a belly filler and I recommend sharing them with 2-3 people.

8. Savouring the Granita on the Islands.

Granita can be eaten any time of the day. Granita is almost like a slushy. A smooth icy drink you eat with a spoon, very popular in bars all over Sicily and the islands. This delicious delicacy is often served with a soft brioche as Granita con brioche and would be for sale with your morning coffee. Likewise, you can also get a gelato con brioche – which is the world's most delicious ice cream sandwich, served on a crisp warm brioche, also eaten for breakfast!

On the Aeolian Island of Salina, there's nothing better than cooling down with a semi frozen lemon granita in the middle of a summer's day. In Lingua you can find traditional fresh almond and pistachio granitas as well as an array of refreshing fruit flavours. Real granita that is, traditionally made with fresh fruits or ground almonds and pistachio nuts. There is nothing better than savouring your Granita whilst staring out to the turquoise waters of the Aeolian Sea.

9. Food and zipping around Salina

If you visit Salina, you can hire Italian cinquecento cars in Santa Marina. Salina has been made famous by movie directors and holiday makers alike. It has also been captured in stunning photography. On one of my recent trips, we had an amazing time touring the island this way. Salina is made up of six volcanoes, so it has a rich soil where produce is abundant. Local specialties include rabbit braised with almonds, pistachios and Malvasia. In addition, fried fish with sweet and sour onions, pastas flavoured with caper pesto and sundried tomatoes and almonds.





10. Capers and La Festa del Cappero in Fiore

Capers and the caper berries pop up on antipasto plates, in pastas, sauces for fish and meats and on the Pane Cunuzata all over Sicily. Salina is home to arguably some of the best capers in the world. Salina hosts a yearly festival in honour of the caper - La Festa del Cappero in Fiore (caper flower party). For three days on the first weekend in June, Salina comes alive with food and wine. It's a celebration of the caper and the abundance of the Island and its rich volcanic soil, perfect for growing delicious capers.



11. Inland Food

Moving towards the inlands you notice a change in the style of eating traditions and also the availability of produce. The locals retain centuries old recipes for handmade sausages, salamis, meats, wild greens and seasonal fruits. Their dolce, gelati, sweets and pastries are laced with historical trade, exotic spices, nuts, fruits, wild honeys using recipes handed down through the ages. The simple cooking techniques used by the Sicilians clearly displays the simplicity of the people and the excellence of the produce. Abundance on the dining table is a way of them wanting to embrace you into their culture and as often as I come to Sicily I am constantly reminded of the quality of the foods, the honesty in the cooking and the pride these people have for a life that is for living la bella vita.

12. Wild Food in Randazzo

Randazzo may be a small town that you would normally pass by, but its riches in food and history make it worth visiting. The foods of the mountains are a recognizable change. We leave behind fresh seafoods and make way for wild food. Fennel studded flavoursome Sicilian sausages, salami, cheeses, open air-dried tomatoes, wild fennel greens, olives, grilled pork, grilled vegetables, rabbit braised with olives, tomatoes and capers. Veal and lemon, ragu sauces, mushrooms and heavier hand-made pastas made with semolina flour giving the real al dente bite. One of my most memorable meals is a simple roast chicken and potatoes. As simple as it sounds it was delicious. The chicken had the most amazing flavour, dusted with oregano, and scented with lemon.



13. Authentic cooking and dining in a castle

Sicily, like many parts of Europe has so many wonderful historic castles that have survived the ravages of invasion and weather for hundreds of years. You may have thought of visiting one or two of these stately castles when in Sicily, but did you ever imagine learning to cook in one? Under the guidance of the maestro in his own family owned castle in Randazzo, in Eastern Sicily, you can. This is an unforgettable experience I love sharing on my tours of Sicily. The maestro Signor Scriviano shows us the art of making classic Sicilian dishes creating a menu of arancini, caponata, handmade semolina pasta, beef involtini, zucchini fritters, fennel and melon salad and ricotta cassata. The piece de resistance of the night is to then dine in the formal dining room of the castle. This is where the last king of Sicily, King Ferdinand III dined many years before. The elegance and wealth of bygone days is reflected in the chandeliers, gold-framed mirrors and tapestries artfully hung on the walls. A magical setting for such a fabulous taste of Sicily!





14. Cannoli in Randazzo.

Mmm cannoli...that sweet and delicious ricotta filled piece of heaven! On one of my recent tours to Sicily, our group was obsessed with cannoli. One of our favourite morning breaks was to stop for a cannoli and coffee. We opted to start a voting system on the best cannoli over the tour. The creamy smooth ricotta filling and cinnamon dusted delicate handmade pastry shell from Randazzo took winning stage. Randazzo is really a town where you will never go hungry. Traditionally, cannoli should be quite thin, but we often seen them thicker because they are easier to assemble and fry. Bakers deep-fry the shells until they are crisp or bake them in the oven. The best cannoli are made and filled just before serving with a glorious cold ricotta cream.



15. Pasta making

Another cooking class with a difference that is one of my favourites when in Randazzo, is with one of the very special locals, Vincenzo, who is passionate about making pasta. Vincenzo has ingenious ways of hand-making a range of pasta shapes using forks and spoons from the cutlery draw. Who would have thought of doing that? Making pasta shells and tubes is never quite as easy as it looks when Vincenzo is doing it. We had a few reruns of rolling and shaping the dough until some presentable pasta was accomplished. Vincenzo's ravioli stuffed with spinach and Parmesan is divine. The pasta melts in your mouth, especially when accompanied by a glass of delicious Sicilian red.

16. Slow food in Catania

Catania is the largest city after Palermo, located further down the east coast. On my tours through Catania, we come upon the art of slow food. A beautiful experience has been to enjoy an amazing dinner of slow food with a menu consisting of local, artisan products that have been registered with the Slow Food band of being unique to specified areas and passing a strict criterion. This maintains the quality and integrity of the products. Nebrodi black pork braised in local red wine, carob bread, pasta with capers, anchovies, cherry tomatoes and scattered with toasted crumbs, veal baked stuffed with beans, char grilled olives, artichoke fritters and more.

17. Catania's “La Pescheria”

The famous “La Pescheria” fish markets have an atmosphere that has remained virtually unchanged for hundreds of years. They hold stage to cries of local fishermen and sellers, with all the wonderful produce that will grace the tables of local restaurants and family tables that day. Fresh and seasonal is the only way the Sicilians eat and shop for food. The local rustic stalls set upon ruins and cobble stoned streets showcase a range of fish, meats and fresh produce in its glorious raw and real state! This is truly the land of slow food and you can be guaranteed you will know what you are buying and where it is coming from. This historic fish market is noted especially for its huge range of the freshest seafood and it is where we can witness the colourful behaviour of local fishermen selling their morning's catch. The assortment of wonderful, mussels, clams and pipis squirt you as you walk past. Fish still jumping as the seller scoops them into their paper wound cones ready to take home. The crowds of locals standing around the tuna and swordfish stands clambering to take home the very best and every part of the fish. It is a delight to wander through the markets nibbling as you go and stopping for morning coffee and pastries.





18. Selse di Limone in Catania

Another historic aspect of Catania to explore is probably something that we greatly appreciated after our long large lunches and that is the Selse di Limone. This is a very refreshing drink made at the local Kiosks studded around the city. The Kiosko as they are called is a point of reference for a meeting place while enjoying the refreshing soda, freshly squeezed lemon and salt drink. Ideal as a digestive promoting belching and relieving some of the discomfort from over eating, which as we found is very easy to do. On a hot day, locals will crowd around the kiosks enjoying an array of flavoured drinks. Although the original lemon, soda and salt is one of the best and from what we saw a real art form in the making..



19. The Feast Day of Saint Agatha and the Minne di Sant'Agata

The Feast Day of Saint Agatha is every year on February 5. Saint Agatha is the patron saint of Catania, and of breast cancer patients, rape victims, wet nurses, bell-founders, bakers, fire, earthquakes and eruptions of Mt Etna. During the Feast Day, bakers across Sicily make minni di virgini in her honour. These are little rounded cakes (almost mini versions of cassata) filled with ricotta, coated with marzipan, and a cherry on top. They represent the breasts of Saint Agatha, which were cut off because she had made a vow of virginity.

20. Food in Siracusa

Syracuse, in South-Eastern Sicily is home to ancient island of Ortigia. A richly historical place, one of the most important cities in the Western world. Considered the cradle of Greek civilization and steeped in baroque architecture and historical relics. They house the most impressive and largest Greek theatre. Right in the hart of Ortigia is the Temple of Apollo. Food in this region does not disappoint.

21. Ricotta in Cavagna

In Cavagna, we eat the most delicious fresh ricotta set into cane moulds. I can't help but to eat mine drizzled with lashings of the delicious extra virgin olive oil from Moresia and Verdesse olives. This is a rare olive produced only in small quantities in and around the Ispica region.

22. Delicatessens of Syracuse

Syracuse is the home to some of the world's best delicatessens, particularly in Ortigia Markets. Sample cheeses, hams, olives, pickles and flavoursome salami. They are usually jam packed with people, but the atmosphere is incredibly friendly. At one end you can pick up a huge selection of ingredients and wines. At the other, you can relax and sample the wares. Enjoy platters (tagliere) of delicious charcuterie and you can order local beer and wine while you're there to make a splendid day of it.





23. Bread making

On many of my tours we are fortunate to be able to share a wonderful cooking class with locals making fresh bread from semolina flour. Once baked it is covered with a blanket and almost left to sweat for about 15 minutes. This improves the crust and the shelf life. Eaten warm it is divine with olive oil, salt, oregano and chili flakes. We also make pasta al nero disceppia, pepperonata – peppers cooked down with onions in a sweet and sour sauce. In addition to calamari stuffed with caponata, eggplant fritters and a selection of salads. All made with produce purchased that morning from the bustling markets in Siracusa. This is a wonderful experience for my tour group. Being able to wander the markets with my guidance – bargaining, buying and tasting our way through the fresh produce gives a true taste of what it's like to be Sicilian.



24. Chocolate in Modica.

The food trails of Sicily's riches always lead to Modica. An aristocratic town made famous in the 16th century by the Spanish and the introduction of the cocoa bean from the South Americas. The chocolate of Modica uses methods of chocolate making from the Aztecs giving the chocolate its unique grainy consistency. Made up of sugar, ground cocoa bean, and adding wonderful flavours such as peppercorns, vanilla, cinnamon, wines, and other exotic spices. Many traditional manufacturers such as Modica's famous Antica Dolceria Bonajuto maintains its original hundred-year old recipes. We often go as a group into a traditional chocolate making factory. Truly a delight for the senses! Our groups love the popular chocolate, torrone, chocolate liqueur, and a particularly special biscuit 'mpanatigghi.' This is a light pastry filled with mincemeat, chocolate and spices.

25. La Passeggiata

La Passeggiata is my favourite time of day when at dusk everyone dresses up and goes out walking arm in arm, wandering through the narrow streets to the main town square. In Ortigia, La Passeggiata is along the waterfront, and is particularly lovely. It's a very traditional Sicilian social activity, a time to chat, a time to be seen, a time to relax at the end of the working day. You might stop for a glass of wine, a little appetiser or even a gelato or gelati. It's mainly about getting out there and enjoying the company of others.

The Sicilian Way

One of the beautiful things about Sicilian life, is the rich social connection. Family is everything and their art of sharing is second to none. Their guests are treated like VIPs. Guests must “eat, eat, eat” everything from the antipasti and the 4 courses that follow even though they honestly cannot eat another morsel. “Basta, basta, basta” is not enough to curb the enthusiasm.

They love food almost as much as their family (and their cars!) It's a love for simple food, and technique which is not rushed. They take their time, with an enviable slow lifestyle that makes it the perfect holiday destination, and truly a way of life to aspire to.

Let me tell you, that the flavours of Sicily and the warmth of this lifestyle will stay in your heart long after you touch down at home.

So...when are you coming to Sicily?



join me on my next tour.

Does this sound like you?

- ✓ I want real Sicilian food and wine, a variety of taste sensations and real cooking experiences.
- ✓ I want an authentic holiday where I get off the beaten track, without foregoing the creature comforts of lovely accommodation and travel.
- ✓ I want to see the cultural sights, but don't want to spend my time trudging around eating sandwiches from a backpack.
- ✓ I want someone to take all the hard work out of finding the very best things to do, see and eat, so that I can relax and enjoy myself.
- ✓ I want to have the freedom to do the planned activities or do as I please.
- ✓ I want to eat and drink my way around Sicily on the trip of a lifetime.

Yes, this is my dream holiday!



The great news is, I go travel to Sicily every year! I offer carefully curated, personally escorted tours right around Sicily on a gastronomic journey like no other. Cook, eat, drink and experience the amazing Sicilian culture in one magical holiday.

Well what are you waiting for?

Don't wish you'd done it, do it!

Let me, a seasoned chef and passionate Sicilian escort you through this wonderful part of the world.

Find out more about my different tours, grab an itinerary or see when we're heading there next.

LET'S GO TO SICILY!