

Fall 2010

Palmento

Robert V. Camuto

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Camuto, Robert V., "Palmento" (2010). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters*. 34.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/34>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Nebraska Press at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Praise for Robert Camuto's *Corkscrewed:*
Adventures in the New French Wine Country

Winner of the 2008 Gourmand World Cookbook Awards, Best Book on French Wines

The French translation of *Corkscrewed* (*Un Américain dans les vignes: Une ode amoureuse à la France du bien-vivre*) won the 2009 Clos de Vougeot literary prize

“Camuto’s lighthearted book is a particularly enjoyable read that chronicles the author’s journey through French wine country in a scrumptious collection of stories about wine, food, vineyards, and winemakers.” 🍷 BETH HISER, *Bloomsbury Review*

“[*Corkscrewed*] inspires thirst and curiosity. . . . Mr. Camuto’s adventures will introduce readers to little-known French wines . . . and to the passionate individuals that persevere despite the absence of monetary reward. These may not be the wines that earn one spurs as a connoisseur, but they certainly may produce a worthy sense of humility at how much there is to learn. I can’t wait to drink them.”

🍷 ERIC ASIMOV, *New York Times*, Dining & Wine section

“If you think you would enjoy having a conversation with a passionate French wine craftsman, dive into Robert Camuto’s delicious new book. I spend a good part of my life underground in France, and everything Camuto relates of his adventures rings true. And to those of you tiring of the varietal bandwagon, here’s an escape route.” 🍷 KERMIT LYNCH, wine importer and author of *Adventures on the Wine Route: A Wine Buyer’s Tour of France*

[Buy the Book](#)

“[Camuto’s] enthusiasm for underdog grapes, regions and winemakers makes him a pleasant guide along the back roads of France.” 🍷 THOMAS MATTHEWS, *Wine Spectator*

“If you saw and liked the film *Mondovino*, get this book. Like a collection of love letters to wine, each chapter showcases a winemaker who has carved out a niche for himself amid the encroaching corporate tide, sprawl, or commercialization. In a world of oak chips and cost-benefit analysis, these are the winemakers who must endure, even in beloved France.”

🍷 MAGGIE SAVARINO DUTTON, *Seattle Weekly*

“Mr. Camuto’s writing is precise, entertaining and compelling enough that it should appeal to audiences beyond the normally narrow scope reached by wine books. It reads very much like a collection of short stories that come together to form what is essentially a non-fiction novel. . . . A rare gem in the field of wine literature and a highly recommended read.”

🍷 DAVID MCDUFF, *McDuff’s Food and Wine Trail*

“[Camuto] is a stylish writer with a gift for describing the way his subjects look and think, and express themselves in words and wine. He explains each winemaker’s approach and results, also adding a bit of insight about intra-French competition and the export market in the French wine industry today.”

🍷 CLAIRE WALTER, culinary-colorado.blogspot.com

“Deliciously descriptive, Camuto is informative without being too technical, a serious observer yet humorously light-hearted at times.” 🍷 JULIA LAUER-CHEENNE, *Lincoln (NE) Journal Star*

[Buy the Book](#)

PALMENTO

AT TABLE

[Buy the Book](#)

Palmento

A SICILIAN WINE ODYSSEY

Robert V. Camuto

University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln and London

[Buy the Book](#)

© 2010 by Robert V. Camuto
All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United
States of America

All photos courtesy the author. ☺

Library of Congress Cataloging-
in-Publication Data

Camuto, Robert V.

Palmento: a Sicilian wine odyssey /

Robert V. Camuto.

p. cm. — (At table)

ISBN 978-0-8032-2813-9 (cloth: alk. paper)

I. Wine and wine making—Italy—

Sicily—Anecdotes. 2. Wineries—Italy—

Sicily—Anecdotes. I. Title. II. Title:

Sicilian wine odyssey. III. Series:

At table series.

TP559.18C275 2010

641.2'209458—dc22

2010001694

Set in Dante by Shirley Thornton

Designed by Nathan Putens.

In Memoriam

Luigi Camuto

1898 (Bronte) – 1938 (New York)

and for my parents

*To the hope that
Sicily remains
an island*

[Buy the Book](#)

“LOOK HERE, CYCLOPS,” said I, “you have been eating a great deal of man’s flesh, so take this and drink some wine, that you may see what kind of liquor we had on board my ship. I was bringing it to you as a drink-offering, in the hope that you would take compassion upon me and further me on my way home, whereas all you do is to go on ramping and raving most intolerably. You ought to be ashamed yourself; how can you expect people to come see you any more if you treat them in this way?”

He then took the cup and drank. He was so delighted with the taste of the wine that he begged me for another bowl full. “Be so kind,” he said, “as to give me some more, and tell me your name at once. I want to make you a present that you will be glad to have. We have wine even in this country, for our soil grows grapes and the sun ripens them, but this drinks like nectar and ambrosia all in one.” — HOMER, *The Odyssey*

THEN ONE OF THEM ASKED me what those Italian volunteers were really coming to do in Sicily. “They are coming to teach us good manners,” I replied in English. “But they won’t succeed, because we think we are gods.” — GIUSEPPE TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA, *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*)

Contents

List of Illustrations	<i>xiii</i>
Acknowledgments	<i>xv</i>
Introduction: Sicily's Moment	<i>xvii</i>

WINTER

1 Benvenuti in Sicilia	3
2 Romancing the Amphorae	12
3 <i>Stranieri</i>	32

SPRING

4 Planet Planeta	61
5 What Drives Marco	80
6 Palermo Holy Week	95

SUMMER

7 Where Have the Leopards Gone?	113
8 Return to Corleone	131
9 <i>Due Donne</i>	145
10 The Jet Set	162

FALL

11 Child of the Wind	183
12 A Bridge Too Close	205
13 <i>Palmento</i>	217

A NEW YEAR

14 New Wine	239
-------------	-----

<i>I Vini: Addresses of Featured Winemakers</i>	251
---	-----

Illustrations

PHOTOGRAPHS

Following page 110

- 1 Giusto Occhipinti of cos
- 2 Titta Cilia among cos's amphorae
- 3 The old *palmento* where cos began
- 4 Frank Cornelissen
- 5 Pressing wine at Frank Cornelissen's winery
- 6 Pippo the mechanic at Bar Sandro Dibella
- 7 Alessio Planeta at Ulmo
- 8 Diego Planeta
- 9 Santa Margherita di Belice, forty years after the earthquake
- 10 Marco De Bartoli
- 11 Vincenzo Conticello in front of his family focacceria
- 12 Lucio Tasca d'Almerita with his sons, Giuseppe and Alberto
- 13 Libera Terra co-op members on seized Mafia land near Corleone
- 14 Arianna Occhipinti
- 15 Francesca Curto looking over the harvest

Following page 236

- 16 Andrea Franchetti in Passopisciaro
- 17 Passopisciaro vineyards in fall
- 18 Pop star Mick Hucknall being interviewed
in his vineyard by Italian television
- 19 Ciro Biondi in an abandoned *palmento* on Etna
- 20 Sebastiano De Bartoli on Pantelleria
- 21 Salvatore Ferrandes in his grape-
drying greenhouse on Pantelleria
- 22 Carole Bouquet among her
vineyards on Pantelleria
- 23 Salvatore Geraci of Palari
- 24 An abandoned *palmento* on Etna
- 25 Alberto Aiello Graci
- 26 Nino, the foreman at Graci
- 27 Salvo Foti
- 28 Pietro Crimi in the *palmento* where
he makes his cosmic wine
- 29 Making ricotta on Etna
- 30 Giovanni Scarfone of Bonavita

MAP

Sicily's Wine Regions xx

Acknowledgments

IN MY TRAVELS ACROSS SICILY, I have been touched by the generosity and warmth of many Sicilians. I want to thank all the winemakers and families cited in this book for their help and hospitality. Among those who generously have given days of their time and helped with research contacts so that I should better understand the island they love: Giusto Occhipinti and Titta Cilia of *cos*, Alessio Planeta, Marco and Sebastiano De Bartoli, the entire *Tasca d'Almerita* family, Frank Cornelissen, Ciro Biondi, and Alberto Aiello Graci.

I can think of no barman with a better appreciation of wine than Sandro Dibella of *Solicchiata*. I feel privileged to have tasted the straight-from-the-heart home cooking of Angela and Rosa Aura Occhipinti. In this project's early stages, I received inspiration and encouragement from many, including Provence winemaker and Sicilian-at-heart Raimond de Villeneuve de Flayosc. In the later stages before going to print, the manuscript was proofread by my friends and fellow wine adventurers Ken McNeill, Art Nelson, and John Forsyth, who offered comments and corrections that are greatly appreciated. I want to thank all my friends and family who have listened to my stories and encouraged me to share them. And I want to thank my wife, Gilda, and son, Dantino, for their patience and for making me homesick whenever I am away.

Finally, I want to thank all those who have courageously worked to make Sicily free, including Letizia Battaglia; all those who have spoken out against the Mafia; and the anti-Mafia groups such as *Libera Terra* and *Addiopizzo*. They have created a climate of expression for all—including many of the voices in this book.

[Buy the Book](#)

Introduction

SICILY'S MOMENT

I WENT TO SICILY IN the winter of 2008 to explore and write about an emerging wine scene. What I discovered in more than a year of travels to the island was more than a fascinating, teeming wine frontier; I found something close to my own heartbeat.

On a trip to Sicily years earlier, I'd sensed that I had landed on *terra santa*. It is a feeling that has only grown as I've come to know this island: from the anarchic street markets of old Palermo, to the morning stillness of the vineyards and lava flows of Mount Etna, to the vast grain-covered hinterlands that turn from vibrant Scottish green in spring to a nearly colorless brown under a scorching summer sun. Despite the legacies of corruption, emigration, violence, and efforts to obliterate its patrimony or scar its nature, something sacred persists here: a natural, familial way of life tied to the farmlands, forests, and seas of what Sicilians call their "continent."

This book was inspired by a personal milestone. The approach of my fiftieth birthday produced one of those moments when you ask, "If this year were my last, how would I spend it?" And so I headed south from my home in Mediterranean France to a land that was more feral, lawless, random, contradictory, and therefore more profoundly Mediterranean. I suppose the fact that my grandfather was born in Bronte (and died in New York when my father was an infant) has something to do with the visceral attraction, although I know people with no Sicilian blood who have similar emotions.

Goethe wrote in the eighteenth century, "To have seen Italy without having seen Sicily is not to have seen Italy at all, for Sicily is the clue to everything."

That statement now seems truer than ever. Modernity seems to have enriched swaths of mainland Italy materially, but robbed something of its soul. Sicily, however, seems to have so far resisted

the forces that transform places into replicas of everywhere else. The traditions that form its identity are intact: a fervent pagan-like adherence to religious symbols, a profound commitment to the extended family above all, the obligation to break or ignore rules imposed by the state, and the correct belief that Sicily's natural bounty and cuisines make the rest of the world seem pale and wanting.

The story of Sicilian wine is a long one: Homer mocked it; Pliny the Elder exalted it; Arab Muslim conquerors probably more than tolerated it. The British merchant John Woodhouse “discovered” it in the sherry-like wine of Marsala at the end of the eighteenth century. And the French and Italians coveted Sicilian wine when the phylloxera parasite ravaged their vineyards at the end of the nineteenth century. Today the vestiges of that last golden age are the *palmenti*—traditional stone wineries with massive wood lever presses that for the most part lie abandoned across winegrowing Sicily. Made obsolete by newer technology or deemed illegal for commercial use by modern European regulations, the old structures have been given over to brambles and the elements or recycled into *agriturismo* bed-and-breakfasts or modern wineries.

Sicily has long been Italy's biggest grower of wine grapes. What is new is that in our shrinking world with an appetite for authenticity, Sicilian *terroirs* and their indigenous wine grapes are valued far from Sicily's shores—from the rich red Nero d'Avola that spread from southeastern Sicily to the elegant Nerello Mascalese resembling Pinot Noir or Nebbiolo on the slopes of Mount Etna, along with white grapes such as Carricante, Catarratto, Grecanico, Inzolia, Zibibbo (Muscat of Alexandria), and many more.

The rediscovery of Sicilian *terroirs* is accompanied by a boom of smaller-scale quality wine production. In 1990 the number of commercial Sicilian wine producers was little more than three dozen; today the number is approaching three hundred—including “foreigners” from the Italian peninsula and beyond as well as European celebrities, but mostly new generations of Sicilians who chose to stay rather than find opportunity elsewhere. Much of this change has to do with greater forces in society. Following decades

of Mafia wars and assassinations culminating in the 1992 killings of Palermo prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, the Sicilian people and an aggressive anti-Mafia movement seem to have pushed the mob underground or off the island. The result is a new sense of openness to the world and what may be Sicily's first entrepreneurial class: after millennia of domination by outsiders, feudal land ownership, poverty, and criminality, Sicily is growing its first generations that—in the modern sense of the word—can be said to be “free.”

I am not a wine critic but a writer who sees in wine metaphors for us all. Wine to me is food (physical and spiritual), an expression of humanity and of nature and that zone where the two merge into something larger. In this communion of life forces, I know of no place richer than Sicily—no place at this moment that seems to have more to say.



PALMENTO

winter

[Buy the Book](#)

I

Benvenuti in Sicilia

I HAD ARRIVED IN SICILY only a few hours earlier, and on the drive to dinner I would break more laws than I had violated during any prior twenty minutes of my life. Indeed, I could always say that I was an innocent *straniero* merely following a lawless guide in Valeria, the waif with the brick-sized monogrammed Dolce & Gabbana belt buckle and the ever-singing *telefonino*, who greeted me at Azienda Agricola cos, which I'd chosen as my first stop in Sicily for all noble reasons. I was here because—more than two and a half decades after its founding by a group of university friends—cos had become a thriving symbol of the new Sicily. Its wines were fashionably sipped in cosmopolitan capitals the world over, and cos was considered on the cutting edge of the growing and wholesome natural wine movement. Indigenous grape varietals were farmed biodynamically (using herbal tea treatments and a few practices that resembled alchemy tied to the phases of the moon) and wines were produced with naturally occurring yeasts found in grapes and with minimal added sulfur (sulfites). More than that—burnishing cos's authenticity credentials—the winery had been fermenting some of its wines not in wood barrels or steel or cement vats but in clay amphorae, a

process reminiscent of the Greeks who had first settled Sicily; and therefore it elevated my role here to something like an epicurean archaeologist.

Of course, I wouldn't have to explain my behavior to anyone, because this was Sicily. And in Sicily, life's little laws and sense of order—let's call them "constraints"—tend to have a need to be not so much broken as simply ignored. I had spent a couple of hours driving from the new, sleek, glass and lava stone Catania airport across the Sicilian countryside, and I felt as though I were the only person on the road enslaved by inconveniences such as wearing a seat belt and observing the lanes marked on the pavement. As a bright afternoon sun and cornflower blue sky faded to night, I'd driven through the randomness of olive groves and stands of eucalyptus that abutted cinderblock housing complexes and junkyards. I'd passed through seas of densely packed citrus trees—arranged with no apparent design and now weighted down with blood-red oranges that dropped into the road only to be splattered by speeding traffic.

It was night when I pulled up *cos's* entry road outside Vittoria, and with the help of dim entry lights I could make out the mix of old and new buildings that formed the *cos* winery and *agriturismo* where I would be spending the next couple of nights. Sitting at right angles at the end of the drive lined with olive trees and lavender was a pair of centuries-old buildings with pale pistachio shutters and tiled roofs. In the taller of the two buildings—a two-story villa with pretty stone balconies and iron balustrades—I noticed the glow of office lights and human activity.

Inside the door of the office was Valeria, a sprite of a woman in her twenties standing talking into her *telefonino* as her free hand fluttered and waved, with her fingers signing their own soliloquy. She recognized me with a raised eyebrow and a quick nod and went back to her business. Her blonde-and-brown-streaked hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail, and she wore a current version of the Italian youth fashion uniform: baggy pants with enough pockets to move multiple *telefonini* every waking hour of the day, hooded sweatshirt, flat sneakers, and that polished steel belt buckle.

“Ciao, ciao, ciao,” she said into the phone what seemed more than a dozen times.

“*Va bene?*” she asked, and introduced herself. I shook her outstretched hand and skipped the details about being lost on my first evening at the wheel in the Sicilian interior. “*Va bene,*” I responded. Valeria and a woman colleague, who’d appeared next to her, began discussing the most pressing matter that evening: my dinner.

The nearby pizzeria was closed. But there was a seafood restaurant about twenty minutes away in Scoglitti where one eats well, they said. I asked if getting there was complicated.

“*No, è facile*”—easy. Valeria said this with such confidence I almost believed her. She volunteered to draw out the route. To make things even easier, she said, I could follow her to the restaurant around eight, as she lived nearby. She showed me to my room across the courtyard and up a flight of stairs.

An hour later, I found Valeria in the office, where she gave me a hand-drawn map—a series of circles, lines, and arrows. She went over the directions slowly. It all meant nothing to me.

“*Va bene,*” I said.

Valeria must have picked up something tentative in my voice, because she looked me in the eye and asked if I was sure I understood. I responded with a *non-è-problema* shrug. Valeria grabbed her *telefonino* and the car keys that dangled from a long cord, and thus began my first lesson in how to drive like a Sicilian.

Which is where the lawbreaking started.

Valeria climbed into her little dust-covered Ford and I followed her to the end of the drive. She rocketed onto the main road, her wheels a cloud of dust from the drive. I was shifting through all gears on my gearbox and racing the RPMs just to keep up with her. Without slowing, she whipped through one roundabout and then another—and as I followed in pursuit, the G-forces made me realize how empty my stomach was. A straightaway provided an opportunity for her to push the accelerator to the floor, hurling her little car into the night—and within inches of the back bumper of another vehicle that rather inconsiderately seemed to be driving at a legal speed.

Her car veered left over the solid white line in the center of the road, and I followed. We blew through a stop sign, careened through a roundabout, and made the little car engines whine. Was the traffic light we just went through *technically* red? Valeria was breaking even more laws than I: peering ahead into her car, I noticed the driver's seat belt hanging neglected and limp, while Valeria cradled her *telefonino* to her ear.

We entered the little well-lit village of Scoglitti and turned off onto a small piazza. Valeria popped out of her car and motioned for me to park in an empty space in a line of cars set at an angle to the curb.

But, I said, protesting, I didn't know the Italian for "crosswalk," and I pointed to the white stripes on the street where Valeria wanted me to park.

"*Va bene*," she said with such self-assuredness it made me feel like a dope for caring about such trivialities. And off she tore into the provincial night.

I parked in the crosswalk and stood outside the car for a few minutes to see if anyone would mind. There were few people on the street. A pair of local police wearing white caps and carrying matching leather satchels that looked full of parking tickets walked right past me and into a corner bar.

Va bene.

Thanks to Valeria's driving, I was early for dinner. So I took a walk around Scoglitti, crossing a brightly lit plaza with groups of old men discussing things the old-fashioned way: with their mouths, their faces, and their hands—not a single *telefonino* in sight. I followed the signs to the port—for Scoglitti sits on the southeastern coast of Sicily facing North Africa. The waterfront with its seawall promenade and stone benches was deserted. The *gelaterie*, *pizzerie*, and seafront condos were shuttered for winter. A few dozen fishing and pleasure boats bobbed in the harbor.

I walked back to where I had parked and climbed the flight of stairs that led to Sakalleo. Pushing open the door, I stood in a small entryway. There was a desk with a small cash register and, off to the right, a kitchen with a pair of women in white aprons busily

chopping while chirping in Italian. I could smell onions and garlic simmering in olive oil, the scent of freshly cut lemons, and the vapors of salty boiling pasta water.

A woman of maybe fifty with curly, light brown hair showed me a table in a corner of one of four rooms lit by fluorescent wall torches—a good sign, as some of the best meals I’ve eaten in Italy have been in family restaurants lit as brightly as operating blocks. On the walls were photographs of scenes from the same fishing boat. As I would later learn, the boat—also named *Sakalleo*—was the commercial boat of the restaurant owner Pasquale Ferrara, who saved the best of his catch for his restaurant. The woman who greeted me was Pina Strano, who had been one of three partners running *cos* before she left to marry Pasquale and join him at the restaurant.

Sakalleo seemed ready for business. A young man and woman in blue jeans and sweaters were busily putting finishing touches on the bright blue and gold table settings. But for whom? There were no other customers in sight and it was already 8:30 on a Monday night.

I was hungry. I hadn’t eaten anything all day except for some shoe-leather prosciutto at the Rome airport. I sat waiting for a menu to arrive. Instead, the young woman came up to me and asked in a soft voice, “*Crudo va bene?*”

The question was if I wanted some raw seafood to start. For instead of a menu, *Sakalleo* poses its guests a series of yes/no questions. To nearly all those questions, I repeated about the only two words I’d pronounced since I’d arrived on the island: “*Va bene.*”

The Sicilian wine list was short and to the point. Though Sicily produces mostly white wines—made chiefly from native Catarratto vines planted on the western half of the island—here in southeastern Sicily I was in red country. The island’s dominant red grape is hearty Nero d’Avola—literally, the black grape of Avola—named for the port town on the island’s Ionian coast about seventy miles from where I sat. I chose a bottle of *cos* wine from the local appellation Cerasuolo di Vittoria, a ruby-colored blend that balances the deep-purple tannic heft of Nero d’Avola with the lighter, cherry-colored, and more acidic local Frappato. The wine came in *cos*’s signature old-fashioned

short, stubby bottles and was served with a small glass made for drinking rather than for savoring aromas. This yin-yang blend—like most Cerasuolos I’ve since enjoyed—was not the world’s most deeply complex wine, but it was surely one of the most easygoing. It was the kind of wine that lets you think you could drink it all day while you *ciao-ciao*-ed into your telephone and parked illegally.

The first of the *crudi* arrived—a pair of raw marinated langoustines and a few prawns in lemon and oil accompanied by a small portion of *merluzzo* (cod) seasoned with garlic and pepper flakes. More than *bene*, the seafood was so finely delicate as to hardly need chewing. Each morsel softened my heart as it slid, dripping its marinade, down my throat. To find fresher I would have had to put on a wet suit. When the first dish was gone, I broke the first of many pieces of bread to mop up the sauce. I followed with another mouthful of wine, which seemed weightless and melded perfectly with the flavors on my plate.

As I reclined against the back of my chair, a muscular man of about sixty, in a blue pin-striped suit and a loosened pink tie with a fat knot, strutted into the room like he owned the place. This man, with his ruddy complexion and a fat radish of a nose, walked over to me, glanced at my polished clean plate, and then looked me in the eye. He lifted a hand out for me to shake. It was as thick and fleshy as a slab of pancetta. “*Buona sera*,” he said softly, the voice churning gravel. As it turned out, he *did own the place*. This was Ferrara.

The young woman returned to sweep away the dish and cutlery and in less than a minute returned with another—this time grilled squid accompanied by a small patty she referred to as “*am-booor-gar di seppia*” (cuttlefish “hamburger”). A third plate, lightly fried baby squid in lemon, was followed by a fourth, a small piece of perfectly grilled, tender swordfish, and a fifth, octopus drizzled with olive oil.

Even before the arrival of the sixth dish—sweet steamed mussels—Sakalleo had earned a place in my personal pantheon of most remarkable restaurant meals ever eaten. It was a short list of restaurant experiences that I created in the early 1980s when I first began traveling to Italy and France as an adult. Yet in recent years—despite

those two countries being the places where I spent most of my time and where I'd eaten my way through dozens of Michelin stars—the list had few new additions. The most inspiring food, I've learned, comes in simple packages without the self-consciousness that accompanies critics' stars. Sakalleo was turning out to be an orgy of the sea in an impossibly plain brown wrapper: not so much comfort cuisine as it was comfort itself.

How was it possible, I wondered, that I remained the only client, even on a Monday night in off-season? The answer to that question came sometime after nine as groups began filing in. Sicilians, I would learn, like to eat in numbers and late. A dozen people in business suits—including one woman who appeared to be laughing and at ease in her singularity—took a table that filled one of the side rooms. An equally large table began filling up another room. Next to me sat two young couples—the women with streaks of fluorescent hair and oversized earrings, and the men sprouting short upright spikes of black hair and styling gel.

Everyone was greeted by Ferrara with the minimum of a handshake. Most of the women and some of the men, apparently depending on their familiarity, got slow cheek-brushing kisses on each side. And everyone, regardless of whether they merited handshakes or paternal embraces, got the same food I did, though at the big tables the portions were served on heaping platters and passed around family-style.

When the young woman returned to my table, she uttered three words that nearly made we weep with appreciation.

"*Pasta va bene?*" she asked me as deadpan as she asked all the other questions. I let out an enthusiastic affirmation. And as she turned away I thought I saw something vaguely resembling a smile pull at the ends of her mouth.

About ten minutes later she returned to the table with a bowl of spaghetti cooked al dente and covered ever so lightly with a transparent white wine sauce flecked with pieces of pink crab. This was pasta as it was meant to be eaten but so rarely is outside of Italy: the noodles and the sauce in a perfect harmony of

flavors, texture, and—as the Italian chefs like to say, particularly in Sicily—*emozioni* (emotions). This symbiotic dance of pasta and sauce is one of the most subtle arrangements I know of and not easy to master; in most places outside Italy the sauce gets overthought, overburdened, overserved, or overseasoned while the pasta itself is neglected. Perhaps it should stand to reason that pasta is understood on an instinctive level in Sicily, now widely accepted as the place that pasta as we know it was introduced by Arabs more than a thousand years ago.

I finished every last strand. Then I watched as the bowl disappeared and another was set before me—this one a plate of chickpeas tossed in a wine and seafood sauce. The aromas drifted up from the plate into my brain's pleasure center, beckoning. I fell back in my chair as helpless and supple as a baby squid. From this vantage I watched one of the simplest dramatic gestures I've ever seen.

Ferrara stood in the middle of the room, after making a lap of handshakes and kisses. It was going on 10 p.m. on a Monday night in winter in the Sicilian provinces, and the place was now packed. He casually looked around him and let his pinstripe jacket slip off his shoulders and down his arms. He took the jacket in one hand, then transferred it to the other, holding it by its collar between thumb and forefinger out in front of him.

As if on cue, the young woman server swept by and removed the jacket from its perch. Ferrara then began methodically rolling up his sleeves, and the woman returned on cue and handed him a burgundy apron, which he slipped over his head onto his wide shoulders with the air of a knight putting on his armor for the trip to Jerusalem. But Ferrara wasn't voyaging to the Holy Land. He was on his way to the kitchen.

I methodically finished the second plate of pasta and watched as the platters of food came out from the kitchen to locals who seemed to regard it all as a normal part of life. This is but one of Sicily's many paradoxes: that people who live with a diet of daily confusion and services at times not much better than the Third World take for granted that they should eat so much better than we modern mortals. Ferrara came out of the kitchen in his apron, carrying a

thin plastic supermarket bag that he brought to the table of business suits. Discreetly, he opened the bag to the man at the head of the table. I caught a glimpse of a tail and fins as Pasquale showed a fish from his daily catch.

Then the young woman appeared again, cleared my plate, and chirped, “*Secondo va bene?*”

Did I want a main course? Was this a joke?

Of course it was not a joke—and I succumbed after I learned that the *secondo* was not very big and would only add five euros to my bill. Before she left the table, she looked at the crumbs on the tablecloth and scolded that if I was getting full, I should not eat so much bread.

I poured the last of the Cerasuolo and drank—the wine seemed to leave something I thought I recognized as appetite in its wake. Then out came a platter that made my insides cry out for help: a mixed grill dominated by fresh crustaceans of various sizes and colors grilled in their shells with their heads and tentacles intact, scented with a hint of herbs and lemon. There were large pink *mazzancolle* (large Mediterranean prawns), smaller deeper-red prawns (known as *gamberelli*), and shrimp (*gamberetti*), as well as a pair of *scampi* (langoustines).

I ate my way though about half of the dish and then gave up. As delicate and delicious as it all was, I could go no further. I collapsed into the chair, feeling the sudden urge for a long nap. The woman—observing that I’d stopped eating and that I wore the lost look of a boiled octopus—asked what was wrong.

The word *basta* spontaneously erupted from somewhere deep in my gut.

She again scolded me for leaving so much on the plate.

It was after ten and there wasn’t a seat left in the house. I asked for an espresso but was told the restaurant had none. Ferrara, I figured, was truly an artist who did not want to muddle his message or the sublime odors coming from his kitchen by serving coffee: *You want an espresso, go to a bar*. So instead, I took a shot of strong, cold, and sweet Limoncello to help me navigate the dark and lawless path to bed.