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SICILY

# MAGICAL TAORMINA

Natural beauty, a rich past, and outstanding cuisine make this ancient Sicilian city that overlooks the Ionian Sea a must-stop for travelers.

*by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli*





**CHURCH OF ST. NICOLÒ**  
stands on the hill in Savoca,  
a small village near Taormina.



**Corso Umberto I** is the pedestrian street that winds its way through the center of Sicily's Taormina, which sits between Messina and Catania. Spilling with cafés, food shops, wine bars and artisan workshops, it is bustling today. Even though this seaside town overlooks the Gulf of Naxos, it's a steamy 89°F today and without a sea breeze in the sky.

My husband Rino and I arrived early this morning from Calabria, taking the old road from Scalea and onto Castrovillari, Cozenza, Lamezia Terme, Vibo Valentia and San Giovanni. It was a three-day journey with two overnights along the way, but Rino is a former race car driver and knows these roads by heart. At San Giovanni, we put the car on the ferry, cross the strait of Messina, and arrive in no time.

From Messina it's another 40 minutes to Taormina. We approach the ancient city set on Mount Tauro overlooking the Ionian Sea and are welcomed by ancient walls where no cars are allowed. Like all places in Sicily, it has a rich and interesting past with invaders, dukes and noblemen who came and left their mark. First there were the Arabs, Normans, Angevins and then Aragons, to name a few. But it is its natural beauty and stunning aerial position that has made Taormina a must-stop on travelers' maps.

named a piazza after. Goethe once wrote, "To have seen Italy without having seen Sicily is not to have seen Italy at all, for Sicily is the clue to everything." He also wrote *Italian Journey* in 1817. This book is a true tell-tale of his intellectual experiences in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. There were also many other great artists who were seduced by Taormina. British writer D.H. Lawrence stayed for an extended period of time while he wrote *Sea and Sardinia*. Americans Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams and Greta Garbo came and went often. Irish writer Oscar Wilde, French artist Jean Cocteau and Italian American Francis Ford Coppola made it their home for extended stays.

At one point Sicily was not part of Italy, and was called The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. It was once the largest of states before Italy was unified and included the Kingdom of Sicily and the Kingdom of Naples. The arrangement of the states lasted from 1816 to 1860 when it was included with the Kingdom of Sardinia. Italy was unified in 1861.

Peppered with medieval churches, a stunning Greek theater and distant-past palazzos, Taormina is also noted for its cuisine. Today, its mystical past blended with Arab influence continues to shadow its cuisine. To learn more about the magic spell that has been cast

food loving passion caused him to dance acrobatics all over the stage.

Chef Mimo explains that Sicily has a mild climate, even during winter when oranges, lemons, and aromatic plants such as oregano, mint, rosemary, and wild fennel grow in abundance. "Our cuisine is a melting pot with its Arabic influence," he says.

He picks up small Sicilian eggplants and says, "We call them Chinese, because it was the Chinese who carried them here so many years ago. Cinnamon, cloves, pistachios and saffron blended their way into our cooking style, thanks to the Arabs. For example, macaroni or mukaran (in Arabic) are long strands of pasta made from durum wheat flour. This pasta is cooked with fish, raisins, pine nuts and saffron; it has Arab-Berber origins." He speaks quickly in a passionate Sicilian accent.

Arancini, the savory rice balls fried to a crisp and left with a moist center, are also Arabic in origin. Stuffed with peas, cheese and sometimes ham or meat, they are made throughout Sicily. Arabs also contributed to the great pastries we know of today as Sicilian, using almonds, pistachio, cinnamon and ricotta cheese. Although there are infinite stories behind Sicilian desserts, the one that I like the most is the one about Sicilian cassata.

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Like all places of beauty, Taormina was discovered by the artists and intellectual types. Among the first was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Others seduced by it include British writer D.H. Lawrence and Americans Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams and Greta Garbo, as well as Irish writer Oscar Wilde, French artist Jean Cocteau and Italian-American Francis Ford Coppola.

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Taormina is part of Sicily's rich past. History books tell us that Sicily was first inhabited by the Phoenicians and Greeks, then evolved into a prosperous area under the ruler Gelon II, who was also Greek. Then the Romans took command for a short time, until they were conquered by the Normans in 1087. Fast-forward to the eighteenth century when the European aristocrat invasion occurred during the Grand Tour. Like all places of beauty, Taormina was discovered by the artists and intellectual types. Among the first was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Goethe was a German writer and statesman, whom the Taorminese even

upon so many travelers, we are spending the day with our friend, Chef Mimo, who has his own restaurant.

We meet Chef Mimo at the produce market at the Arch of Porta Messina, and after exchanging greetings, we head inside. We peruse the stalls and start to shop for the ingredients that we'll later use in the kitchen. Crates, baskets and wooden counters are piled high with artichokes, eggplant and Sicilian mandarins. Sellers shout out, some singing and waving their hands, enticing you to shop at their stand. It all looks more like a *Commedia dell'arte* siciliana, a Sicilian theatre comedy starring Peppe Nappa, whose

The cassata is said to have been introduced in the ninth century when the Arabs introduced cane sugar, almonds, cedar, lemon, orange and mandarin to the people in Palermo. Then, when the Spaniards arrived in Sicily and ruled, they brought chocolate and their famous sponge cake. They quickly incorporated these two ingredients in the cassata recipe, adding ricotta, and the dessert evolved again. It didn't stop there, because when the Baroque period arrived, this decadent cake was decorated with candied fruit, leaving us with the cassata that we know of today.

"I am from Catania," says Chef Mimo, who





**SIGNOR ZAZA,**  
a Sicilian cannolo maker,  
offers samples of his  
creations.





**FOG LIFTS OVER TAORMINA,** which has a typical Mediterranean climate of mild winters and warm, dry summers.

has also lived in Sardinia, Spain and England.

“But I cook very traditional foods from my region, which I now consider Catanese and Taorminese. I returned to Sicily because it’s the most beautiful place in the world—rich in scent, colors and tastes,” he says. Now the chef in his own restaurant, he shares how he got there.

“Everything started in the kitchen with my mamma, Silvana, and nonna, Grazia. They are the leaders of our family—always available to listen and help. When I was little we did not start our day with the typical Italian breakfast pastry, cornetti. Instead, we woke to the ragù of my nonna. I took my inspiration from them. Family is so important in our Italian culture, and thanks to these two

women, I followed my calling. My mamma and nonna taught me the love we have for the family must always be transmitted to the kitchen,” he says.

“At 14, I was still in school and studying, but I started to work in a local trattoria in the prep kitchen. It was a little job, but I learned. After I knew how to prep I changed restaurants and began working with a pizzaiolo. I trained, learning every aspect of pizza making,” he says. After this experience he continued his schooling and also his hands-on experience in a 5-star hotel as a chef in Sardinia, where everything was made by hand.

Turning the conversation back to the present, I ask Mimo about his first and second courses, which I know are his favorite.

“I make everything my nonna made: pasta

al sugo, carne al sugo, la lasagna e pasta al forno, everything made in the traditional way,” he says. He opens his wallet and shows me a photo of his nonna. “I cook my lasagna in my wood-burning brick oven, the same oven where the pizza is made. The burning wood adds a rich flavor. It’s the same for the carne al sugo or ragù. My nonna always added a little pork skin in the sauce, not only because it completely changes the taste making it richer, but it tenderizes all the other pieces of meat in the pan. Tricks of la nonna we don’t learn in culinary school,” he says.

He quickly swings from meats and rich sauces to delicate light fish as we leave the meat section of the market and head to the bancarelle di pesci, ice beds piled with daily catches. In Sicily, fish is cooked simply.





**SICILIAN MARZIPAN,**  
decorative desserts shaped  
like fruit, are a popular treat.



“My motto is never cook with a lot of ingredients, especially fish—you must never cook ingredients with fish, but fish with ingredients. You do not want to have a taste that will cover up the taste of a fresh fish,” he says.

Chef Mimo’s attention is quickly taken away as he eyes a local amberjack. Similar to swordfish in texture, it has firm meat with a mild flavor, making it a good choice for many recipes. But for lunch, he chooses a blue fish which will be prepared with a couple of capers, a handful of black olives and a few cherry tomatoes for color. It’s a recipe that turns out best when you use *un pesce di scoglio*, fish that swim by the coastal rocks. “They are fish with big flavors,” he says.

As morning turns to noon, the temperature rises to more than 91°F, and we stop for a granita. There are so many choices for this semi-frozen drink made with sugar and water: lemons, mulberries, watermelon, almonds, pistachios, chocolate, oranges and even coffee; the options are overwhelming. We order, take our sips and head to kitchen to start cooking.

Besides fresh fish, Chef Mimo loves pasta and can’t choose a favorite. “I love pasta or linguine allo scoglio al dente—with mussels, clams, shrimp, lobster, squid and calamari. It’s a true flavor of rich flavors from the sea,” he says.

As for dessert, it wouldn’t be Sicily without cannoli, a pasta dough fried to a crispy rolled shell then stuffed with ricotta. “The cannolo is from Palermo, and although I do make an excellent one, it is not from my region. You can always tell a cannolo from Palermo because it is bigger and longer, and their stuffing has little pieces of chocolate in the ricotta, or sometimes is lined with chocolate on the inside of its shell,” he says.

“A traditional cannolo has candied orange or lemon whipped in its ricotta and is dusted with crushed pistachios on its open ends. The best cannoli, I must admit, are from Palermo because they have the best ricotta!” he adds.

But for Chef Mimo, his favorite dessert is tiramisu, “and only the way mamma makes it,” he says.

We all cook, he leads, and later his mamma arrives with dessert, and it’s not cannoli. In places with tradition like Sicily, there is no better cucina.

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## Sicilian Caponata (Eggplant Relish)

This relish, served on toast, can be a throwback to more ancient times by substituting powdered almonds for the tomatoes. Sometimes a light dusting of unsweetened cocoa powder is added to this recipe.

- 1½ pounds eggplant, cut into ¾-inch cubes, skin left on
- 3 tablespoons salt
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 4 inner celery stalks, chopped
- 1 onion, finely sliced
- 6 ounces canned tomatoes, minced
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- ½ cup red wine vinegar
- ½ cup capers, rinsed
- ¼ cup green olives, sliced
- Salt, as needed

Place the eggplant cubes on paper towels and sprinkle with salt all over. Let sit for 1 hour, then using other paper towels, dry them off.

Heat the oil in a skillet until hot but not smoking and sauté the eggplant cubes until golden brown. Remove and drain on paper towels. Put the celery in the skillet and sauté it in the same oil until it is golden, then remove and drain on paper towels. Repeat with the onion until it is soft, then add the tomato to the skillet. Cook the onion-tomato mixture for about 10 minutes, stirring frequently.

In a saucepan, combine the sugar and vinegar and heat them. Add the capers and olives and simmer about 10 minutes. Add the eggplant, celery and onion-tomato mixture. Simmer about 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and allow to stand for about an hour.

Serve at room temperature.

Makes 8 appetizer-size servings.





**MARKETS** are filled with eggplant, oranges, and other fresh fruits and vegetables.





## Fillet of Fish, Sicilian Style

- 4 sea bass fillets
- 1 cup of flour
- 6 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup black olives, pitted and chopped
- 1 tablespoon capers, unsalted
- 1 cup of water
- 3 tablespoons of tomato sauce
- Salt, to taste

Rinse the fish and pat dry. Lightly flour each fillet.

In a sauté pan, heat the extra virgin olive oil on medium. Add the olives and capers and mix.

Add the fish fillets and sear on both sides until the fish turn just white (not browned), about 1 minute on each side.

Drizzle with the water and add the tomato sauce. Cook about 10 minutes. Add salt to taste and finish cooking over high heat to reduce the liquid.

Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

**Variation:** Add 1 cup of chopped potatoes and 1/2 cup chopped fennel to the pan and cook until tender. Serve the fish over the vegetables.





**A SICILIAN DESSERT** tray includes a variation of cassata, as well as other popular sweets.

## Cassata Siciliana

- 1 large sponge cake, thinly sliced
- ¼ cup Marsala, divided
- 1½ cups ricotta cheese
- ⅔ cup fine sugar
- ¼ teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 ounces candied fruit, finely chopped
- 2 ounces candied orange peel, chopped
- 2 ounces semisweet chocolate, grated
- 3 cups confectioners' sugar
- ¼ teaspoon green food coloring
- 3 tablespoons water
- ½ cup whole glacé fruit

Line the sides and bottom of an 8-inch mold with aluminum foil, then line it with the sponge cake slices, reserving some to cover the top. Sprinkle with half the Marsala.

In a blender, combine the ricotta, fine sugar and vanilla and blend on low. Add the candied fruit, candied orange peel, and the chocolate and mix until well blended. Add this mixture to the mold, cover with the remaining slices of sponge cake, and sprinkle with the remaining Marsala. Cover the mold with aluminum foil, pressing down on the molded ingredients. Refrigerate for 3 hours.

In a double boiler, melt the confectioners' sugar and add the food coloring and water. Stir well with a wooden spoon and take care that it does not brown. Unmold the cassata and cover with the icing and the glacé fruits. Slice thinly and serve.

Makes 8 servings.