



# Sardinia

## -Part One -

By JIM SANO

Sardinia is an island and region of Italy; it is the second-largest island in the Mediterranean Sea after Sicily. It is the third largest region in Italy in terms of land mass (area 9,301 square miles) and in terms of population, it is ranked 11th (1,658,138). It neighbors the mainland of Italy (120 miles east), the French island of Corsica (7.5 miles north), and the African country of Tunisia (120 miles south). The Tyrrhenian Sea portion of the Mediterranean Sea is directly to the east of Sardinia between the Sardinian east coast and the west coast of the Italian mainland peninsula. To the west of Sardinia is the Sea of Sardinia, also part of the Mediterranean Sea. The Strait of Bonifacio is directly north of Sardinia and separates Sardinia from the French island of Corsica.

The region of Sardinia is one of the five in Italy that enjoy some degree of domestic autonomy granted by a specific statute. Its official name is Regione Autonoma della Sardegna (Autonomous Region of Sardinia). It is divided into the four provinces of Nuoro (NU), Oristano (OR), Sassari (SS) and Sud Sardegna and the metropolitan city of Cagliari (CA). Cagliari is the region's capital and its largest city.



Sardinia's indigenous language and the other minority languages (Sassarese, Gallurese, Algherese Catalan and Ligurian Tabarchino) spoken on the island are recognized by the regional law and enjoy "equal dignity" with Italian.

The population is mostly concentrated in Cagliari and the province of Sassari. Until very recent times, the population inhabited the inner areas away from the sea and the economy was based on sheep-raising and connected activities. Much of the island's arable land is devoted to wheat cultivation and fruit growing.

The region is noted for its blend of rugged mountains called Limbara, Supramonte, Ogliastra, Gennargentu, Iglesiente and Sulcis and the golden beaches, dramatic volcanic scenery, delicious food and relaxed pace of life. With a 1,149-mile-long coastline, the island makes up nearly a quarter of the total length of the main Italian coastline. It is the only region of Italy to not have an expressway. A great indication of the island's relaxed pace of life, driving around is surprisingly stress-free. Designated national parkland and wildlife reserves take up 25% of the island.

Sardinia is covered in natural beauty from coast to coast and has a unique geographical location that makes it much less prone to earthquakes than the rest of Italy. The island itself is very rugged, formed predominantly by rocks and with only a few major rivers. Despite this, the island is incredibly lush thanks to relatively low development.

## History

Sardinia was previously known as Ichnusa dating back from around 1500 BC. Ichnusa is believed to be a combination of the word 'nusa' (meaning island) with 'Hyksos', a tribe who invaded Sardinia. It has also been referred to by Ancient Greeks as Argirofleps and Sandaliotis. The origin of its modern name, written 'Sardegna' in Italian, has a few theories ranging from being named for ancient Greek gods, local mythical heroes or the Sea People.

The island boasts some of the oldest unique archeological remains dating back thousands of years called "Nuraghi". The nuraghe (shown here) are truncated conic structures of huge blocks of basalt taken from extinct volcanoes which were built in prehistoric times without any bonding. They are abundant and found all over the island.

Some 7,000 examples are said to exist. Most Nuraghi are quite small, but a few were obviously fortresses. There is also a Nuraghic village near Dorgali with traces of about 80 buildings identified.

The civilization that built the Nuraghi probably had its roots in the prehistoric population of the island, but its origins and affinities are uncertain. They left no written records. Archaeological evidence from the Nuraghi culture suggests a strongly organized power of tribal states. The working of metal from local mines was presumably the chief source of wealth. However, the presence of Phoenician trade settlements along the Sardinian coasts from the 9th or 8th century BC must have vigorously contributed to Proto-Sardinian prosperity.

Sardinia was rich in coal, silver, lead, zinc and iron and it was not long before the word got around the Mediterranean and outsiders came.

The Phoenicians made their first settlements here around the 9th century B.C. They were followed by the Carthaginians around the 6th century B.C., then the Greeks and finally the Roman conquest in 238 B.C.

In the years that followed the fall of the Roman Empire, Sardinia fell prey to the Vandals of Africa and then Byzantine soldiers. Christianity spread through most of the island, although it struggled to take hold in the more remote mountain areas.

In the 12th century under the influence of the republic of Pisa, the island was divided into four local districts, Gallura, Logudoro, Arborea, and Caralis, called "Iudicati". Each was ruled by a judex whose power little by little became hereditary. In 1241, the King of Sicily, Frederick II, appointed his son, Enzo, king of Sardinia.



In 1323, Jaime II of Aragon formed an alliance with Arborea's king and occupied Cagliari and Gallura. He called these territories the 'Kingdom of Sardinia and Corsica'. Some 50 years later, Pere IV of Aragon gave the kingdom its own parliament. Later, a degree of self-government was added, along with judicial independence.

In the early 15th century, the King of Sicily, who was also the heir to the Aragon throne, conquered the whole island. On his death, ownership of Sardinia was transferred to the Castilians. Thus, Sardinia became a Spanish territory and to defend the island a series of watch towers were built along its coast.

In 1708, at the time of the Spanish War of Succession (1701 to 1714), Sardinia passed into Austrian control by the Treaty of London. Victor Amadeus II, duke of Savoy and sovereign of Piedmont, was forced to yield Sicily to the Austrian Habsburgs and, in exchange, received Sardinia (until then a Spanish possession). Two years later on August 24, 1720, he formally took possession. From that time until 1861, he and his successors were known as kings of Sardinia, though the seat of their power and wealth and their customary residence was in Piedmont.

In March 1848, King Charles Albert promulgated a new constitution for Piedmont-Sardinia, the Statuto Albertino, which became the basis of the constitution of the new kingdom of Italy proclaimed by the first Italian parliament on March 17, 1861. Charles Albert's son, Victor Emmanuel II, became the first king of unified Italy.

During World War Two, Cagliari suffered from heavy Allied bombardment. After the war in 1946, Sardinia became one of 20 different Italian regions.

## The Islands of Sardinia

Sardinia has smaller islands, Asinara, the Maddalena group, and the Sulcis Archipelago, off the coast.

Asinara Island, also known as Devils' island, is home to a colony of wild albino donkeys. Asinara is found in the northern part of Sardinia and was closed to the public from 1885 to 1997. The island is virtually uninhabited by humans, and forms part of Italy's national park system as a nature and marine reserve. It has been a health quarantine station, prison camp during World War I and finally maximum-security prison in the 70s, hosting a few Mafia bosses. This isolation enabled Italy to preserve its natural beauty, which is today finally safeguarded as Asinara has been declared a national park and can be visited only with advanced permission.



La Maddalena Archipelago is the most popular Sardinian archipelago, well known around the world for the beauty and singularity of its beaches and waters. The main island of the archipelago is La Maddalena while Caprera Island is popular for having hosted the Italian general and hero, Giuseppe Garibaldi, during his exile and until his death in 1882. Here you can find the museum dedicated to him called the "Hero of two Worlds" for his expeditions both in Europe and South America.

Sulcis Archipelago is in south-western Sardinia. The archipelago has two main islands, Sant'Antioco and San Pietro. San Pietro's unique center, Carloforte, has been listed among "the best Italian municipalities" and has a linguistic and cultural particularity: the island was colonized in 1738 by Ligurian people who introduced their dialect and habits. The language people speak today comes directly from this time.



**Asinara Island**

## Cuisine and Wine

Traditional Sardinian cuisine boasts very ancient roots. Sardinian recipes are the perfect mix of the many different cultures that have left their mark on the Island from age to age. No Sardinian food is more ancient than the bread, Carasau. Lunch or dinner in Sardinia cannot start without a basket of Pane Carasau (translation: music paper bread). Unlike any other bread, this specifically Sardinian food is closer to a crispy taco than bread. This bread is made from yeast, salt, water and wheat flour. It is very flat and crunchy with a cylindrical shape and lasts for a long time. It is one of the oldest types of bread and history says it was created by the Sardinian women to feed their shepherd husbands while tending their flocks.

An economic and popular dish is Pani Frattau in which five or six wafers of Carasau are sandwiched with tomato sauce, sautéed in a pan and topped with a nice poached egg.

Tagliere is the Italian word for meat and cheese platters. They are common in other Italian regions, particularly in Bologna and Emilia Romagna. But the Sardinians take



**Carasau Bread**



it to a whole new level. Not only does every Sardinia restaurant menu include a series of options for Tagliere as starters, but it is also the thing to eat around 7 pm almost every night.

Burridda (shown here) is a Sardinian cold antipasto of fish such as skate, smooth hound shark, dogfish or any firm-fleshed fish. The fish is dressed with a sauce consisting of garlic cooked in olive oil, walnuts or pine nuts, parsley, and vinegar or with tomato sauce instead of nuts and vinegar.

Sardinian Octopus salad is also another popular starter. The main ingredient of this dish is obviously local octopus which is smaller than a normal octopus and consequently more delicate. It is usually served with boiled potatoes, celery and is dressed with garlic, parsley, olive oil and lemon.

Malloreddus alla Campidanese is a kind of pasta made from semolina and saffron that is native to Sardinia. Its ridged conch shape allows the pasta to catch the sauce and grated pecorino cheese. This pasta is usually served in a tomato sauce with sausage. Sardinia is home to the rarest pasta in the world, Su Filindeu (God's Strings). 10 residents of the small town of Nuoro are the last to engage in the complex process of making this pasta that involves intricately weaving dough into a fine cylindrical

net of noodles that are dried and then bathed in a broth with grated cheese. This Sardinian culinary tradition has existed for 300 years but the skills required have nearly vanished.

Fregola are tiny pearls of pasta, like cous, but it's got a much softer texture and consistency more akin to rice. Fregola, which means breadcrumbs, is a typical Sardinian pasta made of semolina and rolled into small balls. There are plenty of recipes for cooking fregola but the most common is a seafood fregola with clams and prawns which is served with some saffron broth and a loaf of crunchy bread.



**Burridda**



## Cuisine and Wine

Not everyone knows that Sardinia is a major saffron producer in Italy. This wonderful and very precious spice of intense red color is used in many typical Sardinian dishes and is often called “red gold of Sardinia”. Sardinian saffron (shown here) is coveted for its quality due to the bulbs having been cultivated for more than a century.

Culurgiones is a unique Sardinian pasta that looks like ravioli but are stuffed with potatoes and mint. It is commonly served with tomato sauce, basil and a sprinkle of pecorino or with butter and sage.

You have probably tasted pecorino cheese before, but did you know that most of it is produced in Sardinia? It is also one of Italy’s oldest cheeses. Distinctly Sardinian, Pecorino Sardo DOP is the king of Sardinian cheese and is famous worldwide. It is made with pasteurized



Saffron

Sardinian sheep’s milk with a technique that dates right back to 1700. It comes in many variations, but European legislation of PDO dictates that the authentic cheese must only be made with Sardinian sheep’s milk. It takes an average of six months to mature, by which time it presents a dark yellow or brownish crust. The flavor becomes stronger the longer the cheese is aged.

This author loves cheese BUT I will pass on this one! Infested with maggots, Sardinia’s Casu Marzu (shown here) is a ‘special’ kind of cheese. Considered one of the most extravagant earthly delicacies, it is a delight for lovers of strong cheese. It is a traditional Sardinian sheep milk cheese with insect larvae (maggots). A fly deposit the eggs and the larvae in the cheese which creates a high



level of fermentation inside of the cheese. This makes the cheese softer like cheese paste. This cheese is now considered illegal, for health and safety reasons, but can still be purchased on the black market in Sardinia.

As stated from previous regions, the “poor cuisine” is prevalent in Sardinia as well with all parts of animals used as food. It is not uncommon to see on a menu items such as cow and lamb brain, tripe, cow tongue and entrails.

This is probably the most famous Sardinian dish. The suckling pig or “Porcheddu” must weigh from 4 to a maximum of 6 kilograms and should be entirely cooked with myrtle leaves. The spit-roasted suckling pig takes some master practice to be well-cooked/done. It is roasted on a spit over a log fire for about 3 hours or cooked “Incarrazadu” which means in a large hole under the fire. If you want to add a touch of style, leave it to infuse myrtle leaves and serve on a rustic cork tray. (shown here)



Prosciutto di Pecorinois, a Sardinian cured meat made from mutton, is produced from the legs of the best breed of Sardinian sheep. Lamb prosciutto has an intense and fragrant aroma complimented with the full-bodied taste of traditional Sardinian herbs.

Zuppa Gallurese is a typical dish of Gallura. The word “zuppa” means soup, but this dish is not a liquid dish although broth is used to prepare it. The consistency is like that of lasagna. It is a mix of slices of bread (different types of bread can be used), cheese and lamb broth baked in the oven.

Spaghetti with sea urchin is only available from November till April when sea urchins are in season. It is forbidden to take the sea urchins at other times of the year and it is possible to collect only a limited number of sea urchins per fisherman to protect these species.

Bottarga is one of the most famous and tasteful delicacies of Sardinia. Bottarga is obtained from the salting and air drying of mullet roe. This dried mullet roe can

be eaten raw in thin slices as a starter or can be grated as a condiment either with antipasto or to dress pasta, usually spaghetti or linguine. Bottarga di Muggine is sold both whole or ground in a jar.

Lamb with artichokes is a traditional Sardinian plate often cooked during Easter. It is rather easy to find genuine lamb meat in Sardinia.



Compared to a standard artichoke, the Sardinian prickly artichoke (shown here) is distinguished by its compact conical head and shades of purple. The taste is full bodied with a sweet edge and is best served with salad and lamb.



Unique to Sardinia is the *Pompia* tree. It looks like an orange tree, but with strange fruit which is as large as or larger than a grapefruit, bright yellow in color and with a thick, ribbed, wrinkled skin. Some botanists say it is a hybrid between citron and lemon, while others consider it as a hybrid between citron and grapefruit. *Pompia* trees grow wild in the scrub and in citrus groves only in Sardinia where they have been grown for at least two centuries. It is an essential ingredient in some traditional sweets, like *Sa Pompia Intrea*, a traditional wedding dessert that requires lengthy preparation in order to candy the pith in honey. The rind is also used to flavor spirits.

Sardinia is also well known for its sweets and pastries such as *Seadas*, a traditional Sardinian dessert made of fried pastry filled with delicate lemon-scented pecorino cheese and topped with local *Abbamele* honey.

*Pane Cocci*, decorated bread made from durum wheat and semolina, was once just prepared for special events like weddings, although now it is easy to find it year-round. It is often baked in a round shape.

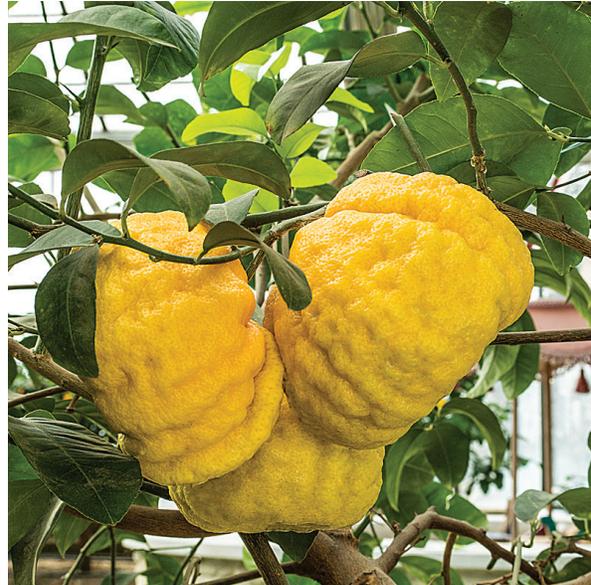
Sardinia's wines have little in common with those produced in the rest of Italy. Sardinia's remote Mediterranean location, as well as the historic influence from other cultures, gives its wines a unique character that might be considered to have more in common with Spanish than Italian wines. Among the best-known wines are *Bovale*, *Monica*, *Vermentino*, *Malvasia*, *Nasco* and *Moscato*.

*Moscato* wines are sweet and often sparkling, while *Malvasia* may be either dry or sweet. Some others worthy of mention are *Cannonau*, a red with high alcohol content, *Nuragus*, dry and with a slightly acid note, *Carignano del Sulcis (DOC)*, a red with a dry lingering flavor and *Malvasia*, a sweet dessert wine.

Perhaps Sardinia's most unique wine, the amber colored *Vernaccia di Oristano*, is based in the province of Oristano. Varieties include both dry and sweet wines as well as fortified "sherry-like" wines. The grape has a long history with Sardinians with many claiming that consuming ample quantities of this wine being responsible for low instances of malaria on the island.

## Sardinia's Blue Zone or How One Lives to be 100

Is it genetics, environment or a combination? Antonio Todde, who lived in a village in the mountains of central Sardinia, was the first man in the world to live to 110. Sardinia's male population is said to have one of the best life expectancies in the world. The island has an above



average life expectancy of 81 years and has the highest rate of centenarians in the world. In 2004, a research team set off to investigate a rare genetic quirk carried by these inhabitants. The M26 DNA marker is linked to this area's exceptional longevity, and due to geographic isolation, the genes of the residents in this area of Sardinia have remained mostly undiluted.

This isolation has helped preserve a very traditional, healthy lifestyle in which food is locally grown. Sardinians still hunt, fish and harvest the food they eat. The people in this area eat a very classic Sardinian diet consisting of a lean, plant-based diet accented with meat, whole-grain bread, beans, garden vegetables, fruits, and,



in some parts of the island, mastic oil. Meat is largely reserved for Sundays and special occasions. Sardinians also traditionally eat pecorino cheese made from grass-fed sheep; whose cheese is high in omega-3 fatty acids. Goat's milk, another staple, contains components that might help protect against inflammatory diseases of aging such as heart disease and Alzheimer's disease. Moderate consumption of locally made Cannonau wine, which has two to three times the level of artery-scrubbing flavonoids as other wines, may help explain the lower levels of stress among men.

Physical activity is a part of each day. By keeping active, many men stay healthy longer. For centuries shepherding offered the best profession. Walking five miles or more a day, Sardinian shepherds received cardiovascular benefits and a positive effect on muscle and bone metabolism without the joint pounding of running. Sardinia's strong family values help assure that every member of the family is cared for. People who live in strong, healthy families suffer lower rates of depression, suicide, and stress. Elders are celebrated and family is revered. Grandparents can provide love, childcare, financial help, wisdom, and expectations and motivation to perpetuate traditions and push children to succeed in their lives. The benefit to elders is that they feel a sense of belonging in their families and communi-

ties. They live at home, where they are likely to receive better care and remain more engaged than they would in a nursing home or assisted-living facility.

Laughter reduces stress, which can lower one's risk of cardiovascular disease. Men in this Blue Zone region are famous for their sardonic sense of humor. They gather in the street each afternoon to laugh with and at each other. Given all these factors, it becomes easy to see how people from this area live such long lives.

