

Sicily -Part One -

By JIM SANO



Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea (9,927 square miles) and the largest of Italy's twenty political regions, slightly larger than Piedmont. Sicily comprises approximately 8.4 percent of Italy's population (5,002,904) and is the fourth most populated of Italy's 20 regions. Sicily has a roughly triangular shape, earning it the name, Trinacria. To the northeast, it is separated from Calabria and the rest of the Italian mainland by the Strait of Messina.

Its most prominent landmark is Mount Etna, the tallest active volcano in Europe at 10,922 feet high and one of the most active in the world. In addition to Mount Etna, the islands surrounding Sicily are also home to several active volcanoes including Mount Stromboli in the Aeolian Islands.

The climate of Sicily is considered Mediterranean. As such, it has mild, wet winters and hot, dry summers. Sicily's capital, Palermo, has a January average low temperature of 47°F and an August average high temperature of 84°F. Sicily gained its current status as a region in 1948. It is divided into nine provinces, Agrigento, Caltanissetta, Catania, Enna, Messina, Palermo, Ragusa, Siracusa and Trapani. All, except Enna, have a coastline. Each province has a capital city of the same name as the province. The most heavily populated city

is Palermo, the regional capital, with 1,044,169 people followed by Catania (population: 648,260), Messina (population: 290,927), Siracusa (population: 219,948) and Marsala (population: 97,472). The autonomous region of Sicily also includes the Aegadian Islands, the Aeolian Islands, Pantelleria, and Lampedusa. Sicily's economy ranks as Italy's eighth richest region in terms of total gross domestic product (GDP, \$102 billion.).

A Brief History

The history of Sicily is full of bloody wars due to the strategic position of the island in the Mediterranean Sea. The location has always been perfect for the commercial route where East connected to West. Throughout its history, Sicily has been influenced by a variety of different cultures including Greek, Roman, Arab, French, Albanian, Byzantine, Norman, Saracen, and Spanish. As a result of these influences, Sicily has a diverse culture as well as diverse architecture and cuisine. The original inhabitants of Sicily were thought to be three distinct groups: the Sicani in the east (possibly from Spain), the Elymians in the northwest, thought to be Aegean (Greek-Turkish), and the Sicels (from Liguria) who gave the island its name and forced the Sicanians to move to the middle of the island around 1200 BC. About 750 BC, the Greeks began to colonize Sicily, followed by the Romans, the Germanic Vandals

and Goths, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Normans, the German Hohenstaufen Dynasty and the French Angevin Dynasty. In 1282, an insurrection known as the War of the Sicilian Vespers resulted in the deaths of the entire French population. In 1302, Sicily was ruled by Spain, then the French House of Savoy, and the Austrian Habsburg Dynasty. Next came Charles of Spain and Napoleon's Bourbon Kings.



After years of war and foreign conquerors, the 19th century brought Giuseppe Garibaldi and his Red Shirts to the island. It took them 3 months to rid Sicily of the Bourbons who had had a 600-year chokehold on Sicily. Once Giuseppe Garibaldi landed at Marsala in June 1860, his army was joined by increasingly large numbers of dissident Sicilian fighters whose loyalty no longer rested with their Bourbon rulers. In 1870, Garibaldi held a referendum and the population voted for the unification of Sicily with Italy. This important vote put the Island back to square one.

Sicily became part of the newly unified Kingdom of Italy. The peasants got nothing, not even the right to vote. Sicily was once again the outpost of an empire with absentee rulers who understood little and cared less about the Sicilians who struggled to make a subsistence living from agriculture and fishing.

The Constitution of Italy recognizes Sicily as one of the country's five autonomous regions. As an autonomous region of Italy, Sicily has its own President of Regional Government (like a governor) who serves as the head of government. The region also has a regional assembly that is led by a speaker. The regional president is elected into office by popular vote and is assisted by presidents on the provincial level, mayors and other smaller positions. The governor and regional government exercise only limited control over certain public services and resources. (Who runs Sicily is a much more complex issue than what many would have you believe.) A serious legislative effort is under way to abolish the provinces, thereby saving the public money required to

support that stratum of costly bureaucracy. Of course, the island's "autonomy" is largely an illusion. Though the region can levy certain taxes, most of the money necessary to operate Sicily comes from Rome and the European Union (EU).

There are several cultural icons and regional symbols in Sicily including flags, carts, sights and geographical features. The Flag of Sicily, regarded as a regional icon, was first adopted in 1282 after the Sicilian Vespers of Palermo. It is characterized by the presence of the trinakria (triskelion) in its middle, the (winged) head of Medusa and three wheat ears. The three bent legs are supposed to represent the three points of the island of Sicily itself. The colors represent the cities of Palermo and Corleone which were the first two cities to form a confederation against Angevin rule. It became the official public flag of Sicily and is used on public buildings, schools and city halls along with the national Italian flag and the European one.



The Sicilian cart is an ornate, colorful style of horse or donkey-drawn cart native to Sicily. Horses were mostly used in the city and flat plains while donkeys or mules were more often used in rough terrain for hauling heavy loads. The cart has two wheels and is primarily handmade out of wood with iron components and then decorated ornately as per the owner's desires and pocketbook.





The Sicilian coppola is a traditional kind of flat cap typically worn by men in Sicily. First used by English nobles during the late 18th century, it was used in the early 20th century as a driving cap, usually worn by car drivers. The coppola is usually made in tweed. Today it is widely regarded as a definitive symbol of Sicilian heritage.

Sites to See

Sicily boasts 7 Unesco World Heritage sites but for many that is just the beginning. Let's start with Agrigento and The Valley of Temples. Founded in the 6th century B.C., the ancient city of Agrigento was one of the greatest Mediterranean centers. The remains of the Doric Temples which dominate the city are well preserved and are one of the most terrific monuments of Greek art and culture. Villa Romana del Casale is located in Contrada Casale, at the foot of Mont Mangone. The exceptional beauty and quality of the mosaics which decorate the villa illustrate the greatness and underline the importance of the Villa.



Valley of the Temples, Agrigento

The baroque towns of the Val di Noto in southeastern Sicily were rebuilt in 1693 after a terrible earthquake. The cities of Caltagirone, Militello Val di Catania, Catania, Modica, Noto, Palazzolo, Ragusa and Scicli represent the result of a great collective undertaking and are the expression of a high-quality architectural and artistic achievement.

Don't miss Syracuse and the Rocky Necropolis of Pantalica where one will discover both Greek and Roman influences. The Necropolis contains more than 5,000 tombs, mainly dating back from the 13th to 7th centuries B.C. Ancient Syracuse also contains, among other things, the Temple of Athena, the famous Greek Theatre and Roman amphitheater.

Mount Etna has been listed for its huge geological, scientific and cultural value. Mount Etna is the most active and the highest volcano in Europe and is worthy of a future article by itself.

The Arab-Norman architecture as represented in Palermo, Monreale and Cefalu gives testimony to the many who conquered and stayed in the region. The Royal Palace with the Palatine Chapel, the church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti, the church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio (della Martoriana), the church of San Cataldo, the "Palazzo della Zisa", Admiral's Bridge and the Cathedral (all of these in Palermo) along with the Cefalù Cathedral and Monreale Cathedral are just a few more beautiful historic sites.

The Teatro Massimo Vittorio Emanuele in Palermo is the biggest opera house in Italy and is the third largest opera house in Europe.

Sicily has a rich and unique culture, especially regarding the arts, music, literature, cuisine, and architecture. Many poets, writers, philosophers, intellectuals, architects and painters have roots on the island. This can be traced back to the Greek philosopher Archimedes, a Syracuse native who became renowned as one of the greatest mathematicians of all time.



Teatro Massimo Vittorio Emanuele



The Greek Theater of Taormina is without question the most important feature for Taormina visitors. Its beautiful natural setting yields a splendid view of the Calabrian coast, the Ionian coast of Sicily and the spectacular cone of Mount Etna.

Terracotta ceramics from the island are well known. The art of ceramics on Sicily goes back to the original ancient people named the Sicanians. It was then perfected during the period of Greek colonization and is still prominent and distinct to this day. Caltagirone is one of the most important centers in Sicily for the artistic production of ceramics and terra-cotta sculptures.

Noto, Caltagirone, Catania, Ragusa, Modica, Scicli and, particularly, Acireale contain some of Italy's best examples of Baroque architecture carved in the local red sandstone. The Baroque style in Sicily was largely confined to buildings erected by the church and palazzi built as private residences for the Sicilian aristocracy.

Catania has one of the four laboratories of the National Institute for Nuclear Physics in which there is a cyclotron that uses protons both for nuclear physics experiments and for particle therapy to treat cancer (proton therapy). Noto has one of the largest radio telescopes in Italy that performs geodetic and astronomical observations. There are observatories in Palermo and Catania managed by the National Institute for Astrophysics.

Syracuse is also an experimental center for the solar technologies through the creation of the project Archimede solar power plant that is the first concentrated solar power plant to use molten salt for heat transfer and storage which is integrated with a combined-cycle gas facility.



Parabolic Antenna of Noto

Sicily -Part Two -

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Cuisine and Vino

Food and wine are among Sicily's main attractions. The sea, the mountains, and the climate give rise to a strong food based economic sector focused on the natural bounty that has flourished due to the rich volcanic soils and ocean bounty. Citrus fruits, wheat, olives, almonds grapes, livestock, and seafood coupled with the amazing history of Sicily yield a mosaic of unrivaled delicacies.

Arancini are arguably the best-loved Sicilian snack and street foods and they have become increasingly popular throughout Italy and worldwide. These deep-fried rice balls are often filled with a meat ragù, green peas, and melty mozzarella. There are, however, endless other types of fillings including pistachios, mushrooms, prosciutto, mozzarella, ham, spinach, and more.



Let's start with finger foods. Panelle or chickpea fritters are these delicious, melt in your mouth flat fried cakes made from the finely-ground flour of ceci (chickpeas). Another treat is Pane Cunzato, or quite simply, "dressed bread". A loaf of bread is split in half lengthwise. Olive oil is drizzled on both parts. The bread is then layered with sliced tomatoes, mozzarella or other cheese, salt, pepper, oregano and a few anchovies, if that's your thing. The top is put back on, and the loaf is cut.





Caponata is a Sicilian eggplant dish consisting of a cooked vegetable salad made from chopped fried eggplant and celery seasoned with sweetened vinegar and capers in a sweet and sour sauce. Caponata is typically used as a side dish for fish dishes and sometimes as an appetizer. Parmigiana di Melanzane or Eggplant Parmigiana is the ultimate comfort food.

Parmigiana is the Italianized name of *parmiciiana* which, in Sicilian, *means the lattice method of arranging the planks of wooden shutters*. As a matter of fact, the slices of eggplant, which constitute the key and main ingredient of the dish, are disposed in layers transversally to each other. The fried eggplant is then baked in a dish with tomato sauce, basil, parmesan and mozzarella cheese. The cheese that gives that typical pungent taste and contrasts the sweetness of the eggplant is primo sale, a mature pecorino (sheep's milk cheese). Only three ingredients make up the real Parmigiana: eggplant, cheese, and basil.

Pasta alla Norma is the most common vegetarian dish on Sicilian menus. It's a tomato and eggplant sauce topped with ricotta salata. Meat dishes are always popular. Many are traditionally made with lamb or goat. Best known outside Sicily is vitello alla marsala (veal marsala), one of many regional meat specialties. Chicken "alla marsala" can be prepared using a similar recipe and method.

Sicily is renowned for its seafood. Sicily is famous for its sardines and Gambero Rosso (red prawns) with big, fat specimens caught off its shores every day. The red prawns from Mazara del Vallo on the western coast of the island are regarded as the best in the world. When they're at their freshest, they are simply dressed in a little local lemon juice and olive oil and eaten raw. Sardines are prepared in all sorts of ways, but one of the most popular is a beccafico, which sees them stuffed with pine nuts, raisins and breadcrumbs before being baked. Involtini di pesce spada, baked swordfish rolls, are also very popular. Thin slices of swordfish are topped with capers, pine nuts, raisins, olives and lemon, then rolled into a spiral and secured with a skewer. They're then baked, fried or grilled, sometimes with extra breadcrumbs around the outside.



Gambero Rosso & sicilian sardines



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Baccala alla Siciliana (dried cod) continues as a staple in many Sicilian and Italian homes especially on Christmas Eve. Finding its way onto the menus of restaurants, this dish has seen an amazing increase in popularity in the USA.

Desserts

Cannoli are the most well-known Sicilian dessert. Flaky pastry tubes that are filled with creamy sweet ricotta and often studded with chocolate chips, pistachios or dried fruit. Cassata is sponge cake moistened with liqueur, ricotta, and candied fruit covered in green marzipan and icing.

Frutta Martorana are almond marzipan pastries colored and shaped to resemble real fruit. They look too plastic to eat but are soft and aromatic. Granita in brioche is a rather decadent traditional Sicilian breakfast! Granita in Sicily is served in cones or stuffed in large sweet brioche buns and often eaten for breakfast in the hot summer months. A refreshing sorbet-like mix of ice, fruit and sugar comes in many flavors. Gelato (ice cream) is excellent. In fact, it is possible that ice cream was invented in Sicily during Roman times when a relay of runners would bring snow down from Mount Etna to be flavored and served to wealthy patricians. You'll find flavors ranging from pistachio, hazelnut, jasmine, mulberry, fig, strawberry and rum. Frutta Martorana



Olives

In Sicily you'll find an abundance of olive trees, always planted in perfectly spaced and well-groomed patterns. Greek settlers imported their beloved olive trees to Sicily in the 6th century BC and olive oil has been produced on the island ever since. Sicilian olive oil is among the world's most fragrant and appetizing. It is believed that Sicily's particularly fertile volcanic soil produces some of the world's best olives. Sicily produces about 10% of Italy's olive oil and Sicilian oils are well known as cold pressed.

(Cold pressing uses a natural process, with no heat, to extract the first oil from the freshly harvested olives. This product is often called virgin or extra virgin olive oil. When it is unfiltered, it has a foggy consistency and a grayish sediment. To purists, this is the best grade of olive oil, and it is ideal for salads. Apart from its purity and the extraction process used to produce it, olive oil is distinguished by its acidity. In general, the lower the acidity, the better the oil. Italian extra virgin olive oils must have an acidity level no greater than one percent, and many boast a level far lower. The main types of olives are green, black and brown olives. The green olives are picked before they are fully ripe, while the black ones are fully ripe when they are harvested. Freshly picked olives cannot be eaten immediately because they are very bitter! The olives you'll find in the store are treated which means olives are kept in tanks for several weeks with water and salt (and sometimes some herbs) or placed in oil. Once completed, they are ready for consumption.)

Wine

Sicily is the world's largest producer of wine. Sicily's most famous wine, Marsala, was first made in Marsala. Marsala is a fortified wine, just like Port and Sherry, with an alcohol content of around twenty percent. It is usually made from native Grillo, Catarratto, or Inzolia grapes. Zibibbo is a grape variety that can be used to make anything from table wine to grappa. However, the Zibibbo wine is strong like Marsala. It is fermented in the sun and then partially distilled naturally, without the addition of

alcohol. It is a hearty red and is Sicily's most popular non-fortified varietal. (For many years, Nero d'Avola was the house wine at the Italian American Community Center.). Sicilians like to end a meal with a digestivo liqueur to help aid digestion. The most popular varieties are fennel, bay leaf, and lemon. Grappa, a brandy distilled from grape seeds, and pomace (dry, clear and high in alcohol) may also be found as a popular Sicilian after-dinner drink.

Cheeses

Certain Sicilian cheeses were introduced by the Arabs, others by the Normans and Longobards during the Middle Ages. Many traditional Sicilian cheeses are made from sheep's or goat's milk, but some of the better-known ones are made from cow's milk. Listed below are some of the better-known Sicilian cheeses. Pecorino, as its name implies, is made from sheep's milk ("pecora" meaning sheep). Pecorino is sometimes flavored with peppercorns or other spices. Caciocavallo is made from cow's milk, it takes at least eight months to age Caciocavallo properly, achieving a sharper flavor in about two years. Canestrato is made from whole cow's milk, sometimes diluted with that of goats or sheep. Its name derives from its 14 months aging in baskets (canestri). Sicilians- A Gifted People

Sicily has a very long history of producing exceptionally gifted people in all fields. For example: Archimedes, mathematician, astronomer, engineer and all-round ingenious inventor, Empedocles, philosopher and inventor of the ancient concept of earth, wind, fire and water as the four elements. Domenico Dolce (of Dolce e Gabbana) Luca Parmitano is the first Italian (and third European) to command the International Space Station. Parmitano was the first Italian to carry out an extravehicular activity (EVA) on July 9, 2019, with 6 hours and 7 minutes of spacewalk. Sicily has three saints, as recognized by the Roman Catholic faith, to its credit. They are St Lucy, St Agatha and Saint Rosalia. Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino were two heroic judges that changed the Italian legal system by putting hundreds of Mafiosi on trial as one group rather than waiting the customary decades to work through them each as a separate case. When done individually, justice was never served because there would not be enough years in one lifetime to get that job done. The Mafia murdered them both but never recovered from these mass trials which since have become the standard and have helped diminish the Mafia's influence on the island.

Famous painters like Antonello da Messina, and Renato Guttuso were born here as well as the famous musician and composer Vincenzo Bellini.



Espera DeCorti (Iron Eyes Cody) & President Jimmy Carter

Some of the most famous writers and literati of Italy were born in Sicily. Here are some of the most noteworthy who helped to create a very special reputation for Sicily in the literary world; Luigi Pirandello, Salvatore Quasimodo, Leonardo Sciasia, Giuseppe Tomasi, Giovanni Verga and Andrea Camilleri, the very popular creator of the books and television series, Inspector Montalbano.

The list of famous Sicilian Americans is so extensive they would require an article on their own, so only a few of the most famous and the most surprising follow. Famous people in theater and movies include actors: Al Pacino, Marisa Tomei, Tony Danza, Chazz Palminteri, Armand Assante, Sylvester Stallone, Giovanni Ribisi, Leah Remini, brothers John and Nick with cousin Aida Turturro, Steve Buscemi, Sal Mineo, Joe Mantegna, Robert Loggia and the surprise is Iron Eyes Cody, the actor in the public service announcement dressed as a native American shedding a tear over pollution. He was born Espera DeCorti, the son of Sicilian immigrants. He was not a Native American.

As for famous people in the music field few were bigger than Frank Sinatra, Ariana Grande, Britney Spears, Cyndi Lauper, Chuck Mangione, Frank Zappa, Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta (better known as Lady Gaga), Jon Bon Jovi, Natalie Merchant, Frankie Laine, Patti LaPone, Louis Prima, Sonny Bono, Liza Minnelli, Vince Guaraldi, Chick Corea, Steven Tyler and the surprise is Alicia Keys. Her real name is Alicia Augello Cook. Her mother, Teresa Augello, is of Sicilian descent. Great athletes and many hall of famers in many fields are of Sicilian heritage, Super Bowl record setting Quarterback Joe Montana, baseball players Mike Piazza, brothers, Dom, Vince, and Joe DiMaggio, grand slam winning golfer Gene Sarazen, and now for the surprises, body builder, Charles Atlas, born Angelo Siciliano and Robert James "Gino" Marella professional wrestler better known by his ring name of Gorilla Monsoon.