

SULTANO IS DEVOTED to utilising Sicily's many fine local ingredients

Sicilian Food | CONNOISSEUR

Sicilian LOVE AFFAIR

Not only is Sicily the perfect romantic getaway, but at Il Duomo, chef Ciccio Sultano's restaurant in the tiny baroque masterpiece of Ragusa Ibla, the whole restaurant and the entire experience are aphrodisiacs



THE QUIET TOWN of Ragusa Ibla is situated in southern Sicily, but chef Ciccio Sultano takes his inspiration from around the entire island



CICCIO SULTANO is considered by many to be Sicily's finest chef

Ciccio Sultano has brought me out a tiny bowl that cuddles a few forkfuls of homemade pasta bathed in almond milk and swirled artfully beneath a raw local shrimp known as a *gobetto*. Sweet, salty, slippery and sublime, it's a carnal dish. "This is modern, but it's Sicily," clarifies Sultano "It's like the perfect ... [insert four-letter word here]."

For the chef, achieving this level of perfection on an island so awash in history is a balancing act that relies heavily on layers and layers of classic Sicilian contrasts: the sacred and the profane, the sweet and the bitter. These play out every day on any Sicilian street. Kids in gaudy fake designer goods swagger and strut past ancient widows dressed in black. Ferraris carrying rich businessmen flick past peasants in horse-drawn carts, clicking slowly down the street. The one-show cinema in the town of Modica plays *Iron Man* one day and *Gomorra* the next. ➤

PHOTO ANDREAS ACHMANN



THE QUINTISSENTIAL SICILIAN: Ciccio Sultano on the streets of Ragusa Ibla



TASTING MENUS at Il Duomo vary according to the season



PHOTO ANDREAS ACHMANN

Above all of these contrasts (and perhaps because of them) are art and architecture. The island's cuisine as part of the former clashes with the thousands of years of the island's conquests and, at their best, bring these forms to their highest levels.

Yet, if you want to mess with the heads of Sicilians, play with their preconceptions about how they prepare food. Depending on who you ask, coffee is to be heaped into a tiny, octagonal stovetop espresso pot until overflowing, long pasta (like spaghetti or fettuccini) must be dropped with a spinning motion into a large pot of heavily salted water. There are time-tested ideas about how to prepare chickpea soup, stewed meats or the bittersweet classic, *caponata*, a mix that includes eggplant, onions, capers and tomatoes. Grandma is usually right, after all, but this often means that, for better or for worse, the menu hasn't changed much since she was a little girl.

Sultano the artist uses a layered approach to create his own contrasts, slowly turning Sicilian food into a modern cuisine, always using the island's best ingredients without upsetting the Motherland's matriarchs ... at least too much.

"People from cooks to housewives do traditional recipes with old technology without asking themselves why. These were conceived in the past, with tools of the past," he says. "If someone asks 'Why do you boil that?' often, the answer is 'My mama did it.'" But for Sultano, who describes his food as "immediate" and "light and clean," mama isn't enough.

"I refuse any attempt at innovation for the sake of innovation," he counters, "because, after all, we're preparing food for real people."

"Sicilian stone is beautiful. Baroque art is beautiful. There is a parallel," he says. "Sicilian Baroque (seen by many as the architectural form's highest point) is a way to make stone beautiful."

Inside Sultano's hometown of Ragusa Ibla, you feel this harmony. Even when you go to the island's largest cities of

Palermo and Catania, you feel the layers of architecture piled on top of each other from past to present, made harmonious by history.

"Fava bean soup is usually dried fava and a little ricotta and fennel," he says, simultaneously getting my taste buds tingling with this Sicilian classic and recalling the idea of some of the best



SICILIAN SOJOURN

WHERE TO EAT

IL DUOMO
Via Capitano Bocchieri, 31
www.ristoranteduomo.it
A Sicilian splurge, Il Duomo is considered by many to be Sicily's best restaurant. Put yourself in chef Ciccio Sultano's hands and let him guide you through a seasonal and local menu.

CUCINA CASALINGA
About halfway between the towns of Modica and Ispica, this unmarked restaurant looks more like a bar/café from the outside (it's across from the Agip petrol station at a 90-degree turn in the road where SP 45 takes off toward Pozzallo), these are simple, Sicilian home-style meals made for locals. Try the chickpea or fava bean soup.

WHERE TO GET DESSERT

ANTICA DOLCERIA BONAJUTO
Corso Umberto I°, 159
www.bonajuto.it
They had it right in *The Godfather* – leave the gun, take the cannoli. And the chocolate. Franco Ruta and his son Pierpaolo have been making chocolate and other delicious sweets the old fashioned way for more than 100 years.

CAFFE SICILIA
Corso Vittorio Emanuele, 125 Noto
Cheat just a little and leave the Ragusa province for a drive to nearby Noto for some of Sicily's best pastries. Take one of pastry chef Corrado Assenza's famous gelatos for a stroll through this beautiful baroque town.

Italian dishes being lumped into the 'brown food' category. "Mine has layers of fat back and cod over mashed, fresh fava beans," he says. "I don't hide ingredients, I put them in – it's stratified."

Whether his cuisine is sacred, profane, or just profanely good, it is hard to cast Sultano, as he struts through town and puffs away at a stubby Toscana cigar, as divine innovator or blasphemer. He is just a ringleader riding the line between beauty and vice, old and new: the quintessential Sicilian.

For Sultano, this can mean pushing through some major, long-standing and historic barriers, but to listen to him and taste his food, it just makes sense. Though he may use history and time working with foreign chefs as a guide, his reliance on Sicilian products, such as olive oil, almonds and seafood is both primary and elemental, causing well-heeled clients from Ragusa Ibla and around the world to flock to his lavish dining room. This devotion even spawned a film, *La Variante Sultano* ('Sultano's Way'), a timpani-bashing ode to the island's bounty, from the fields to the markets to the table. (A short clip can be found on the restaurant's website, www.ristoranteduomo.it)

Depending on the season, a tasting meal might include thin slices of house-smoked grouper prosciutto wrapped around melon from the nearby town of Pachino, white wine made with zibibbo grapes that give off a ginger bread nose, a tomato sorbet that jars some sort of childhood memory and a sea urchin with lemon zest ricotta, which is not like a taste of the sea, but somehow the sea itself.

"Ragusa Ibla is quiet, it's natural inspiration, but it's all of Sicily that inspires me," says the chef. "Palermo's cuisine, Catania's cuisine ... everywhere. Sicily is very large and the mix of many domains, but I make recipes that are the story of Sicily."

Then Sultano's inner Sicilian steps out a bit further. "You need the playful side and the real eating. You need to laugh and smile, but you need to eat." *Joe Ray*

Upholding TRADITION

With his new restaurant, Pendolino, Nino Zoccali is keeping it in the family and bringing a touch of Sicilian flavour to Sydney



NINO ZOCALLI may have grown up in Australia, but his cooking is based very much on his Italian heritage

In post-World War II Europe, finding enough work to feed your family was difficult, with the economic hardship stretching into the mid-1960s in some countries. Italy was one of these countries, with many economic migrants leaving to seek a new life in the New World.

Among them was Nino Zoccali's grandfather, who was part of the largest wave of immigration in Australia's history, arriving in Perth in 1963. He was soon joined by his son, leaving behind a large family in Reggio, a small town in southern Calabria, directly across the water from Sicily. The Zoccali family were bakers and many of their customers were sweet-loving Sicilians who crossed the narrow strait to enjoy the family's breads and pastries.

he says. "Sicily might be Italy's orchard, but it's the sweet and savoury combinations that really set it apart."

Zoccali also discovered that the dialect spoken by his family in Reggio is closer to that of Messina (the port across the strait in Sicily) than to that spoken elsewhere in Calabria. He was intrigued to discover a few villages in Sicily speaking a language derived from ancient Greek and to see signs in both

eventually bought his first restaurant, Caffé Contavino in Dunsborough, in rural Western Australia. After a couple of years he headed east and spent a year working in Melbourne at Fiorentino's, where he met Maurizio Terzini, who lured him to Sydney to open Otto Ristorante at the then-newly developed Woolloomooloo Wharf.

Otto became the darling of the scene, but when Terzini sold it in 2002, Zoccali left as well, spending a few years catering and consulting while developing plans for his dream project, Pendolino, which he finally opened on Easter Monday 2008 at Sydney's beautifully preserved Strand Arcade. "The Strand is a fabulous location," says Zoccali, "the perfect mix of modern and traditional. And Pendolino is everything I dreamt it would be:



PENDOLINO mixes the modern and the traditional

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It was with this strong Italian food background that Nino Zoccali grew up in Bunsbury, Western Australia. In keeping with his father's aspirations, Zoccali completed a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in both Italian and Economics, and won a language and cultural scholarship to spend a year at the Dante Alighieri University for Foreign Students in Calabria.

During this year Zoccali learned a great deal more than just the Italian language, as he immersed himself in the way of life, the local food and the art of sitting back and philosophising about life. He spent a lot of time with his extended family, discovering local dishes, many of which were based on goat – the main meat in the very south of Italy.

Zoccali fell in love with the gourmet scene and was totally enthralled by the Arabic influence of combining savoury and sweet flavours in one dish. "I recognised that this was something distinctive to Sicilian cooking that had evolved over time,"

Latin and Cyrillic script. "This started me thinking about the influence of ancient Greece on Sicilian culture – I'm convinced they played a fundamental role in shaping the Italian psyche and food," explains Zoccali. "The Romans might have been great builders, but it's the Greeks that shaped the country, with the Spartans invading the north and the Athenians migrating to Italy's south, bringing with them, for example, their seafood broth. The Spartans were austere warriors with an almost Germanic attitude to work, whilst the Athenians were philosophers with a laid-back, laissez-faire attitude – distinctions which still largely differentiate northern and southern Italians today."

Returning to Australia, Zoccali was accepted into honours programmes both at the Murdoch University for Economics and at the University of Western Australia for Italian, but his real passion, Italian food, beckoned.

Although not formally trained as a chef, Zoccali's dedication prevailed and he

a wonderful New York-style loft with low light-levels, black ceilings and a separate area where we show and sell a huge collection of Australian and Italian olive oils." Movable partitions separate the restaurant from the olive oil display, allowing Zoccali to expand the restaurant into the oil store when needed, or create a private dining room when need dictates. The room transforms from daytime café to evening fine diner, with the large open kitchen dominating the space, adding to the cosy, comfortable atmosphere.

Zoccali's passion for food, olive oil and wine is infectious and he's surrounded himself with a team that are eager exponents of this triumvirate. His cooking is dominated by the flavours and ingredients of his native Reggio and all the Sicilian influences that left such a lasting impression. Pendolino is a worthwhile new stop on any food lover's Sydney itinerary. Whether it is for breakfast, lunch, afternoon snack and a glass of wine, or dinner, you'll enjoy this little piece of southern Italy in the heart of Sydney's CBD.

Franz Scheurer