

Our Readers Pick the Places They Love

TRAVEL + LEISURE

AUGUST 2007

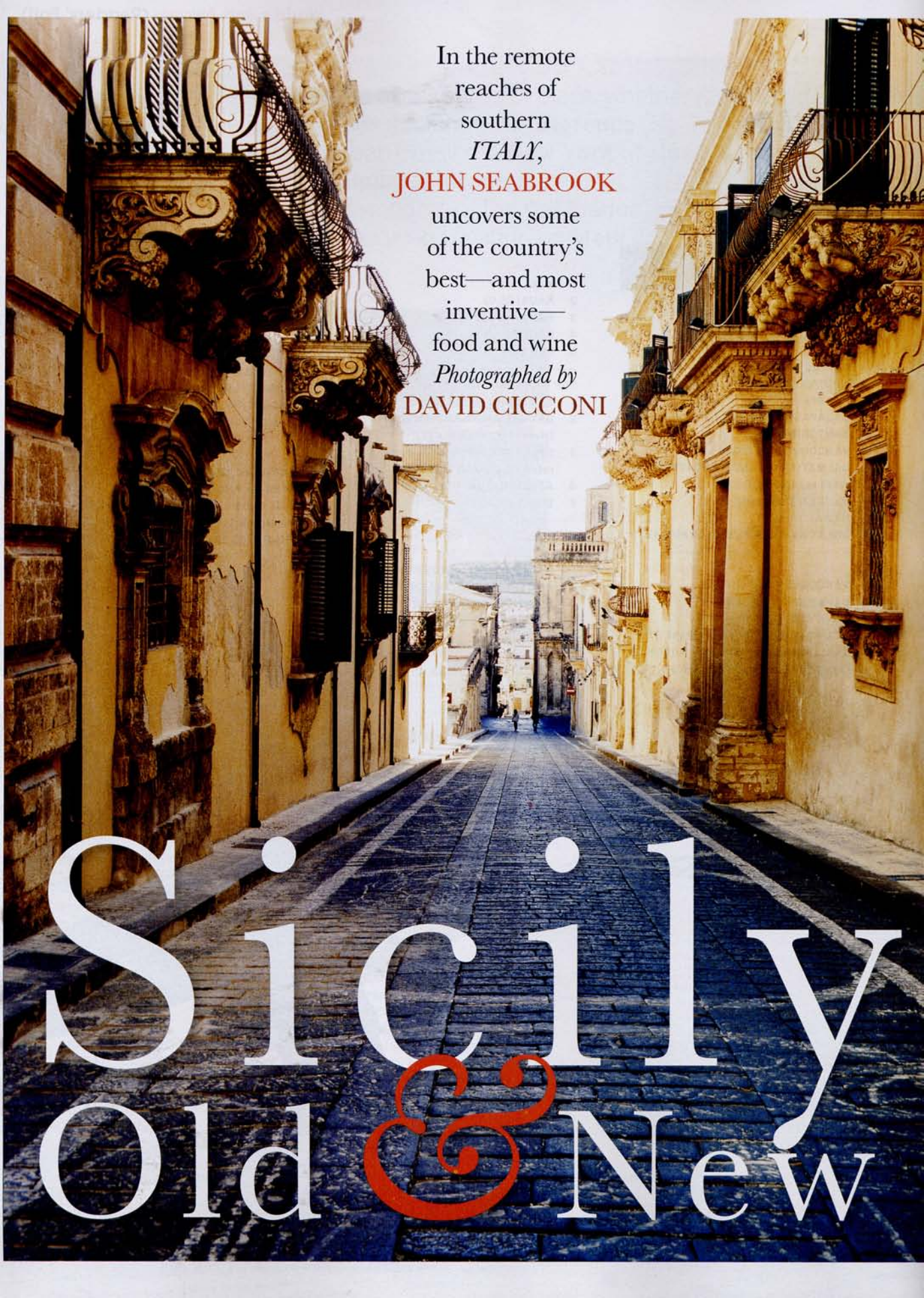
WORLD'S BEST AWARDS

HOTELS CRUISES AIRLINES CITIES ISLANDS



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YOUR
FAVORITE
CITY:
FLORENCE
(PAGE 184)



In the remote
reaches of
southern
ITALY,
JOHN SEABROOK

uncovers some
of the country's
best—and most
inventive—
food and wine

Photographed by
DAVID CICCONI

Sicily

Old & New



GUIDE TO SICILY



☀️ WHEN TO GO

May is the best time—cool enough to visit the cities but warm enough to enjoy a swim. From mid-June through August you won't want to stray far from the beach in southeastern Sicily.

✈️ HOW TO GET THERE

Until the new airport outside Ragusa opens in December, flying into Catania is your best bet. There is regular service from Rome and other European cities, and direct flights via Rome or Milan from New York, Boston, and Washington, D.C. Rent a car at the Catania airport (Hertz and Avis are the most reliable) and chart a circular tour: Siracusa, Noto,

Modica, Ragusa. The distances are small; you could drive across the whole region in two hours.

🏠 WHERE TO STAY

Caol Ishka Hotel Via Elorina, Contrada Pantanelli, Siracusa; 39-0931/69057; caolishka.com; doubles from \$256.

Casa Talia 1/9 Via Exaudinos, Modica; 39-0932/752-075; casatalia.com; doubles from \$162.

🏨 Hotel Eremo della Giubiliana

A former monk's retreat, now an 11-room boutique hotel south of Ragusa. Contrada Giubiliana, Km. 7.5, S.P. Marina di Ragusa; 39-0932/669-119; eremodella.giubiliana.it; doubles from \$336.

Palazzo Failla The hotel has maintained the feeling of a Sicilian villa, with wrought-iron fixtures, frescoed, vaulted ceilings, and antique furniture. 5 Via Blandini, Modica; 39-0932/941-059; palazzo.faila.it; doubles from \$182.

🍷 WHERE TO EAT

Antica Dolceria Bonajuto 159 Corso Umberto I, Modica; 39-0932/941-225; cannoli for two \$3.

Caffè Sicilia 125 Corso Vittorio Emanuele, Noto; 39-0931/835-013; gelato for two \$5.

Duomo The most famous restaurant in the region, the only one to get two stars from Michelin. Chef Ciccio Sultano's business partner, Angelo Di Stefano, looks like a Sicilian Oscar Wilde. 31 Via Capitano Bocchieri, Ragusa; 39-0932/651-265; dinner for two \$269.

Fattoria delle Torri Peppe Barone's sweet-and-sour rabbit was the best version I tasted. 14 Vico Napolitano, Modica; 39-0932/751-286; dinner for two \$102.

La Gazza Ladra A restaurant helmed by chef Accursio Craparo, next door to Palazzo Failla. Try the branzino fillet with saffron and potatoes. 5 Via

Blandini, Modica; 39-0932/755-655; dinner for two \$130.

Le Ularie A dim, cool restaurant in the center of town that specializes in fish. 18 Via S. La Rosa, Noto; 39-0931/574-818; dinner for two \$95.

Masseria degli Ulivi Contrada Porcari, Noto; 39-0931/813-019; lunch for two \$80.

🍷 WHERE TO SIP

Planeta Visits and tastings must be booked in advance. Contrada Dispensa, Menfi; 39-0925/80009; planeta.it.

COS Winery Tours are free but reservations are required. S.P. 3 Acate, Chiaramonte Ragusa; 39-0932/876-145; locandacos.it.

📖 WHAT TO READ

The Patience of the Spider, by Andrea Camilleri, the latest in a series set in the region and featuring the Sicilian detective, Inspector Montalbano.

🎧 WHAT TO LISTEN TO

Eva Contro Eva The most recent CD from Catanian singer-songwriter Carmen Consoli.

T+L ONLINE For more great restaurants and hotels in Sicily, go to travelandleisure.com.



passageways **SWIRLING DOWN** the steep sides of a ravine



Seen from above, *MODICA* looked dreamlike, with labyrinthine



plantations, and **RUGGED LIMESTONE CLIFFS**

Mafia has moved into legitimate businesses, such as health care, retirement homes, and hospital equipment—*mafia bianca*, Sicilians now call it.

So, in the hope of catching a few glimpses of this renaissance, my wife, son, and I charted a course through southeastern Sicily, seeking out a generation of Sicilians who are trying to reinvent the island for a new kind of traveler, one who is looking for rustic beauty and authentic charm. We stayed around the hilly rural area west of Siracusa and east of Agrigento—Noto, Ragusa, and Modica—all beautiful Baroque cities largely ig-

nored by tourists, who almost invariably head for the beach. This is a region of deep gorges, quiet farms, carob plantations, and rugged limestone cliffs. In 1693, its towns were completely razed by a massive earthquake—giving the great Baroque architects a blank slate on which to build rationally planned cities like Noto. The landscape is neither European nor African, but something in between. Culturally, it is the Switzerland of Sicily. Unemployment, which is still at a staggering 23 percent across the rest of the island, is half that in Ragusa. And because the southeast is geographically

(Continued on page 215)



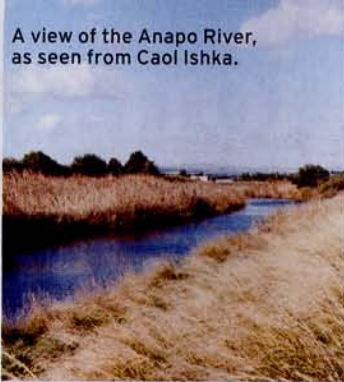
Sicily's Modern Classics Gnocchi with Gorgonzola sauce and cherry-tomato coulis, left, at Caol Ishka's restaurant, Zafferano Bistrot. Above: Poolside at Caol Ishka. Opposite: The wine-tasting room at COS.

This is a *REGION* of deep gorges, quiet farms, carob

Recently, however, there have been signs that Sicily is indeed changing, and that it won't ever be the same again. During the 1990's, partly in gratitude for the island's strong support of his political party, Forza Italia, former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi spent billions in public money there on new roads, new airports, hospitals, and, most extravagantly, a proposed bridge across the Strait of Messina that would have cut car-transit times from 12 hours to 10 minutes. (The project was shelved by Romano Prodi, Berlusconi's successor, last October, and the funds reserved for building the bridge

will instead be used to improve ferry service between Messina and the mainland.) The private sector has responded to these improvements in infrastructure. In the mid 1980's, Sicilian winemakers, after years of producing wine for other labels, began to establish their own brands. Restaurateurs and food producers followed the winemakers, and hoteliers followed them. And although the Mafia has certainly not disappeared, its DNA seems to have changed in the decade and a half since the murder of Mafia prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino caused general outrage and revulsion. The

A view of the Anapo River, as seen from Caol Ishka.



Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Merlot. It was their success that first planted the idea of Sicily as a kind of Italian Napa Valley in the minds of the island's promoters. In the 80's, Planeta, begun by two brothers and their

cousin—Allesio, Francesca, and Santi Planeta—extended the renown of Sicilian wines with their Chardonnays and Cabernet Francs. Finally, over the past decade, Sicily's native grapes have also become popular—most famously Nero d'Avola, but also Moscato, used to make sweet wines, both white and red. For Nero d'Avola, try Valle dell'Acate wine estate's Il Moro, made with grapes from one of the best regions for this variety. For an excellent dessert wine, try Felice Modica's Dolce Nero—black and sweet, full of violence and tenderness, the taste of Sicily. The most delicious of all the local wines is the Cerasuolo di Vittoria, a red made from 60 percent Nero d'Avola and 40 percent Frappato grapes. The latter give the wine its cherry flavor; the former provide the inky, concentrated heat of the sun.

→ COS is a smaller producer than Planeta, but is just as admired by oenophiles. The vineyard is in Acate, in the Ragusa region north of Modica. I drove out there one morning, through the flat fields full of grapevines, with the dry hills in the distance. I waited in the cool and dim cantina for one of the winemakers, Giusto Occhipinti, to arrive. The cantina was an old building, with terracotta, stone, and wood throughout. The musty smell of grapes flowed from a big stone trough, where in their younger days Occhipinti and his brothers used to press the grapes with their feet.

After a while, Occhipinti drove up in his jeep and brought out some wines for us to try. He was born in Ravenna, moved to Sicily for his education, and started COS in the early 1980's with several classmates. In their adamant refusal to use yeasts in wine making or chemicals on the vines, COS's owners are heavily influenced by the militantly naturalist wine making of Stanko Radikon, who has gained fame by forgoing stainless steel and new oak in favor of the ancient Roman method of burying the wines in large clay amphorae in

the earth. At COS, we tried a delicious white, called Rami, made with Insolia and Grecanico grapes, then moved on to the incomparable 2003 Cerasuolo. Giusto took a sip, straightened his back, gathered the fingers on his right hand into a bunch, and slowly brought his hand down from his mouth to his chest. "This wine is vertical. The body accepts it. Most wines are horizontal—they stay in the mouth and don't leave it. Our wine goes to your legs, your arms—it floods the body." Then I tried it. It was a revelation. It had the fruitiness of a Pinot Noir, but something else too—a mineral, almost elemental taste. The old, cold earth itself was in the wine.

The most complete view of the new Sicily I got was from the garden at Casa Talía, a small bed-and-breakfast in Modica. Viviana Haddad grew up in Milan, and that's where she met her partner, Marco Giunta, a fellow designer and an architect. Ten years ago, she would never have considered living in Sicily, but like so many other well-educated younger Italians we met, she opted out of the moving sidewalk of modern big-city professionalism in favor of "slow living." She and Giunta acquired five small adjacent houses on a ridge high above the town center, in what was once Modica's ghetto, and created Casa Talía, bringing an urban design sensibility to the ancient stones. They have taken great care in choosing simple but beautiful materials—lace bedspreads, pressed-iron beds, glossy white stones in the walls, and bamboo ceilings. Thanks to high-speed wireless Internet (an essential part of slow living), Giunta now runs his design business from underneath their fig tree.

Seen from above, as we sat in the garden of Casa Talía, Modica looked dreamlike, with labyrinthine passages swirling down the steep sides of a ravine, ending at the dry bed of the river that runs through the center of town. One night we watched fireworks in celebration of San Giorgio, for whom Modica's great Baroque cathedral is named. Shot from below, they burst not far above

our eye level, safely distant in the space between the two sides of the ravine.

It was in Modica that I tasted one of the strongest and most unyielding of all the flavors in Sicily—the cold-processed chocolate from Antica Dolceria Bonajuto. The store, at the bottom of the stairs leading from Casa Talía to the town center, is well-known, but the longtime owner, Franco Ruta, has recently handed over control to his son, Pierpaolo. They still do their famous *impanatiggi*—pastry envelopes stuffed with eggplant or meat mixed with chocolate—but Pierpaolo is pushing the shop in new directions; salty chocolate is one of his ideas. The Rutas cook their chocolate at 113 degrees for 30 minutes, a temperature at which the sugar does not melt; commercial manufacturers boil chocolate for two days at 176 degrees. The latter method makes the chocolate easier to digest, but, according to Pierpaolo, it destroys most of the flavor (380 different flavors, he says—but who's counting?).

Pierpaolo is serious, committed, and political; he has a poetic expression and sad eyes. He is haunted by the history of European exploitation of South American growers of cacao. He approaches chocolate not as a confection, but rather as a bitter allegory of colonizer and colonized, cold-processed together with the Spanish Inquisition and the 16th-century Jewish diaspora in Modica.

"Chocolate is not about the first moment of taste, it is about the last moment," he said. "First the texture, then the sugar, then the bitter and finally the personality—that is the most interesting thing." Pierpaolo is a personality himself, and a new Sicilian if ever I met one. He gave me lots of different kinds of chocolate, and that's what I should be packing now, if I could tear myself away from our final morning in the Casa Talía garden. I also have a bottle of COS Cerasuolo and some of Corrado Assenza's honey. But before going, I want to experience one final flavor: Viviana's tomatoes.

By now I believe I have found an answer to my question of how Sicily, this oldest of cultures, can ever be new. It will always be new.

Viviana brings out her tomato jam, and I take a spoonful. I feel like I am eating the sun. +