

TRAPANI SALT AND SUN

Ruth Kaplan

SALE E SOLE, salt and sun. These abundant resources have defined the province of Trapani, in western Sicily, for centuries. The Phoenicians were the first to set up salt beds more than 2,500 years ago in the city then known as Drepanon. Sea salt production has only increased since that era. Vast piles of the gleaming white crystals line the coast from Trapani down to Marsala, a route that has been christened the Via del Sale, or the Salt Road. Windmills preside over these snow-white heaps, which are sometimes covered with terracotta tiles to keep from scattering in the breeze. In this area, as in the rest of Italy, sea salt—both coarse and fine—is the standard salt of choice for cooking and seasoning all foods. This flavorful ingredient, plus the ovenlike power of the Sicilian sun, are the key elements for making *bottarga di tonno*, a salted,

pressed tuna roe produced in the area and shaved or grated over pasta or fish dishes. Connoisseurs acclaim Trapani's *bottarga* as the best in Italy.

All Italian coastal regions place an emphasis on fishing, but in the province of Trapani, tuna fishing has become something akin to a religion. The tuna fishing season culminates in May with the highly ritualized *mattanza del tonno*, a traditional fishing expedition that sets off from the island of Favignana, just west of Trapani. The *mattanza*, or slaughter of the tuna, has local fishermen hoisting up an enormous net of writhing, full-sized tuna, some at their peak weight of a few hundred pounds. The fishermen are led by the captain or *rais*, and they have specific prayers and songs to accompany the hunt. An enormous building called the Tonnara Florio in the port at Favignana represents the height that tuna



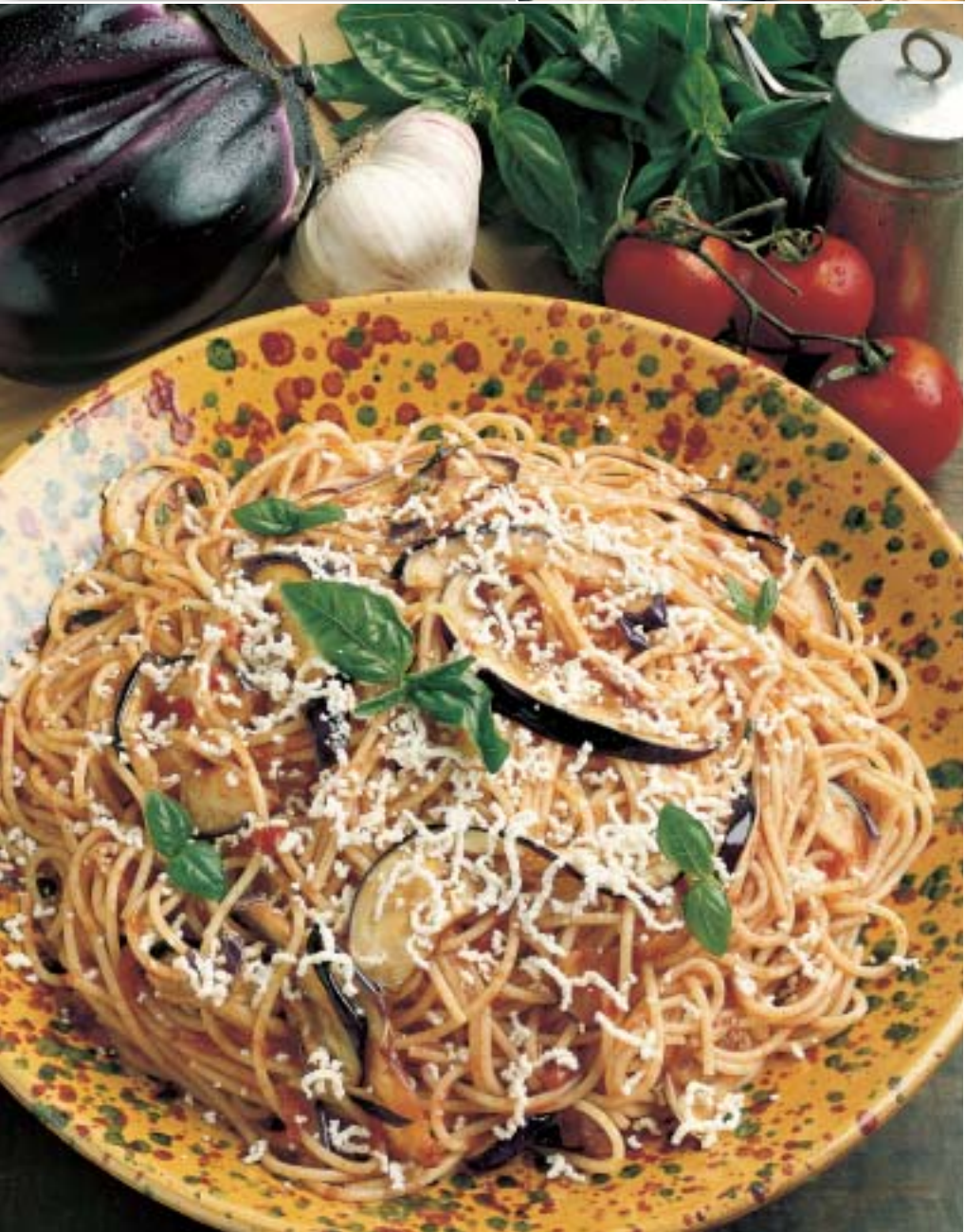
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Alberto Morello



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Previous page: Windmills at the Ettore e Infersa salt works near Marsala. This page, clockwise from top left: Temple E at Selinunte, a settlement founded in the 5th century B.C.; an artisan weaves baskets; pasta alla norma with eggplant and ricotta salata; swordfish carpaccio marinated in lemon, olive oil and herbs.

fishing has reached in the local culture. An enormous, beautiful example of industrial architecture, it dominates the port the way a church or cathedral would dominate another city: It represents the amount of faith and time that the local people devote to the tuna fishing economy.

The simple, pure flavors of Trapanese cuisine derive from the overwhelming presence of the sun and the sea. Mazara del Vallo, south of Trapani on the Via del Sale, is home to Italy's largest fishing fleet, and thus fish and seafood are common dishes. Hundreds of recipes have made tuna a category of its own. Cooked with mushrooms, onions, peppers or peas, grilled, skewered or simmered in almond milk, tuna is an indispensable part of the local diet. The sunny hills produce a wealth of vegetables such as eggplant, artichokes and fennel, as well as citrus and other fruits. Grapes grow heartily in and around Marsala, where they are made into the many varieties of Marsala wine—some sweet, others dry—that are consumed regularly as table wine. This strong drink once had such high production levels that rural buildings called *bagli* were devoted entirely to its storage.

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Sweet treats have made the province of Trapani famous throughout Sicily. Its sorbet, gelato and the slushy ice known as *granita* are well renowned. It was Sicily's Arab domination that brought these cold treats to the island and, through it, to Europe. High on the hill of Monte San Giuliano, above the city of Trapani, is Erice, which is known for another sweet treat: sugary, nutty nuggets of marzipan, or *pasta reale* ●. Arab cuisine is also to thank for this traditional delicacy. The Arabs introduced Sicilians to almonds, which are ground down, sweetened with sugar and orange blossom water and bound with egg whites to make a paste called *pasta reale* or *pasta di mandorle*. This sweet almond paste is the basis of countless pastries and desserts, from soft drops rolled in sugar to harder, baked almond-paste cookies with candied fruit or nuts. The sweet nut paste is often sculpted into fruit shapes and glazed to look like cherries, apples or citrus fruits. Once a treat reserved for Easter and other special occasions, *pasta reale* is now widely available in the area's pastry shops, and is especially sought out in Erice.

OIL AND LEMON-MARINATED SWORDFISH CARPACCIO

This version of a Sicilian classic comes from Chef Alberto Morello of *Olio e Limone Ristorante* in Santa Barbara, California.

- 1 pound swordfish fillet
- 3 cups freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 3 cups extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ cup chopped rosemary
- ½ cup chopped thyme
- 1 tablespoon hot red pepper flakes
- freshly ground white pepper
- sea salt
- 6 thin slices crusty Italian bread, toasted

Using a sharp knife, cut the swordfish into paper-thin slices. Transfer to a baking dish, and add the lemon juice. Place in the refrigerator to marinate for 30 minutes. Remove swordfish from the marinade, and pat dry. In a bowl, add some of the olive oil and some of the slices of swordfish. Sprinkle with rosemary, thyme, hot red pepper flakes, white pepper and salt. Cover with

Clockwise from top: The beach at Castelvetrano; the towering Castello di Venere in Erice; fishing boats fill the docks on Marettimo, one of the Egadi Islands off the coast of Trapani.



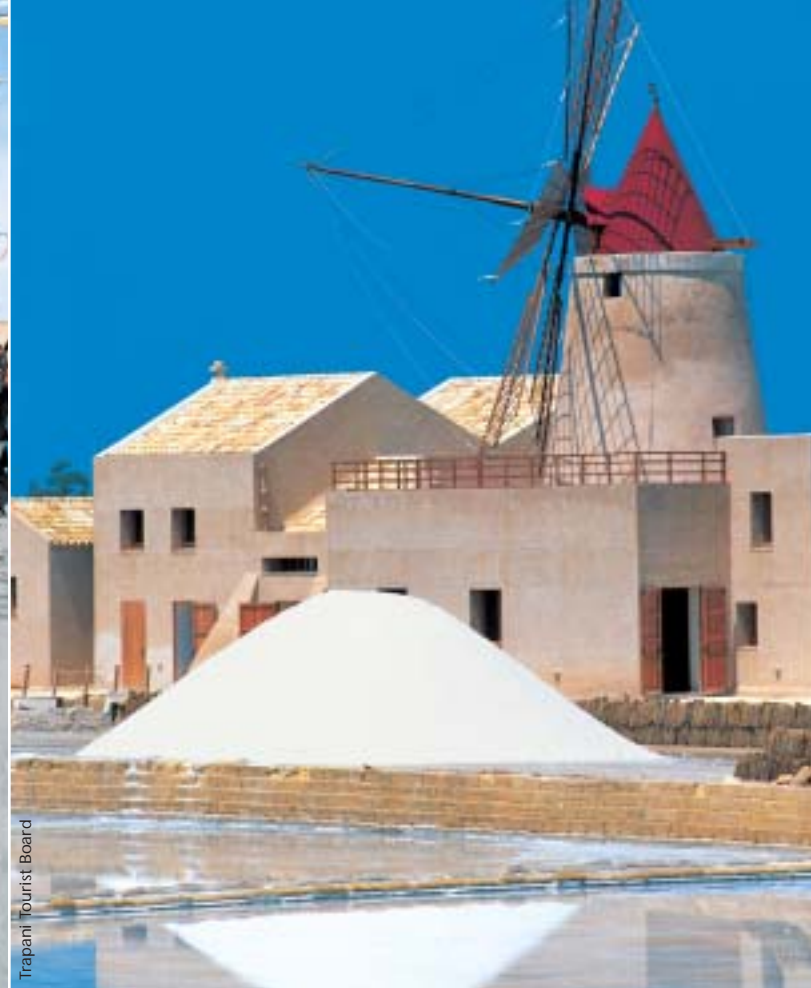
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Clockwise from top left: A town festival in Vita; a snow-white mound of sea salt near Marsala; a church and mosaic pavement in Custonaci; the beach at San Vito Lo Capo; pear tart with marzipan and caramel sauce.

more olive oil, and repeat with the next layer of swordfish, herbs and olive oil.

To serve, place a few slices of swordfish on each plate, and drizzle with some of the marinating oil. Serve with a slice of toasted bread. SERVES 6

PASTA ALLA NORMA

This popular dish was named in honor of Sicilian composer Vincenzo Bellini's opera "Norma."

- 2 medium eggplants
- salt
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1 28-ounce can crushed tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons chopped basil, plus extra whole leaves for garnish
- freshly ground pepper
- 1 pound spaghetti
- olive oil for frying
- ½ cup freshly grated ricotta salata

Wash the eggplants well, and cut them crosswise into very thin slices. Place them in a single layer on baking sheets lined with parchment paper. Sprinkle with salt, and set aside for 30 minutes. The salt will draw the bitterness out of the eggplant.

In a large skillet over medium heat, warm the extra-virgin olive oil. Add the garlic, and sauté until lightly golden. Add the tomatoes and basil, and season with salt and pepper. Cook for 15 minutes, stirring often. Remove from heat, and keep warm.

Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Add salt and the pasta, and cook until al dente. Meanwhile, rinse the salt off of the eggplant slices, and dry them well. In a large pot, warm 2 inches of olive oil over medium heat. Add the eggplant slices, and fry until they are golden-brown and slightly crunchy, about 4 to 5 minutes. You may have to flip them during frying to cook both sides. Drain the eggplant slices on paper towels, sprinkle lightly with salt, and keep warm.

Drain the pasta, toss with the sauce and the eggplant, and transfer to a serving bowl. Sprinkle with *ricotta salata* and whole basil leaves, and serve. SERVES 4

PEAR TARTLETS WITH MARZIPAN AND CARAMEL SAUCE

Homemade marzipan adds a Sicilian touch to this dessert from *Olio e Limone Ristorante*.

For the pears:

- 1 bottle white wine
- 2 quarts water
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1 vanilla bean
- 2 cups sugar
- zest and juice of 1 lemon
- 3 firm but ripe pears (such as Bartlett or Comice), peeled, cored and halved

For the marzipan:

- 2¼ cups almond flour (available from www.lucyskitchen.com/flour)
- 1¼ cups sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- orange blossom water (available at gourmet stores)

For the dough, the caramel sauce and to serve:

- 2 egg whites
- 1 sheet frozen puff pastry, defrosted
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 2 cups sugar
- 3 cups heavy cream

Clockwise from top right: The ornate façade of the Duomo in Marsala; a woman displays her artichoke harvest; fishermen and onlookers participate in the annual mattanza del tonno, or tuna hunt, off the coast of Favignana; lemons and other citrus fruit are omnipresent in the cuisine of the province of Trapani.



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