Eating around Etna

28 Mar 2008 by Nick Lander/FT

As the waiter in the Osteria Antica Marina in Catania, Sicily, a 15 minute drive from the airport, brought us the second half of the dozen or so small white bowls that constituted this fish restaurant's antispasti course, our Roman friend who, like so many from the mainland, has fallen for the charms of this fascinating island, exclaimed, "Ah, this is Sicily".

At the time I couldn't help but agree with him but 48 hours later, after dinner in a disused railway waiting room converted 18 months ago into a restaurant, breakfast in a 127 year old pasticceria and buying sweet oranges from a van with snow capped Etna in the background I began to appreciate that there is far more to Sicily's food than just its fish.

Not that it could be any fresher. The Osteria occupies the northern side (to protect it from the midday sun) of an old square that envelopes the city's fish market which seems to have changed little since the sepia photographs on its walls were taken. To the side of the market is a large, man made channel through which water runs down all the way from Etna to the sea even in the height of summer. The stalls are distinctive for the heads of swordfish and the red bodies of tuna and, as a sign of unimpeachable freshness, numerous species still bent in rigor mortis, particularly large sea bass and red mullet. Alongside are boxes of squid and octopus, sardines and sea urchins and neonata, shiny clusters of red and grey mullet embryos that are hardly bigger than a thread.

As a result, Giovanni Leonardi, Osteria's young chef, has the luxury of not having to bother with a menu. In fact I only saw the printed one after I had paid our bill when the waiter handed it to me saying, "We don't really bother with it as what's available changes every day as do our prices", a flexibility which many chefs would envy. In addition, two refrigerated counters outside the hatch which separates the restaurant from the kitchen contain the fish for the main courses and all the prepared ingredients for the antipasti which the waiters serve, thereby taking the pressure off the kitchen in the same way as the oyster shuckers do outside the brasseries of Paris.

After a rapid exchange, three medium sized dishes appeared with oysters, sea urchins and small, raw prawns sliced lengthways as a kind of appetiser for the antipasti. Then came the bowls of clams, sweet and sour sardines, mussels, and deep fried squid alongside caponata, the distinctive Sicilian dish of aubergine, celery and onion and pine nuts. Eventually they were all cleared away to leave room on our table for a large serving dish of fettuccine with sea urchins. Our main course, probably unnecessary, was a sea bass cooked under salt which at least justified the dessert, a tangy lemon sorbet hiding the first wild strawberries of the year. With a bottle of local white wine our bill was 250 euros for three.

This was a great deal more than we were to spend on the rest of our meals as the towns around Etna revealed their particular and inexpensive specialities. Zafferana is renowned for its honey, Mialetto for its wild strawberries and Bronte for its pistachios. And on the outskirts of Bronte is a restaurant that will delight lovers of good food, trains and the Wild West equally.

The car in which we arrived at the Ristorante Hosteria della Stazione down the steep incline off the road between Randazzo and Bronte seemed to me to be the only obvious symbol of the 21st centrury. Built 120 years ago as the station and waiting room for the single carriage train which circumnavigates Etna, and which still stops here during the day, the building also boasts a series of horizontal wooden posts outside to which I expected to see several horses tethered while their owners ate indoors. Certainly, I was disappointed not to see the sheriff waiting for me on the platform.

But those were the only minor disappointments because the interior has been converted into a simple restaurant with tables on either side and a central passageway to the equally simple, open kitchen at the far end. The walls are covered in photographs of how life was here in the late 19th century and on one wall is still a box of five keys, dated 1895, which controlled the points of the railway line.

The Hosteria now belongs to Sandro, the waiter, and Roberto, the chef, whose culinary skills complement each other as their hair styles distinguish them. While Sandro boasts black Medusa-like hair and heavy, black rimmed glasses, Roberto is grey and bald. Together they form an effective partnership.

We began with an aperitif and a bowl of the local pistachios, thinner, more pointed and redder than those from the Middle East, and then moved on to a series of dishes whose quality seemed to be in reverse proportion to the ridiculously low

prices with most antipasti 5-7 euros, first courses 7-8 euros and all main courses between 8 and 12 euros.

Pistachios featured again in a first course of fettuccine with pesto and a distinctive dessert of two pistachio flavoured sponge circles enveloping a a pistachio ice cream while in between came some local prosciutto with a fennel salad (an easy alternative as a first course to the usual melon); a savoury, crisp cannolo stuffed with ricotta cheese; sweet and sour rabbit with the local, plump olives; and slowly braised pork with polenta studded with chick peas. Walking out under the stars, I felt confused. I had never eaten so well in such an unlikely setting and I still half expected a cowboy on his horse to be waiting where there were only a handful of cars.

Our last stop took us to an even older building but one that could only be found in Sicily. The small town of Santa Venerina near Zafferano, about 45 minutes drive from Catania, has been home since 1880 to Pasticceria Russo and is still family-run by two extraordinarily warm-hearted sisters and their brother.

Over this period Russo has obviously played such an integral part in the lives of all those who live and work nearby that it is impossible not to feel somewhat of an intruder on a first visit, particularly at the sight of the shelves full of their particular speciality, pasta reale, here turned into lifelike cherries, tangerines, kumquats, grapes, broad beans, even potatoes and numerous different fish – all of which along with their other sweet creations, make excellent presents.

Out late breakfast was equally good. Warm croissants filled with ricotta cheese, honey and marmalade; cannoli, the sweet Sicilian pastries with more ricotta and decidedly superior chocolate chips; their own home made hot chocolate without a hint of sweetnes;, and a fascinating range of granitas that included fresh strawberry and almond along with the more common coffee and chocolate.

Osteria Antica Marina, Hosteria della Stazione and Pasticceria Russo left wonderfully strong impressions, visually as well as on the palate. While Etna's winemakers look to the future (see above), what distinguishes these three places is their proprietors' determination to preserve the very best of the past.

Osteria Antica Marina, Catania www.anticamarina.it
Ristorante Hosteria della Stazione, C da Difesa, Bronte 329 0236244
Pasticceria Russo, near Zafferano www.dolcirusso.it