

# LA CUCINA ITALIANA

## Seeing and Believing in Sicily, Part 6: A Favorite Volcano and the Journey's End

Chef and author Faith Willinger moved to Florence more than 25 years ago. Since then she has been traveling back-roads of Italy in search of artisans making the best food, wine, and goods. She writes about these people and their products. Among her cookbooks is the best selling guidebook *Eating in Italy*, the cookbook *Red, White, and Green*, and the recipe and travel compilation, *Adventures of An Italian Food Lover*. This is Part 6 and her final installment on her recent travels to Sicily.

by Faith Willinger



A toast with (from left) Turi Siligato, the owner of Nero d'Avola, and winemakers Alberto Graci and Girolamo Russo.

We were on our way to Mount Etna, my favorite active volcano. I was returning to the village of Linguaglossa—population 5000, 14 butcher shops, my kind of place. We'd be based at the delightful hotel **Shalai Resort**, contemporary décor in a restored 19th century noble residence with frescoed ceilings, animated by hospitable owners Leo and Luciano Pennisi, terrific restaurant with a great, mostly Etna wine list and a spa. (The spring onions wrapped in pancetta, below, are from Shalai.)



My previous visit had been inspired by a chance meeting with a winemaker from Etna—in San Francisco. I'd met Ceri Smith, who owns a wine shop, **biondivino** at a Chianti Classico roundtable in Florence, liked the way she spoke about wine and stopped by on a trip to the west coast. I was impressed with the shop and excited when she told me she was having a wine tasting with young producer **Alberto Aiello**, who I didn't know—I hadn't been to Etna in a long time. I tasted three crus of his Graci Etna Rosso and was hooked; he invited me to visit the winery. How could I say

no? I was curious about the wines of the area. I stayed at the Shalai. **Vito** joined me. Luciano Pennisi told me I was lucky, since his father Rosario, a fantastic butcher, would be making frittole, a special treat, the next morning.

We had dinner at the Shalai restaurant, found the food tasty, somewhat trendy but the sophisticated diners from Catania were thrilled. I especially liked the fresh pancetta wrapped around a spring onion, grilled, one of Rosario the butcher's specialties. We drank Etna Rosso from an impressive selection; Leo and Luciano arranged winery visits for us (and for any guest who asks). We wanted to see **Passopisciaro**, **Terre Nere**, and cult favorite **Frank Cornelissen**, three wineries that created the buzz about Etna wines. Alberto Aiello had invited me to visit his winery and stay for lunch, he'd grill some meat.

We strolled to the butcher shop with Luciano. Rosario was cooking frittole, pigs' ears, snout, skin and belly in their rendered fat in a large copper cauldron over a charcoal brazier in front of the shop. He chopped up a few pieces, then piled them on a golden, sesame seed-topped bun (MacEtna?). Delicious! And then showed me how he makes salsiccia al ceppo, pork energetically hand-chopped with a massive cleaver on a tree-trunk chopping block (ceppo). To complete the Pennisi gastronomic scene, Leo's brother Rosario has a bar pasticceria, **Simpaty**, between the butcher shop and hotel. I'm addicted to their nut cookies, soft and almondy inside, studded with pistachio, hazelnut or almonds, not terribly sweet by Sicilian standards. Individually wrapped nut cookies are available throughout the hotel and in the rooms—I always purchase a box to take home. Simpaty makes lovely breakfast pastries (all natural yeast) and snacks, and is always crowded with locals.

We went to Passopisciaro for our first tasting. The winery is owned by Andrea Franchetti (he also owns **Tenuta di Trinoro** in Tuscany), one of the new pioneers of Etna winemaking. He makes a series of cru from the contrade (one-time feudal estates that divided the region) since each zone has a different elevation and soil mineral content due to lava flows from diverse eruptions. It was easy to see from the tasting that Franchetti, who clearly has a French-influenced palate, gained respect for the native varietals and the volcano, and his wines have become more Etna-ish, less international.

We didn't have time for a real meal, but stopped in **Randazzo at Trattoria San Giorgio e il Drago** for a bite—an ample appetizer plate—salumi, cheese and vegetables, with a bottle of Girolomo Russo from the 'A Rina contrada. We had an appointment with Frank Cornelissen, who takes a cosmic view of winemaking, letting the land express itself with no interventions, no treatments. Etna is his driving force, exemplified by his logo, a minimalist brushstroke of the volcano. Frank's wines are fermented in terra cotta amphorae sunk into ground volcanic rock. We didn't have a tasting, but got a bottle of Rosso del Contadino, a blend of white and red grapes from different contrade that Frank describes as humble. It was and I liked it.

Alberto Aiello met us in Castiglione di Sicilia and insisted on driving us to one of his vineyards—the road was a black lava flow navigable only by 4-wheel drive. The vines were stubby, mostly pre-phylloxera, high-altitude, with no need for pest control, growing in lava-studded volcanic soil on ancient terraces with stone walls. Back at the winery, I met his mother and sister Elena, and then wine maker friends started to arrive. We had a glass of Alberto's delicious Etna white (Catarratto and Carricante) while we were waiting. **Giuseppe Russo**, **Ciro Biondi** and his wife Stefanie, **Michele Scammacco**, **Raffaello Maugeri**, a fantastic cheese-maker from Enna (he grows saffron for his amazing Piantentinu), master distiller **Giovanni La Fauci**. A long table was set up in the cellar and a meal appeared—salumi, olives, extra virgin, great bread, ricotta, a tray of baked cardoons made by someone's mother, grilled sausage, breaded beef rolls with bay leaves on skewers, and prickly pears for dessert, along with rivers of Etna Rosso from those present. I was in love, and then they told me about a yearly tasting, Le Contrade di Etna, where almost all producers were present and of course I promised to attend. So I did, returning to Etna to introduce Massimo to my volcanic friends.

I got a ride to the big event, held at the Passopisciaro winery. One huge room ringed with tables of producers and their latest vintage—get a wine glass at the entrance and taste at will. I met dozens of new wine-makers, tasted lots of wines including **Tenuta di Fessina**, **Terra di Trente**, **Fattorie Romeo del Castello** and **Pietradolce** and met restaurateur Turi Siligato (I wanted to eat at his restaurant in Taormina) and **Guido Coffa** who told me about big plans for his organic farm with heirloom fruit trees—more trees and, eventually, a 12 room rural tourism inn.



Massimo and I walked to the **Ristorante Boccaperta**, with a well priced wine list of all Etna producers, rustic cooking with regional flavors and seasonal vegetables, Rosario's meat-filled grilled lemon leaves (above), heirloom Etna apple baked with Etna Rosso for dessert. We were enthusiastic.

We had big plans in Taormina—a visit to the spectacular Greek amphitheater with Etna in the distance, shopping at a wonderful gourmet food shop where I purchased the Sicilian black bee honey that I'd heard about. I bought some Sicilian reproduction ceramic plates at Carlo Panarello (Corso Umberto 122, tel. 0942-23910) which they mercifully mailed home and, around the corner from the main drag clogged with tourists, had lunch at Turi Siligato's restaurant, **Osteria Nero d'Avola** (below). Alberto and Giuseppe Russo were our guests. We sat at a table in a tiny piazza and had a meal that was one of the best of the trip, accompanied by our guests' Etna Rosso. Raw tuna and its bottarga on a slice of sweet lemon, sea urchin bruschetta, a tangle of fried tiny fish and squidlets, spaghetti with sea urchin (I couldn't resist), artichoke and sweet lemon salad, amberjack with sweet and sour onions, concluding with Modica chocolate with a glass of **Marco di Bartoli Marsala**. No need for dinner.



I stocked up the next morning at Simpaty—those nut cookies, and the Pennisi butcher shop—pancetta rolled around spring onions and skewered meat-stuffed lemon leaves to be grilled. I had to expand my luggage for the trip home. I know I'll be back.

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