

A TOUCH OF MINESTRONE (Originally published July 1972)

Americans who saw the island of Sicily during World War II in the late summer months of 1943 remember it as a dusty, sun-baked, burned-out land of rock walls, stone houses, prickly pear cactuses, olive trees and dry, terraced vineyards. Most of the natives were in hiding. The deserted, poverty-stricken, medieval towns and villages were a colorless, ghostly gray and their narrow, cobbled streets reeked with the smells of decay and the accumulated animal odors of centuries. There was not even a trickle of water in the rocky streambeds. The dust of marching armies and thousands of heavy vehicles powdered the parched vegetation of the untended brown fields. A brilliant sun bore down relentlessly by day. It was only in the coldness of night's early morning hours under the influence of soft moonlight and mists from the sea that the island seemed to breathe and come alive again.

But springtime, before the showers end and before the hot sun takes over for its uninterrupted six-month reign, is the time to see Mediterranean lands. Like Spain, Southern Italy, Greece and the North African coast, Sicily becomes transformed in the spring.

We visited there this year during the last two weeks in April. The island has changed considerably in the last thirty years. The oppressive poverty is slowly disappearing. Land reform has broken up the old *latifundi*, the large landed estates formerly owned by wealthy absentee landlords and worked under feudal conditions by village peasants. The discovery of oil and gas has brought every major oil company in the world to the island and now refineries and plants of the petrochemical industry are spaced along the southern and eastern coasts. The donkey carts and motor scooters have given way to Fiats and Lancias. Construction activity and new buildings surround nearly all of the old towns and cities. Reforestation, water conservation projects and artificial irrigation have reclaimed arid fields. A new transisland autostrada is more than half completed and will eventually bridge the Strait of Messina to link with mainland superhighways.

Beginning with the almond blossom festivals in February until well into the month of June, the island stays in constant bloom. The citrus groves of lemons, limes, oranges and mandarins are loaded with blossoms and fruit simultaneously. The nespole—golden Japanese plums—are heavy on the trees; the fig trees are bearing. The cultivated fields are filled with artichokes, beans and tomatoes; the grape vines are in full leaf. The rugged mountains are clothed in dark green and splattered with the bright yellow of wild gorse and the lighter greens of fennel and wild celery. The wild asparagus is up. The vast wheat fields of the interior are knee deep in new grain and whole hillsides are draped in

magenta blankets of a blooming, alfalfa-like clover. The towns are bright with bougainvillea, climbing roses and trailing geraniums. In the meadows, fields and mountainsides and along the road banks, a thousand varieties of wild flowers are scattered in profusion.

The lush green of spring provides a proper setting for the magnificent archaeological ruins of Greek and Roman civilizations that are to be found everywhere throughout the island. The more famous ones at Segesta, Selinunte, Agrigento, Piazza Armerina and Syracuse are overwhelming enough, but even more fascinating are the less well known ones—Himera, Halaesa, Tindari, Morgantina, Pantalica, Naxos, Thapsos—that an enterprising traveler with a map, small car and persistence can seek out and enjoy in almost complete solitude.

The tourist industry in Sicily dates back to Roman times. It was a favorite vacationing spot for emperors like Hadrian, Augustus and Constantine, as well as for notables like Marc Anthony and Cicero. The remains of regal coastal villas, summer palaces and hunting lodges still dot the countryside. The English have been visiting since Norman times. The Germans, French, Swedes and Danes have been coming for several hundred years. (The Americans are not really missed.) Fortunately for present day tourists, the blight of modern industrialization is still localized in only a few of the island's major coastal cities. Most of the central and western part of the island retains its ancient character and picturesque charm.

It is too bad that most Americans think of Sicily as a mysterious and sinister island crawling with characters out of Mario Puzo's *Godfather* with the Mafia lurking in every alleyway. Actually, the streets of its crowded cities and its lonely mountain roads are infinitely safer than those of downtown Washington, Central Park or any shopping center parking lot in Columbus, Georgia. It is an island of breathtaking mountain scenery and lovely beaches, surrounded by the bluest of seas. It is inhabited by ordinary but interesting people going about their business in everyday fashion but with the added flavors of Mediterranean good humor, lots of wine and spontaneous song. The people are just as fascinating as the scenery.

Our old friend, Mr. Morello, a jolly octogenarian who lives in Palermo, claims in all seriousness that the Sicilians are probably the purest strain of Italians in existence. In the past 100 years or so—except for the brief influx of mainland Italians, Germans, British, Canadians and Americans who passed through during the recent war years and left little lasting imprint—his claim, may have some validity. For the last century and a half, the islanders have led a relatively isolated and clannish existence. But the island's history is more properly measured in millennia instead of centuries. In truth, from the Stone Age

through the 18th Century, it had absorbed and assimilated a greater variety of racial strains than any spot on earth. It was the original melting pot.

Sicily's strategic location in the Mediterranean halfway from the Dardanelle's on the east to Gibraltar on the west, and lying between Africa and the south and Europe on the north, made it a logical crossroads for all traveling adventurers. In addition, its spectacular scenery, mild climate and enduring fertility (it was known as the granary of the Roman Empire long before the time of Christ) made it a prize that few marauders could resist.

The origins of its Stone Age inhabitants are obscured in prehistory; they may have been migrants themselves over connecting land bridges that once joined Europe to Africa. Rock engravings in mountain caves at Addura date back to 7000 B.C. New peoples from Minoa and Crete began arriving as early as 5000 B.C.; the Sicilians, from the Italian mainland first appeared about 2000, the Elymians, from Troy and Asia Minor, in 1500 and around 1200, their relatives from the modern areas of Syria and Lebanon, the Phoenicians and then the Carthaginians.

The Greeks settled along the eastern coasts about the time the Carthaginians established themselves in the west and, from 600 B.C. to 400 A.D.; the predominant culture, influence and language of the island remained Greek. For 200 years Syracuse was the most important city in all of the Western world. The Romans, who ruled the island after 200 B.C., were content to keep it as a province, exacting tithes, collecting taxes and exploiting its many resources, leaving the Greek culture intact. Along with their own people, they did, however, introduce many new ingredients to the island mixture—hairy Celts, bearded north men, dark-skinned Egyptians and black Nubians who worked the fields, mines and quarries as slaves.

When the Roman Empire disintegrated, the island fell to the Goths and Vandals from northern Europe and Scandinavia. They lasted less than a hundred years, until the mid 6th Century when they were overwhelmed by the Turks who annexed the island and made it part of the Byzantine Empire. Constantinople ruled for the next 350 years and left a permanent oriental and mid-eastern flavor. The Arabs and Saracents invaded in the 9th Century, and by 902, all of Sicily was firmly under Arab domination. In the next century and a half, Mohammedanism spread throughout the island.

The Arabs were finally driven out by the Normans from France and Britain between 1060 and 1090. It was only during the relatively tolerant Norman occupation that the Sicilian church became officially Latinized. In the 13th Century, through a marriage succession, Sicily was united to Germany under the crown of the Swabian Emperor

Frederick. Later, as a result of papal intrigue, it was handed over to the French under Charles of Anjou. In 1282, after a great revolt (the Sicilian Vespers) resulted in the massacre of all the French there, the Spanish House of Aragon moved in. Sicily stayed under the rule of the Spaniards and Moors for the next 400 years. It was reunited to the mainland in the 18th Century when Charles of Bourbon became King of Naples and Sicily. The Bourbon families remained in charge until 1861 when the successful, Garibaldi-led revolution unified all of Italy. At this time Sicily ceased to be a political entity and was absorbed into the Italian nation.

Inbred into the character of the Sicilian native over the centuries is the enterprise of the Phoenicians, wisdom of the Greek, organization of the Roman, durability of the African, brutality of the Vandal, bravery of the Turk, chivalry of the Norman, idealism of the English, joviality of the Dane, shrewdness of the Semite, cruelty of the Saracen, faith of three religions, stoicism and dependability of the German, duplicity and volatility of the French, solemnity of the Spanish and the unreliability and adaptability of the Italian. With every invasion, just as they did again in 1943, the natives fled to the caves and villages in the mountainous interior while strangers fought the battles for their towns and cities. And as always, once the fighting was over and the new conquerors comfortably installed, they returned to their battered homes and ravaged lands, adjusted to a new authority and eventually charmed, outsmarted and absorbed the newcomers.

So, the "pure strain" Sicilian is, in reality, a God-awful mixture of every conceivable European, Mediterranean, mid-eastern and North African people—more a spicy distillate of minestrone rather than an extract of clear consommé. The mixture is evident in Mr. Morello, whose skin is a neutral tint somewhere between olive and fair, eyes gray-green, nose Semitic, and hair (before it turned white) once a light brown. Even his great-grandfather Morello, who died in the 1840s and lies today in formal burial clothes in the catacombs beneath Palermo, still sports a wispy, sand blond beard and red hair.

(c) *The Bulletin of the Muscogee County (Georgia) Medical Society*, "The Doctor's Lounge", Jul 1972, Vol. XIX Vol 7, p.18