

Sicilian Magic in the Big Apple

Gero Salamone (October 21, 2015)



The French poet Guy de Maupassant called Sicily “the land of oranges, of blooming ground, whose air in the spring is a fragrance,” An island with timeless appeal, where one becomes enchanted with its numerous cities: the capital Palermo, the charming Taormina, or the historic Ragusa Ibla. A region that over the years has received an influx of different cultures: Greek, Arabic, Norman, Spanish, and other civilizations of the Mediterranean. The popularity of Sicilian cooking makes it easy to experience its distinctive flavors in restaurants scattered across New York.

Listed below are some that offer traditional Sicilian cuisine often with innovative touches that make it even more relevant in the new millennium.

Upper East Side

Italianissimo



307 East 84th Street
212-628-8603
italianissimoristorante-hub.com

The name of the restaurant says it all. Italianissimo (or “very Italian”) Ristorante offers a wide variety of Sicilian specialties. Start with an appetizer of homemade bread, pesto, and olives and sip on excellent wine produced in Sicily. If you want a typical Sicilian first course, there is no doubt about what to choose: the fettucine alla siciliana with eggplant, tomato sauce, and fresh mozzarella. Finally, why not end the meal with a superb pistachio ice cream?

East Village
Cacio e Vino
80 2nd Avenue
(212) 228- 3269
www.cacioevino.com

Cacio e Vino, in the heart of the East Village, was conceived by owner Giusto Priola, who found inspiration in the words of Goethe: “Italy without Sicily leaves no image in the soul.” (“L’Italia senza la Sicilia non lascia nello spirito immagine alcuna.”) The restaurant is made even more charming by the paintings hung on the brick walls that evoke the beautiful land of Sicily. The extensive menu consists of several dishes that recall the flavors of Sicily. To start, try an appetizer with caponata (fried vegetables seasoned with a sweet and sour sauce) and pannelle (fritters made from chickpea flour), followed by a pasta with tuna, capers, olives, and tomatoes. You can also opt for a plate of grilled fish with octopus, tuna, squid, shrimp, and clams, all seasoned with oregano. Before leaving the restaurant enveloped in the perfume of Sicily, you must try the cassata siciliana (sweetened ricotta, sponge cake, marizpan, and candied fruit).

Chelsea
Bar Eolo
190 7th Avenue
(646) 225-6606
eolonewyork.com

In the lively neighborhood of Chelsea, you will find the wine bar, Bar Eolo, which also offers an extensive menu of Sicilian food. At the head of the restaurant is chef Melissa, whose love for Sicilian cooking was passed down to her by her Sicilian grandmother from Sant’Anna, in the province of Agrigento. As an appetizer, try the panu cunsatu (warm bread with olive oil), which you could follow up with delicious ragù, meatballs, or tagliatelle with rabbit sauce. Before leaving, be sure to try the sfinci, a Sicilian doughnut stuffed with ricotta or orange and vanilla cream.

Restivo Ristorante
209 7th Avenue
(212) 366-4133
restivorestaurant.com

Mix together rigatoni, tomato sauce, eggplant, capers, and ricotta and you get the “Restivo Rigatoni.” A culinary specialty that takes its name from the restaurant located in Chelsea and run by the Restivo family. You should definitely try the fresh mozzarella with tomatoes and basil. It’s a small room with less than 50 seats, which makes it an intimate environment suitable for a work lunch or a candlelight dinner.

Soho
Piccola Cucina Osteria
196 Spring Street
(646) 478-7488
piccolacucinaenotecanyc.com



The success of Piccola Cucina Osteria is tied to the creativity of chef Philip Guardione, a true Sicilian, who in a short time has been able to bring the flavors of authentic Sicilian food to the Big Apple. An intimate and welcoming location in which you can enjoy exquisite dishes. Start with a caponata of swordfish prepared in the style of Palermo or sardines alla beccafico with fennel and oranges. A plate of spaghetti with squid ink sauce is a sure bet as well.

Flatiron District

Zio Ristorante

17 West 19th Street
(212) 352-1700
zio-nyc.com

At a short distance from the elegant Flatiron building, you'll find Zio Ristorante, a cool place that introduces Mediterranean cooking with hints of innovation thanks to the creativity of chefs Max Convertini and Roberto Manfe. You'll get authentic and fresh products served by a friendly and hospitable staff. Start your meal with an appetizer made of eggplant, smoked mozzarella, sauce and arugula, and later, enjoy a flavorful tuna steak with fennel, caponata, and stuffed zucchini flowers. Want dessert? Get the cheesecake with ricotta, blueberries, and chocolate!

Little Italy

Da Nico Ristorante
164 Mulberry Street
(212) 352-1700
danicoristorante.com

Like eggplant Parmesan? Da Nico is the perfect place to try a superb version along with other specialties, like traditional minestrone soup of mixed vegetables or spaghetti with tomato sauce and meatballs. The chicken with mushrooms and Marsala wine is also worth a try. This homely place in Little Italy is waiting for you to stop by and spend a pleasant part of your day in the company of Nico's excellent cooking.

Forno Siciliano

43-19 Ditmars Blvd
(718) 267-0790
fornosicilianoastoria.com

Forno Siciliano is a piece of Sicily a short distance from chaotic Manhattan where one can savor delectable Sicilian cuisine. Located in Astoria, a traditional Italian neighborhood, the restaurant is run by a family from the province of Palermo that, for years, has been committed to offering Sicilian food and spreading the knowledge of Sicily's culinary art. Once you enter Forno Siciliano, your eyes are immediately drawn to a series of Sicilian icons, like the famous Sicilian cart or the large, colorful wall paintings depicting scenes of the island in all its beauty. Popular dishes include the delicious penne alla siciliana with tomato sauce, ricotta and eggplant, or the veal boscaiolo with mushrooms, pancetta, and Marsala sauce. This meal can be concluded with a great homemade tiramisù.

Brooklyn Cobble Hill

Ferdinando's Focacceria
151 Union Street
(718) 855-1545

If you find yourself walking along Columbia Street near the waterfront in Brooklyn and you hear Frank Sinatra in the distance, or smell freshly baked warm bread, then you are near a Sicilian restaurant as special as its owner, Francesco Buffa. The restaurant is Ferdinando's Focacceria, named after Francesco's father-in-law, who devoted his life to teaching his family the art of Sicilian cooking. Opened in 1904 in the heart of what was once Brooklyn's Little Italy, the place has remained much the same, giving it a touch of retro "Made in Sicily." You can choose from different specialties like antipasto rustico (rustic appetizers) with a sun-dried tomato base, grilled eggplant,



and caponata accompanied by warm bread. Or even arancini, rice balls full of meat and topped with ricotta and tomato sauce. But the signature dish is Palermo's *vastedde*, a mix of spleen, ricotta, and grated *cacioca-vallo* cheese on a seeded Sicilian bun that will make your mouth water. To finish, fabulous *cannoli* with ricotta.

Brooklyn Park Slope

Bella Gioia
209 4th Avenue
(347) 223-4176
bellagioianyc.com

Bella Gioia is the ideal place to recover your energy after jogging in Park Slope with a wonderful Sicilian dish prepared by the chef and owner, Nico. His passion for cooking was inspired and fostered by his parents and grandparents in Sicily. Your meal would be incomplete without a plate of fresh pasta with sardines and wild fennel or *orecchiette* with tomato sauce, eggplant, and Parmesan cheese. For those who desire a lighter meal, there is a tasty orange and fennel salad. Your lunch or dinner with a delicious pistachio gelato, a digestive walk through the historic streets of this once Italian neighborhood provides the perfect end to a delicious time at Bella Gioia.

Brooklyn Gravesend

Joe's of Avenue U
287 Avenue U
(718) 449-9285
<http://joesofavenueu.com>

If you are looking for a place to eat excellent Sicilian food, then Joe's of Avenue U is for you. A very welcoming *tavola calda* restaurant that embodies the best of *sicilianità* (or "Sicilian-ness"): with symbols and images of the island that will make you forget you're in New York. A glance behind the counter will uncover delicious dishes such as *lasagna* with meatballs and *linguine ai frutti di mare* (with mussels, clams, cherry tomatoes, garlic), which you could order along with an octopus salad. Try the stuffed artichoke and the meatballs seasoned with walnuts, raisins, and pine nuts. If you're craving something more substantial, you can try the *involtini*: breaded veal cutlets rolled with cheese and bacon, and pair it with a nice glass of homemade red wine.

Brooklyn Bensonhurst

Il Colosseo
7704 18th Avenue
(718) 234-3663

Although named after the famous monument in the center of Rome, Il Colosseo — located at the heart of Cristoforo Colombo Boulevard — is a Sicilian-owned family restaurant. Always busy, it sports a large wood-burning oven used to churn out delicious pizzas. Il Colosseo offers a variety of Italian specialties including, obviously, a few signature Sicilian dishes. We suggest getting a plate of pasta with olive pesto and ricotta. If you love fish, the grilled octopus is highly recommended. For dessert, do not hesitate to order the *panettone* with almonds, especially around Christmas. Good Italian wine values by the glass.

Staten Island
Enoteca Maria
27 Hyatt Street
(718) 447-2777
www.enotecamaria.com

Enjoy the ferry ride to Staten Island and admire the sunset on your way to a very special place: l'Enoteca di Maria. Only a five-minute walk from the ferry terminal, this small restaurant allows you to enjoy traditional cooking just like your nonna used to make. What's even better is that there is a different Italian grandmother in the kitchen each day of the week. Each cook comes from a different part of Italy and prepares specialties from her own region. Nonna Nina, of Sicilian origin, will



amaze you with her lasagna or her pasta with grilled eggplant. And what about trying a typical Sicilian aromatic ragù with rabbit meat?

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