



CRIME DOESN'T PAY

DON'T TELL DON CORLEONE,
BUT THE HOTELIERS AND RESTAURATEURS
OF SICILY ARE STARTING TO TAKE A STAND
AGAINST THE ISLAND'S MOBSTERS

WORDS MICHAEL DAY

IN FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA'S *The Godfather*, it was a horse's head in the bed. For Palermo restaurateur Vincenzo Conticello, it was the family cat found shot outside the front door. And, to ensure he got the message, his car was burnt out and mysterious flood damage struck his famous Antica Focacceria San Francesco restaurant.

When Conticello still refused to pay the €500 a month *pizzo* (protection money) – back-dated, to boot – he was summoned to the local Mafia boss. He recalls the date well: March 13, 2006. “The meeting didn’t last long,” says Conticello, a stout, smiling man. “I was told that I would pay €20,000 by tomorrow, or I’d be killed.”

The threat didn’t have the desired effect – Conticello broke one of Palermo’s unwritten rules and went straight to the authorities.

Three years on, as he talks to me in the upstairs dining room of his restaurant, a couple of bull-necked policemen in leather jackets eye me warily. A permanent, armed security attachment is the price Vincenzo Conticello has to pay for defying the local Mafia boss. The mobster, against whom he also testified, was convicted in 2007 and is now serving a 16-year jail sentence. “I think the authorities wanted to make an example of him,” says Conticello, grinning.

Pizzo: a little word. But hundreds of thousands of pizzi paid to Sicilian mobsters each year adds up to a multi-billion dollar racket that stifles the regional economy – and has, according to the Italian employers’ organisation Confindustria, led to the closure of thousands of businesses.

Now, though, many in Palermo are following in Conticello’s footsteps, by joining the Addiopizzo (“goodbye pizzo”) movement (www.addiopizzo.org).

The organisation now has 371 members, including many of the best bars, restaurants, galleries, hotels and shops. The campaign, funded by the redistribution of seized Mafia goods, provides highly visible notices to warn off mobsters, and gives businesses direct phone lines to the police. Members and their supporters ensure the campaign



Clockwise from here, police presence at the 2008 Pizzo-Free Festival; banners and posters; protesters united against the paying of pizzo

maintains a high profile, with colourful demonstrations in and around Palermo, including the student rally in April this year and a two-wheeled protest last August.

For ethically minded travellers, Addiopizzo offers the chance to sample the delights of this gem of a city, secure in the knowledge that their hard-earned euros are not going to end up financing illicit criminal activity.

“You can now buy virtually anything you need here without giving your money to the Mafia,” says Valeria Di Leo, whose PuntoPizzoFree store in the city centre was one of the first to join Addiopizzo. She is now planning what she and her partner claim will be Sicily’s first “pizzo-free” wedding.

In terms of its overall impact on organised crime in Sicily, there’s a long

way to go. Nonetheless, experts insist a new chapter in the island’s turbulent history has been opened.

Antonio Ingroia, the experienced prosecutor leading Sicily’s fight against the Mafia, says Addiopizzo signals a change in the public’s attitude. “We’ve never seen anything like this before in Sicily,” he says. “This movement is adding to the sense that this is a time of crisis for the Sicilian Mafia.”

Reeling from a series of high-profile arrests, he says the crime syndicate is quietly trying to regroup by re-establishing links with the Mafia in the US, and by stepping up its transition from the bloodthirsty organisation of the 80s and early 90s to an international financial crime syndicate.

But, like everyone else, Mafiosi still rely on their bread-and-butter money. Or, in



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their case, drugs and extortion rackets. During a severe world recession, in which Italian press reports suggest even mobsters are having wages cut or being laid off, a squeeze on extortion rackets will be extremely keenly felt.

Big business has also waded in. Confindustria has vowed to expel any member companies found to have paid extortion money. Ivan Lo Bello, president of the organisation's Sicilian branch, hopes, too, that any lingering Hollywood-inspired tendencies to romanticise the Mafia will

fizzle out. Notions of gangster glamour are at odds with the drugs, prostitution, environmental destruction and general squalor that Mafiosi trade in.

From his desk in the opulent Palazzo d'Orleans, Sicily's new president, Raffaele Lombardo, is also keen to talk up the war against organised crime. "A decision to step up the fight against the Mafia has now begun," he says. Addiopizzo campaigners are hoping he does a better job than his predecessor, Salvatore Cuffaro, who received a five-year jail sentence in January this year

for leaking confidential prosecution documents to a Mafia boss.

"That's what we're up against," says Antonella Sgrillo, the chatty and charming owner of the Il Mirto e la Rosa restaurant in the city centre. "Don't forget it wasn't long ago that Sicily had a president who told us there was no such thing as the Mafia."

She says there's a feeling among most ordinary Italians that change will, to a large extent, have to come from the bottom up. And so, for her, joining Addiopizzo was a no-brainer. "The real question is not, 'Why have you joined it?' but, 'Why wouldn't you join it?'" she explains.

For many businesses, however, the threat is not over. The first sign is often a problem getting the key in the front door. It means local mobsters have announced their





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intentions by filling it with superglue. The victims tend to be traditional businesses – bars, restaurants, or construction companies – typically with older patrons. They are owners who, unfortunately, view the pizzo as an occupational hazard, rather than daylight robbery by parasitic hoodlums.

Addiopizzo's headquarters is a large, modern apartment overlooking Palermo's football stadium, which was confiscated from an associate of jailed godfather Salvatore “The Beast” Riina. Edoardo Zaffuto, one of the group's volunteers, admits the movement isn't a cure-all, but he remains upbeat. “The police can't protect everyone,” he says. “Some people think that,

by joining Addiopizzo, shops and businesses are making themselves more exposed. But it seems that people who participate are less likely to have problems.”

Of course, extortion rackets aren't confined to Palermo, and Addiopizzo organisers hope the message will spread across the island. Already, in Sicily's lively second city, Catania, the first bars and restaurants are joining the movement. When enough businesses are committed, Addiopizzo's Catania branch will publicise its names and addresses, too.

“To be honest, I don't expect to see a complete end to the Mafia and protection rackets in my lifetime,” Zaffuto says. “But, for those of us in Sicily who want our island to be free of this, it's an important start – and it is something that visitors can help us to achieve.”

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★ HAVE A PIECE OF PALERMO, PIZZO-FREE

★ Antica Focacceria San Francesco

Munch oven-baked pizza downstairs, or splash out upstairs on seafood, pasta and legendary desserts. Via Paternostro, 58 www.afsf.it

★ Il Mirto e la Rosa

In a quiet-but-central street, this stylish restaurant scores highly on quality and value, with excellent set menus, interesting fish combos and good vegetarian dishes. Via Principe Di Granatelli, 30 www.ilmirtoelarosa.com

★ Il Rintocco

This cosy café, just a couple of minutes stroll from the Teatro Massimo, specialises in *cioccolata* – rich, thick drinking chocolate – in no fewer than 32 flavours. But, if you turn up for lunch, owner Giovanna Saputo will happily make you a sandwich or a salad. (Closed August.) Via dell'Orologio, 14 Tel: +39 091 61 1 0209

★ PuntoPizzoFree

This charming shop was one of the first to sign up to Addiopizzo. There's bike hire, too. Via Vittorio Emanuele, 172 www.puntopizzofree.it

★ Kursaal Kalhesa

Sicily is all about sun and sea. Head to the waterfront to eat, drink, see and be seen. Expect art exhibitions and live music, too. Foro Umberto I, 21 www.kursaalkalhesa.it

★ Amarcord Hotel

Palermo isn't awash with pizzo-free hotels, but the Amarcord is central and good value. Via Mariano Stabile, 139 www.amarcord.it
For more listings, see www.addiopizzo.org