

## Away from the mob

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**ERIC REGULY**

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SAN GIUSEPPE JATO, SICILY — The crepes filled with speck ham and provola cheese are heavenly. But they don't quite distract me from my anxiety as I tuck into dinner at our Sicilian B&B.

Could this sweltering night in the rugged hills behind Palermo be *the* night? Will I be savouring fennel-seed sausages when the grim, heavysset men arrive? Will they pause for a second to allow the diners' curiosity to turn to numb fear before spraying the room with bullets?

There is some justification for such wild imagining. Our small inn, called the Portella della Ginestra, was once owned by the Bruscas — a family synonymous with the blood-soaked history of the Sicilian Mafia.

Bernardo Brusca was the capo of the town a few kilometres down the road from us and a convicted murderer. His son Giovanni, now 51, detonated the bomb that killed Palermo's heroic anti-Mafia prosecutor Giovanni Falcone in 1992. A year later, the junior Mafioso also kidnapped the 11-year-old son of the mobster who had told the story of Falcone's murder to the police. The boy was held and tortured for 26 months, then strangled. His body was dissolved in a barrel of acid.



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Once the home of a mob 'capo,' the Portella della Ginestra (above) is now an inn known for killer Sicilian cooking. (*Antonio Giordano for The Globe and Mail*)

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But in 1996, Giovanni, known as “The Pig,” was finally hunted down. His family's properties, along with thousands of others owned by convicted Mafiosi throughout Italy, were later seized. And some were handed to co-ops, which vowed to use them for the public good — for example, the Brusca house, which was transformed into Sicily's first anti-Mafia *agritourismo*, as the Italians call a farm that takes paying guests.

And that's not the only option for tourists who want to support honest Sicilians, not the island's well-known criminals. Today, visitors can join a burgeoning movement toward ethical tourism on the island by taking part in a growing, incredibly brave anti-Mafia campaign. They can buy wine and pasta at the Libera Terra — free land — co-ops. They can spend their euros at shops that refuse to pay the *pizzo*, or Mafia extortion tax. Plus there are more B&Bs on former Mafia properties in the works.

In November, for instance, a large house near Corleone owned by Salvatore (The Beast) Riina will be opened to tourists. Riina was the undisputed boss of bosses and the most wanted man in Italy until his arrest in 1993. He is thought to have personally killed 40 people and ordered the deaths of 200 or so others — including the murders of Falcone and his colleague Paolo Borsellino. (Palermo's airport is named in honour of the two anti-Mafia magistrates.)

Of course, not everyone who books a room at Riina's former mansion will be there to support anti-Mafia tourism. This property is sure to attract visitors fascinated by mob history at its goriest. As do sites such as the Mafia museum in Corleone, which cater to fans of *The Godfather*. It is stuffed with videos and photos of Mafia hit men and their victims, and documents related to the police investigations. Still, many locals believe that anti-mob sentiment will eventually eclipse prurient mob tourism.

“There is a sort of anti-Mafia tourism coming,” Giuseppe (Pino) Maniaci says.

He certainly has reason to hope so. Maniaci is the host and owner of Telejato, a local TV station that regularly names and denounces Mafia members. In return, the thugs beat him up, slash his car tires and threaten to kill him — hence the round-the-clock police protection for his family.

### GOODFELLAS' GOURMET

As for my own fears, the manager of our inn, 28-year-old Analisa Di Matteo, offers sympathy when I confess that staying in a former mob property is making me a little uneasy. Land is vital to Mafia power. Without it, they are exposed. Wouldn't the thugs, out of sheer spite, try to wreck the business or threaten the

employees?

Indeed, in the early years of Sicily's Libera Terra movement, some co-ops suffered vandalism and theft, though it's hard to say whether they were genuine Mafia revenge incidents. "At first, four years ago when I started here, I was a bit afraid of the Mafia," Di Matteo says. "Now, no. They have never bothered us. They have bigger things to do."

And so does the team at Portella della Ginestra. Their main concern is pleasing patrons, not worrying about horse heads in their beds. We decide to relax and enjoy the place.

To be sure, this B&B is not for everyone. It stands alone in the Jato Valley – no town, no bar or shops within walking distance. Even though it's only 20 kilometres from Palermo, Sicily's biggest city, it feels like it's in the middle of nowhere.

But it's an ideal base for hiking, and for day trips ranging from the ancient Greek temples at Agrigento to the glorious Norman cathedral in Monreale and the lovely beaches near Sciacca. None of these places is more than an hour's drive away.

And what views! The fields around the building are dotted with yellow ginestra flowers. The hills beyond them – small mountains, really – are steep, with rocky, jagged tops. The lack of rain can even give the terrain a desert effect. (Perfect for a spaghetti western.)

The B&B itself is clean and comfortable, if not luxurious. Each of the three bedrooms has gleaming terra cotta tile floors, high wood ceilings, spotless American-style bathrooms and air conditioning that actually works.

But the main attraction here is not the rooms. Or even the scenery. It's the food. Many of the vegetables and spices, from the eggplant to the oregano, come from the house garden. The pasta is made from organic wheat grown at similar co-ops. The wine – strong, deep reds and whites for \$7 to \$9 a bottle – carries the Cento Passi, or hundred steps, label. It takes its name from the film about the murder of a young anti-Mafia activist in 1978.

As for the meals, they're classic, hearty Sicilian fare: The Pasta alla Norma, with a sauce of fresh tomatoes, eggplant, basil and pecorino cheese, is tangy but not overpowering. The zucchini comes dressed in delicate beer batter. And the anchovies, bathed in the lightest of olive oils, are served under a pillow of porcelain-white mozzarella cheese. Sheer bliss.

This could explain why the restaurant is routinely packed even with those not spending the night. Among the regulars is Francesco Galante from Cento Passi wines. So I ask him if he considers the anti-Mafia co-ops (Sicily has five of them) a success.

He admits that the pace of transforming Mafia properties into clean businesses can be slow. But he says the co-ops are making extraordinary progress. The farms worked by the Placido Rizzotto co-op – which includes our inn – sell almost \$2-million worth of wine, pasta and other organic products each year. And they deliver the message that the Mafia does not have to dominate every part of Sicilian life.

"We are showing you can make a right, honest life here, and work without fear," he says. "This is a revolution."

Galante wants me to know that the co-ops are only part of the story, though. He hands me a booklet called *Pago Chi Non Paga* (I pay those who don't pay) and suggests I go to Palermo to see the places it lists – from pizzerias to dance halls – who refuse to pay the *pizzo* Mafia tax.

## COSA VOSTRA

The *pizzo* has been part of Italian life forever. It's a form of negative insurance paid by shop owners: Pay it and the Mafia leaves you alone; don't pay it and your shop might get burned down.

(Or you might get killed, as Libero Grassi was in 1991. Grassi was a Palermo shop owner who denounced the Mafia "tax" in a page-one newspaper article entitled "Dear Extortionist." Three weeks later, he was dead.)

The University of Palermo has estimated that 80 per cent of Sicilian stores pay the *pizzo* – which can be \$1,500 to \$4,500 every three or four months – although almost no one will admit to doing so. Anti-Mafia police have estimated the mob collects \$45-billion a year from bribery, making it one of Europe's biggest businesses.

But in 2004, Sicilians started a grassroots organization called *Addiopizzo* – goodbye *pizzo* – to fight the "tax." Shop owners who join the movement refuse to pay it and get legal assistance if they press charges against *pizzo* collectors. Some also get police protection.

Meanwhile, consumers who support the organization, including conscientious tourists, endeavour to spend money at anti-*pizzo* shops (many identified by the *Addiopizzo* window stickers) whenever they can. So far, almost 300 store owners have signed up.

I take my anti-*pizzo* euros to Capricci di Sicilia, a restaurant in the heart of Palermo owned by Vicenza Eterno. The Mafia has made repeated attempts to make her pay. She has never done so. "I have no fear," she says.

As I eat a delicious, firm fish called spigola, she explains that it would be a dishonour to her family to pay the *pizzo*. Her father was one of the policemen who arrested the

Sicilian crime boss, hit man and (go figure) landscape painter Luciano Leggio in the early 1970s.

So far, neither she nor her shop has been roughed up for resisting the Mafia. Though Eterno says some shop owners have had worse luck and "sometimes those who don't pay have their cars burned." For this reason, some shop owners don't list their names on the *Addiopizzo* website.

"Some people don't want to be heroes," she says. "They have a fear of advertising."

I leave Sicily a couple of days later. After visits to several fine beaches and a tour of the elegantly crumpled Greek city at Selinunte, I figure I

should be able to put any lingering fear, or even thought, of the Mafia out of my mind. It doesn't quite work.

This strange, beautiful, sad island has been ransacked by generations of crime families and they won't fold in the face of Addiopizzo or co-ops on their seized land. But as I fly from Palermo's Falcone-Borsellino Airport, I at least have the satisfaction of knowing that I've done my tiny bit to help the courageous few who have had enough.

*Eric Reguly is The Globe and Mail's European business correspondent. With a report from*

*Lorenzo Tondo in Sicily.*