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Shopkeepers revolt against Sicilian Mafia

Tom Kington in Rome

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Fabio Messina has never run a shop before and agrees that the supermarket he sunk his savings into and opened yesterday sells a rather eclectic array of goods, from marmalade and pot plants to pyjamas and wristwatches.

But it is a landmark in Palermo: all products and staff are 100 per cent guaranteed Mafia-free, supplied only by shops and producers which have stood up to Sicily's Cosa Nostra and refused to pay protection money.

'I decided it was right to give those traders who refuse to pay an extra opportunity,' said Messina, 29, a former boating instructor and bar owner and now owner of Punto Pizzofree. The 'Pizzo' refers to the €200 (£153) to €500 that up to 80 per cent of Palermo's shopkeepers pay the mob monthly to avoid a smashed window, a mysterious fire or a bomb under their car.

The store is part of an anti-Mafia groundswell that started four years ago when activists plastered Palermo with bill stickers stating: 'An entire population that pays the pizzo is a population without dignity.'

That spawned 'Addiopizzo', an organisation promoting stores and suppliers that publicly vowed to pay no more. Today, 9,000 Palermitans are registered customers and the list contains 241 businesses, 30 of which have their products on Messina's shelves.

Punto Pizzofree also stocks produce from farms seized from jailed Mafia bosses including Salvatore 'The Beast' Riina.

The Sicilian Mafia, on the back foot since the arrest in 2006 of fugitive godfather Bernardo Provenzano, was hurt again last year when powerful industrial association Confindustria said it would expel any members paying protection money.

But Palermo's businesses are not in the clear yet. One member of Addiopizzo, a hardware wholesaler, lost €3m in goods when mobsters burnt down his warehouse.

Addiopizzo organiser Laura Nocella said shop owners were nervous after recent arrests, fearing new mobsters might move in. But she added: 'What they need to realise is this is the crucial moment to stand up, or the next mobster looking to take over the patch will know you can be forced to pay.'

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