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Smart Mouth His Palermo Restaurant Is Popular, but It's No Mob Scene

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For 174 years, the Antica Focacceria San Francesco has been acclaimed for serving delicious Palermo-style focaccia, along with pastas made from family recipes and other Sicilian specialties.

The story of just why a fifth-generation family restaurant and its owner need round-the-clock protection is, of course, a very Sicilian one.



Behind these closely guarded doors, focacceria owner Vincenzo Conticello, at center with police officer, serves Palermo-style home cooking to appreciative crowds. (By Robert V. Camuto)

In a nutshell: The local mob made focacceria owner Vincenzo Conticello an offer not to be refused.

He refused.

Last fall, after testifying against the man who had tried to extort "protection money," or pizzo, from him, he became a local hero -- and a marked man.

The focacceria was established by Conticello's ancestor Antonino Alaimo in 1834, and over the years it has been frequented by all of Palermo (from Sicilian dramatist Luigi Pirandello to mobster Lucky Luciano to the assassinated anti-Mafia judges for whom Palermo's airport is named) and by the royal families of Spain, Belgium and Italy.

Conticello, 48, was a political science student when he left Palermo for about 17 years to work on eco-tourism projects in South and Central America. He returned to take over the restaurant with his brother, Fabio, when their father retired in 2001.

Things were going fine until three years ago, when the family's life began resembling a Mario Puzo novel. After a summer of petty-but-regular vandalism -- a window broken here, a car broken into there, gasoline thrown on the doorstep -- a local thug came to extract pizzo from Vincenzo.

"Between 1834 and 2005, the Mafia had no interest in the focacceria," Conticello told me one recent Saturday morning at his restaurant. Out front, two carabinieri (Italian military police officers) were stationed with machine guns and bulletproof vests. Inside, a couple of armed plainclothes officers kept an eye on the door and on Conticello. "In fact, the Mafia came in here to eat. They contracted with us for catering events. We did their weddings."

Conticello's refusal to pay the protection money, and his testimony, have prompted more business owners to come forward in a series of extortion trials. Conticello's would-be extorter and two accomplices were sentenced in November to terms of 10 to 16 years in prison.

The police presence and the surveillance cameras haven't stopped the loyal clientele from filling their stomachs with the focacceria's home



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cooking.

Palermo focaccia bears little resemblance to the pizzalike, herb-covered flatbread found in most of Italy and the United States. At the Antica Focacceria, it is still made the old-fashioned way, on a big antique iron stove in the front room.

The Palermo version starts with slightly yellow and sweet focaccia bread in a form resembling a sandwich roll. Into the roll are placed pieces of dry sheep's milk ricotta sliced from a big wedge, then a few small slices of a warm beef spleen that has been simmering in lard in a big shallow pot. The filling is sprinkled with pungent grated caciocavallo cheese. The result is more substantial than standard Italian focaccia, combining stronger and more complex flavors than, say, a cheeseburger. For a focaccia without the beef, order a focaccia schietta (single). The full carnivorous version is called focaccia maritata (married).

In the downstairs main room with wood benches, iron chairs and marble-topped tables, the service is plastic-plate casual and includes other varieties of street food such as panelle (chickpea fritters) and pizzas (the "Lucky Luciano" is topped with tomatoes, spicy salami, chili peppers, onion and caciocavallo).

In the white-tablecloth restaurant on the third floor, you can sample Sicilian specialties such as bucatini con sarde (pasta tossed with a sauce of sardines, wild fennel, raisins, crushed pine nuts, saffron and tomatoes), fresh preparations of swordfish or octopus, homemade desserts and a selection of Sicilian wines. In summer, the restaurant tables spread onto the picturesque piazza in front of the San Francesco church, now one of the most heavily protected spots in Palermo.

-- Robert V. Camuto

Antica Focacceria San Francesco, 58 Via A. Paternostro, Palermo, <http://www.afsf.it>. Focaccia is about \$3.20, pizza about \$8. For a full dinner in the restaurant, figure about \$32 per person, plus wine.

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