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De-mob happy

After decades of Mafia rule in Sicily, locals are fighting back - and they are asking tourists to help them, by staying in B&Bs, eating in restaurants and shopping in delis that refuse to pay protection money. Stephanie Rafanelli reports

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The real good fellas ... Antica Focceria San Francesco restaurant, Palermo. Photograph: David Levene

It was Sunday lunchtime in Palermo's Piazza San Francesco and the air was thick with charcoal smoke and chatter. A vendor poked an octopus as it roasted on the open grill, releasing a whiff of warm olive oil and lemon that mingled with the city's characteristic scent of brine and dust. A girl carried a tray of sweet cannoli high above her head, navigating stalls of sardine rolls and anchovies frizzling in floury pans. The crowd went about its usual business - church bells chimed and a christening party spilt out of Basilica San Francesco D'Assisi, bobbing the newly baptized bundle as they strolled.

But this was no ordinary Sunday market. It was the "Free Sicily" organic food fair, part of a growing and increasingly visible movement run by young Palermitans rebelling against the mafia, or Cosa Nostra, and the stranglehold organised crime has on the Sicilian people.

"Whatever you do, DON'T mention the M-A-F-I-A," my northern Italian uncle warned me before my last visit to Sicily - a dusty road trip in a clapped-out Cinquecento in 1993 just after the arrest of the boss of bosses Salvatore Totò Riina. In those days Palermo was under a nightly curfew and had all the tourist appeal of a city break in Kabul. From 1971 the ruling Corleonesi clan waged a campaign of terror, executing anyone in politics or law enforcement who dared challenge their supreme power or investigate their dealings in the international heroin trade. But after the brutal murders of heroic anti-mafia judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992 - in revenge for their historic convictions of 119 mafiosi - public opinion and the state turned against organised crime; and with Riina's arrest, Cosa Nostra began to rethink its image. Under new boss Bernardo Provenzano, the mafia abandoned its highly visible strategy of violence for a new low-profile game: the stealthy recuperation of funds through white collar crime - in health, sanitation and tourism - and the extortion of local protection money or pizzo. Cosa Nostra now extorts £130 million from Palermo's businesses each year, according to anti-mafia organisation Addiopizzo, with an estimated £1.3 billion from the island as a whole slipping directly into mafia pockets. Over 80% of Sicilian businesses pay pizzo to the mafia including hotels, restaurants and cafes. "Tourists are indirectly paying a kind of tax to the Mafia," said Laura Nicastro, an activist for Addiopizzo. "Monthly protection money ranges from €200 for a bar to €1,000 for larger hotels. That means that, for every euro you spend on a coffee, up to 10 cents may go to Cosa Nostra."

Addiopizzo, literally Goodbye Pizzo, is an association that fights the mafia through ethical consumerism asking locals - and tourists - to support businesses that refuse to pay. Initially an anonymous campaign group set up by students in 2004, Addiopizzo now has 300 member traders around Palermo - including hotels, bars, restaurants and even a bank. It offers a new concept of ethical tourism to travellers: a "pizzo-free" holiday in Sicily to help locals fight organised crime.

I began my pizzo-free trip with a double espresso at **Antica Focceria San Francesco** (Via Paternoster, 58) - an addiopizzo member - whose owners Fabio and Vincenzo Conticello also organise the Free Sicily Market. Passed down through five generations of the Conticello family since 1834, the restaurant is a Palermo institution renowned for its upmarket version of cibo povero (street food): pane con la milza (veal spleen sandwiches) and and oily fried pizza or sfincione. But in the last year the focacceria has become as famous for its anti-corruption stance as its menu. In September 2007, despite intimidation and death threats, the Conticello brothers made history by denouncing the mafia in court for the attempted extortion of €50,000 pizzo and the enforced purchase of mozzarella from mafia suppliers, condemning three local bosses to a combined 40 years in jail. The restaurant is now under 24-hour police watch: two moody carabinieri (policemen) stared on as locals formed a haphazard queue that spilt out on to the street. "If you bow your head to the mafia it's the first step in losing your dignity,"

Fabio said. "We wanted to serve pizza that is pizzo-free."

From Piazza San Francesco, Laura took me on a tour of Addiopizzo members. I clung nervously to the back of her Vespa as we weaved through Palermo's narrow backstreets. We stopped outside **Prodotti Tipici Siciliani**, a deli where owner Loredana Fulco was selling a bottle of sickly sweet pistachio liquor to a Swedish tourist. The softly-spoken woman is also the vice president of another anti-racketing association, Libero Futuro, named after Libero Grassi, a local pyjama maker who publicly refused to pay pizzo and was gunned down in 1991.

Our next stop was **Emporio** on Corso Vittorio Emanuele, a giftshop stocked with pizzo-free products: blood orange honey, organic olive oil as well as anti-mafia slogan T-shirts. In the corner was a colourful pile of peaked caps in leopardprints, tartans and tweeds: an initiative by clothing label La Coppola Storta to reclaim the traditional mob symbol - a coppola or flat cap worn at an angle (storta) - as an anti-mafia fashion statement. "We haven't had any trouble yet. We're not afraid of the mafia anymore," said Fabio who recently opened the shop with his girlfriend: "We're not just two people inside this room - we're 40 traders."

Laura dropped me off at one of Addiopizzo's B&Bs: **Sole Luna Della Solidarietà** - Sun and Moon of Solidarity. The brightly painted three-room guesthouse in a 1930s palazzo with a terrace overlooking Palermo's laundry-laden balconies is run by Patrizia Opipari. She reminded me of my Italian grandmother: velvet-skinned and cuddly but with le palle - "balls of steel". Patrizia worked for 12 years on youth projects in some of the most deprived areas of Palermo where Cosa Nostra is a way of life.

She set up the B&B in 2004 to help fund the projects and now donates 5% of her profits to Arciragazzi, the children's charity.

"If you fear the mafia you live your life in black and white because your every action is controlled," Patrizia said, her voice echoing across the rooftop. She is not afraid to speak out - she even wears a sweat-shirt emblazoned with the words: "Without the mafia I see in colour". The rainbow theme runs through the house with coloured antique glass, enamel coffee cups and splashes of vibrant marigolds - a Sicilian version of carboot chic. A spherical lampshade hung in the hallway like a giant orange.

In the morning, Patrizia took me for a wander through La Kalsa, Palermo's ninth-century Arab quarter and part of the old town (centro storico). "I'll be your bodyguard," she teased as she guided me through the mesh of alleyways where Norman churches rub foundations with Arab fortifications and Franciscan monasteries. I looked up at decaying palazzi with crumbling, pock-marked facades. Until the mid-1990s the centro storico was a no-go zone - an abandoned ghetto inside the city. In the 1960s, corrupt minister Vito Ciancimino diverted public funds designated for the post-war reconstruction into lucrative building contracts for the mob. Row upon row of ugly tenement housing replaced art deco palazzi, including Ernesto Basile's Villa Daniela, illegally demolished by the Mafia overnight. Today, the treasures of the city - the eclectic architecture of over a millennium of invading Arab, Norman, Bourbon and Spanish civilisations - are gradually being restored; while a fresh generation of Palermitani battles the cultural degradation of their city with a new pizzo-free art scene. That night, I sipped Cynar - an artichoke sherry as strong as petrol - at EXPA, a bar/modern architecture gallery in a blown-out rooftop and stared out across the spires and domes of Kalsa.

From Palermo, I headed towards the mafia heartlands, south of the city. The autostrada climbed into the hilltops teetering on stilts towards the tiny community of San Giuseppe Jato - home to Riina's henchman Giovanni Brusca who was finally arrested for the murder of anti-mafia judge Falcone in 1996. On the outskirts of the village of Placido Rizzotto is a farming co-operative and agriturismo called **Portella Della Ginestra**, based on land once owned by Brusca, confiscated by the Italian state in 2000. The co-operative employs local villagers to make organic "anti-mafia" wine, pasta and lentils from produce grown on the land. The farming group is one of five in Sicily run by Libera Terra (Free Earth), an association working to give confiscated mafia land back to the local community.

Brusca's abandoned cottage - a solitary rose-pink farmhouse nestled in the Jato valley - now serves as the co-operative's agriturismo: an immaculate three-bedroom guesthouse with white-washed interiors, restored brickwork and polished terracotta tiles. I joined Emiliano, the portly chef, on the front steps as he basked in the afternoon sunlight, cigarette in hand. The fields around us were Technicolor green speckled with yellow ginestra flowers. As the sun set, Emiliano dragged me to the kitchen to show me how to make a tangy sauce for pasta con le sarde (sardine pasta) with wild fennel picked from the surrounding fields. That night, we "toasted" the mafia with the fruit of their old land: homemade gnocchi and involtini di vitello (stuffed veal rolls) washed down with Centopassi, the co-operative's red wine, produced on the same soil that once nourished Giovanni Brusca's Kaggio vineyard.

I threw my shutters open the next morning and found myself in the middle of a cloud. A mist had enveloped the farmhouse. Through the whiteness, the hillside echoed with the clink of sheep bells and the "Ga-Ga-Ga!" of farmers training yapping dogs for the September hunt. After breakfast, Francesco from Libera Terra arrived to take me on an educational "anti-mafia" tour.

In the public imagination, nowhere is most associated with the mafia than Corleone. It once had the highest murder rate in the world - 153 violent deaths between 1944 and 1948 - inspiring American novelist Mario Puzo to borrow the town's name for his fictional crime family in *The Godfather*. Its notoriety was perpetuated by the success of *The Godfather* films and when local boy Salvatore "the beast" Riina rose to become the boss of bosses in 1983. Since then - despite the opening of the anti-mafia museum (Museo Anti-Mafia) and the arrest on-the-run boss Provenzano in 2006 - the town has struggled to rid itself of its mafia image, and recently even proposed changing its name. Mafia tours are considered distasteful in Corleone. (No scenes for *The Godfather* were shot here - tours focus on the film locations around Savoca on the east coast.) In Corleone, only Bar Central still cashes in with bottles of yellow amaro liqueur with its own Il Padrino (*Godfather*) label.

"Many tourists come to Sicily in search of *The Godfather*. They eat cannoli, photograph old men in the street and think: Marlon Brando! Bang! Mafia!" Francesco struck his car steering wheel for emphasis as we swerved to avoid a pothole. "But the truth is not so romantic."

We drove on to Piana degli Albanesi, an orthodox Albanian enclave founded in the 15th century by refugees. Outside the Casa Del Popolo, the old Communist party headquarters, four pensioners sat in the sun, dressed in

heavy tweed suits and peaked caps. The men guided us to a nearby mountain pass, where, on May 1 1947, they witnessed the massacre of 11 contadini (peasants) when the mafia fired on a Labour Day celebration. Mario Nicosia, an agile 89 year old with pale blue eyes, and Zerafino Petta pointed to the craggy limestone outcrop where the shots were fired. "I was saved because I hid behind that rock, but my mate Giovanni got hit," said Zerafino, his voice still full of emotion. "He was 16 years old."

We ended the tour on a happier note: at Libera Terra's new agriturismo, **Rocca delle Pioane**, due to open in September. Eight kilometres north of Corleone, the agriturismo is set on the abandoned estate of Salvatore Riina: the most wanted man in Italy until his arrest in 1993 after 23 years on the run. In the 80s, the Corleonesi bosses ruled Palermo as fugitives hiding out in remote cottages in the wilderness. The stone farmhouse with five bedrooms - once privy to whispered murder plots and heroin deals - perches above the green valley of The Dragon's Throat: a newly appointed Mediterranean marshlands reserve. The estate is run by the Pio La Torre co-operative, named after the Communist leader who first proposed the idea of confiscating the mafia's land and assets - gunned down in Palermo in 1982. "So many courageous men lost their lives in the fight against Cosa Nostra," said Francesco as we walked through the fields. "Now, we, the new generation, are finally able to finish the work that they so bravely began." Buzzards circled overhead as we waded through long wet grass to explore the hidden waterfall sprouting from the craggy rocks below.

More Pizzo-free

Capricci di Sicilia

Sophia Loren lookalike Vincenza Eterno who runs Capricci di Sicilia, is the queen of the margarita con anchiovas pizza. The hostess is the daughter of the policemen who arrested former Corleone boss Luciano Liggio in 1964.

· 6 Via Istituto Pignatelli (Piazza Struzo), Palermo (capriccidisicilia.it).

Il Mirto e la Rosa

"I think the Mafia is afraid of me because I'm a feminist," says restaurant owner Antonella Sgrillo who lectures about pizzo in local schools. Her restaurant specialises in vegetarian and Sicilian fusion cuisine.

· 30 Via Principe Granatelli, Palermo (ilmirtoelarosa.com).

Kursaal Kalhesa

A European Union-funded project, Kursaal Kalhesa is a wine bar, restaurant, bookstore and travel agency within an Arabic palace in the Kalsa neighbourhood.

· 21 Foro Umberto I, Palermo (kursaalkalhesa.it).

Golosandia

Pizzo-free gelato anyone? Sicilians are convinced that ice-cream is good for you; they eat theirs in a brioche or sweet bun as a meal. Golosandia's ice-creams are homemade with local produce: try a "healthy" dollop of pistachio or lemon ice-cream or cassata - Sicilian ricotta cake.

· 101 Via Vittorio Emanuele, 101, Palermo.

Hotel Addaura

Mondello is the Hamptons of Palermo, a white curve of sandy beach beneath the shadow of mount Pellegrino. Addaura may not be to everyone's taste - more business than boutique hotel with a drab terracotta exterior but it faces the seafront, has a pool and is managed by passionately anti-mafia Dario Di Lorenzo, a former policeman.

· 4452 Lungomare Cristoforo Colombo 4452, Palermo (addaura.it).

Way to go

Getting there

Ryanair (0871 2460000, ryanair.com) flies Stansted-Palermo from £35.99 one way inc taxes.

Where to stay

B&B Sole Luna Della Solidarietà, Palermo (0039 091 581 671, solelunabedandbreakfast.org) from €40 per night
 B&B. Portella Della Ginestra, San Giuseppe Jato (+091 857 4810 +328 213 4597, liberaterra.it) from €31 B&B.
 Rocca Delle Poiane, Corleone (+091 857 7655, piolatorreliberaterra.it) from €31 B&B Guided tours to Portella Della Ginestra, Corleone and Cinisi from €430pp for five nights including accommodation, can be arranged through Libera Terra (+091 8577655, liberaterra.it).

For a full list of Addiopizzo businesses go to addiopizzo.org.