
PANE, VINO, E FINOCCHIO: IN (GAY) SICILIA

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The true emblem of Italy is not the tricolor but the sexual organs, the male sexual organs. The patriotism of the Italian people is all there. Honor, morals, the Catholic religion, the cult of the family — all are there, in our sexual organs, which are worthy of our ancient and glorious traditions of civilization.
— Curzio Malaparte, *The Skin*, cited in *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art, and Homosexual Fantasy* by Robert Aldrich (London: Routledge 1993)

... picchi-pacchiu, riferita a salsa piccante, un senso di delizia gustativa erotica: non e' la prima volta, del resto, che gastronomica e sesso vanno d'accordo, anche per l'accertata interdipendenza fra le due cose. — Pino Correnti, *Il Libro D'Oro della Cucina e dei Vini di Sicilia* (Milano: Mursia 1976)

Late in the summer of 1995, I took my first trip to Sicily, the homeland of my maternal grandparents (*cognome: Di Pietro*) accompanied by Robert, my “longtime companion.” We gay New Yorkers, both in our early forties, had two main goals for our trip: to eat our way across the island and to experience its gay life.

An ardent gastronome and amateur chef, I had studied Sicilian cuisine and often prepared its signature dishes for Robert and our friends. *Pasta chi sarde, pasta alla norma,*

involtini di pesce spada, fritedda di carciofi e piselli. I had created reasonably authentic versions of these and other classics, but I longed to experience them in the land where they had originated.

My passion for *la cucina siciliana* was surpassed only by my curiosity about the lot of Sicilian same-sexers. The year before our trip Rob and I had met a Sicilian gay man from Catania, the island's second city. A university professor, Gianni had received his doctorate in mathematics from New York University. It was during one of his annual visits to Manhattan that the three of us met, had dinner, and then, sex. We became close friends, and when Gianni invited us to visit him in Catania, we readily accepted.

The food in Sicily lived up to my expectations, and often exceeded them. (That seafood trattoria in Castellamare del Golfo, that *azienda agricola* in Sant'Alfio. . . .) My opinion that Sicilian cuisine is Italy's most flavorsome became a conviction long before our trip ended. But my impressions of the island's gay life were much more equivocal.

Sicily is rife with sex between men; it has been since antiquity. (Having had limited contact with the island's lesbian population, I necessarily must focus my observations on gay men.) Northern Europeans, mostly aristocrats and artists, began heading south some two centuries ago to escape the anti-homosexual strictures of their Protestant societies and to enjoy what they saw as Sicily's tolerant, pre-Christian pansexuality. The German

baron Wilhelm Von Gloeden, whose turn-of-the-century photographs of nude Sicilian boys and men can be purchased today in souvenir shops all over Sicily, is just the best-known of these sexual pilgrims.

But if sex between men, and a realistic recognition of it as a fact of life, are hardly foreign to Sicily, gay liberation is. The liberationist challenge to traditional masculinity and to age-old conceptions of gender role behavior has made only limited inroads in a culture that is, as Malaparte observed, intensely phallocentric. Yet even the more modest aim of being able to live a “gay lifestyle” can be difficult to achieve. Unmarried adults are expected to live with their parents, and often, because of unemployment and scarce housing, they have few other options. This means that only a minority of relatively privileged Sicilian gays can manage to set up same-sex households. Gay life in Sicily recalls Marx’s observation about the interregnum between capitalism and socialism: the new world is struggling to be born as the old one tenaciously hangs on, refusing to die.

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We arrive in Catania late in the afternoon in early September, when the weather, though far less steamy than during the summer’s peak, remains sultry. Gianni meets us at the airport and drives us to his apartment in the city’s *centro*. Exhausted from the flight, we sleep for a few hours on his sofa bed. Our host wakes us to announce that we are going to a street fair being held by the Partito

Democratico della Sinistra, the de-Leninized incarnation of Italy's Communist Party. Gianni says there will be inexpensive good food and lots of *all'aperto* cruising. He turns out to be right on both counts. We stuff ourselves with grilled sausage, *braciolini*, and real Sicilian pizza, not the thick slabs of bread, sauce, and cheese sold in New York that are really just pumped-up versions of Neapolitan *pizza margherita*.

We're also treated to a visual repast of Sicilian manhood, in its delightfully varied forms. Most of the men who catch our eye are what we had expected and wanted to see: dark-haired, dark-eyed, and olive-completed. But we are surprised by the number of blondes, tawny Mediterranean blondes, with golden skin and green eyes, and the redheads, one of whom reminds me of Malcolm X, with hair texture of an almost African kinkiness. Sitting on picnic benches at one of the open-air restaurants, we observe the passing parade of young *catanesi*, most of whom wear tight jeans. As a prominent *pacco* seems the birthright of so many of these guys, perhaps Malaparte was on the money about the true national "emblem" of Italy.

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Gianni will be our Virgil, our guide to both the gay sexual underground and the tiny organized gay community. As someone who partakes of both worlds, he's ideally suited for the role. Gianni is one of the most "out" gay men in

Catania, and possibly in all of Sicily. Not long before Rob and I arrived, there had been a vicious gay-bashing. As is usually the case, a gang of young men beat and robbed a lone unfortunate *omosessuale*. The cops, however, responded quickly, arresting the bashers in a matter of hours. The next day a reporter and a photographer from the local paper showed up at the gay community center (yes, there are such places in Sicily) to ask questions about the incident. Gianni happened to be there, taking part in a discussion group. When he expressed misgivings about having his picture taken, the reporter assured him the photos wouldn't be used.

The next day the story about the bashing appeared on the front page, along with a large photograph in which Gianni's handsome, bearded face was easily recognizable. Then came the phone calls. "We love you and we don't care what you are," Gianni's sister said. "But you must be discreet!" Gianni told us that although his family was not at all happy about his journalistic coming-out, the responses of his university colleagues and students generally had been favorable. Only one professor, a member of the reactionary Catholic organization Opus Dei, scolded Gianni for his "indiscretion." When we inquired whether his job might be in jeopardy, he assured us that Italy's constitution protected him from discrimination. Indeed, there are no anti-sodomy or other anti-gay laws in Italy, and the age of consent for both sexes, and for homo- and heterosex, is 14.

Homosexuality, we discover, is a tradition in Gianni's upper middle-class family: his father, and two of his paternal uncles, were gay. When Gianni came out in his late twenties, his mother took him aside and said, "Look, you can still get married and have kids. Your father was that way, and he got married." The uncles, neither of whom married, chose different paths. One went into business with his mother, Gianni's grandmother, while the other became something of a gay playboy with a passion for race cars. The first lived with his mother until she died. He had been sexually repressed, an "old auntie," but after her death he began to indulge his taste for *ragazzi di vita*, and one of these hustlers, in an incident that can only be called pasolini-esque, robbed and murdered him. The playboy died a few years later in a car crash, smashing up one of his favorite sports cars on a mountain road.

Gianni, as a teenager just coming into awareness about his own desires, had suspected that his father's sexuality wasn't exactly straight. For one thing, Papa had a succession of close male friends, younger men for whom he, a successful businessman, was employer and mentor. Gianni's suspicions were confirmed, some years before his mother's admission, by a phone call to his parents' home. After the male caller heard Gianni's "Pronto!" he started talking dirty. Gianni laughed and said, "You must want my father." Silence, and then the line went dead.

Sicilian gay men have not experienced the devastation of AIDS in numbers comparable to North America and Northern Europe. Except for Milano and a few other northern Italian urban gay centers, the epidemic in Italy mainly has affected drug users, their sex partners, and consequently, heterosexuals who are not drug users. There are two reasons for this: Southern Italy lacks the commercial sex venues that can foster HIV transmission via multiple, unprotected sexual contacts. Southern Italians and Sicilians also have less contact with North American and Northern European gays, who are more likely to be HIV-positive.

Gianni, however, has had firsthand experience of AIDS. A year before Rob and I met him his lover Luigi had died from the disease. The black sheep son of a wealthy Sicilian family, Luigi had fled the island to live and work in Milano, returning home to die. He and Gianni had been together less than a year when Luigi died, but Gianni was devastated. He continues to dream of his lover, and says that sometimes he feels his ghostly presence.

Gianni's mother, a devout Catholic, disapproved of her son's relationship, and of homosexuality in general. But that didn't stop her from helping Gianni care for Luigi. His mother, Gianni explained, believes we are all sinners but Christian duty requires one to help the sick.

Gianni believes that his mother has never cared much about sex, which probably was for the best given the

family she married into. (“There’s me and my two sisters, so I guess my parents had sex three times,” Gianni says.) Religion and cooking are her preoccupations. A follower of the charismatic priest Padre Pio, she does missionary work throughout Italy. I am surprised that missionaries exist in such an intensely Catholic country, but apparently mamma and her friends, other devout Sicilian housewives, have no trouble finding lapsed believers in need of their proselytizing. When Rob and I accompany Gianni on a visit to his parents, who live in a medieval mountain town an hour from Catania, his mother has just returned from a spiritual mission to the heathens of Calabria.

Rob and I were led to believe that she was going to prepare a lavish *pranzo* in our honor. She is, Gianni claims, a genius of classic Sicilian *cucina casalinga*. But she’s *stanca morta* from her Calabrian ministrations, and offers us only coffee and cake, and a rather chilly reception. As Gianni explains that I am “un siciliano di New York” and Rob “un ebreo newyorkese,” she gives us a distinctly un-maternal glare. Gianni later tells me that she hadn’t liked my gold hoop earring, seeing it as an unnecessarily blatant statement of my sodomitic proclivities. When Gianni speaks with her on the telephone the next day, he informs her that Rob and I have been together 15 years.

“*Che schifoso*,” she says.

La Playa, a white sand beach near Catania, is lovely, if not spectacular, and in early September it is virtually deserted. (Why it has a Spanish name Gianni doesn't know, even though he has been going there since he was a child.). Gianni's friend Turi, also a professor at the university of Catania, but in a different department, joins us.

Although Turi is in his early thirties, his short stature — he's only a little over five feet tall — and his boyish features make him look much younger. He's grown a goatee, which, combined with his shaved head and light brown complexion, gives him a very Nuyorican look. He's lively and mischievous, and after hearing his jaundiced assessment of Sicilian gay life, I say, laughing, "*Hai una mala lingua!*"

That evening the four of us drive to nearby Capo Mulina for a seafood dinner at a waterfront restaurant. During the drive I notice several trucks filled with soldiers. They're very young, poignantly so, and they're clutching very big guns. Gianni says the soldiers have been sent to support the local police in the newly intensified fight against La Cosa Nostra. The murders of anti-Mafia magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992 ignited the long-simmering rage of Sicilians against the mob and the politicians who collaborate with gangsters. (Graffito seen on the side of a building: *Democrazia Cristiana = Cosa Nostra*.) The government recently had seized and shut

down a big, glittery *pasticceria* owned by local don Nitto Santapaola.

Dinner at Capo Mulina is wonderful. I enjoy grilled swordfish; Rob has spaghettini with cuttlefish that has been cooked in its black ink, with tomato, garlic, and olive oil. The night air is warm and a light breeze carries the salty tang of the sea. The fishermen's boats rock gently in the dark water. I feel peaceful and utterly content. Gianni raises a forkfull of his cold octopus salad and says, "Did you know that *purpo*"—dialect for *pulpo*—“is a word for ‘gay’ in Sicily?” He explains: “It is because they say we always are grabbing and groping, like this . . .” He waves his arms, imitating the sinuous tentacles of the sea creature.

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We leave Catania early one morning for the drive to Palermo, where we will spend several days as the guest of Farid, Gianni’s new Lebanese boyfriend. Before we get on the autostrada we stop at Pasticceria Savia, a popular little place near Gianni’s apartment that makes the best *cannoli* I have ever had. Biting into the pastry, I realize I have never before really tasted ricotta cheese. Feeling ravenous, I also have a *brioscia* filled with strawberry gelato and then order *arancini* to go, just in case I get hungry during the drive.

Sicily's interior is stunning in its stark majesty. Once the granary of the Roman empire, the vast open fields are largely denuded of vegetation, rocky and arid. After driving for an hour or so, we stop for gas and to use the public toilets. Rob and I are amazed by the men's room. The walls are covered with crude drawings of huge, erect, and ejaculating phalluses, as well as obscene graffiti. There are names and phone numbers scribbled on the toilet doors and inside the cubicles. *Camionisti* stop here for blow jobs, Gianni explains. He suggests we wait a bit to see if any of these horny truck drivers might show up, but "tearooms" have always made me nervous, and the last thing I want is to get arrested in a highway toilet in Sicily, even though Gianni assures me the police don't raid them. In fact, he says, cops themselves cruise the facilities.

We arrive in Palermo in time for *pranzo* at the home of Gianni's friend Mauro, a 36-year-old unemployed architect who lives with his aged mother in a splendid, floor-through penthouse apartment in a middle-class neighborhood. Mauro's family bought the apartment in the Sixties; he tells us that it's now worth "more than a million dollars American." Being the unmarried son among three siblings, Mauro has primary responsibility for looking after his widowed mother.

Mauro's mother, a short, stocky old lady in a flowered house dress, has prepared us a massive meal: spaghetti *al ragù*, breaded and fried veal cutlets, vegetable side dishes, bread and salad, wine, coffee, fresh fruit, biscotti. As I eat, I realize she is staring at me. I look up. "*Occhi*

siciliani!" she exclaims. "*Occhi siciliani!*" Mauro laughs and tells her that of course the *Americano* has Sicilian eyes, his *nonni* were from Siracusa and Ragusa. She beams. I may not be of Palermitan stock, but apparently *Sicilia orientale* is good enough.

Mauro's mamma doesn't know that her son is gay. He thinks it would upset her terribly, Gianni says; even worse would be his brothers' reactions. Except for the casual sex he sometimes has at local cruising spots, Mauro mostly has his gay life away from Sicily. When we arrived he had recently broken up with a man from Rome.

After a pleasant visit of several hours, we leave Mauro and his mamma and drive to Farid's place. He lives in a nondescript apartment complex built on the outskirts of town during the mafia-fueled construction boom of the early Sixties. Farid, who works as a nurse in a Catholic hospital, is thirty-five, tall and handsome, with reddish-blond hair and mustache. He moves with a practiced grace, and we later learn that he had worked as a fashion model in Beirut. He fled the war-wracked Lebanese capital nine years earlier and had been waiting nearly as long to obtain Italian citizenship.

During the next four days Farid, Gianni, and Mauro show us Palermo and its environs. We see the magnificent Moorish-Norman cathedral at Monreale, the shrine of Santa Rosalia, Palermo's patron, atop Mount Pellegrino, the ghastly-fascinating Capuchin catacombs, with the semi-preserved corpses of middle-class nineteenth-

century *palermitani* arrayed on the walls. We shop for produce in the *vucciria*, which Farid says reminds him of Arab *souks*, stroll through La Kalsa, formerly one of Palermo's most dangerous neighborhoods, and observe a wedding at the gothic church Santa Maria della Catena, near Palermo's port. At the Palazzo Normanni, which houses government offices, I freeze in my tracks at the sight of the tour guide. A young, attractive woman with curly black hair and large dark eyes, she looks exactly like my mother did some forty years ago.

One evening we head out to a "youth fair" at a park near the university campus. Gianni explains that these fairs, which feature live music and other entertainment, always highlight a particular social or political organization.

Tonight the focus is on ArciGay, the national gay and lesbian organization. Arci members have set up booths to distribute literature about the organization, as well as safer-sex pamphlets and free condoms. We walk through the crowd, stopping to inspect a row of billboards. Each billboard is covered with photographs of the Gay and Lesbian Pride parade held in New York in 1994, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall riots that kicked off the gay liberation movement.

That's not the only pleasant surprise I receive. I realize that I can't tell who among these young Sicilians is gay and who is not. Everyone mixes together happily and comfortably, something I can't imagine happening in New York, especially not in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, or any other Italian-American neighborhood. Could it be that I am

glimpsing the face of the tolerant, polymorphous future,
here, on this ancient island?

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Giancarlo, a thirty-seven-year-old, underemployed *palermitano*, is Farid's friend and occasional sex partner. He has thick, reddish-brown hair and beard, heavy but attractively masculine facial features, and a muscular physique earned through manual labor. Like so many Italian men, he manages somehow to look stylish in just a pair of jeans and a sports shirt. He's rather taciturn, but when he does speak his voice is deep and resonant.

Giancarlo lives in a working-class quarter of Palermo with his father and two brothers; his mother is dead. He had managed to conceal his homosexuality from his family but was "outed" the year before by an ex-lover, an American flight attendant. After Giancarlo ended the relationship, the *americano* showed up at Giancarlo's home and, in an astonishingly reckless breach of Sicilian social etiquette, tearfully told Giancarlo's father that he had been his son's lover and that he must, absolutely must persuade his son to take him back.

The father, stunned and enraged, chased away the crazy foreigner. When his son came home, papa demanded to know if what the American had said was true. Giancarlo at first denied it, but then said that he had allowed the American to give him a blow job for money. But that was it, it was purely a commercial transaction, he, Giancarlo, was

no *frocio*. Giancarlo's father accepted this explanation and calmed down. Then he wanted to know how much the *americano* had paid.

Our fascination with Giancarlo is heightened by the knowledge that we would soon see him naked. Gianni has a special treat planned for us: an afternoon at what he calls "the nude gay beach" at Barcarello, a strip of coastline west of Palermo stuck between the better-known beaches of Mondello and Sferracavallo. Upon arriving we leave the car in the parking lot and walk west along the coastline for about a quarter-mile. As we make our way through a path that grows increasingly narrow and rocky, there are dizzying cliffs to our right, and the sea to our left. It's a wild, primeval place, this Barcarello, yet sensual and inviting, too.

We finally reach our destination, which isn't really a beach but a section of massive rocks whose surfaces are large and flat enough to accommodate sunbathers. Men, alone and in groups, recline on the rocks or climb among them looking for partners. Most are naked, others wear those skimpy bathing suits European men favor. We find a rock big enough for the five of us — Gianni, Farid, Giancarlo, Rob, and I — spread our towels, and strip.

Nothing happens for a few minutes, until Farid starts the show by kissing and fondling Giancarlo. Soon we are all intertwined with each other, coupling and tripling and quintupling happily. Our friends smell musky, reminding me of the Italian male's aversion to deodorant. Normally I

find this off-putting but it seems appropriate for an *all'aperto* orgy. Rob and I, with our more fastidious American hygiene, smell *too* clean, too sanitized, for this Mediterranean pagan phallic rite.

Our activity attracts the attention of the other cruisers, and soon we're surrounded by naked and semi-naked men, some masturbating, others just watching. No one speaks; the silence is broken only by the crashing of the waves on the rocks below and the sporadic cries of "*Vengo!* *Vengo!*"

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Back in Catania after our Palermo stay, we spend our last Saturday night in Sicily club-hopping with Gianni, Farid, and Turi. The first place we hit, Club Pegaso, plays thunderingly loud techno music in its main room. There's also an upstairs video lounge showing American porno and a basement "dark room" for cruising and sex. The crowd is very young, except for one *anziano* of fifty or so, who dances solo on a platform, wearing only bikini briefs. He seems totally absorbed in the brutally loud music and his own movements, but every now and then he glances down from his pedestal and smiles at the crowd, like a benevolent high priest acknowledging his acolytes.

After a few hours we leave, deafened, for another club. Le Stelle, set on a hillside on the outskirts of town, is an outdoor disco run by two glamorous "lipstick lesbians." The crowd is mixed in age and gender, the music is mostly 70s and 80s disco tunes played at a bearable volume, and the

atmosphere is relaxed, casual, unlike the frenzied party-hearty mood at Pegaso. The five of us drink, dance, and have a wonderful time. I look at the faces surrounding me and swear I could be in Brooklyn's Spectrum, a popular disco whose clientele is primarily Italian-American gays and lesbians. ("Saturday Night Fever" was filmed there, back when it was a straight club called Odyssey 2000.) Except here the crowd is better dressed and better coiffed.

We rise late on Sunday, having stayed out drinking and dancing until five in the morning. Gianni and Farid have planned a fabulous pranzo for us, the last meal we will share before Rob and I return to New York. Turi's coming, and Mauro is driving in from Palermo. Farid has mastered the cuisine of his adopted home, and he takes over the preparation of the meal. As I have dreamed of cooking Sicilian food in Sicily I want to challenge him for control of the kitchen, but it's useless, his *idee fixe* of Mediterranean hospitality demands that hosts cook, guests eat.

By mid-afternoon we're gathered around the table, sipping wine, as Farid serves. First course: zuppa di cucuzza, the long, mild-tasting green squash popular throughout Southern Italy, cooked in a delicate chicken broth and garnished with grated *parmigiano*. Next, spaghetti with chopped fresh tomato, lightly sauteed red onion, a hint of garlic, and shredded basil leaves. Then, roast chicken that has been marinated in olive oil, the juice of blood oranges, rosemary, bay leaves, and garlic. The side dishes are pan-roasted, garlicky potatoes sprinkled with chopped parsley,

and the green cauliflower Sicilians call *vruccoli*, sauteed with black olives.

The abundant good food reminds me of Sunday feasts at my Aunt Lina's house. After Mass my parents, my brother, and I would drive to her home in Queens to spend the entire day. The midday meals were enjoyable, but as a quiet gay kid uncomfortably aware of his difference, I often felt alienated from my male relatives, who could be aggressive and boorish, and uncomprehending of my preference for books and art over sports.

Here, in Catania, *a tavola* in Gianni's home with his friends, now mine and Rob's, I truly feel I am with *famiglia*. Food, desire, friendship — it all comes together for me, on the island from which my relatives left, impoverished but hopeful, some seventy-five years ago. These men I'm eating, joking, and laughing with, whose bodies I've enjoyed and whose lives I've entered, have welcomed me as a returned cousin, and I don't want to leave. I want to be the Di Pietro who came back and stayed: a sweet dream, and one entirely out of the question.

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POSTSCRIPT

Several months after we returned to the States Farid finally received his *documenti*, and is now an Italian citizen. Mauro has gone the opposite route. He became lovers with a Spaniard he met in Rome and is preparing to move to Barcelona. Emboldened by his decision to leave Sicily,

he came out to his family. His mother predictably was upset, but her distress had more to do with his leaving home than his sexuality. Mauro's sister proved totally supportive, explaining sensitively to her children that *zio* was gay and had found happiness with a man from Spain. His brothers did not welcome the news, but at least they didn't throw a fit, as Mauro had feared.

Gianni and Farid split up amicably after one year and remain friends. Farid has a new lover, Nino, a *palermitano* whose family, Gianni says, is mafioso. Cosa Nostra they may be, but Nino's relatives understand and accept the relationship, treating Farid like a new member of the family. I wonder what might happen if Farid ever decides to break up with Nino.

These days the primary political concern of gays and lesbians in Sicily and throughout Italy is to win official recognition of *unioni civili*, domestic partnerships with legal and economic benefits comparable to heterosexual marriage. (Two Sicilians — a middle-aged lesbian couple from Taormina, one of whom works in the office of that city's mayor — have become national leaders in the cause.) But the Left, now in power for the first time through the dominant position of the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS) in the *L'Ulivo* (Olive Tree) coalition, has proved a fickle friend. To maintain the crucial support of its coalition partners the *popolari*, former members of the defunct Christian Democrats, the PDS has refused to endorse civil unions. Some PDS members have even condemned gay partnerships in language that could've

been drafted by the Vatican. Other leftists, however, have vociferously denounced the PDS's opportunism.

La lotta continua.

George De Stefano

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