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TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF “FREE LAND”

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In the Mafia’s Heartland, Anti-Mafia Farms Flourish

 Sicily’s Placido Rizzotto Cooperative brings jobs, development, and hope to Cosa Nostra territory



George de Stefano

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Gianluca Faraone of the Placido Rizzotto Cooperative and two visitors (Photos by R. Eisdorfer)



Trattoria at the Placido Rizzotto Coop



Products of the coop sold under the Libera Terra brand



The underground cell where mafioso Gioivanni Brusca hid his kidnap victim Giuseppe Di Matteo

Looking into a hole deep in the ground, I saw the horror of the Sicilian Mafia.

It was a hot and sultry June day in 2005 when my partner, Rob, and I, along with Giovanni, a friend and university professor, visited the town of San Giuseppe Jato in western Sicily. The town is near Corleone, and, like the place made notorious by *The Godfather*, it was a Mafia stronghold. We were in San Giuseppe Jato to visit the Placido Rizzotto Social Cooperative, a farm established in 2001 on 445 acres of land confiscated from two of Sicily's most notorious Mafia bosses, Salvatore "Totò" Riina and Giovanni Brusca.

In 1996, the Italian government enacted the Asset Confiscation Law, which authorized the confiscation of property and other assets of mafiosi. The government contracted with Libera Terra (Free Land), a coalition of civil society anti-Mafia groups, to administer the program. In the first four years of the law, nearly 900 properties in Sicily and Southern Italy, as well as other assets worth \$120 million, were repossessed from La Cosa Nostra figures and converted into agricultural cooperatives.

The Placido Rizzotto cooperative is named in honor of a socialist trade union leader from Corleone murdered by the Mafia in 1948.

In April 2005, I emailed Gianluca Faraone, the president of the cooperative, saying that I was coming to Sicily and requesting a tour and an interview. Faraone replied that he would be happy to show us the farm and properties and speak with us.

We arrived in mid-afternoon, when the scorching sun was at its peak, after a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Catania in eastern Sicily. When we arrived, Gianluca was there to greet us. He was a lean, shaggy-haired twenty-eight-year-old with a serious, unsmiling demeanor.

First, Gianluca showed us the inn the cooperative had built from one of the crumbling stone farm buildings on the property. The restaurant was a large, long room filled with wooden tables and chairs,

exuding a rustic charm. In the lobby, a stand sold "Libera Terra" pasta made from organic wheat grown on the cooperative's lands. Gianluca said the cooperative would soon open the inn, where tourists could experience rural life, eat farm-to-table local specialties, and learn about the cooperative's mission.

Gianluca next showed us the fields where the cooperative grows wheat, olives, and grapes. As we stood in the sweltering heat, he told us that the lands are worked by about 25 seasonal workers, in addition to 14 cooperative members, volunteers, and employees. He said he hoped that the cooperative would eventually grow to provide more jobs to unemployed local youths who were at risk of being recruited by organized crime.

When we asked whether the cooperative had experienced problems since it opened four years earlier, Gianluca told us its guard dog had been shot, farm animals killed, and farm machinery destroyed. In its first year, the company that had agreed to provide the cooperative with a wheat harvester reneged after being threatened. Police intervention was needed to acquire a harvester. In 2004, the year before we visited, arsonists burned some 25 acres of the cooperative's wheat fields. But despite the challenges, Gianluca noted that the regional and national governments supported the cooperative, and most locals welcomed the presence of an enterprise dedicated to Libera Terra's goal of "cultivating and restoring dignity to lands long humiliated by Mafia arrogance."

Next, we left the sun-drenched fields for a darker place, literally and figuratively. Gianluca took us to the abandoned country villa once owned by Giovanni Brusca, a member of the Corleonese Mafia whose brutality was extreme even by Cosa Nostra standards.

Years earlier, police had raided the villa while searching for Giuseppe Di Matteo, the twelve-year-old son of Santino Di Matteo, a Mafia assassin. After he was arrested, Di Matteo became a "pentito," a government witness, and he revealed Brusca's key role in the 1992 assassination of prosecutor Giovanni Falcone. To silence Di Matteo, Brusca had his son kidnapped, hid him in the villa for two years, and then ordered him to be strangled and his body dissolved in acid.

Inside the dark, trash-strewn villa, Gianluca showed us the underground room where Giuseppe Di Matteo was hidden and murdered. "Room" is too generous a description for what was basically a hole in the ground under the villa's floor.

The police had tossed the villa during their search for Giuseppe. Among the disarray were children's toys and a playpen. While Giuseppe Di Matteo endured his subterranean torment, *la famiglia Brusca*, the mafioso, his girlfriend, and their son enjoyed normal family life.

Those minutes we spent in that house of horror haunted us afterward. When we left Gianluca and the Placido Rizzotto cooperative, we drove in Giovanni's Land Rover to Corleone, the three of us silent the entire ride. We hadn't eaten, so we stopped in a small trattoria. It was late afternoon, past lunchtime, and we were the only customers.

Giovanni predicted that the staff would not be welcoming, and he was right. We were served efficiently, but there was a chill in the air that didn't come from air conditioning. We were outsiders, Giovanni said, and hence suspicious. Had the staff realized we were three gay men, our reception would have made the chilly treatment seem hospitable. The food was serviceable, nothing special, and it certainly didn't compensate for the ambiance.

Still affected by what we'd seen at the Brusca villa, we wouldn't have enjoyed our meal if it had been the best cuisine on the entire island.

Twenty years after we visited the Placido Rizzotto Cooperative, the enterprise not only remains in existence but has grown to occupy more confiscated Mafia lands. Its product lines include organic pasta, olive oil, grains, and legumes. Its wines, sold under the Centopassi brand, are distributed throughout Italy and Europe and are available in some US cities. Its *agriturismo* hosts visitors from Italy, Europe, and beyond.

A 2021 study of the cooperative's activities and performance found that the Libera Terra project was

“constantly growing” and that it had “a positive impact...in terms of social and employment opportunities.” Most of the value it generated went to the workers. The “continuous investment in skills development makes the cooperative a healthy business model that respects workers’ rights, in contexts where this is often difficult to find.”

Twenty years to the day after our 2005 visit, Giovanni Brusca was completely free. He was released on June 5, 2025, after serving four years on parole following a twenty-five-year prison sentence. Brusca admitted to 150 murders, including the assassination of Giovanni Falcone and his wife Francesca Morvillo, also a prosecutor, and the killing of Giuseppe De Matteo. (In an interview for a 2024 book, he said he was a “monster” and claimed to be haunted by his crimes.)

Ironically, the clause in Italy’s “pentito” law that allowed for the release of mafiosi who collaborated with the government was endorsed by Falcone. Now, Brusca’s release has ignited a debate about the law.

The widow of one of the bodyguards slain with Falcone and Morvillo said, “I am well aware that the law has been applied, but I am deeply bitter.” She added, “I believe it is disgraceful that Brusca, despite having benefited from the law on cooperating witnesses, is now a free man.”

Brusca will now live outside of Sicily under a false identity in Italy’s witness protection program.

Meanwhile, the Placido Rizzotto Cooperative and its resilient members continue to offer a model of a different Sicily, one where legality, social justice, and sustainable growth flourish where corruption, terror, and murder once reigned.

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Written by George de Stefano

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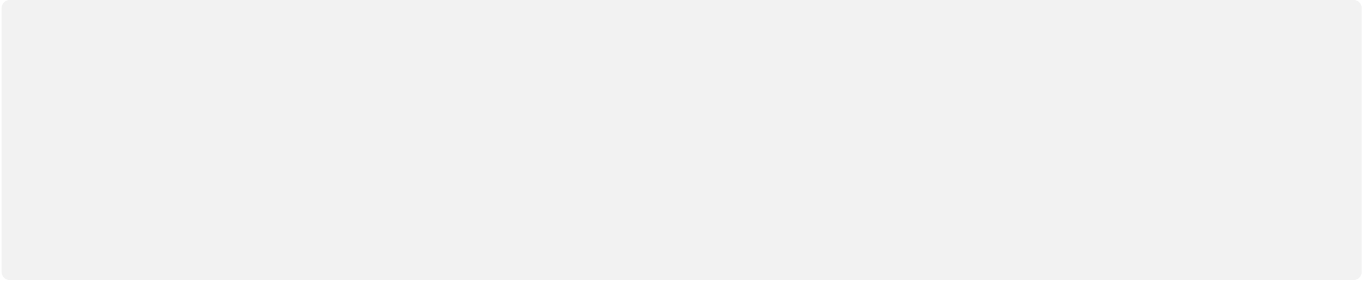
George de Stefano is an author ("An Offer We Can't Refuse: The Mafia in the Mind of America") and a contributor to other books and print/online publications.

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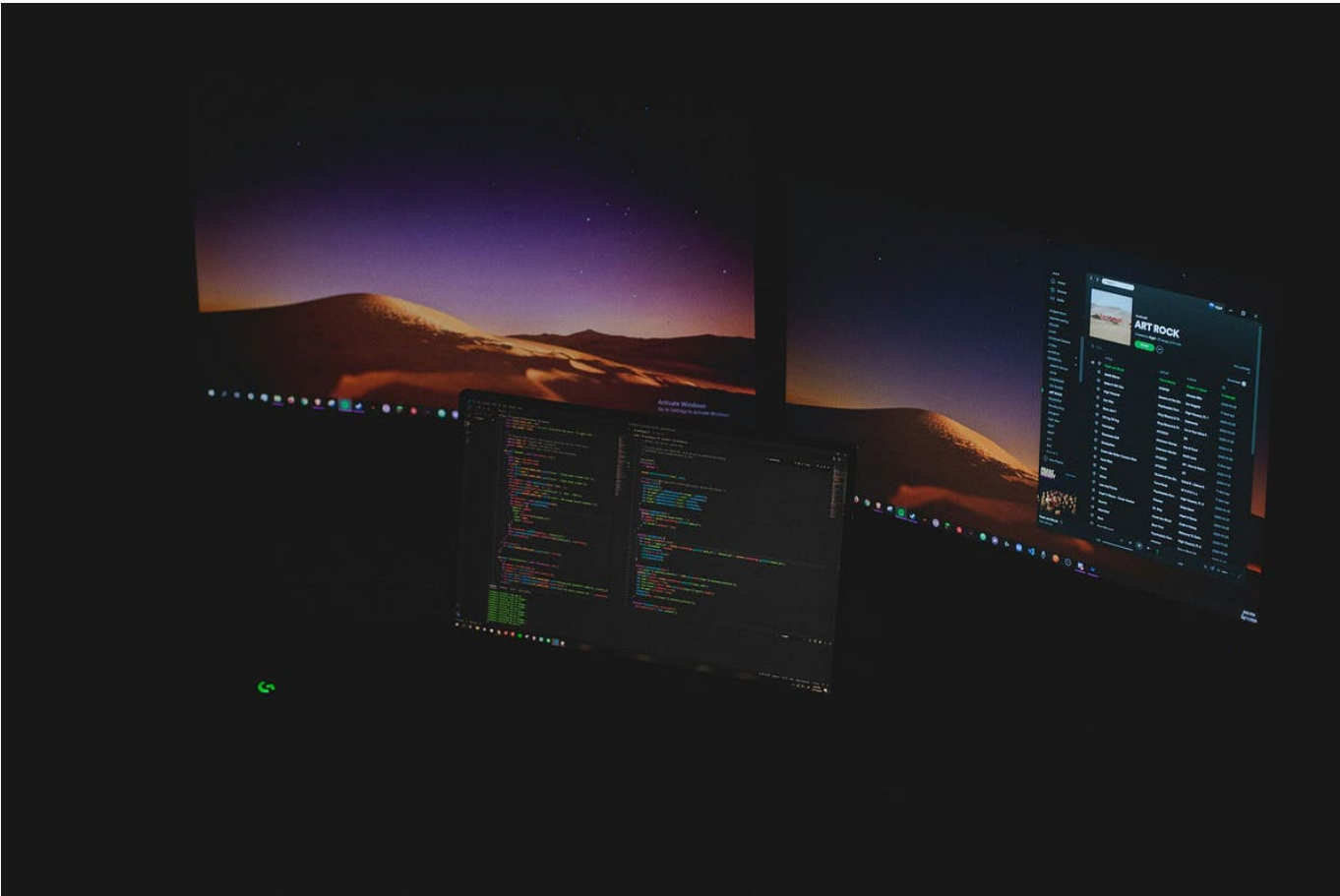
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and patron of knowledge; whose Red Fort a hub
for poets like Ghalib, Zoude, and Momin:

*My heart is not at peace in this desolate homeland
Who has found eternity in this ephemeral abode*

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the throne in the revolt's symbolically
placed on the throne.

Arrest and Trial

The British suppressed the revolt, arrested, and beheaded his sons at a platter before
him. He was exiled to Rangoon (Burma), where he spent his final days.

Final Wish and Grave

Zafar had unfulfilled to be buried in Delhi, quoting another line of his poetry:

*How unfortunate is Zafar! For burial.
Not even two yards of land were to be had in the land of the beloved*

Lesson from History

Bahadur Shah Zafar lived as a king who became immortal by his poetry.

Time was there affluence • then is so can happen
Power, knowledge, and love can be ruled by destiny
Poetry and literature stand over, humorless as one cause of hearts

Bahadur Shah Zafar was that of a king who became immortal through his poetry,
He's the last Mughal king, old man pious verses.



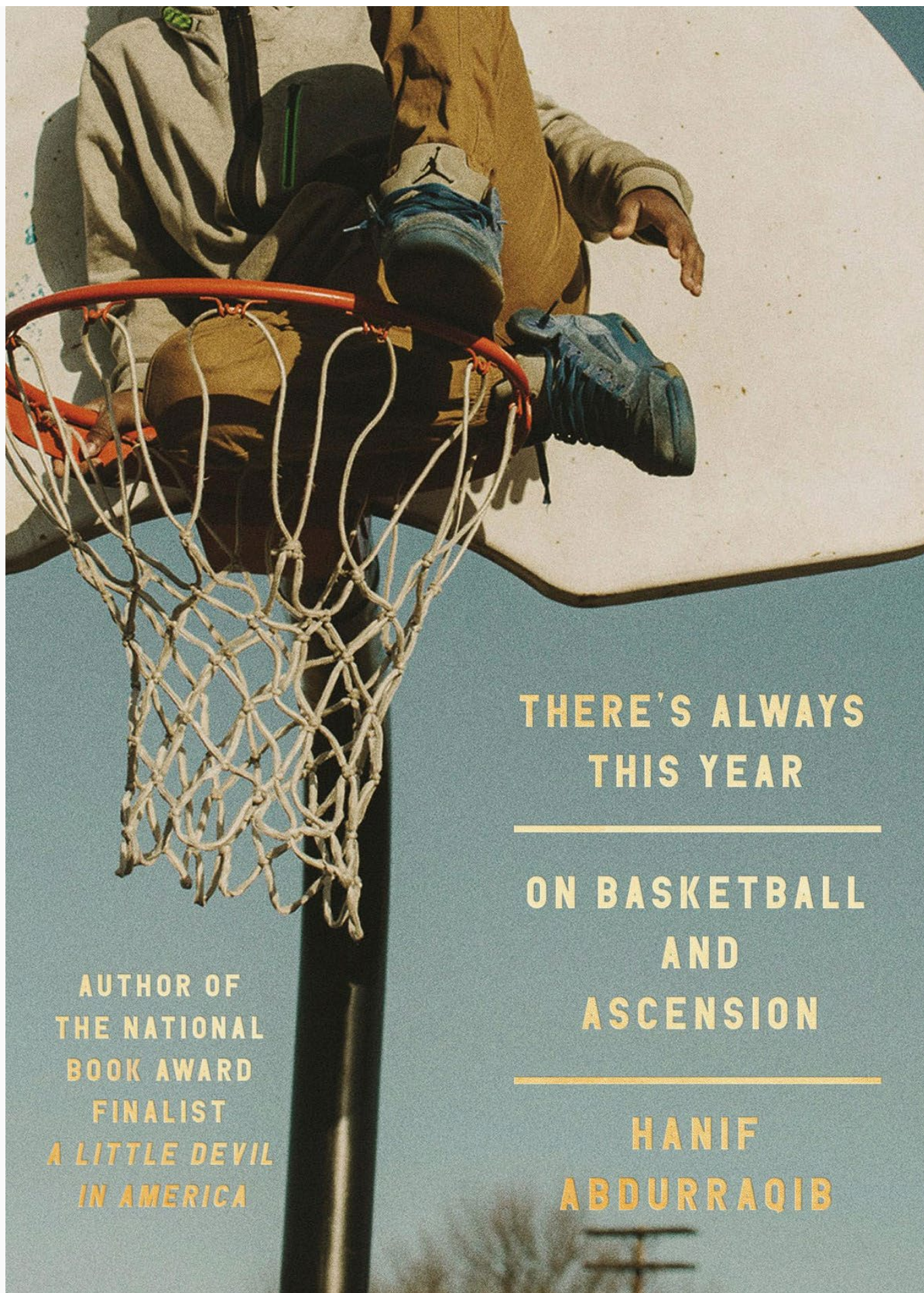
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