

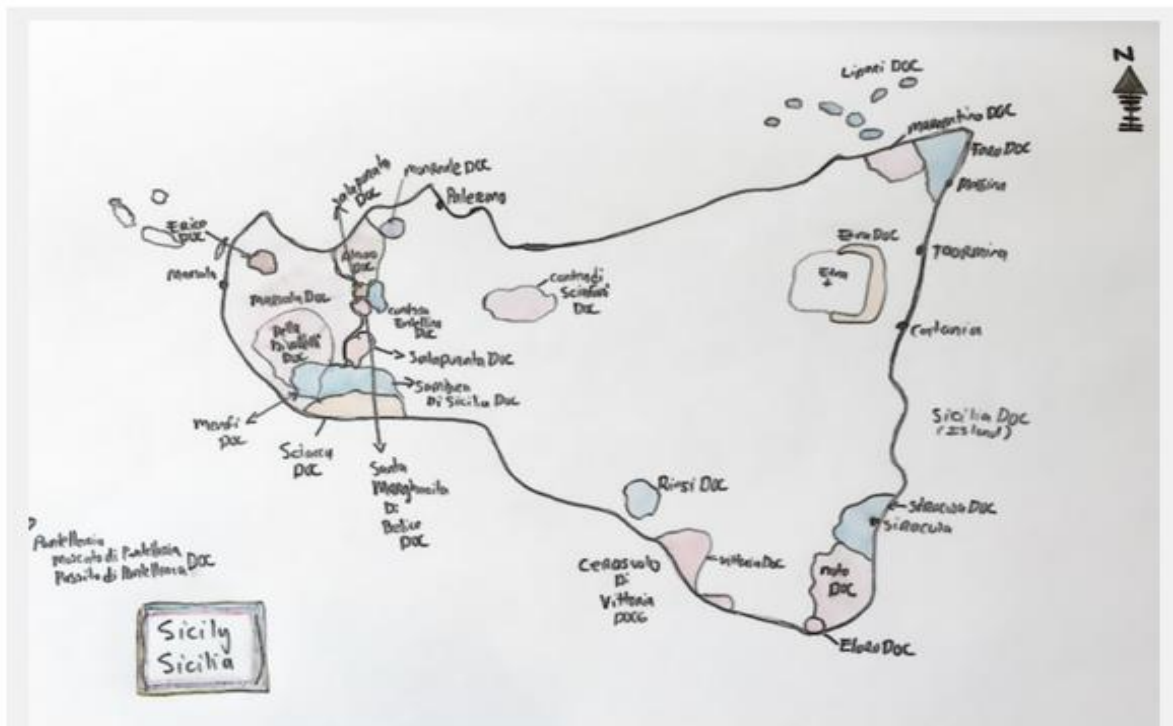


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A Love for Sicilia - Wine, Food, People and The Land - Part I - Palermo

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Sicily - A Drawing I Created Simply Because I couldn't find a Map that was Showing All of the Wine Regions

I had the privilege of stepping onto the beautiful island of Sicilia this past April (2017). I have been fortunate to have been through almost all of Italia: North to South, East to West. I have been to all larger Italian cities and many numerous small ones. I never tire of the adventures and experience of this amazing country.

Sicily loomed large in my mind and represents a land where it is not just a crossroad but more than that—it is a rich culture that would be Sicily with or without being a crossroad. I am student of history: actually I am passionate about history. While many people have come and influenced Sicily Sicily has persevered and has and is a culture that has included it's historical experience but something that is all it's own.

The Normans, the Spanish, the Arabs, Greeks, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and so fourth have left their mark. Sicily is now appreciated in a way that it should always been viewed—it is an expansive Mediterranean land of expansive vistas, mountains, hills, volcanoes, and many smaller islands surrounding the larger land. I think I came to visit Sicily late not because I didn't think it was not important ... I thought how will I get around? I didn't think it would be easy to get from all points on the island. I have never thought of Sicily as small and getting there it was much larger than what I had imagined.

I have tasted all Sicilian varieties many times prior to arriving and have always found these varieties compelling, alluring and something I cannot stay away from for too long. Nero d'Avola was the first Sicilian red wine and Grillo the first Sicilian white wine. And I was finally able to taste the lovely red wine grape that I cannot find in the US – the Perricone grape. I was very excited to taste a few Perricone wines.

I was delighted to attend *Sicilia in Primeur* this year at Radicipura. I was delighted to see the diversity of the tour list and was lucky to get on my first choice which was western Sicily. I picked a tour of visiting Cantine's that I wasn't aware of or had not tasted wines from.

I landed in Palermo to begin my tour of wine producers [Baglio di Pianetto](#), [Alessandro di Camporeale](#), [Dei Principi Spadafora](#), [Tenuta Rapitalà](#), [Fuedo di Sisa](#) and [Cantine Rallo](#) but before I started on my trek with fellow wine journalists, sommeliers and garden journalists I had a tour of Palermo. I visited the Centro Storico and I was delighted to get a guided tour. I like to take a break and listen to someone and glean their knowledge about this large and very accessible city (I am usually my own tour guide). The Centro Storico was very walkable and I took in as much as one can in this short visit. While I have read about the many cultures who have visited and some have stayed is both the complexity and depth of it's beauty and mystery of Palermo.



I am outside the Palazzo dei Normanni



In courtyard of the Palazzo dei Normanni



Exterior wall to the Capella Palatina



Main altar of the Capella – the very beautiful Christ Pantocrator



The ceiling with it's Muqarnas – an Arabic architectural detail that makes this chapel so unique with a blend of several styles



Beautiful Dome: No Space without Any Mosaic Detail



Glorious mosaic-a very intriguing icon with Christ and God.

My first stop was the Palazzo dei Normanni started in the 9th century by the Emir of Palermo. The Cappella Paletina was built by Roger II in 1132 which was built on an older Chapel incorporating Byzantine mosaics, Arabic elements of Muqarnas (ceiling) and arches and housed in a Norman structure. The design of the Cappella is not the result of an accident but purpose built. I know and often forget the many Byzantine influences in many churches and chapels in Sicily – it is at one level unexpected but in another comforting and awe inspiring. The Christ Pantocrator unifies all of the iconography as is the expected element that brings the entire mosaic art work together. I would love to experience a mass here—the smell of incense, the sounds of the assembled, the music: a truly engaged and special sense of spirituality must happen here.



Teatro Massimo in Palermo: the largest opera house in Italy; final scenes of Godfather II were filmed here

All Italian cities have their charms and absolute uniqueness. I did have preconceived notions about Palermo—what would I find? What would it be like? We all do this to not make a pre-judgement but to both look forward to a visit and to level set expectations. Rarely have ever visited a city and especially in Europe where I was disappointed. Palermo is a city of endless charm—both distant from the Peninsula of Italy but close because of language and hospitality. Even though Palermo is both an Italian and Sicilian city it feels exactly the way I expected. I thought the city was absolutely clean.... immaculate. I wish my home base of San Francisco was as clean.



Love the complexity of this Cathedral exterior and I like how visitors can go to roof top.



Gothic arches uniting the Bell Towers - Intriguing and I cannot think of Another Cathedral's Exterior that has a similar design



I then went to the Cattedrale Metropolitana della Santa Vergine Maria Assunta (Palermo Cathedral). The exterior doesn't match the interior. The exterior is ornate—a beautiful deep sandstone colour and the eye wonders it's many architectural elements and designs. It almost looks more castle-like than cathedral. The impressive and famous main portico a Catalan-Gothic expression (by Domenico and Antonello Gagini) and is on the southeast corner versus entry from west. The cathedral exterior ornateness gives an homage to Palermo's past and it certainly doesn't feel like many of the Duomo's in the rest of Italy.

The interior is a marked contrast from exterior to interior. The nearly ecstatic exterior gives way to a white Baroque interior. I was hoping for the exterior to match the interior as an ultimate testament to Sicilian design. I was not disappointed and found intrigue in the altar with it's many candelabra, the long aisle, side chapels, treasury and the solar meridian (which I would not have expected).





A Hole in the Dome to Let the Sun come Through to Align to the Meridian on the Cathedral's floor



The Meridian with the Astrological Markings

After visiting Palermo Cathedral, I walked down the Via Vittorio Emanuele you can stroll this main Via to see other sites. An impressive corner is the heart of where Palermo is split in quarters: The Quattro Canti. Each quarter has a lot of representation and meaning. The Quattro represent the four seasons; each have a patron saint as well as one of the better known Spanish Kings of Sicilia. The Southerly one represents the neighbourhood Albergheria is attached to the Palazzo Reale and is in honour of Charles V and the patron saint is Christina of Bolsena. The west corner is in the Seralcadio/Capo neighbourhood and is in honour of Philip II and the patron saint is Santa Ninfa. The north corner is in La Loggia neighbourhood and in honour of Philip IV and the patron saint is Oliva di Palermo. The east corner is in Kalsa and in honour of Philip III and the patron saint of this corner and patron saint of Sicilia is Sant'Agata. It was a very small intersection and is busy but not overwhelmingly so.



Turn the corner from Quattro Canti and you'll see the Pretoria Fountain; elevated above the street level.



The Pretoria Fountain



The Pretoria Fountain – Looking East; Santa Caterina is the church in back; on the left is the Cosma di Palermo

Go towards church Santa Caterina and take a right to get a splendid view of Santa Maria dell'Amiraglio and San Cataldo. Santa Maria dell'Amiraglio holds status of co-Cathedral and is a treasury of Byzantine mosaics and dates back to the 1,100s—smaller than the Capella but an outstanding structure of this era. Santa Maria dell'Amiraglio is part of the Italo-Albanian Greek Catholic Church which is in communion with Rome. The Arab traveler Ibn Jubayr said of this cathedral: "the most beautiful monument in the world."

To the west of this cathedral is the Church of San Cataldo with 3 pink domes—it is apparent without knowing the history that this was once a mosque now converted to a church. San Cataldo holds a special place in terms of Arabic and Norman architecture—the outside is clearly and Arabic style and the interior is completely Norman. San Cataldo is a church of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre which reports directly to the Holy See.





In the background is San Cataldo

I then was able to visit a church that I wanted to see—at least in terms of ornateness. The Church of the Gesù. The Gesù is a Jesuit church and constructed in 1590 and completed in 1636—every surface of the church is in bas relief. Look up at the ceiling and you'll notice the mural is very striking. The church was damaged considerably during WWII and the new ceiling fresco was completed and dedicated in 2009.



Beautiful and striking fresco dedicated in 2009

And finally, I head to the outdoor market. Outdoor markets for me represent my desire to not only have authentic regional cuisine but what I would cook if I was there. The historic market is known as Ballarò and is on Via Ballarò—the market is a stones throw from the Gesù.



And lastly, I noticed beautiful murals and outdoor wall art. This shows a certain character of history, artistic side and playfulness of Palermo.



This is part one and more to come about my trek to Sicilia. Don't wait to see Sicily—it is a wondrous place to visit and I cannot wait to return. Please stay with me on this journey.



Salute,

James

James the Wine Guy

Demystifying Wine...One Bottle at a Time from all wine regions around the world.

Wines courtesy of producer.

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