

COOL CATANIA

THE DARK BEAUTY OF CATANIA'S LAVA-STRUCTURED STREETS BELIES A LIVELY CITY BRIMMING WITH EXPLOSIVE PASSION FOR FOOD, FUN, LIFE AND ART. **RICK LE VERT** VISITS A SICILIAN CITY WHERE MODERNITY AND TRADITION GO HAND IN HAND

Aer Lingus flies to Catania in Sicily*
from Dublin every Sun

*Commencing 29 Mar

Bar Tazza d'Oro dal 1980



PHOTOGRAPHY JON CUNNINGHAM



SOME CITIES YOU can read on their surface. And then there are those like Catania, where the surface hangs over them like a nearly impenetrable veil hiding their inner workings from the prying eyes of strangers. Even in the sharp light of the Mediterranean sun, the dominant greys and blacks of Sicily's second city – the lava rendering of its Baroque façades and the lava cobbles of its streets – radiate moodiness.

I spent several days scratching away at the surface of Catania, catching glimpses of the life behind the veil; following voices down shadowy alleyways to find chic bars full of university students drinking cocktails to the sounds of classic Motown; pushing through the curtained doorways of faceless trattorias to fall upon lunchtime crowds eagerly tucking into plates of pasta; stumbling upon a black-tie function in the elegant ballroom of a Baroque villa, where the giddy laughter of the attendees was matched only by that of the wait staff enjoying a smoke in the darkened courtyard below; or poking my head in the doors of countless churches and windowless shops – it was like sneaking a peek into the inner sanctum of Byzantine Christianity or the glorious world of rubber gaskets, depending on the door in question.

But life in Catania can abruptly break into the open, like it did the Sunday evening shortly after my arrival. An hour earlier, all that moved here were wisps of steam ◯



Market street in Catania

CAFÉS HEAVED WITH FAMILIES IN SEARCH OF *GELATO* AND RICH SICILIAN PASTRIES. SURVIVAL ARTISTS ON THEIR BUZZING SCOOTERS WEAVED IN AND OUT OF THE TRAFFIC



leaking from the snow-capped peak of nearby Mount Etna, and the odd bit of paper that fluttered around the Piazza Duomo to the rattling accompaniment of the shutters on the shops and cafés.

Those cafés suddenly heaved with families in search of *gelato* and rich Sicilian pastries. Survival artists on their buzzing scooters weaved in and out of the clogged traffic, and corner kiosks did a brisk business in *seltz limon* and Nutella frappés – the first is a refreshing blast of fresh-squeezed, fizzy lemonade; the second a calorie explosion of Nutella, cream, milk, ice cubes, and brioche cakes whipped to the consistency of cold, liquid lava. Frappé in hand, I joined the masses for the *passeggiata*, the evening stroll down the via Etna's broad expanse. Catania may not be quaint, but it has its charms.

The pre-dawn cacophony of the *pescheria*, the fabled fish market, jolts Catania to life like an ancient, ritualistic alarm clock. By mid-morning a slick layer of scales and slime had covered the lava cobbles of the small square where local fishermen sell their catch. Shoppers picked their way gingerly over the greased surface, but one burly fishmonger used it to his advantage, effortlessly dragging a big blue tub of sardines from one end of the square to the other.

Perched on a terrace overlooking the square, I watched the spectacle unfold. A bloody-aproned man wielding a cleaver the size of his arm hacked steaks from a swordfish. Another opened sea urchins, one after the other, and spooned out their mushy insides. A grizzled veteran kept splashing cold water on the strikingly beautiful

shapes and patterns of his display – tubs of glistening, silver-bellied anchovies; curling scrolls of red and grey mullet; amorphous blobs of monkfish; jumbles of octopus tentacles; and inky mounds of squid.

Most species I could recognise, but some, like a curious, fingernail-sized mollusc apparently found only on the beaches south of Catania, baffled me. “They’re a very good sign,” was all I could get from one local, his carrier bag bulging with sardines. “The water must be very clean for them to live.”

From fish to fashion... “It’s like a catwalk, except you’re the one moving,” Aixa Rodriguez said, referring to one of the long vaulted galleries in the Palazzo Biscari, an 18th-century villa recently converted by couture designer and Catania native, Marella Ferrera, into an elegant design studio and boutique fashion museum. Curator of the museum, Aixa could just as easily have been one of the exotic creatures seen modelling Ferrera’s works in the gauzy images that fill the palazzo’s trusty ground-floor windows.

The original pieces lined one side of the gallery: a bustier of terracotta shards stitched together with fine monofilament thread; a dainty dress of traditional lace embroidered with bits of reddish coral, clumps of dried sea sponge and shavings of black lava; a sculptural headpiece made of papyrus; a macramé blouse of raffia fibre; and a bra of copper thread, twisted and tangled into something resembling two very fragile bird’s nests. Maybe the imagery of the market was too fresh in my mind ◊



A quiet street in the nearby hilltown of Taormina



THE PRE-DAWN CACOPHANY OF THE *PESCHERIA*, THE FABLED FISH MARKET, JOLTS CATANIA TO LIFE LIKE AN ANCIENT, RITUALISTIC ALARM CLOCK

— maybe I was just hungry — but as Aixa talked to me about the rich references literally woven into Marella’s designs, I couldn’t help thinking about caponata.

In profane language, caponata or *caponatina* as it’s called in Catania, is a stew. Prepared properly, though, this classic Sicilian melange of aubergine, peppers, tomatoes, onions, and celery results in a dish of such powerful complexity that it once left the great food writer, Waverly Root, more than a little weak in the knees. The simple key to its sublime success he deduced after an especially memorable meal of it, is to first spice and sauté the base ingredients separately, before combining them in a large pan and finishing them with vinegar, capers, olives and a dash of anchovy juice.

There are endless variations on this sweet and sour marvel. Some throw in pine nuts, raisins, or chopped basil. Others add swordfish, octopus, artichokes, or even grated chocolate. But a true *caponatina* has as many different flavours as it does ingredients, and each is perceived at the same time without losing their separate personalities. Call it the condensed history of Sicily in a pan, sizzling with vivid associations of land and sea, of family and religion, all of it mingling with the densely textured culinary influences of a cultural crossroads. Simultaneously ancient and modern, Baroque and earthy, Ferrera’s wonderful creations struck me as a high-fashion *caponatina*, and as something deeply, almost disturbingly Sicilian.



At the fish market

In couture fashion and cuisine this dense associative stew is richly expressive. But in the context of contemporary Sicilian society it can mutate into a maddening maze of impracticality and corruption. The visiting outsider might find both sides of this cultural coin intriguing; many of those who live here though, Marella Ferrera included, gave me the impression of feeling frustrated. “Please go easy on Catania,” she pleasantly asked me as I was leaving the studio, “the past few years have been tough on this city.”

After wandering through yet another of the city’s shadowy courtyards, I found Scenario.Pub.Bli.Co, home to the acclaimed modern dance company of Roberto Zappalà, beaming like a contemporary jewel in the Baroque crown. Like Ferrera, Zappalà has returned to his native Catania, bringing the international arts world with him. Aixa had recommended I visit saying, “Even if there’s

nothing on, the bar is a good place for a drink. Be sure to say hi to Emmanuel, the barman. He’s a friend of mine.”

Scenario’s three performance spaces were indeed quiet except for an evening tango class so I joined Emmanuel at the sleekly styled bar for a glass of local Etna wine and a good chinwag about local politics. He seemed torn between laughing and crying as he told an incredible saga of corruption that seemingly only Sicily can produce. “The sad part of it all,” he said with an air of defeat, “is that we re-elect the people robbing us.”

I asked him about something I’d heard earlier, about the Sicilian language — a rich amalgamation of every linguistic group that has ever touched this island — supposedly having no future tense. He looked at me puzzled, ran a few test sentences through his head and then said with utter amazement, “I never noticed that before.” ◊

Go with the flow**Etna and the Ionian Riviera**

Antonio, my guide to Mount Etna and the Ionian Riviera, must be the only Sicilian who prefers not to drive. As we passed Ognina, a quaint port on the north side of Catania, he calmly pointed and said, "That's Ulysses' port. He comes ashore there in the *Odyssey*." I was too busy playing a white-knuckled game of chicken with manic Sicilian drivers to see much of what he was pointing at. But the story Antonio told me finished with Ulysses sailing away, the enraged Cyclops, Polyphemus, blindly hurling the rocks that formed the basalt islets now poking up out of the rich blue waters of the Ionian Sea.

Like a brooding Cyclops, Mount Etna dominates this stretch of coastline from Catania to Taormina, occasionally spewing out ash, rock and lava in a pique of anger, but seldom proving deadly. Unfortunately the rubbing together of the African and European tectonic plates – the same geologic phenomenon that feeds Etna's fury – unleashes regular, and much less merciful earthquakes. But life in the shadow of Etna also has its upside: mineral rich soils ideal for growing vines and citrus, and a powerfully romantic landscape that for centuries has gripped the imagination of visitors as different as Goethe and DH Lawrence.

We broke free from the grip of Catania, heading for Aci Trezza. The sun was warm. A lone diver harvested sea urchins from the rocks near the mouth of the little harbour, and a steady swell broke on the jagged edges of Polyphemus' handiwork. "Want to know what I like best about Aci Trezza?" Antonio asked me. "It feels normal. Even at the height of summer, it gets crowded but never loses its sense of character." I had to agree; it felt somehow normal. And I liked it.

We drove on, passing the faded pastel façades of abandoned 19th-century villas, and the vibrant green and yellow of lemon trees. Working our way gradually up the mountain's eastern flank, we entered Etna's DOC, a winemaking region that in just a few short years has gone from producing bulk plonk to some of Italy's most coveted vintages. But the scars of Etna also became more apparent as we climbed: buildings crumpled by a recent earthquake; the scabrous remains of a molten lava blister that had collapsed and sent its contents oozing down the mountainside. Eventually, we emerged into a freakish, lunar landscape of dormant craters and swirling drifts of black dust and white snow, with views of half of Sicily in the distance. ○



Some extinguished craters on Mount Etna

PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

Where to find La Movida

They call it *la movida* – the scene, the party, or the groove – and with nearly 70,000 students, there is plenty of *la movida* in Catania. Your first source for up-to-date information on what's on is the monthly cultural calendar *Lapis*, available free in most hotels, bars and restaurants. Here are a few starting points:

Zo

This contemporary arts centre in La Ciminiera, a renovated sulphur refinery, does it all: film and video screenings, concerts, theatre, dance, events, and exhibitions. Also contains a thumping club with DJ sets, and a bar/café/restaurant with the requisite exposed brick, industrial feel. Piazzalle Asia 6; zoculture.it

Teatro Massimo Bellini

Acoustically perfect and dripping with opulence, this 19th-century masterpiece is Catania's home for opera, classical and contemporary music. Piazza Bellini; teatromassimobellini.it

Scenario.Pub.Bli.Co

Scenario.Pub.Bli.Co is the ultra-sleek, state-of-the-art home of Roberto Zappalà's contemporary dance company. The equally sleek bar/café is good for drinks and food even when the performance spaces are quiet. Via Teatro Massimo 16; scenariopubblico.com or compagniazappala.it

Bonù Design & Bistro

Combination concept store, bistro, and ultra-cool bar tucked away down a hidden entranceway. The place where the fashionable young set mingles over happy-hour cocktails and finger food. Corso Italia 23

Glamour Café

An artsy-studenty bar and café with regular DJ sets, live music and art events. Via Carcaci 11. glamourcafe.it

Where to Eat**Trattoria Casalinga da Nino**

A Slow Food-awarded restaurant serving classic Catanese and Sicilian cuisine, wonderful seafood salads and pastas. Lunch only. Via Biondi 19; tel: + 39 95 31 13 19

**Osteria I Tre Bicchieri**

Creative Mediterranean cuisine, with a fabulous wine list. Via San Giuseppe al Duomo 31; tel: + 39 95 71 53 540

Osteria Antica Marina

Catania's go-to place for seafood; sitting as it does, practically smack in the middle of the fish market, it doesn't get any fresher or better than this. Via Prado 29; tel: + 39 95 34 81 97

Scardacci Pasticceria

Sicilian neighbourhood *pasticceria* with superb coffee and a bountiful selection of pastries, cakes and sweets. Corner of Via Santa Maddalena and Largo Paisiello

Where to Stay**Grand Hotel Excelsior**

Recently renovated, post-war goliath designed to compliment the fascist-era Hall of Justice on the opposite side of the Piazza Verga. Inside, though, it offers all the comforts of a five-star hotel right down to palatial marble bathrooms and a resident pianist tickling the ivories in the lounge. Piazza G Verga. thi.it

BAD B&B

The polar opposite to the Excelsior except that this idiosyncratically styled B&B is also a recent renovation and very comfortable. Expect unique rooms decorated in layers of 70s-era kitsch, contemporary design and Sicilian artefacts. Via Cristoforo Colombo 24; badcatania.com

UNA Palace Hotel

Not exactly the middle point between the above two options, but close. A tastefully renovated, turn-of-the-century building with many superb period details. Via Etna 218; unahotels.it

Where to Find Fashion**Museum & Fashion**

Marella Ferrera's magnificent renovation of the Palazzo Biscari is a must see, even for non-fashionistas. The boutique museum says as much about Sicily as it does Ferrera's fashion. And if you're in the market for the ultimate couture frock, you'll find Marella's design atelier on the flipside of the museum. Via Museo Biscari 16; marellaferreira.com