

## Pizza and piazzas: the Palermo street food tour



On a night tour of Palermo, Caroline Phillips samples fast food Sicilian style. She tries balls of saffron rice with mozzarella, homemade pasta, and the local delicacy, calf's spleen

3 September 2014 by Caroline Phillips

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It's hard to explain how enticing Sicilian street food is. Grilled cow's bowel appetisers don't sound too, well, appetising. How about spicy spleen sandwiches or griddled horsemeat? They don't immediately appeal. So, on a trip to Il Vignale, a rural villa near S. Stefano di Camastra on the north coast of Sicily, I don't go straight to these hardcore culinary experiences. Maria, the chef, breaks me in slowly.

First, she magics up feasts of zucchini flowers delicately stuffed with the freshest ricotta, melting pastry parcels of porcini, and homemade pasta with the spinach-like tenerumi. She feeds us tender black pig, a speciality from the nearby Nebrodi Mountains.

The villa's owner, Dario, lures us further into a false sense of dietary security by giving us bottles of his home-pressed virgin olive oil and baskets of the estate's organic aubergine and cucuzza (a long snake of a courgette). Only then does he say, "You must not meeces the Street Food Tour in Palermo. Izzz experience molto importante een Sicily."



Il Vignale, a rural villa in the north of Sicily that was Caroline's base

### The food the locals eat

He packs us off to Palermo for a soloSicity Street Food Tour, promising us (deep breath) entrails. This may require a paper bag, and I don't mean for buying food.

The tour begins at 8pm by the farmacia opposite Palermo's Teatro Massimo, Italy's largest opera house and the first of many imposing buildings we see on our walking tour.

"What would you like to eat?" asks Fabrizia, our food Sherpa. "Tripe," replies my friend, throwing down the comestible gauntlet. "We're not vegan, vegetarian or faint-hearted." Not much.

Palermo is one of the world's best cities for street food, cooked and eaten standing or sitting by makeshift outdoor stalls and in market bars. This is how the locals eat. It's



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their version of McDonald's.

Street food has existed in Sicily for centuries. The island's history is revealed in the contents of its *al fresco* saucepans. In three millennia, the port city of Palermo has been invaded by the Carthaginians, Arabs and Normans. They didn't bring hamburgers and hot dogs with them.

### Palermo piazza, pizza and Panelle

First stop is the Touring Café, sitting under pictures of the Pope, saints and the café founder. If you're a real wuss, you can try u' Sfinciuni, a thick, spongy Sicilian pizza.

But they also make 1,000 arancine 'bombs' a week here: deep-fried saffron rice with mozzarella and prosciutto or spinach and ricotta (price €2 each). People are queuing excitedly for the cricket-ball-size explosions of taste wrapped in crispy perfection, which then they eat the Sicilian way: with their hands. We join in cheerily.



Arancine, 'bombs' of deep-fried saffron rice with mozzarella and prosciutto or spinach and ricotta

Palermo is handsome, decaying and poor. Through side streets no wider than my arms, and well-watered by cats, our next stop is in a piazza with a 16<sup>th</sup>-century church, under the gentle yellow glow of light from wall-mounted erstwhile gaslights on 18<sup>th</sup>-century houses.

The outdoor tables are full of people eating Sicilian fast food: rolls filled with different types of meat. We try their speciality, Stigghiole (barbecued lambs' intestines). Very tasty, if a little fatty.

We throw thoughts of Horsegate (the British scandal of adulterated burgers) to the wind and try you know what. It's as good as any decent steak.

We're introduced next to a kebab named Eat and Drink. "You eat the bacon," says Fabrizia, "and drink the juice from the spring onion cooked inside it." The warm evening air blows delightfully on our faces. The Vespas rev up beside our table.

We move on. Each time we turn a corner or emerge from another cobbled alley, we see another beautiful building under the moonlight. In Piazza Caracciolo there's a stone fountain, a vendor who is busy boiling octopus and table football being played.

Nearby, a tattooed chef (known as The Mad Panelle Maker) is smoking cigarettes while frying Cazilli (potato croquettes with mint) and chickpea fritters (Panelle) in a pan of hot oil. We savour the Panelle discs – great peasant food – as crowds of young people tuck in, knocking back sweet local Zibibbo wine.



Stigghiole (skewered lamb intestines) was not half as 'adventurous' as some of Palermo's offerings

### Boiled calf's spleen, anyone?

Next we find Rocky, the self-dubbed King of Spleen, on the corner of Via Pannieri. A

...from the mid 1980s, the sun, a faded ring of green, on the corner of the pavement. A crowd three-deep, with hungry eyes, is watching the king as he chops boiled calf's spleen and lung then warms it in a fast-melting lump of lard. The raw ingredients hang like wet chamois leathers in the markets. This is way outside my comfort zone.

"Eez Rocky, eez number one in Palermo," says a strong-stomached 50-something as he tucks rapturously into a Pane ca' Meusa spleen bun (€2). "Eee does it plain, not married. Married is topped with Caciocavallo cheese. Eez no original way."

Rocky has been making these filled baps all his life, he tells me in Italian with a thick Palermo dialect. He grins sweatily. "I was taught by my father and grandfather. My son is learning from me. I get my luck from S.ta Rosalia."

Reader, I did it. I took a bite. And the flavour is excellent, albeit with a texture like chewy liver.

We've been on a two-hour tour, full of characters, noise, fun and tastes. The street action finishes as late as you like: "They stay as long as people want to eat," says Fabrizio. "Sometimes 2am. Sometimes 3.30."

We are distracted by a fellow foodie, Erika Heynatz, the Australian actress, sprinting across the road, narrowly dodging traffic. "Jeeez," she wails. "Don't let me be run over when the last thing I ate was bowel." Bowel? Let's not go there...

- Palermo Street Food Tours are available exclusively to guests staying in soloSicily villas. Prices start at €20 per person for a 90-minute daytime or night tour, rising to €35 per person for a half-day tour.

- For further information on Il Vignale, contact [villa specialist soloSicily](#). Phone 020 7097 1413

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