

Untold Italy Episode 107 - Tastes of Sicily

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 107.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy

Ciao a tutti! Hello everyone. I hope you've had a great week so far. I'm Katy here with another episode of untold Italy that's bound to tickle your tastebuds. We're going to Sicily today. Hooray! It's one of my favorite places on earth, there is nothing this island does not have - sun, sea, history, wine and of course sensational food and especially seafood which I have to admit is my favorite. If I could choose just one food to eat for the rest of my life it would definitely be seafood. Ok, that's a food group but I'm sure you get the idea.

Joining me on the show today is my good friend and Sicily expert **Karen La Rosa** from La Rosa Works Sicily tours and travel, Karen's appeared on the show many times and that's because if there is something she doesn't know about Sicily - it's past, present and future - then it is probably not worth knowing.

Karen is leading our first Untold Italy tour departing this October so I thought we'd give you a tiny taste (pardon the pun!) of some of the dishes our tour guests will be trying when they visit Sicily later this year. By the way, there are still a few spots left so if you are interested, head on over to tours.untolditaly.com/sicily where you'll find a detailed day-by-day itinerary to fire up your wanderlust.

Now I bet you can't wait to hear about Sicilian food so let's get started and find out what we should eat when we're in Sicily. Buonissimo!

Katy

Bentonata Karen. Buon Anno. And welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

Karen

Oh, thank you. It's so good to be here. I love doing this. It's fun to chat.

Katy

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It really is. Karen and I would be chatting all day everyday for hours, I can imagine. But we're going to be talking about something very special today, which is Sicilian food. But before that, we get onto those delicious dishes. Karen, you've been on the show several times already, and I have to say to our listeners, if you have even a passing interest in Sicily, I do encourage you to listen to those episodes that Karen's already shared with us, but in case you've missed them, I'd love you to introduce yourself to everyone Karen.

Karen

So Karen LaRosa is my name. La Rosa Works Sicily Tours and Travel is my game. I have been arranging tours for people since 2008 and taking groups myself, arranging itineraries for people to go. And I like to share my passion for Sicily. So people get to go and see many different things in many different ways, variety and exploring and discovering the inner belly of Sicily.

Katy

So Karen has got such a deep knowledge of Sicily, and it's from part of her heritage. And you have also several qualifications around Sicilian wine and Italian wine. So I love talking to Karen because what she doesn't know about Sicily probably isn't really worth knowing.

Karen

Well.

Katy

I'm going to embarrass you. So today we're going to be talking about Sicilian food. And honestly, this is one of my most favorite topics, because even if you think Italians really love their food, I can tell you now that Sicilians probably love their food even more. Would you say that's a right assessment?

Karen

Oh, absolutely. The problem with this subject is you could talk about it for hours and hours, and we don't have hours and hours, so kind of have to just go around the edges and touch base, so that you wet your appetite, so that you want to go on your own and discover on your own all these different things. You can talk about Sicily using so many different things as a backdrop just to give you an idea of what that place is like. And it's so special in so many different ways. So today we're going to talk about food in general. All of Italy is like comfort food. All of Italy is. When you go to Italy, you eat specialties. You eat seasonal foods. Things that are locally grown and produced. It's always been that way here in the United States, it's kind of novel and it's expensive, and we have green markets and things are too pricey for a lot of people to buy. But Sicilians and Italians, it's always been that way. They're a population of foragers they like things that grow near them. And depending on the season, you can see cars

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on the side of the road looking for wild greens or chestnuts and wild fennel. Asparagus, mushrooms. I've seen it all herbs, and they're all carrying their little bag with them. I'm not sure it's always 100% legal, but it grows. It's like in the wild. Then you add warmth and hospitality to this wonderful food that they make and wine and who doesn't want to be there. So Sicily is that and like more, it's a paradise of food. I remember eating alone at a restaurant once, and you would have thought I was the Queen. I love traveling by myself. I know you and I have talked about this, but it's a - traveling alone I have no problem with. These waiters fussed over me in a good way and took none of my instructions for the light dinner that I envisioned. "But no, you must try this and that". And "no, you can't have that without this". And they describe what you'll eat. They show you what you'll eat. They tell you a story about it or explain the recipe, which is, of course, was in their family for generations and always made the correct way in their house. Yes. So it's not just about filling your stomach or satisfying a hunger pang. It's an event. It's a salad of meaning and history of love and pride and generosity all mixed up for you to enjoy at the table. A real celebration.

Katy

That's exactly the way it should be, because I think sometimes you see in our society where people are rushing around and they're just sort of shoving food into their mouth and it's lost its joy. And its meaning. I know for us in our family when we sit down to the table and I make sure that we do this every night, actually, because I've got small children and it's my favorite time of the day because everyone's sitting together and we're enjoying something together. And I feel like we should all do this way more often. And sometimes when we let it sleep and we don't have those dinners and I feel like something is missing from our family. And I feel like that's the one amazing sort of thing that we've taken, especially from the Italian side of family.

Karen

Yeah, absolutely. We did that with our kids as well, and we still do it, even though they're all out of the house. We do Sunday dinners, and it's important. So I really believe in that. Plato had said something once that - he was not so impressed. And he had said that Sicilians build things like they will live forever and eat like they will die tomorrow. So negative, Nancy, that Plato was, but he's not one of the ones I would have chosen to dine with if I had a historical figure to choose from. But anyway, so just talking about how they live in Sicily, they revere farmers. Here we don't have that same kind of feeling or sensibility. I mean, there seems to be an appreciation over there for just this neverending hard work that farming is. And I get almost emotional when I think of it with the labor that goes into growing grapes, for example. I mean, we think about harvest. Oh, isn't it pretty? All the grapes are hanging on the vines, but it's a full twelve month, 365 day a year job to make those grapes happen on that vine and make them happen well, and take them to the next step to make wine. We drink wine like, oh, you know, we're sitting around having a drink and not even thinking about the amount of work that went into that or any of these other things. So it's really I find interesting to see

that they put farmers on a different plane in Sicily. You go to someplace like olives, for example, have you ever been to see olive oil production?

Katy

Yeah, I have. But, yeah, do share about that is so amazing.

Karen

I mean, it's just amazing. Again, same thing with the grapes or anything else. You take care of these trees for an entire year before you have to choose just the right moment to pick them and get them off to the production facility in a matter of hours. And they go through the process, which doesn't take all that long. And then out of the tube into your container comes this green gold, just this gorgeous green peppery herbaceous stuff that we use easily/often in the kitchen. And it's just an amazing process. It's one of my favorite things, actually in Sicily, and probably one of the most fundamental foods that they use is the olive oil. I was always amazed when I read how people in America they've used more and more now that there's been a lot more marketing for sort of the small production items and organic and all that kind of stuff. But still Italians consume, like, eleven liters of olive oil per person every year, which is an enormous amount compared to what we do here.

Katy

It's fascinating, actually. And I think sometimes what we experience in terms of olive oil here in our countries, in the United States and in Australia and in countries around the world, it's not even the same. So it's hard to really describe the difference in flavor between something that you will buy at the supermarket in our country to something that has been freshly pressed and straight from the tree almost. It is completely different.

Karen

Yeah, it really is. They have trees in Sicily that go back 1000 years that are still giving fruit. It's amazing. And they are like grapes, different cultivars. You have basic types. The main types Nocellara dell'Etna and Nocellara del Belice, Tonda Iblea, and Biancolilla are like, probably the foremost common. The olives that they use for oil. And the Castelvetrano olives have become very popular now as eating olives. We find those in New York all over the place. They're kind of a bright green and big. So each of those have different flavors because, again, like grapes, they actually have courses that you can go like a Sommelier, learn about the different olives and then learn how the different soil that they grow in affects the resulting flavor. So some oils - if people are really into this, they'll use certain ones for salad and certain ones for something else and some taste grassy and some taste peppery. And they might have notes of almond and artichoke and tomato even or something. So it's fun to kind of pair which olive oil you're going to use, for which dish that you're making. And they use it for everything. I was so shocked the first time I saw somebody drizzling their olive oil on their pizza, but you do see it.

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Karen

It goes on pastas and soups and fresh ricotta and even pizza. So they use it for preserving foods. It's just a staple in the Mediterranean diet, but particularly in Sicily. They use it a lot. Even if we think about going to the supermarket and buying some important label cost a lot of money. And so many people have olive trees in Sicily, and they don't necessarily produce the olive oil themselves. What they do is they'll take it to a consortium or a cooperative. You go, you pick your olives, you make an appointment, you bring the olives, they press your olives, make your oil, and you go home with your little containers. And sometimes it's enough for your family for the year. Or maybe you have some to share with your parents or your friends. But it's just part of their life. So that's one important food thing to pay attention to when you visit Sicily, it's hard to avoid.

Katy

Well, I actually really love that peppery flavor. And I remember the first time that I tried it, and I was just like, this is amazing. It was like just a flavor bomb in my mouth, and I was thinking, wow, I didn't know that it could taste like these.

Karen

Yeah, some of them are really intense flavor. It just depends. I was with a group this past September, and it started to rain. So we kind of pulled into this little restaurant shack kind of place on the beach, and we were sitting there telling stories and reading from a book and having a gay old time. And then the friend of the guide that we were with came over and just let us taste some of his olive oil. Well, we made him turn right around and he went and we all bought his olive oil because it was incredibly good with that punch, and you couldn't see through it. It was really opaque. Anyway, I'm going on and on about olive oil, but when you taste a good olive oil... We here slather it all over bread, and they do, too, but not like we do at restaurants here where you go and dip. They don't do that over there, but they do pour it all over bread and eat the bread.

Katy

That sounds delicious right now.

Karen

Yeah, but I mentioned ricotta cheese, and that's another really super favorite thing of mine, and it's a staple in their diet.

Karen

It's made daily at all the farms all over the island. And if you go there early in the morning, when they typically make it after they've milked the sheep, they'll serve it to you warm and

fresh. And it's literally like a religious experience. I'm not even kidding. As you drive around the landscape, they're just dotted with sheep and goats and cows, too, but lots of sheep. They milk every day. And from that we get the cheese. It's really, really delicious. Well, I know one farmer, let me tell you a story about one farmer who owns hundreds of goats, and he knows all of them well, individually. Personally.

Katy

Do they have names?

Karen

Well, I think some of them do, but he knows if they're under the weather, if they should be resting. And I guess if you sit behind them, you get pretty intimate with them. Milking them twice a day. I've tried. Have you tried milking? No.

Katy

A cow, but not a goat.

Karen

I've tried. I know how close to them you are, and it's not easy. They make it look easy. But I can't say it came naturally to me. Anyway, yeah, they do have to be milk twice a day. And I know this one family - I actually went to visit them in October in a very small village. It was barely a village. It was their homestead and some of their relatives homestead. And they had 600 sheep. And they milk them twice a day. And I wondered, how on Earth do they have time to do anything else? But they do. They make cheese both organic and with slow food methods. They package it, they market it. They sell it like 200 kilos a day. I mean, I can't even fathom that.

Katy

How many people in this family?

Karen

Well, that's the thing. They were the mother who kind of was turning it over to her children, who were in their 20s. The daughter has gone to University. I'm not sure about the son, but together they are doing this. And they make the ricotta cheese in a kettle over a flame with wooden utensils. You need a special permission to do it in the old ways, which they have. So it's like every attention to detail. So it's kind of amazing to see that. And ricotta actually means cooked twice. So it's made from the whey leftover from the first step in cheese making and sheep's milk is best for ricotta. It's richer and creamier than goat's milk. There are cows whose milk makes good ricotta. The ones from Modica are particular breed, and those are very nice for the ricotta. But warm ricotta is like baby food. It's comfort food. And it's used

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for so many different things to fill all sorts of pastas, but also to sweeten desserts. So I was in a gas station once another one of my sidebars, but when I was thinking about this, it brings to mind all these particular stories. And my friend brought me a Cassatella, which is like a moon shaped fried pastry filled with sweet ricotta. And this one was warm. They call them ravioli. I took a bite in this and I swear to you, it made me weak in the knees. It was just so good.

Katy

Why does it always happen? It's these really strange places, like the gas station. And you're like, what? Because you're like, I'm at a gas station - this is not a pretty place, but I have this life changing pastry I am going to remember for the rest of my life.

Karen

Never underestimate the gas stations in Sicily because they have locals who cook there, too. I had a cannolo once, as big as my right shoulder. I was in a small town not far from Palermo, and I have two photos. The first one was the plate with this giant cannolo and a napkin, and the second one was just crumbs. I couldn't believe I devoured the whole thing.

Katy

I have the interim photo of that, like the one cannola that I had in Sicily. I had this bite and I'd forgotten to take the photo beforehand. It's a cannola with a bite out of it. And then it was just like, no more after that, it was gone. I need to stay in my imagination forever. It was just so good.

Karen

It's kind of an amazing product, Ricotta, because there aren't many things you can think of that would mix well with almonds and chocolate and cinnamon and sugar, as well as garlic and lemon spinach, tomatoes and olive oil. So it can really go both ways. And if you're not mixing it with a lot of sugar, it's really a low calorie fresh cheese. Usually the aged cheeses are the more richer and more caloric ones. But it's just such a delightful thing to eat in any form.

Katy

And it's also obviously, if it's not being made from cow's milk, it's really lactose free, so if people have a problem with lactose intolerance, they can enjoy that, too. And it's obviously high in calcium. So these are the things that I love about Sicilian and Italian food is like, not only is it something comforting and something delicious, but it's also nutritious.

Karen

Right?

Katy

So it's got all these benefits and values that just come together in one delicious thing. And you just can't stop when you start thinking about it really. I'm getting very hungry now. Karen, you're going to tell us about pasta now, too, aren't you?

Karen

Yes, I am. I'm going to tell you about pasta. I'm going to tell you about another one of my favorites, which is pasta alla norma. So I know, you know, pasta alla norma, you've been to Sicily, so you've probably had it many times over there. But it's a dish made with short cut noodles, usually like a rigatoni or a penne mixed with fried eggplant and fresh tomatoes and basil and ricotta salata, which is a salted version, a hard aged ricotta. And legend has it that the dish got its name from the composer Bellini, who was from Catania, and his opera Norma, premiered, and it got rave reviews. And not long afterwards he had a good friend, Nino Martoglio, who was a writer, tasted the pasta dish, and he thought it was so fabulous, he shouted, It's a Norma! And that kind of stuff. So the dish is simple, simply delicious. And it's ubiquitous, even though it originated in Catania. Unlike many other regional specialties, that sort of stay where they originated from, you'll find this one all over the island, and I find it on the island of Manhattan quite frequently, too. And if it's on the menu, I have a hard time saying I want anything else.

Katy

You know, I tell you, every one a secret favorite vegetable is eggplant, and I just love it.

Karen

I love eggplant.

Katy

It's my favorite. I can't stop eating it. And it's actually it's summer here in Australia when we're recording it. So it's definitely eggplant season right now, and they're just so delicious.

Karen

But they have a way of working with eggplant that says dish has fried eggplant in it. But you would never know that it's fried eggplant. I don't know. It's just different the way they handle the vegetables so that it just doesn't taste gooey and greasy. It's got integrity and really good flavor. They eat pasta every day in Sicily. There's like hundreds of ways to make it, and each with all the different shapes. I think there's something like over 350 different shapes of pasta, and each sauce calls for a particular shape because you might want to have something that catches it and it's like orchiete or you might want to have a tubular pasta. Pasta with Trapanese. Pesto trapanese, which is made with almonds and tomatoes, basil and cheese a little different than Genovese. Made with Busiate, which is like a tightly curled pasta. You

have Agneletti al Alforno, which are the little ring shaped pasta baked in the oven in a round form pan. And it has tomatoes and lots of other ingredients. It's like lasagna - winter pasta, and oftentimes because it takes a little time to make it. It's served around the holidays. And then you have Pasta con le Sarde, which is another popular dish, although some people find it an acquired taste because it's pretty strong. That comes from the west more. Legend has it that the Arab military had to feed the troops, so they mixed together whatever they could find around them. Sardines, wild fennel, even some pine nuts and usually bucatini, which has the long pasta with the hole in the middle. But unless you're in the Ballarò market in Palermo or someplace really dedicated to tradition, it can be varied. Using anchovies, for example, which I think they did after World War II when they didn't have sardines. And if sardines aren't around, they can make substitutes. And this is another dish that's actually found all over the island. Like I said, I think people have sort of a love-hate relationship with it. To be honest, it's not my favorite of the dishes in Sicily, but it's certainly interesting. And I've had it many different ways. Bernadette Peters, who is Sicilian, by the way, she buys this sauce by the case. Bernadette Peters, the actress.

Katy

Oh, I don't know her.

Karen

Really? Oh, my gosh. She's very famous here. Anyway, she buys it by the case. It comes - there's a brand that comes in a can that's actually pretty good, and she apparently can't get enough of it.

Katy

It was interesting. We were watching a cooking show last night on I think it was on Netflix, and they had to make a traditional Italian dish. These are the top chefs of the world. And then someone did something a little bit crazy, which the judges were - I can't remember the judge's name, but he's like his top chef in Italy, and he's very into fine dining. And he just went, no, no, no, no. They actually made this a version of Pasta con Sarde with the Tjarin noodles from Piedmont and it was just all wrong because they and he just really slammed these guys for doing this dish because the Tjarin noodles were egg based noodles, and it just didn't go. It was just too rich and too wrong to go with the sardines, actually.

Karen

Yeah. That's why they have all these different shapes, because certain things, the sauce will shine if it is on the right kind of noodle. If you put something on the wrong shaped pasta, it might slip right off and it won't adhere to the pasta or it won't look as good. I don't know, but they have all these particularities about their pasta and what's supposed to go with what?

Katy

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Oh, my God. You wouldn't want the sauce to sleep off. That would be a disaster.

Karen

That would be a disaster. You want the sauce on your pasta. The other really interesting one that's very popular is Pasta Seppia Nera, which is we call it squid ink black pasta, but it's not really squid, it's cuttlefish. And they usually put that on a spaghetti. Now that's a really interesting one to eat, because there's just no way to come out of that without a black mouth.

Katy

What have you been eating today, Karen?

Karen

Oh, you always know - it's in your teeth, but it's really good. That's a very nice one. So there are lots of different pastas, and they throw them in soup. And even I've seen pasta on pizza. Whoever gets tired of eating pasta, not me. I could eat it every day.

Katy

Yeah, me, too.

Karen

If I'm in Sicily, I don't always feel guilty about eating it every day. First of all, because they usually eat it for lunch. I tend to eat very late. I mean, it's 8.30 New York time right now, and I still haven't had dinner. But there when you eat it for lunch, it's not that bad for you. It's better for you. It's more easily digestible. Today, a lot of the farmers are going back to using the ancient grains because they realize that all the refined wheat has caused so many problems in people's digestive tracts that they have gone back to planting tumminia, rusello and perciasacchi. These are things like kamut and spelt, and they're making pastas and pizzas out of these grains, which are much healthier for you and much more easily digestible. So when I'm over there and they're really being served quite a bit, I don't feel too guilty eating pasta every day.

Katy

But the thing is, I think it's really interesting because a lot of people that are gluten intolerant or celiac, they worry if they're going to Italy or Sicily if they're going to not be able to enjoy themselves. But this is really not the case over there. I can't think of many other countries, actually, that are doing such a great job of adapting to these changes in our bodies and tastes as well around eating. This is a really great example. You can actually get some amazing pasta dishes that are suitable for celiacs, and for people that are gluten intolerant,

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you do need to do your research, especially if you're celiac. I'm not an expert in that. And obviously it's a medical condition that if you were suffering from it, you know, but yeah.

Karen

I have a friend who is celiac, and so I've been that route with her, and I know that with the markets, it's not easy. It's never easy with that condition. But there are ways if you're just gluten intolerant almost every restaurant offers gluten free pasta, and then there are these other alternatives, if that restaurant, perhaps to use the ancient grains, but it's much easier to deal with that situation over there than it is here in the United States, and it's getting better here. But over there you go in a restaurant say you're gluten intolerant no problem. They bring you the gluten free.

Katy

Yeah. And the other ingredient that they have that they use in a very famous dish is rice.

Karen

Oh, my gosh. Rice. Yes.

Katy

Great for people that are gluten intolerant and celiac.

Karen

Yeah. And that's an interesting one because in the 10th century, the Arabs brought the rice over to Sicily, and the island looked a little different. Back then, there was a lot of water, and they were masters of irrigation, so they were able to cultivate it today. They don't grow rice anymore over there. But one of the most popular things uses of rice are stuffed rice balls or what we call arancini. And they originated in Sicily. What they do is they cook the rice and cool it and they flatten it. It's mixed with a little bit of saffron flattened in your hand, and then they put a filling inside of it. It's sealed with the rice. And then they dip it and coat it in a batter and then into the fryer it goes. And then it becomes crispy on the outside and soft. And with the filling inside, it's really delicious. I actually have a video on my YouTube done by a place that opened in New York. Two guys from Palermo came. Poor things literally opened about two weeks before the pandemic hit. But they survived, and they are thriving, and they literally make some of the best arancini I've ever had. So every now and then I head downtown just to satisfy my craving. Originally, Arancini contained just meat and vegetables, because that's what they had. They were easy to carry and going off to work, you needed some energy. So they're kind of known as street food and come from the west side of the island. But as time moved on, things evolved. And then tomatoes came over in the 16th century, under the Spanish rule. An evolution happened, and tomatoes were incorporated into some of the meat and vegetable filling. And then later on, they decided to add, like, a

beamel sauce or a cheesy interior. And we know that bechemel only came over with the French. So that's also an evolution. Things evolve in Sicily. And just like the history, the food is an evolution of layers and layers of history and people who came over and brought their own foods and traditions all put together. That's what we call Sicilian food today. It's just an amalgamation of all this stuff. Again, lots of regional specialties, even within the island, people who make things on the East Coast, people who make things on the West Coast, they'll even fight about what it's called like they do with the arancini. On the West Coast. They call it one - it looks like an orange so they call it with an a, Arancho with an a. And then on the East Coast, they call it arancini with an I. It's masculine. And then they argue about this as if it is the most important thing, very passionate about their food. But they are very, very delicious. I can't recommend them highly enough. When you're over in Sicily, you'll find them everywhere. In Catania, there's a place called Savia, right across from the Bellini Gardens. The best place to get arancini in Catania is fabulous.

Katy

Do you have a favorite type of arancini?

Karen

I kind of do. I sort of love the pistachio. When I'm in Catania, you're thinking about .Bronte You're thinking about pistachios. And I like that one a lot. I like them all, really. But although the bechamel would not be my favorite, I'll be honest, I'm not a creamy, creamy kind of person, but anyway, loads of them to try. There's a shop in Palermo that now just sells arancini and any kind of flavoring you could imagine. So again, they've evolved and are making things in different ways now, and it's all good.

Katy

But the other really good thing about arancini is that you can actually from the sounds of it, as I know, is that you can get the vegetarian. So if you're not eating a lot of meat, then you don't even have to eat a lot of meat. And there's so many dishes that you can try over there that don't even include meat. So if you don't like fish or meat, then you're fine. Off you go. You can try many different things. And there's a very famous dishes isn't there that you just will find everywhere that you absolutely must try when you're in Sicily.

Karen

And that is back to our eggplant conversation. Caponata.

Katy

Yummy.

Karen

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Again, another dish that is found all over the island, they're not really sure where it came from. It could have been Spanish, could have been Greek. Lots of different theories, because the word - the etymology is not really understood what the word means. And it's kind of like a condiment or a side dish that is fried eggplant, the main ingredient. And then depending on where you are on the island, could have celery, capers and carrots and tomatoes and pine nuts, sometimes raisins or olives, almonds, even pear. The premise is a sweet and sour side dish that is that kind of keeps the integrity of each of the vegetable, so all the ingredients must be cooked separately for it to be done properly. And as I said, every area has their own version based on whichever ingredients are local, and almost every cook has their own recipe. When I post a photo on my social media, I know I will have lots of comments, and my favorite story was a long time ago. I made some Caponata for some Sicilian friends that live here in New York, and I was so excited I brought it to them, and I couldn't wait to get their approval for my hard work and how - I thought it tasted really good.

Karen

And they looked at each other and they nodded and they looked at me and they nodded. And I'm like waiting. And he said, It's good. It's not Caponata, but it's good.

Katy

So which ingredient had you left out or had you added that wasn't right?

Karen

Well, their family made it with pear.

Katy

Oh

Karen

Pera. As he said, that was their secret ingredient, and they were from Catania. So I'm not saying that everyone in Catania makes their caponata with pear, but their family did. And as I said, that's the best recipe because it was there and I actually had their caponata, and it is very good, but it's all different depending on who's you try. But I've never had any that I didn't care for.

Katy

Well, you might have to just call your Karenata.

Karen

Yeah, right. It's funny because my husband has been, I guess, because I inspired him - but he's been experimenting with a lot of these different dishes, and I finally got him to kind of hone in on the exact way that I like it not too sweet and not too this. And when he makes it, he makes a lot of it. So he doesn't do it very often. But I just love having it in the house. It's the perfect little go into the refrigerator and have a few bites and it gets me through.

Katy

And it's a really good antipasti as well, isn't it? You can have it on a little bread and oh, Yum. I'm really a big fan of the capers. I love the capers. I don't know. It's just that I've got a really big affinity with the capers and eggplant.

Karen

Yeah. I love the brininess of a caper. Often I use that instead of salt in whatever it is I'm cooking, you just throw the Capri in and it makes the difference. So we're talking a lot and we probably deal with dessert. I mean, the Sicilians love their sweet. Even for breakfast they eat things that are covered in powdered sugar.

Katy

Yes, they do.

Karen

Stuffed with kind of marmalades and honeys. And they have these wonderful, very low sugar kind of cakes made out of honey and almonds and oranges that you often see on the breakfast table at your hotel that are just delightful. But I often see at hotels that we stay and also a huge bowl of sweetened risotto and plunked right next to it is a big bowl of these wonderfully delicate cannoli shells.

Katy

Oh, my goodness.

Karen

I see people eating them just loading their canolli up and having that for breakfast. And I just smile ear to ear because - enjoy your vacation.

Katy

Well, I mean, seriously, if you're going to be in Sicily, you better eat canola and, like, honestly, life changing. You think you've had it before, but you haven't. You really, really haven't. You haven't had it before. You've been. It's one of those things you can tell people, but until they've experienced it. They don't know.

Karen

Once you've had a good canolli, it's a whole different thing. They're everywhere. And I'll tell you what you're going to look for - you're going to look for a shell that's made with a little sweet wine in the dough, rolled thin, wrapped around a bamboo cane tube so it resembles a bow tie and then fried so it should come out and it'll look like toasty dark and be flaky crispy. But it's never filled before you get it. So the shell should be filled right before you eat it. And if it's not, if it's prefilled, never eat that canola. Your shell will be soggy you don't know how long it's been sitting there. You won't want that. Ricotta cream, personally, I prefer the sheep's milk ricotta. But cow milk is good, too. And in many places that's just what you get. And it's simply ricotta and sugar. I mean, it couldn't be easier that's whipped around, so it's creamy. Shouldn't be too sweet, shouldn't be overworked. Less is more and fresh is best. Typically, they come with a piece of candied orange or lemon peel at the edges. Sometimes the edges are dunked in some pistachios. Sometimes they put chocolate chips in or something like that. But I prefer the plain one myself. And odd places - if you're going on that cannoli hunt, one of the strangest places that I found strange was Piana degli Albanese, which is a small town south of Palermo. And yes, it's the town of the Albanian. So if you go into this town, the street signs are written in Albania, and there's still churches that are from the old days in the Albanian style. And anyway, they make wonderful cannoli. The small town of Datillo is known kind of as the best place, one of the best places also in the northwest, on the way to Trapani and in Salemi, I had a great one. And then there was that one in Taormina, which actually was one of the first ones I ever had. And that one was pretty memorable. I could go on and on.

Katy

Maybe we should think about doing a canolli tour, like literally, you could do one.

Karen

Oh, gosh, you could. I have my good friend who was on one of my tours way back when - that was his goal, he was going to have a canolli in every - a canola in every town that we visited. And he did. And the guy is like a rail. He's so thin, he can be whatever he wants and doesn't matter. But we all benefitted. There was bites all around, so I tasted a lot of cannoli that trip.

Katy

Well, good thing he shared really.

Karen

yes. Sharing is a good thing, especially when the size of your right shoulder.

Katy

There must have been a very big bamboo stick that they're wrapping it around. But anyway

Karen

Well, that's the old tradition. Sometimes they use stainless steel now to make them. But still, there are loads of videos that you can watch about the traditional way of making them and just the care that goes. That's the thing so much care goes into making all of this food. As I said, it's just tradition. It's what they learned from their mother or their grandmother or father or grandfather. It's just very special.

Katy

Yeah. And I think that's sort of circling back on our conversation. I think that's why it would be kind of a bit rude to sit there and rush the experience because so much care and attention has gone into making it that it really does deserve your care and attention to eating it. And so if you sit down and you savour each bite, then I think that's the ultimate level of respect that you can give to the process of producing and cultivating the ingredients and then making the food to these amazing recipes.

Karen

Oh, absolutely. I mean, when they walk out of the kitchen with a huge frying pan and there's a whole fish in there with all these other things in the pan, and they want to show it to you because they're so proud of the freshness and of how well they prepared it. And now they're going to serve it to you. It's a thing of pride. It's a thing of celebration, as I said in the beginning - of food and togetherness and all of the history that went into making that and the hard work. So it's pretty amazing. You can't escape but appreciating it in that way when you're in Sicily.

Katy

Yeah. Karen, this has been such a great conversation. You know what fancy finishing on canolli. But I won't be able to stop thinking about them all day because I know some people have favorite memories of the places they go and the views of landscapes from their travels. But I have to admit most of mine are of food. And one of them was of a life changing canola that we had in Ortygia, which I am vowed to go back to and try again because it was next level amazing.

Karen

Yeah. You don't forget that. Like you said, the historical things are important, too, but there's just something about food that touches the heart in a way that nothing else does.

Katy

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So now, listeners, Karen is, of course, leading our Untold Italy tour of Sicily later this year, which is actually going to be full of these fabulous dishes and many more. But she also shares so much valuable information and ideas about Sicily and organizes travel and tours around the island. So, Karen, why not let everyone know how they can stay in touch and follow you?

Karen

You can come to my website. It's larosaworks.com, and through there, you can contact me via email or phone. And I'm also on social media. I'm on Facebook and I'm on Instagram. Usually every day. That's @losaworkssicily, and you can private message me direct message me through whatever message you want to. Just ask your questions. I'm here. I love talking about Sicily. It's my favorite subject.

Katy

You're so good at it. Thank you, Karen.

Karen

Thank you

Katy

Grazie for bringing back those Sicilian taste memories Karen, I really appreciate it, but I'm so hungry now. Thanks for joining us on Untold Italy again today

Karen

Oh, it's my pleasure. Always. Thank you.

Katy

Well listeners, I hope you enjoyed that little taster of Sicily's delicious food treats. And it really is just the tip of what is on offer. We didn't even mention granita which is Sicilian gelato, often served for breakfast with a warm brioche. I know it sounds like a fast track to a diabetes diagnosis but let me tell you, it's one of the best breakfasts I've ever had. A true breakfast of champions! We'll save a full run down on this amazing treat for another episode but let's just say, add it to your list of dishes to try. In all the flavors!

If you'd like all the names of these dishes and the places Karen mentioned, head on over to untolditaly.com/107 for episode 107 where you'll find all the delicious info you could wish for. I've also included a link to the Untold Italy Sicily tour departing 1st October 2022 should this episode have tempted you to join us. Trust me, it's going to be so much fun

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Thank you one and all for listening to our Untold Italy podcast. We love bringing you the special pockets of food, wine and culture across Italy. If you loved this episode, why not share it with your Italy-loving family and friends or give us a 5-star rating or review in your favorite podcast app. This helps Apple and Spotify know we have a show worth listening to and it means the world to us to know that you're enjoying our content.

And finally, we're so excited to bring you new episodes every week and this year we're actively focusing on sharing more native Italian speakers and locals just like next week's guest - podcast favorite Plerpaulo our guide from Joe Banana Limos who is going to fill us in on the best day trips from Sorrento!

But until then - ciao for now