

Untold Italy Episode 287: Beyond Cannoli - Sweets to Seek out in Sicily

Do you have a sweet tooth? Then you had better head straight to Sicily. The Sicilians know a thing or two about dolce and while you've probably heard of cannoli, you've definitely never tasted one as delicious as those you'll have when in Sicily. And then there's granita, cassata, bianca mangiare.

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 Clarke:

Ciao, benvenuti, welcome friends. People usually fall into two categories when it comes to food cravings - either the sweet or the salty. I'm generally a salt fiend - give me a wedge of cheese any day, but I can also be tempted by sweets if they are not too sweet and made with precision. I don't really like junky chocolate or lollies, candy for that reason. But a dense gelato would be more than ok.

I'm very fussy about that and that's why you'll only find the good stuff - the very best gelaterie and pastry shops - in our Untold Italy app. We're working on Sicily right now so that will be ready soon, but already, there are 12 of the 20 regions ready for you right now. When you upgrade to the premium app version, you'll get travel guides plus general travel tips and itinerary ideas plus all access to all of our podcast episodes ad-free and easy to search by topic. We keep adding more as part of the one-time fee and you get first access to the latest podcast episodes too, as a thank you for all your support.

And if you book in for one of our trip consultations or itinerary planning sessions, as a bonus, we'll upgrade you on the app for free because we want to make sure you have access to the very best gelato and all the Italian things.

So anyway, I'm wondering if you've ever tasted a proper Sicilian cannolo? I once thought I had, as we have a lot of great Sicilian-style bakeries here in Australia, but it wasn't until I went to Sicily and I had the real deal that I understood what all the fuss was about.

And it turns out Sicilians are obsessed with sweets, more than other Italians in fact. When you're in Sicily, you'll notice sweet treats everywhere and it's a very serious business. So I

thought we should delve deeper into this and invite someone along who knows a thing or two about cannoli.

Joining us today is Henna, one of our wonderful hosts from Untold Italy tours. Henna has been living in Italy, and for most of the time in Sicily, where she's been part of a famous cooking school. She's also attended the extremely prestigious food program at the University of Bra, but above all, she is obsessed with Italian food - so andiamo, let's find out about that cannoli, shall we?

Katy Clarke:

Bentornata. Henna, welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast.

Henna Garrison:

Thanks, Katy. It's great to be here.

Katy Clarke:

I'm so excited because obviously, you are an important member of our team. And now you're also joining us from beautiful Sicily right now. Whereabouts exactly are you?

Henna Garrison:

I am in Cefalu at the moment. I've had a foot in Cefalu since 2017. And it's August as we're recording, so it's the high summer months. It's warm, the beach is full, and it's really beautiful right now.

Katy Clarke:

Amazing, Amazing. So absolutely gorgeous. And I'm so jealous. But you're on the podcast last year with some of our friends, but some of our listeners may not know your voice, so can you let them know what a woman with such a lovely Massachusetts accent is doing in Sicily?

Henna Garrison:

You called it, Katy. Not an Italian. So I am from Nantucket, a small island in Massachusetts. I have been living in Italy since 2014. I came over to do a master's program at the University of Gastronomic Sciences - that's up north in Piedmont. And it was founded by the founder of Slow Food about 20 years ago. So my master's program was in food, culture and communication. Obviously, I'm someone who likes to eat and enjoy Italian food.

Henna Garrison:

I came over thinking I would do a one-year program and maybe stay on another year, see how I liked things in Italy. And now it's been almost, I guess, 11 years, which is absurd, but very exciting. I currently work, as you said, as a tour leader for Untold Italy, which is definitely my favorite. And then I also have been at the Anna Tasca Lanza Cooking School here in Sicily since 2017. I work in general management for them. It's a beautiful place and introduced me to a lot of Sicilian food.

Katy Clarke:

And you were there during COVID weren't you? So you did get to learn a lot about life in Sicily.

Henna Garrison:

I did. I feel very fortunate. It was a crazy time, but I did get to appreciate the natural beauty of Sicily in that moment. It was very quiet and just, yeah, an interesting moment. Not much going on. But that was a good reset and luckily, I came out of it healthy and happy.

Henna Garrison:

So that's. That's okay.

Katy Clarke:

I can't think there's of many places I'd rather be than in Sicily during that moment. Because, you know, they do, of course, have all this beautiful, beautiful food that you've learned so much about. And so today we're gonna talk about Sicilian sweet treats - which Sicilians, they love sweet things, don't they?

Henna Garrison:

They do, they do. Italians in general. I mean, you'll learn quickly that the Italian breakfast, when you come over this way, we're not, we're not doing a typical American brunch or bacon and eggs. It's all about sweets. So they start their morning with cookies, with cakes, with croissants, with all of the good stuff. My mother-in-law, who's not Sicilian but Italian, she told me the other day that I need to eat more sugars because it's hot out. So clearly, the taste for sugar also comes with the Italian heat in their culture. I don't know if this is scientifically true, but I'm up for it because I love any excuse for a sweet treat.

Katy Clarke:

With the breakfast is so funny. My son loves an Italian breakfast. How many pieces of cake is too many? I don't know because I just stop looking when he's going for it on those hotel buffets. It's, it's almost embarrassing in fact.

Henna Garrison:

It's addicting. It's definitely addicting. And I have completely converted. My favorite morning is a, is either a donut or a cornetto, which is like a croissant and a nice, either cold coffee or black Americano in the mornings.

Katy Clarke:

It's so funny because all of our health advice at the moment here in I guess English-speaking countries is like you've got to eat protein, you've got to get in that however many hundred grams a day of protein. And the worst thing you can do is have the carbs and the sugar in the morning. But the Italians have been, you know.

Henna Garrison:

They, they're doing it, so they're doing something right.

Katy Clarke:

And I think it's really interesting in Sicily as well, because not only do they have the sweet of the sugar, but there's so many different influences that come into the cooking in Sicily and also the sweets. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Henna Garrison:

Yeah, definitely. Sicily is great because it's, it's like a crossroads of many different cultures. And I'd say probably the most prominent influence would be the Arabic influence that has stayed over the years. So this means a lot of things like the pistachios, the almonds, you'll find cinnamon and particular spices and a lot of their both sweet and savory dishes. And that all comes from the Arabic influence and just refined sugar in general. That was something brought over with the Arab, you know, settlements here. And so we probably have that influence to thank for all the sweet treats. Sicily is also interesting because there was a period of what they call the *Monsù* cuisine.

Henna Garrison:

These were French chefs that came over in the 17th to 19th century to cook for Sicilian nobility. And so they were bringing a lot of, like, French, you know, what we would call French techniques of the time that have also influenced some of the cooking here in Sicily. And you can see that in desserts, like *Bianco Mangiare*, which in French, I think, is like *Blanc manger*. It's like a milk pudding. So you have diversity across the palate here.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, I mean, this is the amazing thing about Sicily in general. Not just in the sweets or the food, but just all over the island, you have these influences, which makes it a pretty magical place and very different to the rest of Italy.

Henna Garrison:

Yeah, it's. I mean, you see it, too, just in the architectural styles, in the landscapes. You have a lot of, you know, a lot of different styles and people who have moved in and out of the island. And it's its own continent in a way. There's a lot of different landscapes, but places, people, and it's a real melting pot.

Katy Clarke:

Did the Arabs bring specific ingredients or techniques or what did they bring with them?

Henna Garrison:

Yeah, ingredients, definitely, like the pistachio cultivation, almonds, you know, the use of spices. There's debate on the topic of *granita*, which is a Sicilian. I hate saying shaved ice or slushy, but sometimes that's what comes to mind when I try to translate it. If you haven't had a *granita*. But there is a story that also the current day *granita* is based off the Arabic dish of *sherbet*, which was an ice flavored with lemon juice or citrus juice. So I think they did a great job in bringing some strong influences to the Sicilian cuisine.

Katy Clarke:

You might not know the answer to this, but it just occurred to me, where did they get the ice from back in the day?

Henna Garrison:

Well, the stories that I've heard is Mount Etna. So that's another. You know, that's another thing is that we have the sea over here on one hand, and we also have really high altitude up on Etna. So you had ice, and that was one of the first places where people took ice from the volcano and were able to store it like underground cool places to have refrigerated things and icy dishes. So that's a theory, a working theory.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, makes sense. They didn't have electricity or, you know, like refrigeration or anything like that. So they had to get it from somewhere. I heard the Romans would do that as well, send people up to the Apennines and grab some ice.

Henna Garrison:

Makes sense.

Katy Clarke:

All right, so let's dig a little deeper. Shall we talk about some of these sweets? Because, like, really, Sicily, I don't know, they kind of do it the best. I mean, that's a bone of contention, I guess. But I don't. I can't think of anywhere else in Italy where they really - they might have one or two dishes that, you know, you get bombalona down in. Down in the south, or you get a baba in Naples, but you have, like, a vast array of sweets in Sicily, so it makes it really exciting. Should we start with the classic? The one, the original, the one that everyone loves.

Henna Garrison:

The Sicilian Cannolo. Is that what you're thinking of?

Katy Clarke:

Yeah.

Henna Garrison:

It's funny, a lot of dishes, and especially sweets, like, when you think of what the iconic Italian dishes are, like the cannolo. I grew up in Massachusetts. I'd go to the North End in Boston, and, like, that was what we think of as the Italian dish or the Italian sweet is a cannolo, and it is Sicilian, and it is delicious. And if you haven't had one, it's a fried pastry shell stuffed with sweet ricotta and often has either pistachio crumbs or a slice of candied orange on. On either end. And they are absolutely delicious. I don't even know what else to say about them. Katy, what do you think's important? What should we share?

Katy Clarke:

I think that the thing that I think people should know is that most of the time, if you've had them at home, you haven't had them properly.

Henna Garrison:

I would agree. I would agree. The thing I think with cannoli, that's important that you want to have it filled the minute you're eating it. So if you see them hanging out in a beautiful display in a bar or pastry shop, the ricotta filling will often have made the shell a little mushy. So if you really want to get the best Cannolo, you need to look for a place where they fill them on the spot. So sometimes you'll see cannoli, espresso, which means they're doing them right. Then sometimes you just have to go in and ask. Like, my favorite sp spot here in Cefalu, I would never have known that they have cannoli because they fill them in the back.

Henna Garrison:

They aren't on display. But you go in, you ask, and they. They put the ricotta filling in right then, and that makes sure that you have the shell that's nice and crunchy. And crumbly. And then the filling is sweet and often cool because they keep it in the refrigerator. So that's the best bet.

Katy Clarke:

Delicious. I mean, there's nothing worse than a soggy canola, really. But it's like a sad thing.

Henna Garrison:

It is, I have to say, because I think a lot of people know about the cannoli, but they don't know about its cousin, which is the cartoccio. Have you ever heard of this? Have you had one?

Katy Clarke:

No, I haven't. Tell me more.

Henna Garrison:

So this is probably one of the most decadent Sicilian sweets. And you have to think, if you know the shape of a cannolo, it's the same shape. However, instead of a hard shell, it's sort of like a puffy donut wrap. So it's like a fried dough in a nice. What do you call that? Cone shape. And then they stuff it with the same ricotta filling. And this is like a combination of a fried doughnut with sugar outside and then the sweet ricotta inside. And it's to die for.

Henna Garrison:

It's really one of my favorite things.

Katy Clarke:

If we want to appease you Henna, then we just buy you a plate of cartoccio.

Henna Garrison:

You can. Yes, that will work.

Katy Clarke:

I think I have seen them. I think they might also be a little bit less messy to eat.

Henna Garrison:

Yeah, they're softer. So when you take a bite, it's not like falling apart in your hand. They're softer, and they will keep you full for the entire day. If you have one of those in the morning, watch out.

Katy Clarke:

It's got everything. Well, because, in fact, it's quite balanced when you think about it, because it's got the carbs and the protein, because the ricotta, very high in protein. So there you go.

Henna Garrison:

So, yeah, a complete meal.

Katy Clarke:

Complete meal. If you put some fruit on it.

Henna Garrison:

Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

Let's just go a little bit deeper into this ricotta because. Well, originally, back in the day, they make them properly here now, but... and they use ricotta. But back in the day, they would use, like, some sort of, like, pastry cream. And that's not traditional, is it?

Henna Garrison:

No, you. I mean, you can now, like, you'll still find a lot of cannoli that are, like, filled with chocolate or filled with pastry cream or pistachio cream. But these are. I think these are like modern inventions. They know that the traditional cannolo with ricotta has done well, and so now you can find alternatives that are stuffed with more. I don't know. I hesitate to say artificial, but more like. Yeah, maybe.

Henna Garrison:

Maybe more I don't know what the word is...

Katy Clarke:

More custardy, creamy thing.

Henna Garrison:

Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

I mean, they're good, but it's not the tradition.

Henna Garrison:

No, it is not the traditional. And if you want something with a custard cream or a pastry cream, there's lots of different options. So go for like, go for the classic.

Katy Clarke:

If we want something with a more creamy base, what do we go for?

Henna Garrison:

Most places in Italy, you can find the Italian version of a little beignet, which is sort of like a choux pastry stuffed with pastry cream or with like pistachio cream or chocolate, like a chocolate custard. So those are really good. They're usually like the tiny little size and they call them mignon pastries also. This is all from the French kind of tradition. The French have their croissant and the Italians have the version, the moon-shaped version, which will either be called a cornetto if you're in the south of Italy, or a brioche if you're in the north. So that's sort of the - it's a more modern pastry, but it's a go-to. And you'll have, you can have that filled with yellow pastry cream or pistachio or Nutella or chocolate. And that's like a very, very classic breakfast pick.

Henna Garrison:

And I would always recommend that if you like the pastry cream, I'd say.

Katy Clarke:

Delicious. And it's funny though, isn't it? Because brioche is not the brioche that we think of, is it? It's like in that context, it's, it's more, it's kind of weird. It's not really a croissant. It's something, some different type of pastry.

Henna Garrison:

It's something that also Italians get mixed up. So brioche, for example, here in Sicily, if you ask for a brioche, you're going to get the Sicilian brioche called Tupò. For me, it's the closest to like a Challah bread, like a sweet bread with a little, it's a little round sweet bread with a little cap on the top, like a little hat. And this is the brioche in Sicily. So sometimes up north when you ask for a brioche, you'll get a croissant-type of pastry. So if a northern Italian comes down to Sicily and asks for a brioche, the waiter, often knowing that they're from the north, from their accent, will specify, do you want this Sicilian brioche? Are you looking for sweet bread or do you want an Italian brioche? Are you looking for a more croissant-type of thing? So it's confusing. Yes, it's a confusing language.

Henna Garrison:

Brioche, cornetto. There's a lot going on there.

Katy Clarke:

The brioche, though, there's a special thing with breakfast. And I have to say, this is like, one favorite memory that I have from being in Sicily with my husband's family, who had an auntie - she sadly passed away now, but she lived in Messina, and the relatives wanted to give my children, 4 years old, a proper Sicilian breakfast. And so off we went, and we got the granita with the brioche, which really kept them going for a few hours. But let's have a chat about that, because that is something that's so Sicilian. And you know, you've got to just go for it when you're there, because it is the best. Literally, especially in summer.

Henna Garrison:

It is. And it's. It's not something that I would ever have imagined on my radar, dunking sweet bread into an icy, slushy type of thing. It's crazy. Sounds crazy, but it tastes wonderful. Sometimes, if you're feeling super decadent on your granita, you can get some whipped cream, and then you have your bread, your sweet bread, your brioche, and you have your icy granita, which you can get fruit-flavored. So, like, lemon is a classic here in Sicily, like, pistachio and almond are super good.

Henna Garrison:

I also love coffee. If you're starting off strong, first thing in the morning, a coffee granita with whipped cream on top and then your brioche on the side, and you just dunk it all together. It's delicious. However, I have to say, my favorite granita flavor that I have only really seen in Sicily is mulberry. So coming from New England, coming from the Northeast, I don't think I've ever seen a mulberry or really heard of mulberries before. And when I had a mulberry granita, that was my first introduction, I couldn't understand. It's called gelsi or gelso in Italian. And I just didn't know what it was until I saw it at a fruit store.

Henna Garrison:

They were selling just buckets and buckets of gelsi - of mulberry. And it's the most. It's almost like a Blackberry, but it has a little bit more tang to it. And it's my absolute favorite granita flavor, for sure.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. One time when we were there, we decided, we're in Marzamemi, actually. It was a hot day, and we were by the sea, and we wanted. We got the three flavors, I think we got almond, gelsi, and the gelsi is really fresh, isn't it? Like, it gives you a zingy.

Henna Garrison:

Yes, exactly. It has that zing. And. And it's great with. Because the pistachio and the almond are like, rich, very rich. So when you have, like, another, you can always get more than one flavor, often two flavors in your granita.

Henna Garrison:

And so it has a nice combination when you do, like, fresh mulberry and, like, that really rich, nutty pistachio or almond. Wonderful combination.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. And the mulberry. So it's, like, bright purple.

Henna Garrison:

Yes. So don't wear your white outfit when you're eating it, because, I mean, if you're me, you're gonna get it everywhere. And it stains. It really stains.

Katy Clarke:

How about these Sicilians? So they're always wearing white in summer - white linen. And I don't know. They always look chic, and I don't know how they do it. There's no Gelsi granita on them. It never looks crumpled.

Henna Garrison:

I know. Between the, like, tomato sauce, the gelsi. Like, I couldn't do it. I wear. My strategy is to wear patterned clothes so that when it stains, you can't really tell that I've got huge stains all over it.

Katy Clarke:

I love it. Oh, it's so true, though. But, I mean, it's very juicy food. Like, there's, like, a lot of liquids happening and. Yeah. Bright colors. Ah, it's all good. It's all good.

Katy Clarke:

Well, we've covered the two big ones. What else do we have? There's so many other ones. Do you have any other favorites?

Henna Garrison:

I think the iconic, one of the iconic Sicilian sweets is Cassata. I would call it like the queen of Sicilian cakes. Cassata is beautiful. If you've ever looked into a Sicilian pastry shop and seen this - it's a round cake covered often in a green almond paste on the sides and then decorated with candied fruits. So, like, slices of candied orange, candied cherries, green and red. And it just looks like something fit for royalty. And it is.

Henna Garrison:

It's beautiful. It's super sweet. Like, most of the versions that you will find in pastry shops at bars. It's like a little slice will send you reeling for the rest of the day. Have you had them before, Katy?

Katy Clarke:

It's too much for me, to be honest. Yeah, you have to be a real sweet tooth.

Henna Garrison:

Yeah, I have a real sweet tooth, and this is something I learned the hard way. I took, like, a whole Cassata home with me one time and my roommate and I had it for breakfast, lunch and

dinner for like 48 hours. And then we both said, okay, time to take a pause. It was great. I fulfilled many dreams, eating almost an entire Cassata in 48 hours, but I don't think I'd do it again. So, for those who maybe haven't seen it, it's like a sponge cake base. And then you have your sweet ricotta layer. So that's the same sweet ricotta that you'd find in a cannolo.

Henna Garrison:

And then on the outside, you have a ring of almond paste that's often colored green with, you know, traditionally they would have used some sort of greens to color it. Now we have modern-day food coloring, so it looks like electric green often. And then on top, as I said, you have all of these candied fruits. And if you get a slice and you have like a whole candied orange or a whole candied cherry on it, just pure sugar in your mouth, like pure pure sugar. Absolutely delicious too.

Katy Clarke:

When I was growing up in Australia, if there are Australians listening, they'll understand this. We had this ice cream that was called Cassata and they made it similar to that with candied fruits inside. So it was like the Australianized version of the Sicilian Cassata, which was actually quite nice actually. But yeah, I haven't seen it around very often. But yes, for me it's only a small slice. I don't think I could go a whole cassata.

Henna Garrison:

If you're looking for like a mini portion. So you have your Cassata. And often, if you're getting this in a bar, you'll get a slice of Cassata of the big Cassata. But they also have something called Cassattine, which is a little cassata and it has the same shape, but it's mini size. So it's just like maybe the size of your. A small fist. And they make the whole cake in these tiny little molds. It looks exactly the same.

Henna Garrison:

You still have, like the green almond paste and a little candied fruit on top, but it's a tiny version. And I think it's one of the cutest little pastries that you can find because it's like the mini version, just a couple of bites. And I don't know, there's a lot of debate around if it has the same taste as a big Cassata because obviously the proportions of like the almond paste and the sweet ricotta are different than a big ricotta, but I think it's cute.

Katy Clarke:

Good to know. Good to know. There's so many sweets. We've got a whole list here. But one thing I think is very interesting in Italy, and it's why you have to keep going back, is because at certain times of the year, they bring out the certain types of sweets and bakery items. And so Easter is a big one, isn't it?

Henna Garrison:

Easter, yes. Easter is a big moment for sweets. You'll find a lot of Cassata, something that I saw in Sicily that I had not seen before. So Sicily has the tradition of Frutta Martorana, which are the almond paste treats that are shaped like little fruits. So there's molds and they take

an almond paste, a sweet almond paste, and they make it into the shape of like a pear or an apple or even bananas. You can find all different shapes and they paint them so they look like real little fruits. These you'll find around Easter. But then in Sicily, you also find the same thing, but in the shape of a little lamb, which is just...

Henna Garrison:

Can be absolutely adorable or can be actually frightening, depending on how well it's painted and how well it's made. I'm happy to share photo evidence of some of the more scary almond-paste lambs.

Katy Clarke:

Do it. I think I've got some cute ones we can put next to them.

Henna Garrison:

Yeah, we can showcase all of the styles of little lambs. But, yeah, you have a little lamb made of almond paste and then you're supposed to eat it. So I think it's easy to eat an almond paste fruit. You cut it up, you're like, oh, I'm enjoying fruit. But then when you get to your almond paste lamb, you're gonna have to dismember it. I don't know if this is appropriate for a podcast, but it's like, where do I start? Do I cut off the leg first and eat them? It's terrible.

Henna Garrison:

It's terrible. They're so cute to look at, but eating it is hard.

Katy Clarke:

100% agree. I was like, I think that's just for decoration. But no, they do eat them. And some of these bakeries, some of these pasticceria have, like, huge ones as well. Like, that's their window dressing, isn't it?

Henna Garrison:

Yes, their window display. Exactly. I'm like, who's the family of 18 that's going to eat this entire almond paste? Because if you. If you have tried any, you know, of the Frutta Martorana or the almond paste lambs, I mean, one bite is pure sugar and almond. You aren't having a cake-sized portion of this. Takes weeks to, to get through just one of these little sweets.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, it's, it's a lot. What about at Christmas time? Do they have any things that they like to eat at Christmas?

Henna Garrison:

So Christmas has one of the sweets that I've never seen, I'd never seen anywhere. It's called Pignolata and it's so cute. I was trying to think this morning, Katy, if I have seen it really in pastry shops and sometimes around Christmas you find a little version. It's sort of like a shortcut crust pastry that's deep-fried. So they cut little nuggets of this. You have to imagine little, little balls that are kind of like jingle bell-sized of short crust pastry. And then they

deep fry them and make this mound, this little mound of tiny little fried, you know, dough balls and then glaze it with tons of honey. And the modern-day version, you have colored sprinkles on top.

Henna Garrison:

So it's so cute. It also can stay out. So you'll have like this pile and then slowly through the holidays, you're picking one after the other off this huge tray of fried sweet dough balls. It's heavy, it's cute, but it's something I've seen more in like homes. I have seen some versions in pastry shops, but it's more like I would see it more in families.

Katy Clarke:

Is it a bit like the struffoli they have in Naples? Because that's more like they're puffy little dough balls.

Henna Garrison:

Yeah, these are like hard, which is, which is the thing that makes them interesting. It's like eating a fried cookie, almost. Yes, a honey-fried, honey-covered cookie, I think. I mean if you're, if you're listening, you're starting to hear Sicilians love fried things. So I'm thinking of like all of the classics. And if you're not deep frying it, you're probably not doing it right. Cannolo shell, the pinolata. Sfince are another super typical Sicilian dessert that are deep fried. Have you had them before?

Katy Clarke:

No, but tell me more.

Henna Garrison:

You can find them year-round, the Sfince or sometimes like pronounced sfinge, depending on where you are in Sicily. But they are traditional of San Giuseppe, which is the Italian Father's Day on March 19, and Sfince di San Giuseppe in Sicily, you'll find that everyone prepares them a little bit differently. So it's always sort of like a choux pastry that's deep-fried. So you get this puff ball that's empty inside. And in Palermo, for example, they often stuff it with the sweet ricotta. So again, deep-fried sweet ricotta, amazing combination. Can't go wrong.

Henna Garrison:

The Sfince where I've lived for a while in inland Sicily, there they do them. They do the same, you know, choux pastry that's fried. Instead of filling them, they just drizzle honey on top and then they put either pistachio crumbs or like a slice of candied orange on top. So they're a little bit lighter than the Palermo version. But I've also seen them just plain with powdered sugar. Yeah, it's a great... It's in March is San Giuseppe, so something sweet and fried in the colder months is always nice. But now you can pretty much find them year-round, if you look.

Katy Clarke:

They sound delicious. I love anything with pistachio, actually. I'm a big pistachio lover. And in fact, when I come back from Italy, if my family's not with me, I have basically got half a

suitcase full of pistachio things.

Henna Garrison:
Perfect.

Katy Clarke:

We're a bit pistachio mad here. Now they have one other type of dessert, which is more like pudding. So, should we round it off with that? Yeah, something a little bit lighter.

Henna Garrison:

So classic. Since we're in August, you can find Gelo di Melone. So this is like a watermelon pudding. And it's so good because if you are in Sicily, you will see just heaps and heaps of enormous watermelon everywhere you go and you won't know what to do with them because one can only eat so much watermelon. Although that's not true - I could eat watermelon forever. So they make a pudding, a watermelon pudding.

Henna Garrison:

And it's absolutely delicious. Super easy, very light, very sweet, because we love sweet. And this is the summer version, the Gelo di Melone. So watermelon jelly, let's say. In the winter, you can often find a Gelo di limone. So, a lemon like a lemon pudding or a lemon custard. You know, you can do more of a custard with like eggs if you want something heavier. But depending on the season, the pudding, you know, use whatever fruit is. Is in season.

Henna Garrison:

So, yeah, I love a good Gelo di Melone

Katy Clarke:

They're just really creative when you've got like extra, extra stuff, you've got to make it into a sweet.

Henna Garrison:

Yes. It was thinking, actually, when you asked about Christmas, because everything, you know, Sicily is abundant. We're lucky because we have a long growing season. But then there's, you know, the summer and the fall harvest, which is just - everything's about preservation and one of, you know, one of their sweets here in the summer, we have fig season, tons of figs. But what, you know, you can only eat so many fresh figs. So often they'll dry the figs and then for Christmas time, there's a sweet called Buccellati, which are cookies stuffed with like dried fig. So they've used that fig they've preserved in the summer to make something that's delicious in the winter.

Katy Clarke:

I feel about figs the way you feel about melons. They're so good. My mother-in-law has a fig tree, it's thriving in the Adelaide summers. It gives big juicy figs. They're delicious. Fantastic. Now, Henna, we can't all be in Sicily like you, so how easy are these things to make?

Henna Garrison:

Listen, I'm an eater. I'm not a cooker. Like, I let the people who are good at what they're doing do their jobs well, especially pastries. Like, I will go to a pastry shop over trying to make something at home. Although I have to say, I've had a lot of wonderful cannoli that have been made by others in their homes. If you are someone who's adventurous, who likes to deep fry, who has time, who wants to find the best ricotta around, you can definitely make it. I think things like the Gelo di Melone or Gelo di Limone, that sort of stuff, is a little bit easier to translate.

Henna Garrison:

Once you're out of Sicily or out of Italy, you can definitely find whatever fruits in season and do a nice little, you know, like a little jelly or a little pudding type thing. I'm gonna be honest, you know, I don't think they're easy to make at home. But if you do make them, I will happily try them for you. I can taste test.

Katy Clarke:

Or you just have to go to Sicily and it can take you on a tour of her favorite pasticceria. Have you got any ones that you want to share with everyone?

Henna Garrison:

My advice is always to look for pastry shops because now, like a lot of bars or cafes, they have pastries. If you find a place that's only doing pastries, you know, they're probably good at what they do. Also, you know, a lot of these sweet traditions, something we didn't talk about, you know, came out of the convents. So nuns were often in charge of making a lot of, a lot of the sweet treats. Sugar was precious. For example, in Palermo, there's still like the Santa Caterina convent, where you can go and get one of the biggest and sweetest cannoli in Sicily. So you can look for places that are, you know, that are unusual like that, where to find sweets. I'll show you some great places, but I think you'll find a lot of really good places anywhere in Sicily.

Katy Clarke:

So don't get sucked in by these TikToks or Instagram, giant cannolis or whatever. Like. Yeah, go to the neighborhood pasticceria. And yeah, the thing is over there is that they're very proud of their work and they're mainly serving locals for this stuff. So you're not going to last very long if you're doing a dodgy cannoli.

Henna Garrison:

Exactly. That's true. That's very true.

Katy Clarke:

But I think as well what you said is go for the pasticceria over the bar. So I think maybe if people haven't got a lot of experience traveling in Italy, they may not know the difference, actually, because a bar might be open all day, maybe into the evening, and they may do

breakfast with the brioche or the cannoli if you're in Sicily. And they may go on until, you know, maybe 8 o'clock at night serving drinks and snacks and things. So it's not their specialty.

Henna Garrison:

Right. There are some, there are some great bars that have great pastries attached to them, but a lot of the times they won't be as fresh. They might be outsourcing, like they might have a pastry place doing their pastries. So, you know, if you find a spot that does only pastries, it's a good sign.

Katy Clarke:

Henna. This has been a bit of a treat and I'm very hungry now and I'm very jealous that you're probably going to now wander down the street for a freshly piped cannolo after we finish this recording.

Henna Garrison:

I might. I might get a Cartoccio today, Katy. I might go crazy. Who knows?

Katy Clarke:

Oh, why don't you get two who knows? Just pretend that I'm eating one of them and then you won't feel guilty at all. Thank you so much for sharing all your information on the podcast about Sicilian sweets. I know that when anyone's on tour with Henna, they are going to have a delicious, sweet treat time. And she knows so much about Italian food and Italian wine and it's just a delight to hear you talk about it. I always enjoy having chats with you. So thank you so much. Grazie mille for coming on the podcast.

Henna Garrison:

Oh, thank you, Katy. It's always fun to be here. And, yes, please come over. I will share sweet treats with you anytime. And I'm excited to continue my adventures here in Italy and share with everyone all of the yummy things we have.

Katy Clarke:

Grazie, Henna. Thank you.

Henna Garrison:

Ciao, Katy.

Katy Clarke:

Even if you're more tempted by salty flavors, I can assure you that you'll want to get stuck into the treats on offer in Sicily.

One tip for you, if you're in a group, I can recommend ordering all the granita flavors in one go so you can try them all. I loved the gelsi or mulberry flavour and pistachio, but the kids loved chocolate and strawberry and my husband liked the almond and coffee - so it worked out great!

We'll be making sure all our guests have an in-depth Sicilian sweets experience in a few weeks' time when we head into sweet-making heaven in the Val di Noto on our Eastern Sicily tour. And on next year's Sicily trip - our 12-day adventure across the island includes a sweet-making workshop at one of the most celebrated bakeries on the island.

You'll find all the details of those tours and the delicious sweets we discussed today on our website at untolditaly.com/289 for episode 289.

Thanks to all our wonderful listeners for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. I hope you enjoyed today's show. If you did, then it would be amazing if you gave us a rating or review in your favorite podcast app. Shout out to Champagne Stephanova from Australia for their lovely review. Sounds like you might also be an Oasis fan like me! Appreciate your support

On next week's episode, we're going to discuss another sweet yet sour product from central Italy. It's one that's steeped in tradition and ritual and an important part of the culture of the Emilia region.

But until then, it's "ciao for now".