

A Sicilian Christmas Reverie

by Leslie Andrea Westbrook

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRAN COLLIN

I've only visited the craggy
Mediterranean island of
Sicily once—so far. A local
woman there informed me
that I would cry when I left.
She was right.



Sicily is a place that is easy to fall in love with—especially if it's part of your heritage and hard to get out of your system. "It's in the blood," my womanizing grandfather, Johnny Blandino, reminded me once upon a time while inquiring about my love life, not my cooking skills. Despite my WASP-y name, I am half Sicilian. I am several generations removed from the old country. Both sets of my maternal great-grandparents—none of whom I knew—immigrated long ago (one side landed in New Orleans). Traditions filtered down and became diluted, or disappeared altogether, as my family acclimated to their new homeland.



Cucciddati—Sicilian Christmas fig cookies.





Chef/owner Alberto Morello of Olio e Limone in Santa Barbara.

Sometimes I wish I could not only turn back the clock but time travel. Where would I go? To the towns where my ancestors lived—Campo Felice, Cefalu, Palermo and Piana degli Albanesi—before they emigrated to America.

What were holidays like on this Italian island, a place unto itself, I wondered? I began by asking my mother, Marcella, what she remembered from her childhood family traditions. Her grandparents had a ranch in Baldwin Park in LA's San Gabriel Valley, where she spent lots of time and made happy memories.

"My grandmother made old-style, thick-crust pizza with tomato sauce and anchovies, which was considered a great delicacy. She also made cookies with lots of anise in them," she said, adding, "She was very pious and always on her knees praying!"

What my mother remembers is *Sfincione di San Giovanni* or, in English, Palermo Christmas pizza made of mozzarella and

parmesan cheese combined with a host of sweet caramelized onions, a layer of thick tomato sauce and a few anchovies, encased between a thick, soft focaccia-style crust and a mountain of toasted breadcrumbs covering the top—making it crunchy. The *sfincione* (which translates to "thick sponge") pizza my mother recalled is not round, but baked in a square tray and cut into squares or rectangles and often sold as street food in Palermo.

Chef/owner Alberto Morello of Olio e Limone in Santa Barbara concurred: "It's a big focaccia with a thin layer of tomato sauce, onions, salted anchovy and lots of breadcrumbs that have been first toasted in a pan with olive oil, which gives it a crunchy top, similar to Chicago pan pizzas."

Pizza for Christmas? Licorice-flavored cookies?

It's true!

Sicilian born and raised until the age of 18, Chef Alberto

Opposite: *Timballo di bucatini*—thick noodles with meat sauce and a layer of fried eggplant and young pecorino.





Opposite: White anchovies marinated with parsley and lemon with caper berries. Above: Large prawns with spicy oregano oil.



Roasted baby goat with polenta.

Perhaps, if I visit the grotto in Alberto's Sicilian hometown, my wish to know more about my ancestors would manifest. Although my lineage of yesteryear won't be there, I can conjure what life was like for them in earlier times. I might gain a clue as to what enticed them to make the arduous journey to America, the promised land.

added plenty more Sicilian food memories. He returns annually to visit his 92-year-old mother in his childhood town, where he helped create a special attraction (more on that in *uno momento*).

In Alberto's village of Custonaci, in the province of Trapani, sweets were always a treat. He fondly remembered *graffe*—a donut without the hole filled with a ricotta cannoli-style filling made from sheep milk (Bellwether Farms produces a sheep milk ricotta):

"The sugar goes through until your ears become red!" he laughed. "After church, we'd have a few cents left and run to the local bar to buy some!"

My mother told a donut story of her own.

"I was about eight years old and I came home from school one day when we were living with my grandparents. I decided I wanted to cook something. So I looked in an American cookbook and got the ingredients out of the cupboard. My grandmother didn't speak English and didn't know what one of the ingredients was, so I left it out. I put oil in the frying pan—she knew what I was doing and helped me with that. My donuts were beautiful and tasted good but were hard! I'd left out the shortening, because she didn't know what that ingredient meant. They looked like and tasted like donuts, but they were hard as doorknobs. The family always called my homemade donuts doorknobs!" she laughed.

Back to the old country memories, Alberto made me hungry with his long list of traditional Christmas Eve dinner items, especially the Feast of the Seven Fishes that is not only important, but also abundant. He reeled off the following: white anchovies marinated with parsley lemon and *alici marinade*, tiny sardines marinated in lemon and oil; clams with oregano breadcrumbs; *baccalà alla Siciliana*—fried salt cod filet (not my favorite when tried in Portugal recently, maybe the Italian version is better?) with onions, parsley and olive oil; big or small shrimp with a spicy oregano oil and calamari salad with green onions.

"Moray eel is very important, with tomato, capers and olives. Vegetables are served buffet style. Families gather together, all dressed up for the holiday, exchange presents and usually celebrate until 1am!" said Alberto, noting that his Christmas meals were more meat-oriented.

"What I remember the most is the *timballo di bucatini*—thick noodles with meat sauce. In a large pan, put a layer of fried eggplant in the middle of the pasta, a layer of *primo sale* (young pecorino) and an egg here or there. We used to prepare this and put it in the oven at 8am on Christmas morning. When we returned home from church (if midnight Mass was missed), it was ready and the outside was so crispy!" the chef recalled.

Alberto, an only child with many aunts and uncles, fondly remembered a special menu of roasted baby lamb or baby goat (*capretto*) with potatoes and escarole sautéed with olive oil and garlic, and a salad made of thin slices of fennel with blood oranges and black olives.

Christmas fig cookies called *cucciddati* and items that aren't available here, including pastry filled with figs, clove and honey and cannoli filled with cassata (again, made with sheep ricotta) topped off his list. *Torrone*, the delicious and chewy white nougat with almonds, is a favorite candy usually sold at Italian delis. Alberto said *torrone* is also popular around Christmastime in Sicily, but it is a Northern Italian import, not a southern tradition. Christmas trees were introduced to Sicily in 1943, thanks to the servicemen there during WWII.

To drink?

"In my area, Campari with orange," said the chef.

La Famiglia

On my maternal grandfather's side, the Blandinos were a large family. My grandfather Johnny and his eight sisters and brothers grew up in a large house in what was a more rural downtown Los Angeles (on 23rd Street near San Pedro Street) a century ago. The family also had a ranch in the far reaches of the San Fernando Valley. One day, when he was a teenager, my grandfather got into trouble—his punishment was to walk all the way home from the ranch. It took him the entire day!

We never attended big Blandino family Christmases. My mother, father, sister and I spent the holiday with my father's side of the family. (Apparently this was my divorced Italian grandmother's choice.) Decades later, I got to savor Easter at my Auntie Clara's table groaning with homemade ravioli, lasagna, baked chickens, salads and more—and desserts from the family's favorite go-to: Claro's Italian Deli. When I asked my cousin, Jack the dentist, what he recalled of family Italian Christmas traditions, he mentioned *struffoli* honey balls.

Whats' *struffoli*, I wondered? Basically, it's sweet donuts coated in a honey glaze that are piled high, similar to the French *croque-en-bouche* (the French version are cream puffs drizzled with caramel).

"I never did understand the big deal with the *struffoli* that would be piled up like a honey-soaked pyramid, but my mom and aunts were major fans!" my cousin recalled.

My grandmother, whose birth name Angelina became Anglicized to Jeannie, always brought a beautiful box of carefully wrapped cookies coated in powdered sugar for our Christmas Eve open houses. I recently reproduced the Italian wedding cookies, but switched up the season by taking them to the annual summer pizza/bocce ball party put on by UNICO,

the Italian American service club. These buttery/flour/sugar/almond balls are popular in other cultures and also known as Mexican wedding cookies and Russian teacakes.

Isn't life about making new traditions as well as savoring the old ones? I discovered a few unfamiliar treats in my research for this story, including a traditional Sicilian Christmas dessert called *buccellato*, thanks to Southern Italian cookbook author and culinary tour guide Rosetta Costantino (who has a recipe on her website). Rosetta compares the pretty crimped pastry to a "supersized fig cookie." I may give it a swirl this Christmas—although several male Italian chefs told me it was "challenging" to make (perhaps due to the special crimping tool that is traditionally used). Rosetta is bringing me a crimper from Palermo. I can't wait to try it out. But I might have to visit her in the meantime, to learn the art of my ancestors.

Chef Alberto's Special Attraction

Alberto's village is famous for a "living history" museum. Grotta Mangiapane depicts 18th-century life and is especially active during Christmastime. Alberto helped create this star attraction in an old grotto/cave dwelling, along with the town priest and other locals.

Now I yearn even more to experience Christmas in Sicily—where nativity scenes are a big deal and whistles are blown at midnight and, more importantly, the world stands still for family gatherings.

"Nobody works! Everybody STOPS at Christmas—except the hospital!"

Alberto said. My friend Chris Woods vouched and wrote to me: "I was in Sicily one Christmas. Everything was closed. Had to eat Pringles for lunch. We did eat eventually. Everyone came out on the streets around 7pm and then it got quite jolly!"

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If I am very, very lucky, I might even learn how to make the ring-shaped dried fig Christmas treat *buccellato* from someone else's beautiful Sicilian *nonna!* 🍷



Marcella Blandino (the author's mother) at age 5 in 1934.

Award-winning writer/author **Leslie Andrea Westbrook** is a third-generation Californian on both her Sicilian (maternal) and Westbrook (paternal) sides. Her articles appear nationally (*Traditional Home* magazine), regionally in California and online globally. If not dreaming about traveling to Sicily about now, she's probably pondering a pizza.