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Searching for Jews in Taormina, Sicily

By Carol Goodman Kaufman
Advocate correspondent



"Jews' Lane," in the ancient Jewish ghetto in Taormina.

PHOTO BY GIOVANNI DALLORTO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

TAORMINA, Sicily – It was our very first cruise, and we were excited to see places we had never before visited. The friends with whom we traveled were veteran cruisers, having been on over two dozen trips, and they had prepared us with all the practical information we would need, from how to negotiate the enormous ship and the necessity of purchasing anti-seasickness meds to the best places to find Wi-Fi on shore. We were ready.

Our first stop was the port of Messina, on the northeastern tip of the island of Sicily, the largest in the Mediterranean. With no delay, our bus whisked us off to explore Taormina, a 45-minute drive southwest via a steep, winding ascent through tunnels dug into the Peloritani Mountains.

The first official mention of Jews in Taormina is recorded in the year 1415, although some historians believe they arrived on the island at around the time of the Maccabees – during the

second century BCE – while the Seleucids under Antiochus were waging war against the homeland. Sicily's location along maritime trade routes in the Strait of Messina makes that theory eminently possible. Of course, that also made the island a prime target for invaders, including the Greeks, Romans, Normans, Arabs, Byzantines, French and Spanish. Sicily continues to be a prize, where tourists may enjoy the influences imprinted by each of these cultures.

Five hundred years ago, 40 percent of Sicilians were Jewish, according to Rabbi Barbara Aiello, the American-born founder of the Italian Jewish Cultural Center of Calabria. At that time, they were prominent in business, industry and agriculture – although I can't quite figure out where in the steep mountains they farmed or how they reached the sea from so high up.

It also appears they lived in relative safety and security – the key word here being relative – for almost half a century under King Alfonso V of Aragon. That security was not lacking in challenges, however; the first occurred in 1428, when Jews were ordered to attend sermons aimed at converting them. A substantial bribe influenced the king to repeal the decree in 1430.

Still, the repeal did not stop the Sicilian monk Capistrano from fanning the flames of anti-Semitism. He appointed investigators into Jewish business practices, resulting in an enormous fine of 2,000 ounces of gold.



"Jews' Lane," in the ancient Jewish ghetto in Taormina.

PHOTO BY GIOVANNI DALLORTO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Poll

During the current presidential campaign, little has been said publicly about candidate Bernie Sanders' Jewish heritage. Should it be a topic of discussion?:

- Yes. It would show how far Jews have advanced in this country.
- No. It would only harm his candidacy.

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One of King Alfonso V's last acts was to prohibit aliyah to Israel. When some brave African Jews tried to make a break for it, another 1,000-ounce fine added yet more gold to the royal treasury.

Then, of course, came Ferdinand and Isabella, who on March 31, 1492 issued their Edict of Expulsion. Since Sicily was part of the Spanish kingdom, the order affected over 100,000 Jews living on the island, including those in Taormina. Masses of Jews left on the last day of that year.

The exiles fled to Apulia, Calabria and Naples, where, two years later, a deadly virus broke out and spread throughout the area. The Jews were blamed for the outbreak, so they packed their belongings and left yet again, this time for Ottoman-controlled territory: Constantinople, Damascus, Salonica, Cairo. There they remained for almost two-and-a-half centuries. When in 1740 Sicily issued a proclamation inviting the Jews back, some did return but, soon feeling the same old anti-Semitic threats, they returned to Turkish territory.

While remnants of the town's Greek and Roman past are still visible today in the once-walled city, little evidence of Jewish presence remains in Taormina. Signs for the Jewish ghetto and the Street of the Hebrews still stand; and a couple of buildings, one of which may have been a synagogue, feature Stars of David in their façades. Aside from those few landmarks, though, nothing of a once-vibrant Jewish community endures. Curiously, though, I also spied the stars on the multi-colored gel candies being sold in the open-air market.

We hiked a steep hill to visit the Greek amphitheater, the second largest in Sicily. Built in the third century BCE, renovated by the Romans, and then again by its modern inhabitants, it is used today for concerts, film festivals and theatrical productions. After exploring the ground level, we climbed the steep stairway to the top of the stadium and were rewarded with a fabulous view of the sparkling turquoise waters of the Ionian Sea and the volcanic Mount Etna.

Arancini

Serves 3 or 4

The culinary highlight of our visit (and perhaps in all of Italy) had to be the arancini: deep fried, breadcrumb coated veggie-and-cheese-stuffed risotto balls. With their origins in Sicily, it was practically mandated that we try some. With all of 15 minutes to eat before our bus was scheduled to leave, we found a tiny restaurant tucked into a narrow alleyway and each chose one. The one and only upside of having limited time was that we could have but one; these little balls of heaven could prove addictive. Writing this column provides all the incentive I need to make them at home.

Arancini require a two-day process, but they are not hard to prepare, and you get the added bonus of having two dinners from one foundation.

The day before you want the arancini, prepare the risotto. Using the recipe below, there will be plenty left over, even if feeding four people.

Ingredients for Risotto:

4 Tbsp. butter
4 Tbsp. olive oil
3 cups sliced mushrooms
5 cups of pareve chicken broth
¾ cup white wine
1 medium onion, finely chopped
2 cloves garlic, minced
1½ cups Arborio Rice
¼ cup grated parmesan cheese
3 Tbsp. chopped fresh parsley
Salt and freshly ground pepper

Directions for Risotto:

Heat half the butter and half the olive oil in a skillet over medium high heat. Add mushrooms and cook for about five minutes, or until softened.

Boil water to add to pareve chicken powder.

Heat the remaining butter and olive oil in a large pan over medium heat.

Add the onion and garlic and sauté until it begins to soften but not brown, about four minutes.

Add the rice and stir for 1 minute, make sure all the grains are well coated.

Add the wine and stir until it's completely absorbed.

Begin to add broth one ladle at a time, adding another when the broth is just about absorbed, stirring almost constantly to avoid sticking.

Continue adding broth one ladle at a time until you have used it all.

Half way through, add half the mushrooms and the red pepper.

When you are almost to the end of the broth, add the peas.

Once the rice has cooked to the point of being creamy but mushy, add the

rest of the mushrooms, parmesan cheese, and parsley, and season to taste.

Stir and serve immediately.

Ingredients for Arancini:

Vegetable oil, for deep-frying

2 large eggs, beaten

2 cups cold risotto

½ cup grated parmesan cheese

1½ cups cornflake crumbs

2 ounces mozzarella, cut into 1/2-inch cubes

Salt and pepper

Directions for Arancini:

Pour about 1½ inches of oil into a heavy large saucepan or wok and heat over medium heat to 350 degrees. (When a drop of water sizzles, it's ready.)

Stir the eggs, risotto, parmesan, and ½ cup of the cornflake crumbs in a large bowl to combine.

Pour the 1 cup of cornflake crumbs onto a large plate or platter. Using about 2 tablespoons of the risotto mixture for each, form the risotto mixture into 2-inch balls.

Insert 1 cube of mozzarella into the center of each ball and close rice over it.

Roll the balls in the cornflake crumbs to coat.

Working in batches, lower the rice balls into the hot oil with a slotted spoon.

Cook until deep golden brown, about 5 minutes, turning halfway through.

Using a slotted spoon, transfer the arancini to a plate lined with double-thickness of paper towels to drain.

Season with salt and pepper.

Serve hot.

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