

# Sicily: 'Agriturismo' Brings Visitors Down to the Farm

By David Taylor and Lisa Smith  
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We realized what we were in for when Aldo Conte came out of the kitchen with his arms full of dishes made from fresh local produce: grilled smoked eggplant, slices of a pumpkinlike squash, pickled zucchini, stuffed green peppers, caponata and a decanter of Sicilian rosé to wash it down. And that was just the antipasti.

We had a full night ahead of us. The cozy dining room brimmed with delicious aromas, and in the next room his family and friends sat chatting around the television. Deep in the Sicilian countryside, we felt at home, only better.

When we decided to go to Sicily, we both knew we wanted to try a farm-stay, or agriturismo. I don't know whether we were swayed by images from old Italian films of families gathered at an outdoor table over a fabulous meal, or by raves about Sicilian cuisine being the next big thing. Maybe we even had a notion of "Sideways," Italian style, with picnics amid rows of grapevines.

Whatever the reasons, we were enchanted by the prospect of staying close to the soil. And we weren't alone. Going online, we found that agriturismo options throughout [Italy](#) have bloomed in recent years.

Now we had tough decisions to make. In Sicily alone, there are a host of farms and country homes to choose from, many with Web sites showing idyllic estates with swimming pools set in rolling hills, giving the impression of baronial fiefdoms. Half the fun was mulling the choices; we were torn between staying in the island's heartland or on the coast.

We settled on the northeastern Madonie mountains, which include Sicily's largest

nature reserve. The Madonie are in a chain of ridges stretching from the Italian peninsula across the Sicilian Channel to [Tunisia](#), where they rise as the Atlas Mountains. The Madonie region is off the beaten track yet reasonably close to Enna, the hub of the interior, and Piazza Armerina, a small town outside Enna famous for its striking mosaics of an ancient Roman estate.

We chose Casale Villa Raino, a 19th-century country estate in the Raino Valley, based on the photos of its centuries-old setting and testimonials to the chef's abilities. Our e-mailed reservation request (in English) received the friendly reply: "A presto." See you soon.

## **A Mix of Cultures**

The Natural Regional Park of the Madonie, two hours outside traffic-crazed [Palermo](#), is defined by villages, farms and countryside. Many of the hill towns date to the Saracens, Muslims who ruled Sicily in the 10th and 11th centuries before being pushed out by a wave of [Norman](#) invaders. The Madonie region is more wooded than other parts of Sicily, with giant hollies, wild olive trees and Sicilian firs.

Just a few miles beyond the park lies Gangi, a medieval stone fortress-town perched on a peak. It is known within Italy as the home of the 17th-century painter Giuseppe Salerno, nicknamed "the Cripple of Gangi" (lo Zeppo di Gangi).

It's easy to drive right past the sign for Villa Raino. We did just that and had to double back. After several turns onto ever-smaller roads, we pitched headlong down a one-lane track as steep as a chute at an amusement park. We came to rest at the stone manor house, between pastures and olive trees on our left and the swimming pool on our right, empty in the cool weather of mid-September.

The young woman at the front desk showed us upstairs to our room. It was airy and light, with high ceilings, blue terrazzo floors and an antique wardrobe made of burled wood. The bathroom had a claw-foot tub and comfortable old fixtures. Our balcony overlooked the restaurant's patio and the hillside where the angular town of Gangi perched, silhouetted in the afternoon sun.

We were still settling in when an old sedan pulled up to the front door, laden with produce. It was Aldo Conte, the proprietor and chef. A tall, gangly man, he welcomed us in English with a joke and a suggestion of where we could get a bite in town that afternoon.

The charm of agriturismo is that you get to immerse yourself, at least briefly, in a place you probably wouldn't otherwise find. Of course, you might find Villa Raino through word of mouth and come for a meal on the weekend. But chances are you wouldn't feel comfortable strolling up the dirt track behind the building alongside the sheep pasture, and communing with the fields and four-legged residents.

The sheep stared back. A big, 26-year-old roan horse stood patiently by the path, untethered. Named Shithan for one of the titans of ancient [Rome](#), it once belonged to Conte's parents. We walked up the track past the olive grove to the top of a knoll and looked out over the estate. If you have time and the inclination, you can visit local farms and see, even in winter, fallow tilling, sausagemaking and Aldo's favorite, cheesemaking.

The proof is in the eating, though, and the high point of our visit was Conte's own performance in the kitchen. We came down for dinner at 8 p.m. to find him red-aproned, bustling around the small dining room, with its sunny yellow walls and four simple wood tables. (A larger hall is used on weekends, when the restaurant draws visitors from as far as Palermo.) Conte was a one-man show: host, maitre d' and waiter for all four tables. Filling the other three tables were hikers on a walkabout organized by a British touring group.

After the magnificent starters came two types of pasta on large platters: spaghetti with olive oil, garlic and fresh mushrooms, and rustic bucatini alla amatriciana, a hearty pasta dish flavored with tomatoes, peppers, pecorino cheese and guanciale (lean Sicilian bacon made from cured hog jowls). The entrees that followed were fresh and simply prepared: a delicious homemade sausage, grilled beef and veal cutlets. Then came the fruit course, a still life of perfectly arranged red grapes and peaches. We finished with Conte's cannoli, made with a light ricotta filling inside hand-rolled pastry tubes slightly thicker than usual. A spectacular feast.

Taking our dishes away, Conte huffed with good humor that we must not have liked the food since we had eaten so little. We were stuffed.

Exploring Gangi filled a pleasant afternoon. In the quiet of the siesta hour, the winding main street Umberto I (throughout Sicily, every town's main street seems to be named either Umberto I or Umberto II, two kings of a united Italy) felt like a ghost town, complete with fleeting voices heard through the closed doors of shops and homes. The main square was empty except for two kids playing foosball.

We surveyed the massive tower built by the Knights of [Malta](#) in the 1200s and

admired the sheaves of wheat that arched over the street, reminders of the previous month's festival to Demeter, earth goddess.


Most of the stone doorways are chiseled with the year of their construction -- 1669, 1661 and earlier -- and every few steps up the winding road, we gained a new dramatic vista. The mix of cultures in the town's architecture, a blend of Arab, Norman and local, lends the place a moody quality. A 9th-century Saracen tower at the foot of Gangi is a reminder of those invaders. The painter Salerno's work is on display in the Chiesa Madre, a church built in the 1600s. At the edge of town we passed a cluster of elderly men straight out of a Fellini film and stopped at a bar for espresso, drinking it while standing at the counter, in the local custom.

One day wasn't enough. We could have used another for a meal at Tenuta Gangivecchio, an old abbey-turned-cooking-school on the edge of town, and to explore the nearby mountain villages of Polizzi Generosa and Petralia Soprana.

In the morning, Conte served a generous breakfast in the sunny dining room: fresh bread, local marmalade and honey, homemade white hoop cheese, hard-boiled eggs and slices of sweet yellow melon. (Agriturismo breakfasts are typically more spare.) Strong coffee and hot milk made it complete. As the last British hikers set out up the hillside for Gangi, we urged our little SmartCar up the steep lane, with sheep jingling a farewell behind us.

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