A Journey into the Imaginary of Sicilian Pastry

It was summer when we embarked on a mythical journey that took us across Sicily from west to east, following the glorious trail of a confectionary tradition famous for its archaic opulence. We had an anthropological exploration in mind. Beginning with flavors, we observed shapes and tracked down production methods. A world gradually emerged in which we discovered new ingredients brought by successive waves of invaders, labor and manufacture defined by power structures and social conventions; and religious beliefs that gave rise to a wide variety of sweets. Though we learned history and etymology, we also sought to dig deeper, to engage in an archaeology of the imagination, where sweet things represent a creative answer to the demands of the world.

Moors wearing turbans, Aztec priests, Spanish governors, Norman lords—the noble ghosts of history squeeze inside a wobbly coach that travels the roads of the collective unconscious. Resting on their knees is an oversize pupo of sugar, its arms and legs sticking out the carriage windows. A mob of angry nuns assaults a delegation of Swiss pastry chefs responsible for having corrupted the middle classes with their secular cakes. It is then that the Swiss pastry chefs revolt and threaten to harm the sugar doll.
The road of memory is far from smooth. The collective unconscious stumbles easily. The carriage rolls on, but the box seat is empty.

The past was not the only source of marvel. At times we witnessed what seemed like culinary miracles, such as a strawberry sorbet that did not melt, keeping its shape for more than twenty minutes in the Sicilian heat. Might this reflect the miraculous industrialization of Sicilian sweets, the hydrogenated fats and gelling agents that inflate ice cream and protect the mouth from the sensation of cold? It is hard to explain the secret of this sorbet, as Sicilians are still the proud bearers of a venerable gastronomic tradition, which they appear to hand down faithfully. But the memory of taste is volatile, and economic opportunity accelerates falsification.

**Mimetic Solidifications and Architectural Crusts**

Palermo. Behind tall palm trees we spied the honey-colored walls of the Norman Palace and the Most Holy Virgin Mary of the Assumption Cathedral. Intricate reliefs belabor the stone in a thousand patterns before crumbling into sandy chaos. The color and texture of the sandstone bear a striking resemblance to a cookie that has been baked to perfection. You can almost smell the fragrance of vanilla.

There is an obvious kinship between the colors and shapes of Sicilian pastry and the prominent forms of its natural and urban landscapes. In this setting, pastry chefs work like architects, with one eye turned to nature and the other to artifice. A cake is a construction. Its constituent ingredients act like building materials that combine according to their natural properties to achieve a specific texture, shape, and flavor.

*Cubbaita, giurgiulena,* and *petrafermula* form the bedrock of Sicilian sweets, its ancient and solid foundation. They are forged by fire into quasi-eternal structures, archaic preparations meant to melt slowly in the mouths of patient children who are aware that expensive treats need to last. If impatience takes over, beware that a chunk of *giurgiulena* can split unexpectedly, reducing the pleasure by half.

Sicilian dialect uses just one word, *giurgiulena,* for both sandstone and sesame seed brittle. It is an ancient word, from the Arabic term *al juljulan,* which means “sesame,” a seed widely used throughout the Middle East. Sicily became acquainted with sesame seeds after A.D. 800, when the island fell under Arab influence. *Giurgiulena* is a Christmas confection, a small, hard block with a fine, grainy texture; *cubbaita* is another name for the same preparation of toasted sesame seeds cooked in honey. This name comes from the Arabic *qubbayt,* literally, “sweet work.” There is something archaic, primitive perhaps, in the idea of taking simple elements—sesame seeds, almonds, candied citrus peel—and keeping them whole, turning them into a mass with the help of a sweet binding agent, in this case, honey. The result is a conglomerate, not a synthesis. Each element retains its individual shape and texture. When eating a conglomerate, one tastes a simple succession of separate flavors.

The same can be said for *petrafermula,* another conglomerate, prepared with the candied peel of oranges and citron to which almonds can be added (it is then called *petramennula*). Honey and candied peel are cooked to a high temperature and poured, lavalike, onto a tray to solidify. *Petrafennula*’s hard block of translucent stone melts in the mouth, its fruit-like fossils trapped in an amberlike suspension. It is a compact treat that can be easily transported and lasts for a long time in the cold months.

*Giurgiulena, cubbaita, petrafermula,* and the more elaborate *torrone* (nougat) are popular treats sold by street vendors in autumn and winter—in cooler weather the honey and sugar do not melt into a sticky mess. *Torrone* is an ancient treat that has come down to our time unchanged. An edible fossil that belongs to a still lively popular tradition, it is sold during religious celebrations when the streets around churches fill up with stalls. In Palermo, the connection with *torrone* is so strong that the city’s inhabitants, considered loud and fun-loving, are dubbed *turronari.* *Torrone* is an Arabic invention that arrived in Sicily after a detour in Spain, where a new way of binding toasted almonds was devised. Instead of simply pouring out a hot, lactic flow that cools and hardens around pieces of nuts and fruit, *torrone* was created by alchemy, the transformation of a light, foamy substance into opaque, solid matter. It is based on a leap of the imagination: honey is gently cooked for a long time until almost completely dry, then whipped with egg whites until stiff. The combination of cold and hot produces the unexpected—a frothy, gooey mass to which hot sugar syrup and roasted almonds are added. To make *torrone* requires skill and attention, particularly attention to temperature, for only the exact moment can bring about the perfect reaction between honey and sugar that results in a vitreous crunch.

An extravagant and much more recent version of a sweet building block is *gelato di campagna* (ice cream from the countryside). Although it looks like ice cream, this confection has none of its complications, such as needing
relative of ice cream had political value: its three colors celebrated the newly attained unity of the Italian peninsula. Today the three colors of the Italian flag have metamorphosed into fluorescent hues. Consumption of gelato di campagna peaks during the St. Rosalia Day celebrations in July, since the trustworthy confection can withstand the warm summer temperatures.

Exit Palermo.

Shells and Bones

Sicilian pastries are built by aggregation and superposition. They seldom arise from doughs that develop airy volume. This is not a country where flour and eggs combine with rising agents to create variations of golden crusts and spongy textures. Indeed, pasta forte, the only indigenous pastry dough on the island, is an austere combination of equal parts flour and sugar, kneaded for a long time with the smallest amount of water necessary to bind them into a hard, homogenous mass. Molded into shapes—usually elongated, bonelike formations that celebrate All Saints’ Day—they are left out in the air to dry for at least two days before being baked in the oven. Leaving raw dough exposed to the elements runs counter to all the received to be stored in a cold place (hence the reference to the countryside, where such storage would have been difficult).

We tasted our first gelato di campagna in a pastry shop in Palermo’s historic center. Technically, it is a piece of fondant in which the sugar crystals have fused into a smooth, opaque paste that can be colored according to whim; almonds and chunks of crystallized fruit are added for extra allure. The pleasure of such gelato is predominantly visual—a garish triad of pistachio green, strawberry pink, and white, set off by the odd transparency of crystallized fruits. This visual richness dissolves into the monochrome texture of sugar melting in the mouth.

The strength of sugar fondant lies in its mimetic power. It is a mise-en-scène, a fiction that imitates ice cream in appearance but is subversive in its consistency. We expect something that looks like ice cream to taste like ice cream. Yet our expectation of cold is frustrated, as is our expectation of a melting, transient sweetness, which is replaced by the relative permanence of a supple mass of sugar.

The original gelato behind this preparation is pezzo duro (“hard piece”), a compact slice of layered ice cream that was all the rage in Sicilian cafés in the late nineteenth century because it kept its shape during handling and could be neatly eaten with knife and fork. At the time, this “poor”
precepts of baking, which advise that the unstable mass of dough must quickly be tempered by the action of heat. According to this common wisdom, the worst that can happen while baking is a sudden change of temperature caused by opening the oven door.

When the pasta forte is baked, the heat of the oven simply enhances the evaporation that has already taken place during the drying process; no dramatic change of texture occurs. Even the color of these cookies is not altered by the action of heat, and they remain pale. Except for their undersides, that is. The pasta forte is sprayed with water before going into the oven, and this film of water caramelizes the sugar. The result is yet another expression of volcanic energy, a sort of pumice stone that remains impervious to humidity for days. The only concession to flavor is the addition of ground cloves, hence the alternative name, pasta garofanata.4

The magic of Sicilian pastry does not lie in changing volumes and textures by means of oven heat. Nor does it lie in the alchemic transformation of a wet ball of dough into the fragrant airiness of a sponge. Rather, Sicilian pastry is based on the accumulation, sculpting, and modeling of the ingredients—the building materials—in ways that do not alter their intrinsic properties. At least, this is the theory behind the unspoken rules that underlie and orient the actions of pasticceri, noblewomen, nuns, and housewives in their search for the gustatorily desirable.

The Sicilian pastry landscape is dominated by sheaths of sugar that insulate and protect what lies underneath. Prepared separately, these sheaths are placed over an existing structure. The most famous example of this process is the cassata siciliana, the apotheosis of stratification. Layer upon layer, cassata is built by the ritual accumulation of precious ingredients (chunks of crystallized fruit suspended in a cream of ricotta and sugar) over Genoese sponge. Topping it all is the cassata’s unique crust, a thick mantle of sugar and almond paste that secures and gives shape to the rich, moist filling.

Our epiphany with the crust occurs on the beach in the nature reserve of Vendicari: a white, brittle crust of salt interspersed with clumps of glasswort that grow on the edges of shallow pools of water. The salt crust crackles under our feet as they sink into a mix of earth and spongious sand. All of a sudden, the salt surface turns into the mirror image of sugar frosting. The tactile sensation is the same, as are the vitreous layers. Whereas sugar crusts keep a moist filling from drying out, salt crusts are the result of evaporation.

All conquerors bring new ingredients. By the tenth century Arabs introduced the cultivation of sugar cane to the island. Local merchants called the new white stuff “salt of the Arabs.” With sugar, everything changes; a new grammar of taste is born. Sugar “disappears” into the ingredients into which it is mixed, intensifying their potential for sweetness without altering their aromatic profile. Sugar makes new techniques possible: unlike honey, it can withstand high temperatures and thus can transform into a variety of textures, from syrups to frostings, crystals to filaments. A precious ally of sugar is the almond, also brought to Sicily by the Arabs and used in conjunction with sugar to create softer sculptural preparations, like the protective shell of cassata.

A frustum of dazzling white, cassata suggests a kind of magic, since its construction requires considerable skill. The white and green frosting has the smooth perfection of marble. The pistachio-green sides can be more or less steep, depending on the whim of the pasticceri. Configurations of crystallized fruit decorate the top. When closely observed, cassata has the static beauty of decorated porcelain. Because it shows no signs of the cooking process, it does not register the passage of time; it is essentially a piece of architecture. Once disassembled, the cassata reveals secret moisture under its velvety frosting. A thin layer of Genoese sponge still clings to the underside of the green covering, like roots to a piece of soil.

Today, cassata has a baroque appearance. Thick slices of candied citrus and orange peel, silver confetti, and glacé cherries cover the top in a floral pattern, finished with a pencil-thin line of white frosting that curls and festoons across the fruits and the sides of the confection—an inspiration that comes from the eighteenth-century stucco and plaster techniques used in palaces and royal courts. But there is a jarring note to the overall composition. Classic baroque pastries from the royal courts used custards and cream fillings. The fact that cassata is filled with sheep’s-milk ricotta points to a much older and more rural context. The ricotta retains a clear gustatory trace of its animal origin: chunks of crystallized fruits ennobles its gamey tinge but do not alter its fundamental character.

The contemporary version of cassata is remarkable because under the baroque re-elaboration of the frosting lies an archaic gustatory experience that plays on the contrast between a coarse, milky product and the refinement of crystallized fruits. This cake is a living fossil that points to a cake that antedated the arrival of the Arabs by centuries. In fact, the name cassata does not come from the Arabic qas’at (round container) but from caseata, a Roman pie made of ricotta, flour, and honey. As Christianity spread, cassata came...
to be considered appropriate fare for fast days. Medieval Franciscan monks carried it throughout the peninsula.

Sicily abounds in variations on the theme of layers and secret cores protected by a compact shield that is both functional (to keep in moisture) and decorative (to express economic power). In the baroque town of Noto, near Catania, famous for the cultivation of almonds, convents devised a layered cake called faccioni di Santa Chiara ("the wide face of St. Chiara"), which was covered with chocolate and topped with a paper mask representing the face and wings of an angel. The ascension of layers begins with a veil of almond paste lining the mold. On it are piled citrus marmalade, then a disk of Genoese sponge, then more orange marmalade, and finally more Genoese sponge to seal the whole. Then, the coup de théâtre: the entire construction is inverted onto a tray and smothered with chocolate frosting.

Another layered construction is the trionfo di gola ("triumph of gluttony"). The quick home version consists of brioches that are hollowed out and filled with pistachio paste and pumpkin jam. Arranged in a deep bowl, they are covered with a milk blancmange. There is no official version of this cake. Each family creates a variation on a basic motif that consists of the accumulation of elaborate layers to impress even the most jaded palate. The base is a disk of shortcrust pastry covered with pistachio custard, topped with a disk of Genoese sponge to support another layer of custard. The sequence of Genoese sponge and fillings is repeated until the rim of the container is reached. The final layer is a white cornstarch custard, the blancmange, topped by a curtain of frosting. Applause.

A gesture repeated in convents, noble palaces, pastry shops, and simple homes is the ritual covering of cakes with a mantle of friable, chinalike frosting. This specific action has a name: 'ngilippari. The words co'ngilippatu and cu'marmuratu indicate that a cake has been "covered with icing." On the one hand 'ngilippari (kin to the word giulebbe—Arab and Persian rose-scented julep syrup) points to dense, sweet varnishes that ennoble and preserve; on the other, the semantic cloud around marmuratu icing includes the inalterable perfection of ice cold marble (marmo). Frosting has different textures. A brittle fondant is obtained by kneading a simple sugar syrup on a marble slab to cool it, while crunchy enamel is obtained by adding egg whites, flour, suet, butter, or ammonia. Technically, Frosting prevents the underlying matter from drying out, but symbolically it functions like a blank page that can carry any message, from an angel face (faccioni di Santa Chiara) to the coat of arms of noble families.

Eternal Aspirations

Like any work of human ingenuity, confectionery carries the desire to leave a trace beyond the creator’s fleeting life. Cakes are constructions on a modest scale that do not claim to last forever. However, Sicilian pastries have a Promethean soul and strive harder for eternity than other confections. In so doing, they show the extent to which food is an ideal receptacle for human yearnings. Take almonds, for example. In the Christian tradition the almond is a symbol for the soul, and its oval shape encircles holy figures in medieval imagery. When nuns in Sicilian convents use finely ground almonds for their feats of confectionery, we can experience the incarnation of the spiritual raised to the nth degree.

Convents have always been hubs of pastry production. They fulfilled both religious and economic needs, acting as safety valves for families with too many daughters, and managing the dowries of the rich while providing work for the poor. Girls from poor families supplied the abundant work force needed to execute the elaborate recipes to perfection. However, their tasks were intentionally segmented so that no single girl could master the entire process. Abbesses went so far as to weigh the ingredients in secret. Such proto-Fordism kept novices in line as skilled executors of a partial task.

For society at large, convents were efficient conversion devices. Rare and expensive ingredients found their way in as presents sent by aristocratic families to their novice daughters. Thanks to the work of the poorer nuns, these raw materials emerged as sophisticated sweets to be sold or exchanged for favors. Sweets conceived in monastic seclusion were consumed amid the buzz of social gatherings in noble palaces. In an inverse transmutation, nuns inspired profane pleasures from which they were materially excluded.

Many convents invented their own signature confectionery. The monastery of Montevergine in Palermo created minne di vergine (virgin’s breasts), hemispheres of almond paste filled with pumpkin or citron jam and topped with a suggestive glacé cherry that alluded to St. Agatha’s mutilation. In the Benedictine monastery of Gran Cancelliere in Palermo, nuns invented feddi del cancelliere (literally, “meat slabs,” an irreverent reference to the backside of a local bureaucrat)—two roundish marzipan mounds filled with ricotta.

But the most spectacular and successful contribution to the pantheon of confectionery comes from the convent of Martorana in Palermo: the frutta di Martorana, almond paste—pasta reale—usually made in the shape of small fruits. An epitome of the creative act, these confections are
ambitious to the point of hubris. Unlike other sweet preparations, this paste of ground almonds, sugar, and egg whites is not tied to a specific form but can assume any configuration. If God made man by molding clay and water, nuns made luxuriant reproductions of God’s creations by means of a neutral almond paste, which they shaped and painted.

Marzipan fruits overcome the opposition between the transitory beauty of life and the eternity of the inorganic. Made of perishable almond paste saturated with sugar, they extend a flamboyant gustatory experience to infinity. Marzipan is a favorite children’s treat prepared for All Souls’ Day on November 2. According to popular belief, children are still “in transition” and thus in a better position to communicate with their ancestors, who are the ones said to leave marzipan fruits at the foot of children’s beds that night. In a symbolic inversion, these sweets are a sort of charm given to children to regale the dead with colorful and tasty morsels from the living world.

If the mimesis of marzipan flirts with eternity by modeling a medium, the same effect is achieved by candied fruit through a process of mummification. Sugar alone crystallizes the natural form of oranges, tangerines, and lemons: membranes harden into vitreous partitions; juices acquire greater viscosity. In Sanskrit, khanda are pieces of crystallized sugar cane, rough prototypes of canditi. Candied fruit is an art that results from a dual action: water needs to evaporate, while sugar syrup needs to saturate to prevent decay. Crystallization is a culinary version of embalming, an acting out of the fear of death. All these luscious, gemlike creations represent a wider, unconscious effort to prolong life beyond death. In Sicily, the same convents that produced candied fruit were laboratories where the bodies of the dead (priests, nuns, and members of the nobility) were carefully embalmed. The practice of mummification continued into the nineteenth century, when it was finally banned.

And now our journey has come to an end. After visiting the modern kitchens of pastry chefs and interrogating reticent nuns and passionate housewives, we wonder: What is left of the grand tradition of Sicilian confectionery? Sadly, it is but a puny carriage that travels unfamiliar paved roads.

These days, the almonds used to make pasta reale are no longer the fragrant Noto variety. Industrial production, labor costs, and trade volumes demand cheaper ingredients imported from Asia. “Faster” and “cheaper” are the imperatives with which current confections must comply. The result is pseudo-artisanal confectionery, the erosion of skills and the simplification of a profession to the point that
The wobbly coach rolls on uncomfortably along the paved roads. The colorful ghosts of history can no longer tell their tale. Many of the secret recipes, fiercely guarded by jealous nuns and proud noblewomen, have been swallowed forever by silence.

A pothole suddenly jolts the coach, causing the sugar pupo to fall and shatter into a thousand pieces. Professional mourners appear and begin to wail around the fragments that lie on the pavement. A boy approaches, reaching out with a jar of pistachio cream made by Caffè Sicilia. It is the end of tears and the beginning of an entirely new tale.

NOTES
1. Teatro dei Pupi, the Sicilian Puppet Theatre, has a history as ancient as that of pupi ‘i zuccaro—sugar puppets that replicate the characters of medieval epics.
2. Fennula comes from fondere, “to melt,” thus literally meaning “stone that melts.”
3. One etymology has it that torrone refers to torrefare, the roasting of beans or nuts.
4. Garofanata comes from chiodi di garofano, the Italian word for cloves.
5. In their book Bitter Almonds Mary Taylor Simeti and Maria Grammatico relate the vicissitudes of many girls from poor families in the convent of Erice. Grammatico decided to spy on the nuns to steal their secret recipes in order to reproduce them outside the convent. Today her products are a unique example of top-grade convent confectionery. In other instances, the nuns’ selfish shortsightedness condemned many traditional preparations to oblivion. See Mary Taylor Simeti and Maria Grammatico, Bitter Almonds: Recollections and Recipes from a Sicilian Girlhood (New York: Bantam Books, 2005).
7. Corrado and Carlo Assenza run Caffè Sicilia, where they serve top-quality traditional sweets as well as avant-garde creations.