

# Ambassador



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Sicily's Painted Carretti

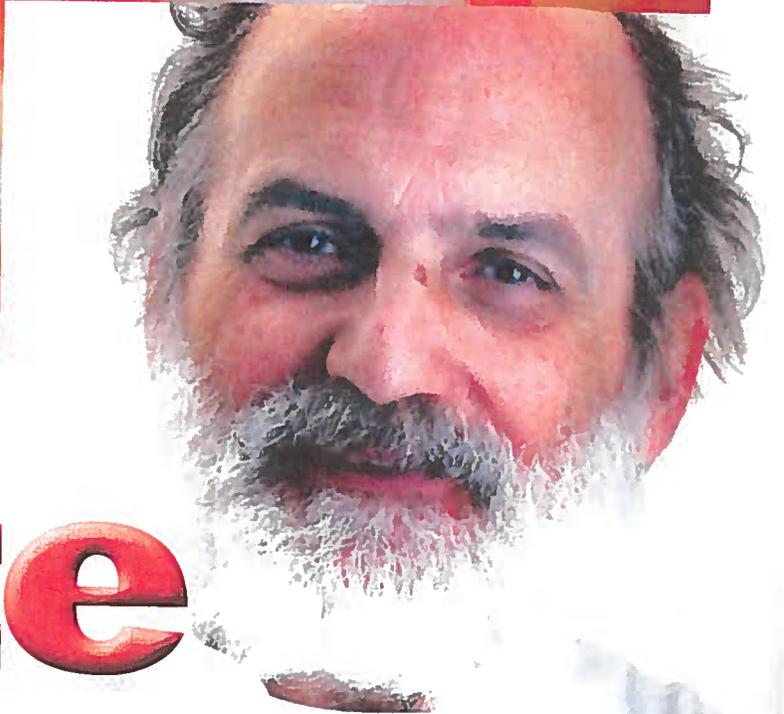
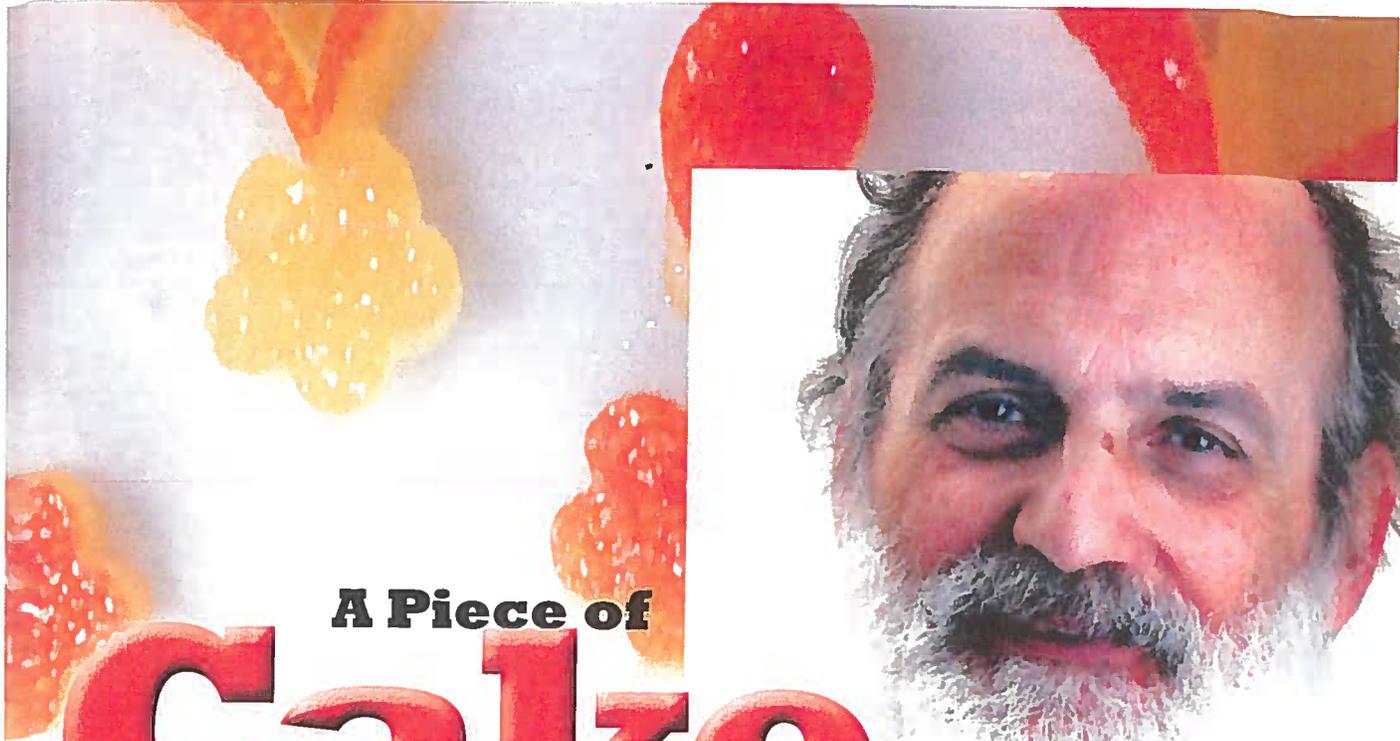
Petrosino vs. The Black Hand

Sage of Sweets Corrado Assenza

Civita di Bagnoregio Lives!

Sicilian Wines Erupting

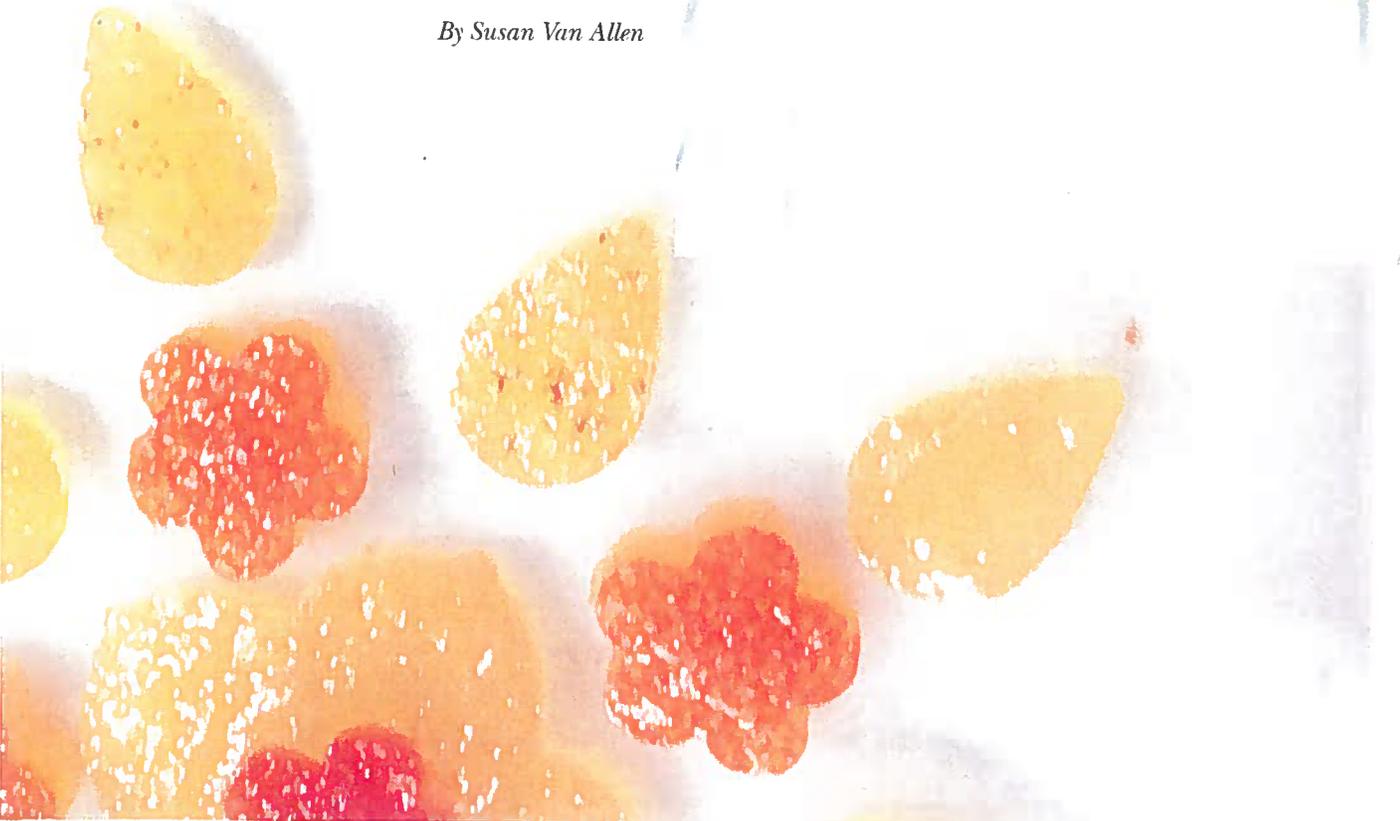
NIAF 42nd Anniversary Gala Preview



**A Piece of**  
**Calke**

**Sicily's Sage of Sweets**  
**Corrado Assenza**

*By Susan Van Allen*



# I'm trying not to gush.

Sitting across from me is a superstar,  
**Corrado Assenza.**

He has been praised all over the world for everything from his gelato to his pastries. Here at his headquarters, at the Caffe Sicilia, in the southeastern Sicilian hill town of Noto, Sicily's Wizard of Sweets sets a humble tone. We're at an outside table, in the hazy afternoon light, as Noto natives pass by with respectful "Buon Giorno, Corrado." He nods back like a Godfather Don.

For centuries, Sicily has been famous for its sweets: gelato, cannoli, biscotti flavored with almonds and pistachios, granite (those fabulous fruit-flavored ices), *torrone* (a brick-shaped nut-and-honey treat). And then there is my favorite, what Assenza calls "the most elegant expression of Sicilian culture." *Cassata Siciliana*.

The classic *cassata* is a heavenly cake that's filled with a mix of ricotta, sugar, nuts, cinnamon and candied fruit, encased in a liqueur-soaked sponge cake, covered with marzipan, sweet white glaze, and a swirly candied fruit decoration. Finishing it off is that universal symbol of perfection—a cherry on top. It's a cake straight out of a fairytale.

That cherry on top brings me back to my grandparents' Newark, N.J., dining room where cherry-topped cakes were the grand finales to all our celebrations. They were made by my grandfather, who once worked at a *pasticcERIA* in Naples. He was a master at mixing together eggs, flour and milk to make the classic crema. I'd sit at the kitchen table, licking the spoon he'd hand me—a gesture of such comfort and kindness. He'd slather white cakes with that delicious yellow *crema*, stack those cakes, and cover the tower with whipped cream. With his wrinkled, shaky hands, he'd give me the cherry to top it all off.

I've been indulging my-cherry-on-top *cassata* obsession all over Sicily, testing these scrumptious cakes everywhere. I found every one so very satisfying in its own unique way.

In Palermo, they were styled like round jewelry cases. In chic Taormina, *cassata* dazzled me in a *pasticcERIA* display case, gleaming with candied pastel fruits. On the folksy Aeolian island of Lipari, hidden in an alley past the port, I found an almond-less version, soaked with the local malvasia wine, and sprinkled with chopped pistachios. In Catania they were boob-shaped, to honor Saint Agata, the city's patron, whose breasts are revered in sculptures, paintings and pastries all over town.

Clearly, no foodie police have laid down *cassata* rules,

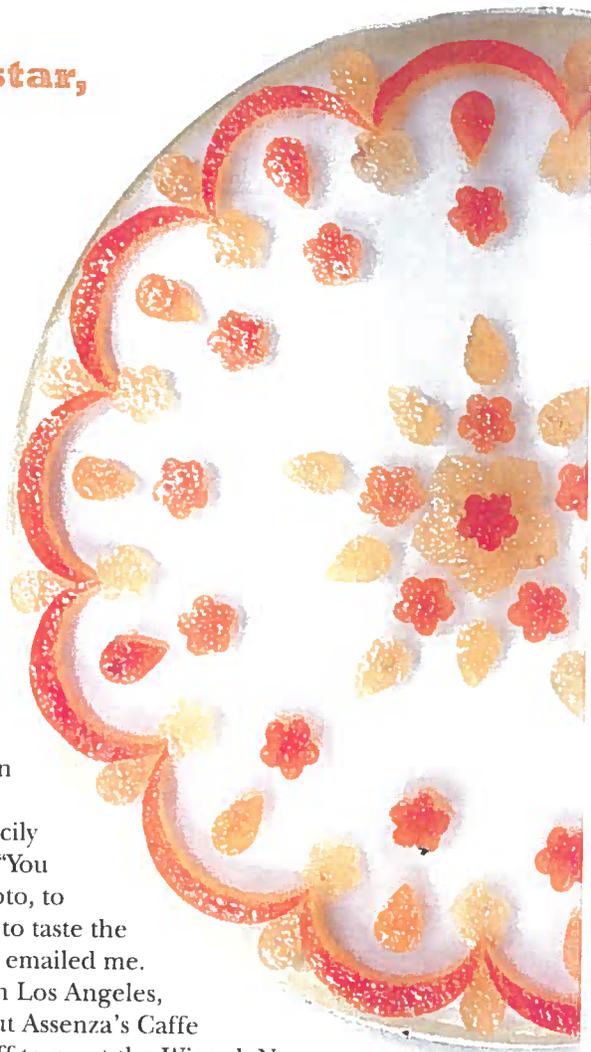
as they did to standardize pizza Napoletana. When it comes to *cassata* in Sicily, the attitude is everybody goes their own sweet way.

My way has led to Noto, lured here by Renee Restivo, a Sicilian American friend who runs Noto's Soul of Sicily cooking school. "You must come to Noto, to the Caffe Sicilia, to taste the best *cassata*!" she emailed me.

From back in Los Angeles, I read raves about Assenza's Caffe Sicilia, and set off to meet the Wizard. Noto inspires immediate wows. It's one of Sicily's most elegant spots, nicknamed "The Garden of Stone," adorned with the purest of Sicilian Baroque architecture—a mix of smiling putti, curlicued archways, and ornate balconies—the perfect backdrop to frou-frou *cassatas*.

Where did all this Noto beauty come from? A devastating tragedy. A massive earthquake in 1693 leveled this whole area. For the next 50 years, an amazing recovery took place, as architects who had been to Rome and seen Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers in Piazza Navona rushed to the rescue, inspired to rebuild. They designed churches and palazzos that out-Baroque'd any Baroque in Europe.

Instead of building over the rubble, as was done in the nearby Ragusa and Modica, a vacant plateau was chosen to compose a new town from scratch. Since it had no port, Noto wasn't going to gain money from trade, so it was created to be a showpiece to attract the upper classes, a playground for priests and aristocrats. ➤



This is not the Sicily of the immigrants I grew up around at the Jersey shore—with *nonnas* piling baked ziti on to my plate, lamenting, “In the old country, all we had to eat was dirt!” No, this is the Sicily that evokes bygone days of *principessas*, decked out in wide pastel skirts and parasols, riding in gaily painted carriages down this grand Via Vittorio Emanuele. They’d have splendid evenings at Noto’s opera house, and end the night at Caffe Sicilia, with the perfect *Cassata Siciliana*.

The place I’d read so much hoopla about turns out to be so low key. You’d imagine since it’s been around for more than 100 years, that it would be done up in the style of Italy’s classic historic cafes, but the Caffe Sicilia is a pious pastry chapel, simple and narrow, with a hint of glitz in the back salon where there’s a chandelier made of vials of Assenza’s world famous honey.

Nothing distracts from the Wizard’s impeccably arranged display. He has distinguished himself in the gourmet universe by bringing inventive twists to the classics—which explains such wonders I’m browsing, like licorice gelato, and shimmering layer cakes flavored with bergamot and cinnamon. My eyes land on miniature *Cassata Sicilianas*, labeled *cassatine*, each adorned with two perfect candied orange diamonds bordering a cherry on top.

A beaded curtain sways and out from the kitchen he arrives: Corrado Assenza. With a warm welcome, he takes time for me at his outside table, telling me how he grew up in Noto, left to study bees at the University of Bologna, and then returned here to the family business where his childhood toys became his tools.

“Nature is the key to pastry making,” he says. “We must understand nature and the changing landscape, then bring in our new ideas so that history and tradition are still respected, but the *caffè* doesn’t become a museum.”

I leave with my selected treat. Sitting across the via from Caffe Sicilia on the grand cathedral steps, I plunge a plastic fork into Corrado’s *cassatina*. My taste buds meet the happiest mix of sweetness they’ve ever encountered, far better than any other *cassata* I’ve tasted. The ricotta is creamier, with just the right balance of citrus zing; the marzipan encircling it is divine, smooth, sweet, almond.

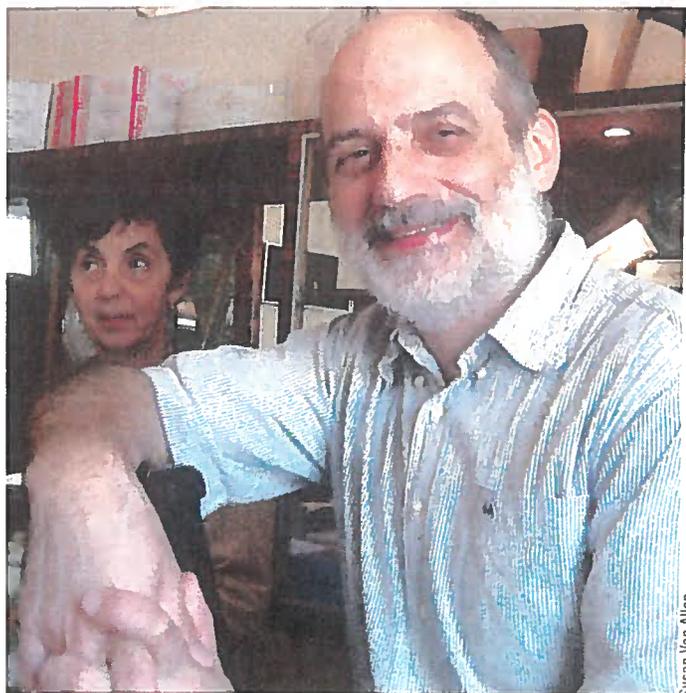
Layer by layer, this *cassatina* symbolizes more than a thousand years of Sicilian history. The sugar cane, the almond, the lemons and oranges, were brought here by



Fugzu (CC BY 2.0)



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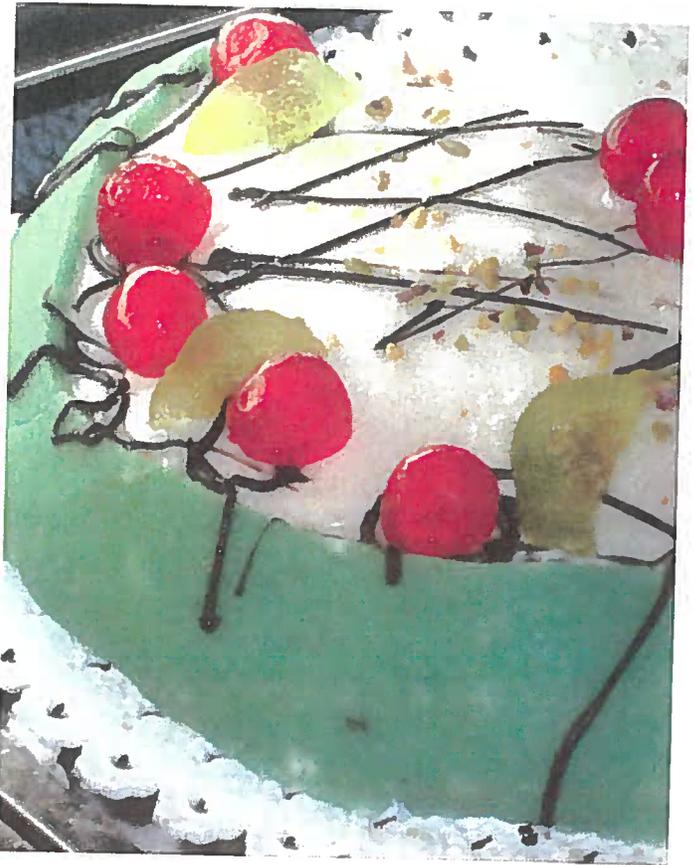
Susan Van Allen

9<sup>th</sup>-century Arab invaders. The *pan di spagna* (sponge cake) is from the Spanish; the white *fondente* icing from the French. The marzipan is dyed green in homage to the days when bakers could afford to use pistachio paste made from those famous nut trees flourishing in the nearby village of Bronte.

Cathedral bells clang cueing thoughts of the cake's holy history. Busy Sicilian nuns of medieval days got the recipe for *kas'at* (meaning bowl) from the Arabs, then renamed the bowl-shaped cake *cassata*. Nuns started a tradition of making *cassata* for Easter, as a rich reward to break the Lenten fast. Convents got so swept up with the *cassata* craze that, in 1574, a bishop stepped in and ordered a stop to the cake making, because it was taking the nuns away from their Holy Week prayers. Meanwhile, Sicilian Jews were making *cassata* for Purim parties. How amazing to know that, centuries ago, Muslims, Catholics and Jews lived together in peace and harmony, celebrating with such a cake!

I finish the *cassata* on the steps, licking the fork clean. It's the sweetest flow I could have wished for. A cherry-on-top moment. ▲

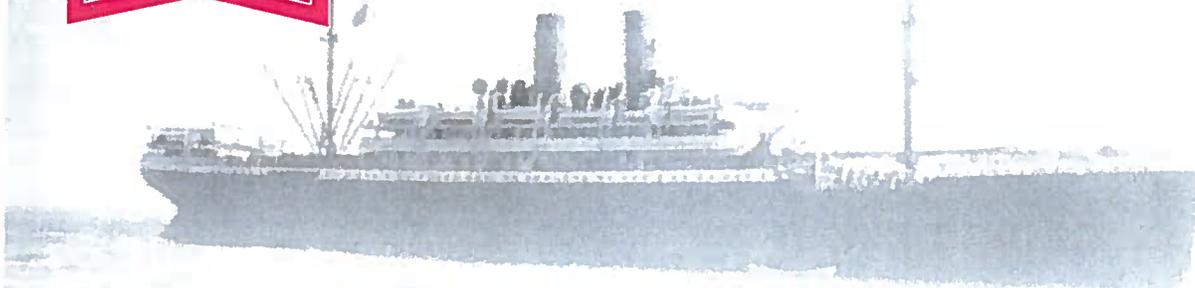
*Susan Van Allen is the author of three books about Italian travel, including "100 Places in Italy Every Woman Should Go." She also designs and hosts Golden Weeks in Italy: For Women Only tours. More info: [www.susanvanallen.com](http://www.susanvanallen.com)*



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