

NEW LIFE FOR OLD WAYS

INVADED OVER MILLENNIA BY GREEKS, ROMANS, ARABS, NORMANS AND SPANISH, SICILY HAS A RICH AND COLOURFUL CULTURE WHERE OLD TRADITIONS STILL FLOURISH.
WORDS: TRICIA WELSH.

In recent years, many Sicilians who left the island in their youth for better opportunities elsewhere have been returning: their love for Sicily brought them home. Today, these prodigals are ensuring their homeland's culture and strong-held traditions are not only kept alive but will thrive.

Lawyers, bankers, financiers and creatives have returned to their roots and now offer traditional ventures, establishing artisan wineries and running gorgeous accommodation in restored farmhouses and gracious palazzos.

'AGRITURISMO'

With a doctorate in landscape architecture, years teaching in Versailles, Milan, Palermo and Naples,

and a glittering career working with celebrated gardener Gilles Clément, Fausta Occhipinti could have chosen a sleek city life. Instead, she returned to her family's crumbling estate in the hills near Vittoria, in southeastern Sicily.

"I chose this place because it was beautiful – the stone walls, the vineyards, the olive groves," Fausta says. "Here, people had kept the traditions alive. For me, that was incredible. I wanted to build something, stone after stone, that would keep that knowledge and beauty alive."

The Occhipinti family has been in the area since the 17th century, once owners of vast farmlands. Like many Sicilian families, they abandoned agriculture in the 1970s for city jobs as lawyers, architects and engineers. "My sister and I were the first generation to come back," Fausta says with quiet pride. "We opened up this world again to the rest of the world."

Every cent Fausta earned teaching at university went into restoring the abandoned *baglio* (farm buildings). She worked alongside local craftsmen, reviving the old framework of the buildings, protecting the stone textures, conserving water and refusing to use plastics. She restored 12 former farmhouses into charming, airy, rustic-chic retreats, blending whitewashed walls, antiques and local ceramics with serene vineyard or pool views to become Baglio Occhipinti. On a clear day, you can see Mt Etna.

Fausta's sister, Arianna, studied wine-making in Milan but missed the land back home. Returning to Sicily, she established her own vineyard and winery, Occhipinti, using the 'bush vine' method of planting where vines are not trellised but bound to tall chestnut wooden stakes from Mt Etna. She has featured on Stanley Tucci's *Searching for Italy* programme.

Fausta's partner, lawyer Franzo Boscarino, left Milan and returned to Noto to open a family hotel, Casa Vendicari, and a seafood restaurant.



Fausta Occhipinti





FARMHOUSE TO BIO-RESORT

Trained in pharmacy and specialising in herbal medicine, Maurizio Tedesco spent years working in his family pharmacy in Aragona, yet the pull of the land and a desire to revive ancestral traditions inspired a bold new chapter.

In 2016, he unveiled Fontes Episcopi, a refined bio-resort set within a mid-19th-century farmhouse once owned by the noble Genuardi family. Abandoned for years, the estate was sympathetically restored over four years into an intimate 11-room retreat while maintaining its historic character.

Maurizio Tedesco (centre)



The surrounding hectares once again produce organic vegetables; he produces his own cold-pressed extra-virgin olive oil and makes flour from the ancient grains that grow near the Valley of the Temples of Agrigento “in the last existing garden of Aesculapius.” Guests dine on authentic Sicilian dishes prepared by local *mamme* (mothers) — from sardines a *beccafico* and handmade artichoke pasta, to classic cannoli.

But Fontes Episcopi is more than a place to stay. “I have learnt to be a farmer, a breeder and a host,” Maurizio says. “Here, our guests travel without moving, experiencing the soul of Sicily — its flavours, traditions and the human warmth that defines our island.”

A PALAZZO IN NOTO

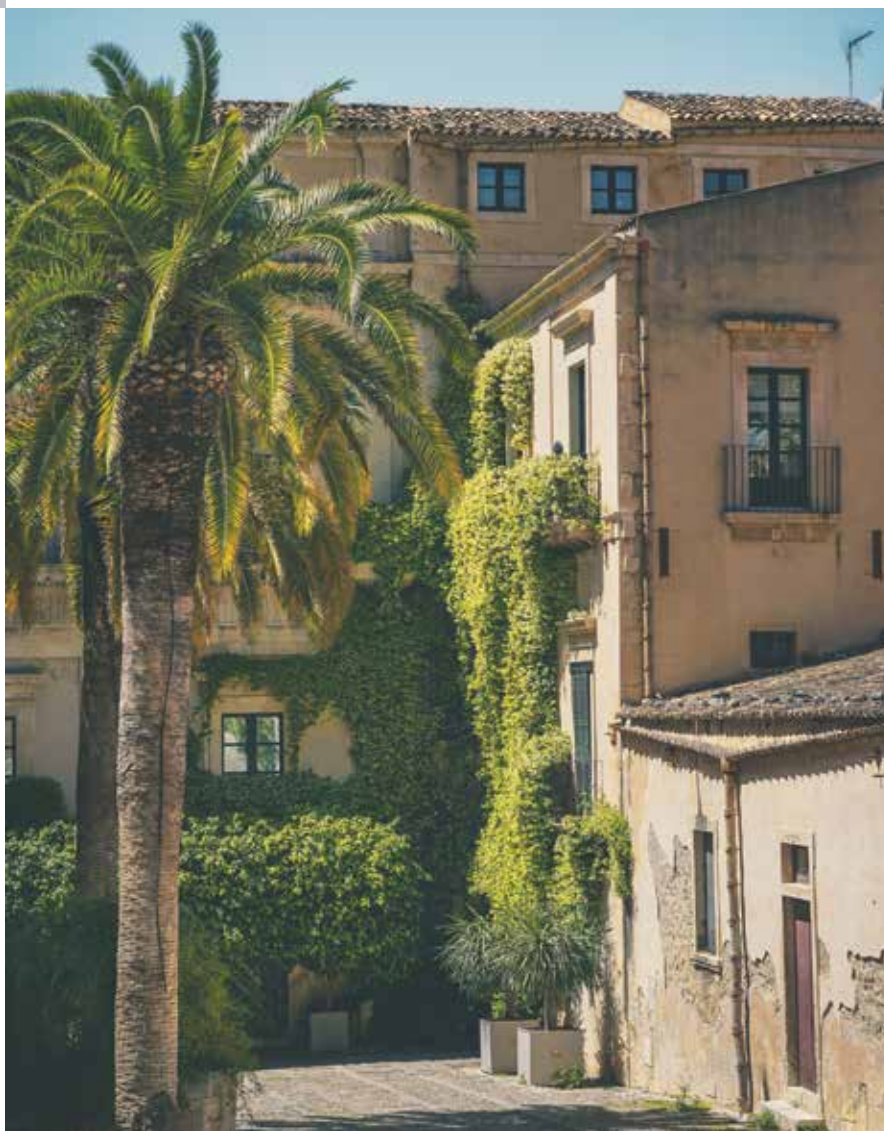
For Cristina Summa, Noto has always been more than a destination — it is a lifelong love affair. Though raised in Turin, childhood summers spent with her grandmother in this honey-hued Baroque jewel of southeast Sicily shaped her destiny. “I always knew I would return,” she says, “to protect its beauty and share its culture.”

After a high-profile career that included work on the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, Cristina chose a more intimate ambition: to create a refined “home away from home” for discerning travellers. That vision became reality in 2007, when she and her husband discovered a private wing of the magnificent Palazzo Nicolaci, once home to a Sicilian prince. Painstakingly restored over two years, its frescoed ceilings and curated antiques reopened in 2009 as Seven Rooms Villadorata.



Cristina Summa

In 2012, she transformed a ruined rural estate into Country House Villadorata, a serene 25-hectare retreat defined by olive groves, silence and sustainability. “Authenticity matters,” she says. “So does respecting nature and the local community.”





Guido Coffa

ETNA HIDEAWAY

When Guido Coffa left a successful career as an automotive engineer in the US, he never imagined returning to the foothills of Mount Etna. "It was a shaping experience," he recalls, "but Sicily was calling."

In 2007, he took over a semi-abandoned farm in Zafferana Etnea, where lava-stone buildings lay in ruin and vineyards were long neglected. After five years, Monaci delle Terre Nere opened with just six rooms. Today, it is an acclaimed eco-bio resort and wine estate, offering 24 suites and villas across 25 hectares of terraced gardens, olive groves, vineyards and rare-fruit orchards. "It's an elegant hideaway on the slopes of Europe's most active volcano," suggests Guido.

Even the resort's menus celebrate Sicily's

biodiversity. "We follow the philosophy of Slow Food," he explains. Fresh coastal fish, estate-grown produce from its two-acre garden and heritage ingredients such as Bronte pistachios and Nubia red garlic reflect a commitment to reviving authentic Sicilian flavours.

"We are custodians of our history, and traditions here are stronger than globalisation," he adds.

ESSENCE OF SICILY

After studying in Bologna, Viviana Buscemi returned to Sicily and, in 2004, with her husband Salvatore and later business partner Peppe Mendola, founded Essence of Sicily alongside Fili Farm at Diodoros Garden. Together they revived the site, abandoned for 40 years, within Agrigento's historic Archaeological Park. Today,

the garden flourishes as a living stage for authentic encounters with Sicilian culture.

Essence of Sicily curates experiences that celebrate the island's traditions, flavours, and landscapes. Guests can wander Fili Farm, cook with organic produce, enjoy luxury picnics amid ancient olive groves and take guided tastings of citrus, cheeses, wines and artisanal cured meats. Every activity connects travellers with the farmers, artisans, and time-honoured practices that keep Sicily's heritage alive.

"Farming traditions are part of our identity. By sharing them, we preserve them," she explains. Through Essence of Sicily, visitors don't just taste the island, they experience its rhythms, stories and enduring soul — guided by a team devoted to keeping Sicilian culture vibrant, accessible, and unforgettable. ■