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## Oh, Sicily!

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PART ONE

## Home Cooking in Sicily

By Nancy Harmon Jenkins

**P**ino Maggiore's restaurant, Cantina Siciliana, is in the old Jewish quarter of Trapani, a harbor town at the extreme western end of Sicily, where ferries for Tunis come and go. There's a raffish maritime air about this city; since long ago—since Phoenician times, to be exact—ships and sailors have called on Trapani from all the major Mediterranean ports. Still, you might be surprised to find that couscous, those tiny semolina grains ubiquitous across North Africa, play a significant part on the Trapanese table,

and equally surprised that Pino, who is 51 years old, learned how to make it by hand as a child.

Couscous, or *cuscusu* as it's called in Sicilian dialect, is for me one of the most telling examples of Sicily's engaging melting-pot cuisine, a vestige (some historians believe) of the Berbers and North African Arabs who invaded the island more than a millennium ago and ruled it for a couple of centuries. Sicily's culinary history is like an intricate, multilayered pie—an *mpanata*, to use a Sicilian word borrowed from Spanish. The various elements come not just from Phoenicians and Arabs but also from Greeks and Romans, Byzantines, Normans, Germans, Aragonese, Spanish, and French, not to mention from modern-day Italians and other Europeans. Each group left its mark on Sicily—or rather, Sicily absorbed them all—and over the centuries, those influences have blended together in remarkable ways. Take Pino's couscous, which he prepares not with lamb and vegetables, as you'd see in the Arab world, but with a lusty *brodo di pesce*, or fish broth, scented with bay leaves and cinnamon sticks. It's a dish with one foot in Italy, another in North Africa, but it could belong only to Sicily.

I've been coming to Sicily for decades now, to research books and to introduce chefs and cooks to the foods of the island. My trips often begin with a meal at Pino's restaurant because his traditional approach elicits a quick understanding of what makes Sicily such a culinary gold mine. Here are the exotic touches—the couscous and currants and saffron—alongside beloved Sicilian staples; the hearty pastas, the incredible seafood and vegetables and citrus, the capers, the olives, the fresh ricotta, the wild fennel, and more. Unlike the rest of Italy, Sicily remains a bit mysterious and raw, the embodiment of an older Mediterranean culture and cuisine.

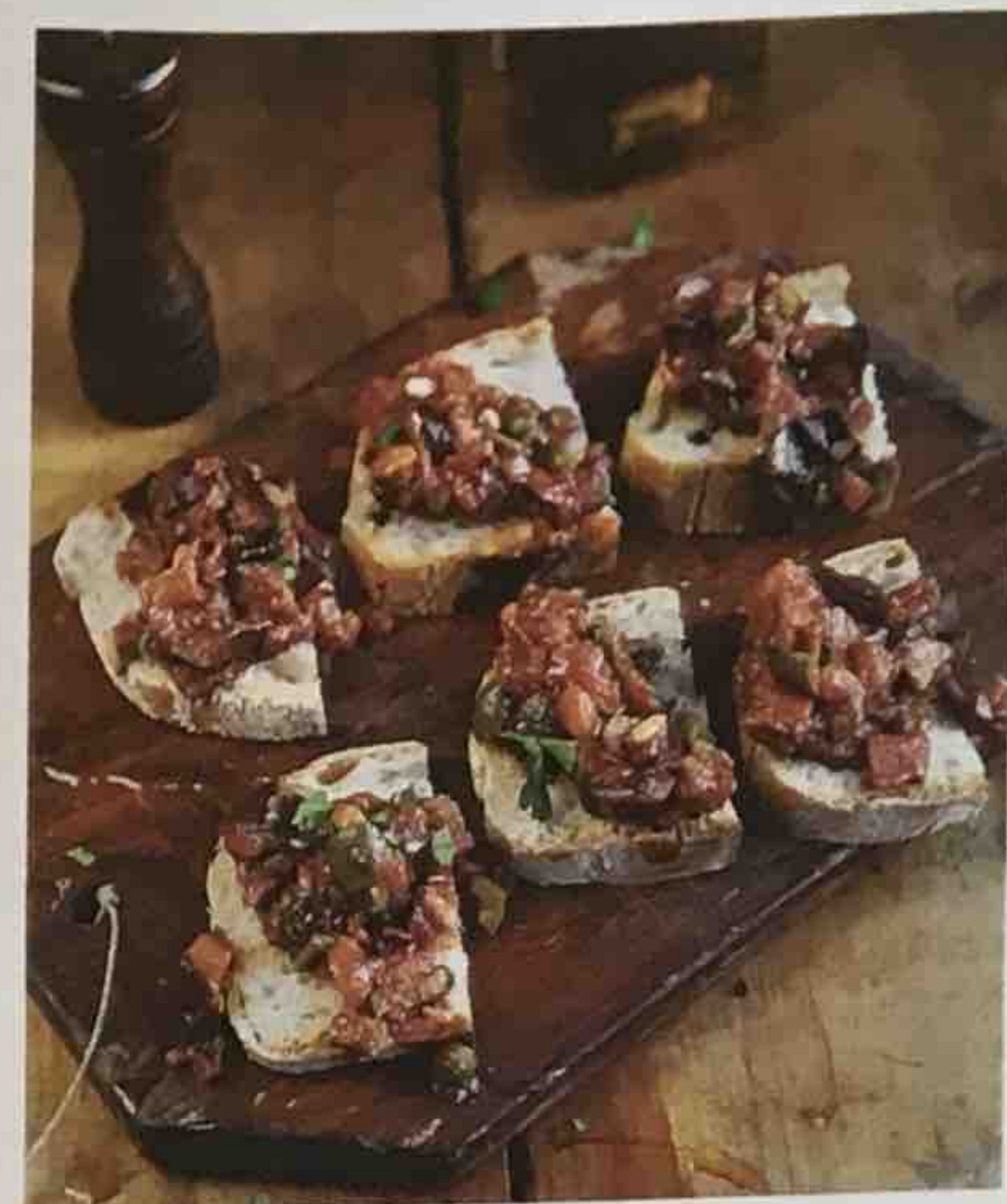
Over the years, I've come to believe that the heart and soul of Sicilian food, even as it's prepared at the best restaurants, is grounded in home cooking. The great cooks I've encountered here—from Pino

Maggiore in Trapani to Eleonora Consoli, a teacher at the other end of the island on the slopes of Mount Etna, to Zia Pina, tough-minded purveyor of a cookshop in Palermo—have all, at one time or another, described a dish to me as “something my mother”—or “my grandmother”—“used to make.” There's nothing new about this notion, for sure, but it seemed to me that what distinguishes Sicilian cuisine, what preserves it in a world where traditional foodways are often threatened, are those strong familial links going back generation upon generation, practically to the time of the ancients.

THINK OF SICILY AS THE ANCIENTS DID—as a giant triangle (they called it Trinacria) with one point nearly touching the toe of the Italian boot. The largest island in the Mediterranean, Sicily is smaller than Maine but larger than Vermont, and it encompasses some of the oldest cities in Italy (Palermo, Catania, Siracusa), one of the world's most active volcanoes (Etna), a bustling tourist trade along the coast, and a deeply rural agricultural society in the island's interior (where much of Italy's organic produce is grown).

Palermo, its capital, is Sicily's liveliest town, with more people but also more markets, more monuments, more restaurants, and arguably more traffic jams than any other. Catania, a couple of hours southeast on the *autostrada*, is more sober, in part because of the dark gray palette of the city, the result of at least seven historical inundations of lava flows from nearby Etna. But the fish market just off the main square is one of the most colorful in the entire Mediterranean, like a giant stage set every weekday morning as fishmongers call out their wares. Then there are the quiet inland cities that rise up from the green landscape, a jumble of medieval buildings like Enna and Caltanissetta, and villages like Polizzi Generosa, Salemi, even storied Corleone, that seem to belong to another time entirely.

A look at the map shows why Sicilian cuisine is such a heterogeneous mix. The island, which lies at the very heart of the Mediterranean, is a true crossroads. Here Africa first encountered Europe, and the Christian West came into contact with the Orthodox, Jewish, and Islamic cultures of the East. Early Greeks may have brought the first olive trees



Clockwise from top left: pasta with sardines, fennel, and currants (see page 64 for a recipe); Giovanna Giglio Cascone samples the sauce for her tomato and cheese pie (see page 65 for a recipe); caponata (see page 62 for a recipe); friends and family celebrate Pasquetta, the day-after-Easter feast, at Fabrizia Lanza's home Case Vecchie, on the Regaleali estate in central Sicily.



NANCY HARMON JENKINS is the author of *Cucina del Sole: A Celebration of Southern Italian Cooking* (William Morrow, 2007). Her most recent story for *SAVEUR* was “The Essence of Olives” (April 2010).