



THE SHEPHERD'S WAY

MAKING RICOTTA by HAND is a CENTURIES-OLD TRADITION in the HILLY PASTURES of CALABRIA.

IT IS FIVE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING in rural Calabria, with an hour to go before dawn, but fortunately the lights are on at Bar Fox. My friend Rosetta Costantino and I need a cappuccino, so we position our little rented Fiat Bravo in front of the roadside café, park between two hulking semi rigs, and head inside to join the ruddy-faced truckers for coffee. I'm not in the habit of launching my days at this early hour, but if you want to see the region's famous ricotta being made, you have to get up with the shepherds. § I have come to this remote part of southern Italy with Rosetta, a Calabrian shepherd's daughter who

by JANET FLETCHER *photographs by* LANDON NORDEMAN





Above, from left, fresh ricotta in rush baskets at Malorano's dairy; Giovanni and Antonietta Bevilacqua. Facing page, ricotta and roasted pepper frittata.

emigrated to California 34 years ago, when she was 14. Rosetta, a cooking teacher and chemical engineer, has never forgotten the cheeses of her childhood, particularly fluffy ricotta, derived from the whey produced during the making of pecorino and other cheeses. Her father used to make it on the family farm near Verbicaro, a hill town a few hours northwest of where we are now. I met Rosetta four years ago, and in the time I have known her, I have heard innumerable ricotta rhapsodies and rants, the latter occasioned whenever circumstances force her to use a store-bought version.

In desperation, Rosetta and her mother, who lives near her in Oakland, developed a recipe that yields something close to their family's farmstead cheese. Their kitchen version, in my estimation, is impressively creamy, but Rosetta swears that it doesn't measure up to the sweet, delicate sheep's milk ricotta—handmade in small batches—for which her native region is known. So, we hatched a plan. We would travel to Calabria together in the late spring, prime season for ricotta as the ewes are producing plentiful milk and feasting on lush, fresh pasture. Rosetta would reacquaint herself with the ricotta of her youth, and I'd experience an artisanal specialty that has gone far to shape the rustic cuisine of Calabria. What if it *did* require a few early mornings?



CALABRIA'S LANDSCAPE is one of extremes. While the Tyrrhenian coast lures summer hordes to its modern beach resorts, including chic Tropea, the interior remains sparsely populated. Its sleepy villages can seem little changed since the early 20th century, when many thousands of Calabrians emigrated to the United States and Canada. And, although Calabria has one of the longest coastlines of any region



in Italy, it is also mountainous; the craggy Pollino, Sila, and Aspromonte ranges form a rocky spine that stretches down the toe of Italy's boot. Sheep nuzzle in the foothills' grassy pastures, and goats thrive at higher elevations, scrambling up rocky slopes. The region's economy, still predominantly agricultural, relies in no small measure on sheep's and goats' milk for cheese making, an activity practiced here since Roman times.

We choose to base ourselves in Crotona, a Calabrian province that

RECIPE

Frittata con Ricotta e Peperoni

(Ricotta and Roasted Pepper Frittata)

SERVES 4-6

Calabrians sometimes add sliced cured sausage to this popular frittata on Easter, to celebrate the end of Lent and the freedom to eat meat again, according to Rosetta Costantino, the author's friend.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1/2 cup grated pecorino | 1 large yellow onion, halved and thinly sliced |
| 2 tbsp. roughly chopped flat-leaf parsley leaves | 1 small waxy potato, peeled and sliced into 1/8" rounds |
| 1/2 tsp. kosher salt | 1 red bell pepper, roasted, peeled, and cut into 1/4" strips |
| 1 tsp. chopped fresh oregano | 3/4 cup homemade or store-bought ricotta |
| 8 eggs, beaten | |
| Freshly ground black pepper, to taste | |
| 3 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil | |

1. Arrange a rack in the middle of the oven and heat to 425°. In a large bowl, whisk together 1/4 cup of the pecorino, parsley, 1/2 tsp. of the salt, oregano, and eggs and season with black pepper. Set egg mixture aside.

2. Heat the oil in a 10" nonstick ovenproof skillet over medium-high heat. Add the remaining salt, onions, and potatoes and cook, stirring occasionally, until lightly browned and soft, about 20 minutes.

3. Remove skillet from heat. Add the egg mixture to the skillet and stir to distribute the onions and potatoes evenly. Scatter the peppers over the top, spoon the ricotta over the mixture in 6 dollops, and sprinkle with the remaining pecorino. Bake until lightly browned and the center is set, about 15 minutes. Run a rubber spatula around the edges of the frittata to loosen it. Slide the frittata onto a serving plate. Season with more black pepper, if you like.



hugs the Ionian coast, because the area is famed for its pecorino, the aged sheep's milk cheese that's a cornerstone of the Calabrian table. The production of pecorino yields whey—the cloudy liquid that separates from the curds during cheese making—which is the primary ingredient in traditional ricotta. Some cheese makers feed whey (which still contains some protein and fat) to livestock on their farms; others supplement the whey with fresh milk and reheat the mixture slowly until new curds form to create ricotta. (The word *ricotta* means recooked.) In contrast, most of the ricotta produced in the United States is made from whole cows' milk curdled with vinegar, a procedure that leads to a higher yield and a faintly sour flavor.

Ricotta is made throughout Italy, from Emilia-Romagna, where it fills tortellini, all the way south to Sicily, where the creamy cheese enriches the island's famous pastries, but in Calabria, cooks would be adrift without it. "It's a staple there because it was traditionally a shepherds' society,"

JANET FLETCHER is the author of *Cheese & Wine: A Guide to Selecting, Pairing, and Enjoying* (Chronicle Books, 2006) and the coauthor, with Rosetta Costantino, of a forthcoming book about the cooking of Calabria.

Above, from left, Giovanni Bevilacqua's work boots outside his house; family portraits in the Bevilacquas' living room.

Rosetta says. When she was a child, all the *contadini*, the people who lived in the countryside, kept a few goats and sheep, which gave milk for farmhouse cheese. Such practices are vanishing as Calabrians move to the cities, but ricotta is still prominent in the daily diet here, one based largely on pork and vegetables. It moderates the heat of the fiery local pasta sauces seasoned with peperoncini. Children slather fresh ricotta on their breakfast toast, and home cooks add it to frittatas. In the rural restaurants and bakeries we visit, we encounter fresh ricotta dolloped on pasta with tomato sauce, layered with fried eggplant and tomato in a Calabrian variation of eggplant parmigiana, and accompanying hard-cooked egg and soppressata in the stuffed pizza known as *pitta*. Local shops also sell ricotta that has been salted and dried for long keeping. This firm, shavable ricotta salata, sometimes laced with crushed red peppers, appears on antipasto platters or is grated liberally over pasta. (See "Ricotta Ten Ways", below, to learn about other styles.)

Calabrian markets carry several types of fresh ricotta, some made at large-scale dairies from cows' milk, others on (continued on page 58)

RICOTTA TEN WAYS

Calabrian sheep's milk ricotta is just one of many varieties of the cheese; the ten described here are available in the United States. Ricotta infornata 1, or baked ricotta, has a distinctive tan crust, a toasty flavor, and a firm but supple texture comparable to cheesecake's; Italians often eat it with bread or as part of an antipasto platter. Homemade ricotta 2, made by adding rennet or an acid, like vinegar, to heated whole milk, causing curds to form, has a milky flavor that's suited to a wide variety of dishes. Ricotta affumicata 3, or smoked ricotta, when grated over pasta or melted in a panini, lends a baconlike richness to the dish. Crushed red chile flakes are a common seasoning in numerous southern Italian dishes, and they're also

what give ricotta salata al peperoncino 4 its piquant bite; the cheese makes an excellent addition to linguine with arrabbiata sauce. Faintly grassy and rich, sheep's milk ricotta 5, or ricotta di pecora, works well as the focal point of a dish, whether eaten on crostini with honey and figs or tossed with pasta. Most factory-made ricotta 6, like the Polly-O brand shown on the facing page, is produced from cows' milk and has a fine-grained curd; its mild flavor and consistent texture, achieved by the addition of stabilizers like gums, makes it a good choice for lasagne and other cooked dishes. Ricotta impastata 7, or pastry ricotta, is whipped to create an ethereal texture and is sometimes sweetened; professional pastry

chefs use it to make fluffy fillings for cannoli and sfogliatelle, a traditional Italian layered pastry. The dense and pungent fermented cheese known as ricotta forte 8 is a specialty of Gravina, a city in the southern Italian region of Puglia; this ricotta is aged from 60 days to a few years, and its flavor is reminiscent of blue cheese's. Ricotta salata 9 is salted, pressed, and then dried and aged for three months, which firms the cheese and yields a bright, mildly salty flavor; try crumbling it over salads or grating it into pasta dishes. Buffalo milk ricotta 10, or ricotta di bufala, has a pleasingly gamy taste and a dense texture (owing to the higher fat content of buffalo milk). (See THE PANTRY, page 107, for sources.) —Ben Mims





RICOTTA

RECIPE

Zucchini Ripiene con Ricotta

(Zucchini Stuffed with Ricotta)

SERVES 6

In this dish, zucchini are stuffed with the twin stars of Calabrian cheese making: pecorino and ricotta. Flecked with tomato and mint, they are equally good eaten hot or at room temperature on a warm summer day.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 6 medium zucchini (about 2 lbs.), halved lengthwise | $\frac{3}{4}$ cup grated pecorino |
| 7 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil | $\frac{3}{4}$ cup fresh bread crumbs |
| 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped | 3 tbsp. finely chopped flat-leaf parsley leaves |
| 1 yellow onion, finely chopped | 2 tsp. dried mint, crumbled |
| 2 medium tomatoes, cored, seeded, and chopped | 2 tsp. chopped fresh oregano |
| 2 cups homemade or store-bought ricotta | 2 egg yolks, beaten |
| | Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste |

1. Using a small spoon, scoop out and discard pulp from each zucchini half, leaving a $\frac{1}{4}$ " rim around the edges. Heat 3 tbsp. of the olive oil in a 10" skillet over medium heat. Add garlic and onions; cook, stirring occasionally, until translucent, about 6 minutes. Add tomatoes and cook, stirring occasionally, until soft, about 4 minutes more. Remove from the heat and set aside.

2. In a medium bowl, stir together the ricotta, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the pecorino, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the bread crumbs, the parsley, mint, oregano, and egg yolks. Fold in the onion mixture and season with salt and pepper. Set the filling aside.

3. Arrange an oven rack about 7" from the broiler element and heat. Rub the insides of the zucchini with 2 tbsp. of the olive oil and season lightly with salt. Place zucchini cut side up on a foil-lined baking sheet and broil for 5 minutes. Remove baking sheet from oven and fill each zucchini half with enough of the ricotta mixture that it mounds slightly but doesn't spill over the edges of the zucchini. Sprinkle each stuffed zucchini with the remaining pecorino and bread crumbs and drizzle with the remaining olive oil. Broil until the zucchini are soft and the tops are lightly browned, 10–15 minutes.

(continued from page 54) local farms from goats' milk. But the most prized is the sheep's milk ricotta made on small farms: it has the scent of ewe and a richness that the others can't match. Although Calabria has no shortage of sheep, Rosetta and I soon learn that cheese-making shepherds aren't easy to find. Alfonso Maiorano, an esteemed pecorino producer in the province of Crotona, told us that he knows no one who still makes pecorino and ricotta as Rosetta's father did—with the raw milk of his own flock, warmed over a wood fire, cultured with bacteria present in the milk and in the air, coagulated with rennet, and molded in hand-woven rush baskets. The European Union has cracked down on practices it perceives as unhygienic, many of them part of the cheese-making process here for centuries. Even Maiorano has begun heat-treating his milk (a safety precaution that stops short of pasteurization) and has switched to plastic draining baskets, as has almost every producer who hopes to avoid the scrutiny of the EU. In frustration, most of the small-scale shepherds have abandoned commercial cheese making entirely, says Maiorano. Most of them sell only milk now.

We are dismayed by Maiorano's account and reluctant to accept that the 15-year-old EU has so swiftly stamped out methods that have prevailed here for centuries. Surely somebody knows somebody who knows a defiant shepherd still making ricotta the old-fashioned way.

We return to our rooms at the nearby Agriturismo Dattilo, a working farm that accommodates guests. Dattilo encompasses a well-maintained organic olive grove, a vineyard, and a four-year-old restaurant that, in recent years, has developed an excellent reputation for its creative use of traditional Calabrian ingredients—eggplant, salt cod, bottarga, peperoncino, wild fennel, sardella (a spicy anchovy spread), and, of course, ricotta. At dinner on this evening, we savor the local ricotta in several guises: stuffed in grilled calamari; fashioned into an elegant version of ricotta fritters, a Calabrian home favorite; and starring in a spuma di ricotta al caffè, a whipped ricotta and coffee mousse that tastes like caffèlatte in pudding form.

The next day, we recount our shepherd predicament to Margherita Amasino, a 23-year-old cook at Dattilo who was raised in the nearby town of Torre Melissa, in the hopes that she might have some *contadino* connections. She calls her mother, who calls an uncle, and we soon have our

HOW TO MAKE RICOTTA AT HOME

Traditionally, ricotta was made by reheating whey left over from the cheese-making process; these days it can still be made from whey or whey fortified with milk or cream (to increase the yield), or by extracting curds from whole milk, which is the norm in commercial dairies. The author's friend Rosetta Costantino led us to an easy method that produces the sweet, earthy flavor of old-world ricotta by combining whole milk with rennet, which consists of enzymes that act as a coagulant. We tried coagulating ricotta with lemon juice, vinegar, and buttermilk but ended up with neutral-tasting, large, crumbly curds. Rennet produces moister, tastier curds, as it leaves more proteins intact and does not inhibit the milk's flavor compounds as an acid would. The

temperature to which the milk is heated is also important. Bringing the temperature up to 200° sweetens the milk and readies its proteins for coagulation. It also causes the curds to retain more whey, for a creamier, smoother cheese. To make about 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups of ricotta, heat 1 gallon whole milk and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup heavy cream over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally with a wooden spoon and taking care not to scorch the milk, until an instant-read thermometer inserted in the milk reads 200°. Skim foam from surface of milk. Pour milk into another pot to facilitate cooling. **1** Add 2 tsp. kosher salt to milk; stir to dissolve. **2** Carefully nestle pot in a bowl of ice water and stir to bring the temperature down. **3** When milk reaches 125°, **4** mix 1 tsp. liquid animal rennet (see page 107) with

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup cold water in a bowl, **5** then stir into the milk. Let stand undisturbed until the milk has visibly thickened, about 10 minutes. With a wooden spoon, cut a large X in the coagulated surface of the milk. Stir quickly for 15 to 20 seconds to break up the solids. **6** Using a fine sieve, slowly stir milk in one direction around edge of pot, so that the curds begin to separate from the whey. Continue to stir gently until you have gathered a large mass of curds. **7** Gently scoop curds, in batches, into 2 disposable ricotta molds (see page 107) or into a cheesecloth-lined colander set over a sheet tray. **8** Allow excess whey to drain from ricotta for 1 hour. **9** Use cheese immediately or refrigerate, covered, for up to 3 days. —Hunter Lewis





RECIPE

Polpette di Ricotta

(Ricotta Fritters)

MAKES 20 FRITTERS

Chilling the ricotta-prosciutto mixture after mixing it allows the flavors to come together and makes the balls easier to form.

- | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|--|
| 2 | tblsp. extra-virgin olive oil | 1/3 | cup grated mozzarella |
| 4 | cloves garlic, smashed | 1 | tsp. finely chopped flat-leaf parsley leaves |
| 1/2 | tsp. crushed red chile flakes | 1/2 | tsp. grated lemon zest |
| 1 | 14-oz. can crushed tomatoes | 1/8 | tsp. freshly grated nutmeg |
| 6 | basil leaves, torn in half | 3 | egg yolks plus 2 eggs |
| | Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste | 4 | oz. thinly sliced prosciutto, finely chopped |
| 1 | cup homemade or store-bought ricotta | 1/4 | cup flour |
| 1 | cup fresh bread crumbs | 1/2 | cup dried bread crumbs |
| 1/2 | cup grated pecorino | | Canola oil, for frying |

- Heat olive oil in a 2-quart saucepan over medium-high heat. Add garlic and cook, stirring occasionally, until golden, about 5 minutes. Add chile flakes; toast for 1 minute. Add tomatoes and basil, bring to a boil, lower heat to medium, and cook, stirring occasionally, until sauce begins to thicken, 6-8 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Reduce heat to low; keep warm.
- Stir together ricotta, fresh bread crumbs, pecorino, mozzarella, parsley, lemon zest, nutmeg, egg yolks, and prosciutto in a medium bowl. Season with salt and pepper; cover and refrigerate until firm, about 30 minutes.
- Put flour, whole eggs, and dried bread crumbs into 3 separate shallow dishes; whisk eggs. Using your hands, form chilled ricotta mixture into 1 1/2" balls. Working with 1 ball at a time, dredge in flour, then eggs, then bread crumbs, shaking off any excess. Transfer to a parchment paper-lined sheet tray.
- Pour enough canola oil in a 4-quart saucepan that it reaches a depth of 2". Heat over medium-high heat until a deep-fry thermometer inserted in the oil registers 350°. Working in batches, fry the ricotta balls, turning occasionally, until golden brown, about 3 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the balls to a paper towel-lined plate. Serve with the tomato sauce.

Above, from left, fried ricotta fritters; a street in Crotone, the main city of the province of the same name. Facing page, a customer in a Crotone butcher shop.

shepherd. Giovanni Bevilacqua, Amasino's great-uncle, would be happy to let us observe his cheese making, but we must be at his farm by sunrise tomorrow. Amasino agrees to accompany us and suggests that we meet for coffee at Bar Fox before heading into the hills.

WHEN WE ARRIVE IN TORRE MELISSA, a winegrowing hill town about six miles inland, dawn is casting its glow over the grapevines that line the dirt road where Giovanni and his wife, Antonietta, have their small farm. Giovanni, a kind-faced man in his 70s, greets us at the car and then walks us over to a brick shed where he makes pecorino and ricotta to sell to his neighbors. Four metal buckets filled with last night's milk hang from a rod outside; they have been there all night, cooled by the evening air, slowly building up the bacteria that will hasten the coagulation of the morning's fresh milk when the two batches are mixed—a first step in the production of pecorino. The Bevilacquas' son, Gino—a 35-year-old with dark, wavy hair and a pack of Marlboros in his shirt pocket—is in the pasture, milking ewes. The morning air is soft and calm, the country silence broken only by the splashing of milk into pails and the tinny clang of sheep bells.

Five more great ricotta recipes at SAVEUR.COM/ISSUE113

While Gino milks, Antonietta and Giovanni work in the cheese shed, warming last night's milk in a large cauldron that's heated from below by a wood fire. When the evening milk reaches the temperature of the morning milk—about 86 degrees Fahrenheit—Antonietta pools the two batches in the cauldron and adds the rennet, a natural coagulant containing enzymes extracted from a lamb's stomach. Now we must wait for the milk to separate into the soft curds that will become pecorino cheese and the liquid whey that will eventually yield ricotta.

To pass the time, Rosetta and I drive into town to get some day-old bread from the local baker; we hope to persuade the Bevilacquas to make ricotta impanata, the traditional shepherd's breakfast of stale bread softened in warm whey, then whipped with ricotta. When we return, at eight-thirty, Giovanni is enjoying a tumbler of homemade wine outdoors with a neighbor. We follow him into the cheese shed, where the sheep's milk has coagulated into what looks like thick yogurt. He checks the consistency with a soup spoon and then pokes a wooden dowel into the



RICOTTA

METHOD

Spuma di Ricotta al Caffè*(Ricotta and Coffee Mousse)*

The recipe for this elegant, easy-to-make dessert (facing page) is based on one prepared at Ristorante Dattilo in Calabria. Purée 2 cups store-bought ricotta in a blender until smooth. Transfer to a large bowl; set aside. Whip together 1 cup cold heavy cream and 1/3 cup sugar in a large bowl until soft peaks form. Set aside. Bring 1/4 cup water to a boil in a small saucepan; remove from heat. Whisk 2 tbsp. of the water with 2 tbsp. instant espresso in a small bowl. Whisk remaining water with 1 tbsp. powdered gelatin in another small bowl until dissolved. Stir espresso mixture into ricotta, then gelatin mixture; fold in cream in 3 stages. Chill mixture for 1 hour, then transfer to a pastry bag fitted with a star tip. Pipe mixture into 6 sundae glasses; refrigerate until set, about 1 hour. Garnish with shaved chocolate. Serves 6.

vat, stirring vigorously to break up the curds, which float to the surface like small clumps of meringue before sinking to the bottom. Then Giovanni rolls up his sleeves, washes his arms in a nearby sink, and plunges them into the vat. Up come masses of slippery curd, which he piles in mounds in seven pecorino draining baskets. After the curds drain, they will be turned out, sprinkled with salt, and transferred to wooden racks in an adjacent storeroom.

It is only nine o'clock, but the day feels half over, and there is still ricotta to make. Gino rekindles the fire, and Antonietta lines up plastic

ricotta baskets on the draining table. She adds salt to the whey that's left in the cauldron, along with a little fresh milk to improve the yield; then, as the vat heats up, she stirs, and stirs some more. Steam rises, warming the room, as Antonietta skims froth from the whey's watery surface. In an instant, the ricotta forms. "See how it's floating?" Giovanni says of the curds bobbing to the surface. "See how it comes up?" Soon the surface is a cottony sea of white, and Giovanni kills the fire. With a perforated ladle, he skims the cauldron's surface and offers us a taste of the fresh ricotta. It is utterly enchanting: soft, sweet, and silky, a world apart from the grainy American supermarket versions. I don't have to ask Rosetta's opinion: the grin on the shepherd's daughter's face tells me that this is the real thing.

Working quickly, with the fluid motions of people who have done the same task daily for decades, Giovanni and Antonietta scoop the fragile curds into plastic baskets. Giovanni pulls out his pocketknife to cut up the bread, fills a large wooden bowl with the crusty cubes, and ladles some warm whey over the top. Once the bread has softened, he adds several spoonfuls of ricotta and stirs the mixture into a smooth porridge.

Seated at the Bevilacqua's dining table, Rosetta and I dip spoons into the ricotta impanata. It is sweet, milky, and about as comforting as a down pillow. Antonietta urges us to have more because Giovanni, in what I am coming to recognize as standard Calabrian hospitality, has made enough for ten. "My uncle would say, 'If you don't eat it all, the sheep won't give milk tomorrow,'" says Antonietta. And so we eat, savoring the essence of fresh sheep's milk and reliving a moment from long ago. 🐏

THE GUIDE

CALABRIA

Dinner with drinks and tip:

MODERATE \$35-\$59 EXPENSIVE Over \$60

The coastal city of Crotona, which is easily accessible by rail and air (Air One, a Lufthansa partner, offers daily connections from Rome), serves as an ideal jumping-off point for exploring Calabria. To find additional hotels and farm stays, or agriturismos, in Crotona and nearby towns and villages, visit www.venere.com.

WHERE TO STAY

AGRITURISMO "DATTILO" *contrada Dattilo, Strongoli Marina (39/0962/865-613; www.dattilo.it).* Double: \$53 per person. With eight comfortable apartments with kitchens, this farmstay about 12 miles from Crotona allows guests a glimpse of life on a working olive oil and wine estate. In the morning, you can harvest your own fruit from the farm's many fig, blood orange, and mulberry trees. The attached restaurant (see "Where to Eat," below) is renowned for its innovative takes on local specialties, such as ricotta fritters and grilled calamari. Don't pass up the 'nduja, a spicy pork spread,

AGRITURISMO "LE PUZELLE" *S.S. 107/bis contrada Puzelle, Santa Severina (39/0962/51-004; www.lepuzelle.it).* Double: \$54 per person. This eight-room farmstay, in a thoughtfully restored farmhouse half an hour from the Ionian Sea and the Sila Mountains, offers a splendid Sunday lunch, attended by local families and featuring excellent regional cooking.

FATTORIA IL BORGHETTO *località Capo Bianco, Isola di Capo Rizzuto (39/0962/796-223; www.fattoriailborghetto.it).* Double: \$155. Built in the style of a stately country farmhouse, this four-year-old inn near Crotona occupies the grounds of a working farm that produces much of the food offered to guests, from sheep's milk ricotta to prosciutto.

WHERE TO EAT

MAX TRATTORIA ENOTECA *via Togliatti, Cirò Marina (39/0962/373-009; www.trattoria.it).* Moderate. Fresh-caught fish is the star of the show at this rustic trattoria and wine bar in the seaside town of Cirò Marina. Start with an antipasto platter showcasing the spicy local sardella (a spread made with baby anchovies), and then move on to the outstanding cavatelli with superb fish ragù.

RISTORANTE DATTILO *contrada Dattilo, Strongoli Marina (39/0962/865-613; www.dattilo.it).* Expensive. One of Calabria's most acclaimed restaurants, Dattilo updates local Calabrian fare with modern flourishes while staying true to local tastes (the ricotta-stuffed squash blossoms are a favorite). In the summer, sit outside in the lovely bougainvillea-filled veranda.

WHAT TO DO

LIBRANDI *S.S. 106, contrada da S. Genaro, Cirò Marina (39/0962/31-518).* This internationally known winery, long established in the region, focuses on indigenous red grape varieties such as magliocco and gaglioppo. In the winery's tasting room, guests can sample the estate's signature wines: the rich, full-bodied Magna Megonio and the aromatic Gravello.

MUSEO DELLA CIVILTÀ CONTADINA *S.S. 106, Torre di Guardia Aragonese, Torre Melissa (39/0962/370-056).* Situated in a 15th-century Aragonese tower, this small museum offers a unique window onto Calabrian rural life. Lovingly crafted displays shed light on cheese making, weaving, and the other everyday tasks of a traditional farm in southern Italy.