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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Fall 2012), pp. 65-69

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/GFC.2012.12.3.65>

Accessed: 02/09/2012 11:30

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# Fighting Sicilian Corruption, One Vine at a Time



VISITING LAND WORKED BY the Libera Terra cooperative, in Sicily, feels as much like an exploration of the forces of ambition and optimism as an encounter with winemaking and farming. Since 2001 Libera Terra has been turning earth once held by the Mafia into organic farms and vineyards, coaxing lemons, lentils, chickpeas, and grapes from land that is as beautiful as it is heavy with history.

I first met Francesco Galante, communications director for Libera Terra and president of Cooperative Placido Rizzotto, in October 2010 at Terra Madre, the

*Above: Since 2003 Libera Terra has been turning earth once owned by the Mafia into organic farms and vineyards.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIE DOEZEMA © 2011

international Slow Food event that takes place every two years in Turin, Italy. In between learning about heirloom dates from Libya and native mulberries from Tajikistan, I attended a tasting of wines made by cooperatives. Centopassi, the label Francesco was there to represent, stood out both for its taste and its story. The Centopassi wine I loved most was made from Grillo, an exuberant

white grape that loves hot temperatures and is often used in Sicilian wines.<sup>1</sup>

Centopassi (One Hundred Steps) is a winery under the umbrella of the Libera Terra cooperative. The winery bills itself as “an attempt to produce high-quality wines as a way to give new dignity to lands and people that deserve a better future.” Its name is taken from the 2000 film of the same name, about the life of Giuseppe “Peppino” Impastato, an anti-Mafia activist who was killed in 1976.<sup>2</sup> The mission of the larger cooperative echoes that of the wine label: its work is to reclaim land, liberty, and agency for Sicilians, who have, for generations, had to cede them to one of the most enduring criminal organizations in history—the Mafia, also known as Cosa Nostra.

The operations of Libera Terra are made possible by a 1996 law that authorized private organizations, cooperatives, or municipalities to reclaim property that had been acquired through illegal activities. The primary requirement for reclamation is that the land be returned to the community by making it socially beneficial. Today, Libera Terra has eight co-ops in four regions across southern Italy (Puglia, Sicilia, Calabria, and Campania), manages almost one thousand hectares, and has a staff of 130. The company sells more than thirty organic products, from fruit compotes to dried legumes, and manages two winemaking entities. Libera Terra products are distributed to wholesalers and restaurants all over Italy. Internationally, small orders of wines are starting to come from Germany, Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, and a few other countries.

Francesco Galante began as a volunteer for Libera Terra in 2006 and has since become one of the organization’s main spokespersons. Tall and lanky, he is thirty but looks older, as though the weight of Sicily lay on his shoulders. He wants to do it all: make products that people buy not just for their story but for their quality; provide workers with fair wages and respect; improve the high unemployment rate in Sicily, particularly among youth; and undo decades’ worth of systemic corruption. This is the Libera Terra agenda; it’s daunting, to say the least, and progress is, inevitably, slow.

The Mafia has had a stranglehold on Sicilian culture, society, and politics for decades. Anti-Mafia movements began to gain momentum only in the 1990s and early 2000s. For example, the anti-racketeering organization *Adiopizzo* has been influential in fighting against the *pizzo*, or Mafia tax, charged to local businesses and shop owners. The 1996 law allowing land formerly used by the Mafia to be taken over by social cooperatives like Libera Terra was an enormous step in the anti-Mafia movement, a reordering of power. Previously, the Mafia had cultivated these lands not

to earn money but as a matter of prestige. These were some of the best fields around Corleone and San Giuseppe Jato—the most fertile, the most beautiful. Reclamation of the land was symbolic as well as pragmatic, an attempt to diminish the psychological and financial prowess of the Mafia.

In addition to the battle against the Mafia, Libera Terra faces a more basic challenge: convincing people that paying a bit more for their products is worth it. This problem is, of course, not unique to Sicily. Attention to how things are raised (organically, locally) and how people are paid (fairly, with a living wage) raises the price of food, fueling debate about whether eating healthy food (predominantly fruits and vegetables, preferably organic) is inevitably elitist, while eating unhealthy food (highly processed, short on fresh produce) is a reality of circumstance for those of meager means.

In Sicily, the redistribution of wealth implicit in significant changes in the food system could actually help disempower the Mafia. The island’s poor infrastructure and organization, its lack of sustainable development or economic progress, and its high unemployment rate reflect, in part, the Mafia’s survival strategy. The Mafia is more likely to endure when citizens are vulnerable: when there is high unemployment, distrust of government, and an ineffective state system. Efforts by groups like Libera Terra not only provide greater economic autonomy to citizens through employment with fair wages, they also provide a sense of empowerment. To the extent that the cooperative thrives outside the ambit of the Mafia, it partakes of a true reclamation—not only of land, but also of agency. This empowerment entails the disempowerment of the Mafia, which makes the work of the cooperative both exciting and perilous.

“The first time you really notice the Mafia is when you look for a job and don’t find one,” Francesco says. “There is richness without development.” Sicily is stupendously lovely, and its mountainous landscape and arid climate are surprisingly fertile. There are almonds and olives, wheat and legumes, grapes from the earth and salt from the sea. The bounty of Sicily and its strategic location have made it an object of conquest for centuries—Greeks, Romans, Arabs, and Normans have claimed it at various times. Sicily’s tumultuous history is part of what makes the island the diverse, enchanting *vucciria* that it is today.<sup>3</sup> It is also the root of many of the island’s contemporary challenges.

The richness without development that Francesco describes is the Mafia’s living legacy, a condition that is both stagnant and deep-rooted. The current reality of the Mafia is not cinematic or romantic, nor is it as dramatic or violent as it was during the macabre 1980s and early 1990s, when killings were dreaded but expected. Today,

the organization's means have changed and its demonstration of power has evolved. The Mafia's influence is insidious, woven into the economic and political fabric of the island, from the *pizzo* paid by businesses, to the organization's links with politicians. Palermo is "a cultural battleground where the Mafia and state compete for power, legitimacy, and territorial control."<sup>4</sup>

Though he was born and raised in Palermo, Francesco didn't know the full reach of the Mafia before he began working for Libera Terra. In the early days of the cooperative, it was hard to recruit people, despite the atypically fair wages offered. People were hesitant because they were scared, Francesco says. In 2003 and 2005, two Libera Terra fields were burned in acts of retaliation for taking back the land. In recent years, things have gotten better. The job opportunities Libera Terra offers are well perceived by the local people. No more fields have been burned, and it is no longer difficult to find people to employ. During the summer so many people want to volunteer for the organization that some have to be turned away.

It took the local population some time to get used to the idea of Libera Terra, Francesco says; to get used to the idea that they could take action against the Mafia without endangering themselves or their families. Those who work for Libera Terra not only earn a fair wage, they also participate in the politically symbolic and historically significant act of taking back territory that once belonged to the Mafia and reappropriating it for the larger social good. This is not just an agricultural venture but also a direct slap in the face to organized crime.

Despite many promising developments, the biggest hurdle for Libera Terra is not the climate or soil, or the financial crisis, or marketing. It is psychological. "It's Sicily which is wrong, not the soil or the environment," Francesco says. "People don't expect things to change here. It's a frame within which they think and within which they act."

Many of the friends Francesco grew up with have left, gone to Germany, Switzerland, or North America in search of less complicated and more lucrative lives. As he describes it, the island's ambitious youth start off idealistically, hoping to change things, hoping to succeed. But they hit a ceiling and leave.

The monumental change still needed keeps Francesco from feeling a grand sense of accomplishment about how far Libera Terra has come. From the outside, of course, the work of the cooperative appears successful and visionary on several levels. In addition to its Slow Food ideals and objective of fighting Mafia control, Libera Terra employs a certain percentage of disabled workers, people who, due to

physical, mental, or emotional challenges, would not easily find employment.<sup>5</sup>

Thanks to its boutiques across Italy and more than three-dozen products, Libera Terra is gaining a reputation throughout the country. The most successful Libera Terra shop in Sicily is in the hilltop town of Erice, famous for its summer fog and poetically named sweets made by nuns, such as *sospiri* (sighs) and *cuscinetti* (little pillows). The Erice shop has high sales due to its steady flow of tourists, which illustrates the cooperative's marketing conundrum—that its products tend to be more popular in the towns or regions where people can afford higher prices. Outside of Sicily, Libera Terra's products are increasingly known in the north of Italy, where consumers have traditionally been able to spend more money on higher-end specialty foods.

Through its increasing national visibility, Libera Terra hopes to help bridge a stubborn psychological chasm between Italy's North and South: that is, the idea that the Mafia is a southern problem and the north is off the hook. Next year, Libera Terra has plans to begin work on reclaimed land outside of Turin, a symbolic step. "This is a mental barrier," Francesco says. "They say the Mafia doesn't exist there." Because the presence of the Mafia in the Italian North has been less brazen, more prosperous northern cities like Turin have managed to escape the Mafia image that much of southern Italy has endured for decades.

Some of the towns surrounding the Libera Terra land in Sicily are known primarily for their bloody pasts. Corleone, the town made famous by *The Godfather*, has become a tourist magnet. In real life, the town is known as the birthplace of several Mafia bosses, and the local clan, the Corleonesi, is among the most ruthless in Mafia history.<sup>6</sup> At Central Bar, a café just across from City Hall in Corleone, you can eat a lemon granita while surrounded by posters and paraphernalia from *Il Padrino*. Not far from this ersatz monument to the Mafia is Libera Terra's Bottega dei Sapori e dei Saperi della Legalità, or Shop of Taste and Awareness of Legality. A quote from Paolo Borsellino, the anti-Mafia judge who was killed in 1992, hangs outside the building:

The fight against Mafia, which is the first problem to solve in our unfortunate and beautiful land, must be not only a cold repressive action, but a moral and cultural movement, involving everyone, especially younger generations, the most fit to feel the beauty of the fresh taste of freedom that sweeps away the foulness of moral compromise, of indifference, of contiguity and, hence, of complicity.<sup>7</sup>

On the top floor of the Libera Terra shop in Corleone are paintings by local artist Gaetano Porcasi. Porcasi's work



is a very different type of commemoration of the Mafia than the one at Central Bar. The exhibit is a haunting depiction of decades of violence and loss, told through large canvases saturated with hues of eggplant, ochre, sage, and crimson, colors that attempt to capture *sicilitudine*, the Sicilian mood. Many of the paintings are ominous, even gory. One shows a man shot in a parked car abandoned in a field of wheat. Other paintings by Porcasi depict the 1947 killings at Portella della Ginestra, a massacre of farmers who had gathered to defend labor rights.

With Francesco I visit the site of the massacre after my visit to the shop in Corleone. It is one of the most beautiful places I've ever been—high in the brown hills, overlooking a patchwork of fields and vineyards. Far in the distance, still hazy in the late-day heat, is the sea. Large stones now mark the spot of the killings. A ceremony is taking place during my visit, a joint effort of three survivors of the 1947 killings and a group of students from Trieste, Italy, members of Responsabilità Impegno Memoria Educazione, an association dedicated to preserving history and memory through creative collaborations.

The three survivors taking part are now old men, but they are still active in speaking out against the Mafia. The troupe of students from Trieste is eager, optimistic. That night, I have dinner with the students at the nearby agriturismo run by Libera Terra, a former Mafia house turned

Above: Gaetano Porcasi's paintings, on display at the Libera Terra shop in Corleone, attempt to capture *sicilitudine*, the Sicilian mood.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIE DOZZEMA © 2011

B&B. We share platters of *panelle*, deep-fried chickpea fritters, and pass bowls of *pasta alla norma*, made with wheat and eggplant grown in the surrounding fields. We drink Nero d'Avola from Centopassi and end the meal with *gelo di anguria*, a delicate watermelon dessert accented with chocolate and jasmine.

I am the only guest to spend the night at the inn, and I feel isolated. The moon is bright, the landscape silent except for the occasional distant cowbell or bark from a dog. The house used to belong to Bernardo Brusca, one of the most infamous and brutal Mafia bosses. It was likely used as a safe house, a place for planning and assigning killings. Brusca's son, Giovanni, detonated the bomb that killed Giovanni Falcone in 1992. Giovanni Brusca was also responsible for the kidnapping, torture, and murder of Giuseppe De Matteo, the young son of a Mafia informant. The stables that came with the land are now dedicated to Guiseppe, killed after more than two years in captivity, at the age of thirteen. He loved to ride.<sup>8</sup>

I visit the barn the next morning. There are only three horses, and one of them is on the skinny side. All are in paddocks, munching on hay and flicking flies while the morning is still relatively cool. Near the paddock is a pile

of horseshoes in different sizes and shapes, covered in thick rust. A pile of abandoned good luck.

After seeing the stables, Francesco takes me up to another vineyard, home to the newest Centopassi vines and the label's next great hope. The grapes have just been planted. They're fragile, beautiful, and you want to cheer them on. The vines have been transplanted from Mount Etna, one of Sicily's best-known wine regions. It's an appropriate match. This is the highest piece of land owned by Libera Terra, and at 940 meters above sea level it makes an ideal, if windswept, vineyard in the sky.

Other crops growing in this same soil had the best yields the cooperative has seen: the chickpeas are the most delicious, the lentils the most succulent. This is tough land, rocky soil that gets in your shoes and leaves indentations on your feet. The soil is punctuated by sizeable hunks of marble. These are conditions that will make the grapes work hard in the coming years—a challenge that should build character and complexity. The soil is to the grapes what Sicily is to Libera Terra. Francesco doesn't know yet if the grapes will produce the prize wine he hopes to make; it will take at least five years before the vines have matured enough to tell. Likewise, he doesn't yet know how far Libera Terra can go, will go, in helping to transform the island's endemic problems. Though Francesco works as a spokesperson for Libera Terra and Centopassi, he seems repelled by the idea of a fairy tale. He doesn't want to fold things into the neat and tidy package that consumers and journalists often seem to want.

Francesco tells me that someday he will build a house above these vines, on a piece of land that causes the heart to pause, to listen and absorb. There are birds and haze, wind and sky. I am reminded of Michelangelo's frescos of hands. Standing here, I feel cupped in a benevolent palm, floating and small in a way that is both reassuring and humbling.

Across the small valley, not far as the crow flies, is another house nestled into the mountainside, partially hidden amid green leaves and trees. This house once belonged to the driver of a famous Mafia boss. The driver has since been arrested and his house is abandoned. Maybe someday it will be reclaimed, Francesco says. *Someday* is a word that comes up often in conversation, a word that pushes the limits and explores the reaches of optimism. *Someday* is a word that tends to drive ambitious people crazy. But in the case of Francesco and Libera Terra, ambitious doesn't mean hunger for money or power, but for deep and lasting change.

In a pamphlet Libera Terra describes its multiple objectives:

create a network of associations, cooperatives, labour and development agencies, also at an international level; disseminate citizen know-how valorizing youths as the main players in a process aimed at permanent education on lawfulness and involvement; encourage the recall of the Mafia victims as a testimony of rightful, conscious, and brave acting; promote the establishment of cooperative farms on the seized lands, capable to produce high-quality wines, as well as pasta, legumes, oil, and preserves.

Visiting the young vines above Portella della Ginestra is the perfect ending to my trip because it represents the perfect beginning: exhilarating and unknown, full of hope and trepidation. 🍷

#### NOTES

1. The grillo wine made by Centopassi is dedicated to Nicolò Azoti, who was killed by the Mafia in 1947. He worked on behalf of agricultural cooperatives, fighting for a sharecropping law that would give 60 percent of agricultural produce to the farmers and 40 percent to the owner. Azoti's case never went to court and his killers went unpunished.
2. There were supposedly one hundred steps between the houses of Impastato and Tano Badalamenti, the local Mafia boss. Impastato was beaten to death, and then tied to the railroad tracks and blown up with TNT. His case was treated as a suicide until 1997, when it was reopened. Gaetano Badalamenti was convicted and sentenced to life in prison for the murder.
3. *Vucciria* is a Sicilian word that means "voices" or "hubbub" but is often used to describe anything chaotic or disorderly. It is also the name of Palermo's daily food market near Piazza San Domenico, a raucous event that meanders through alleys and small streets.
4. Carina Gunnarson, *Cultural Warfare and Trust: Fighting the Mafia in Palermo* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2008).
5. The history of social cooperatives in Italy and Europe is well established. In Italy, the tradition of social cooperatives gained official approval in 1991 under Law 381. There are two types of social cooperatives: those that manage social services, health, and education, and those that advocate professional integration for people with disabilities. Libera Terra is a social cooperative of the second type.
6. The town's name was used as the fictional surname of the title character in Mario Puzo's book and Francis Ford Coppola's films. In 2006 Bernardo Provenzano, a native of Corleone known as the "Boss of Bosses," was arrested after more than forty years in hiding. In 2011 Gaetano Riina, another high-ranking official in Corleone's mob, was also arrested. (Gaetano's brother, Salvatore "Totò" Riina, was arrested in 1993.)
7. Borsellino and his fellow magistrate, Giovanni Falcone, have become anti-Mafia icons in Sicily. You learn their story as soon as you land in Palermo at the Falcone-Borsellino Airport.
8. Giuseppe's father, Mario Santo Di Matteo, a Mafioso also known as Mezzanasca, took part in the killing of Magistrate Giovanni Falcone in 1992. He was arrested on 4 June 1993, and became a government witness. Giuseppe was kidnapped in 1993 and held in captivity before being strangled to death on 11 January 1996. His body was later dissolved in a barrel of acid to destroy the evidence.