

Tutto Bene

In the remote Sicilian town of **Mussomeli**, residents, local producers, old and young alike are gravitating towards the growing community hub that is The Good Kitchen

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It's silent. The crumbled Sicilian town's buildings, stacked cheek by jowl, are hung with precarious rusting balconies and unopened, wind-stripped shutters. They split the early light, casting blue shadows below. A wash of peachy light blurs imperfections on the pockmarked yellow stone, igniting the grizzled townhouses with a heavenly glow.

The town's main square, Piazza Umberto I, has yet to be anointed by the sun. Fingers of soft wind whisper their way along lamplit side streets. That wind sounds like the town's name: a sibilant cadence, a delivery of elongated vowels – Mussomeli.

Then, noise. The gruff cough of an engine as a cobalt Fiat 500 bounces across the cobbles. A door flings open and Danny McCubbin appears, with a boyish grin, a plastic bag of fat biscotti dangling from his hand. As though on cue, another car bundles past. Slowing with a beep, the old man at the wheel waves genially to the stocky Australian. A few pedestrians file into view and a pigeon tumbles into the square, swooping low.

It's the same wherever we go in the hillside town – the populace gravitates towards this carefree Aussie. Strangers call down from balconies offering directions; elderly perambulators stop him for a chat. He's a catalyst for conversation in an emptying town – and the conversation inevitably involves food.

Lost in the central folds of Sicily's interior, Mussomeli is isolated by location, but also by decline. Sicily is one of Italy's poorest regions, with a youth unemployment figure edging towards 50 per cent. An exodus of the young has emptied interior towns. In Mussomeli, those left behind live in the "new" town, a crisscross of post-war blocks painted in shades of buttery yellow, leaving the maze of ancient, dilapidated homes in the Centro Storico district vacant, tumbling down a hill from Piazza Umberto I like a boulder field. Clock towers

and haughty church facades sit squeezed between fading medieval houses. Here, the streets have their own sense of time, moving at the speed of the flat-capped old-timers shuffling past.

McCubbin is one of the town's newest imports. Fresh from London, and a 17-year career working for Jamie Oliver, the 57-year-old food campaigner arrived in 2019 and bought a dilapidated house for €1 as part of a municipal scheme trying to reverse a slow economic collapse.

"There's a lot of serendipity in my life in this town," McCubbin tells us during a two-hour drive along the steadily worsening roads that lead from the eastern city of Catania to Mussomeli. Palermo is another two hours away. The landscapes are desolate: big brown hills, all soil-carpeted, pierced by sudden eruptions of sculptural limestone outcrops. The rocky formations look like the vertebrae of some great Sicilian backbone running down the centre of the island.

Besotted with the ruinous beauty of the ghostly homes, as well as the congeniality of the local residents, McCubbin moved here permanently in December 2020. During the misty winter lockdown, he noticed quiet queues of people outside church doors on weekdays, waiting for food. It wasn't enough to just live here; he wanted to give back. "Mussomeli brought all the strands of my life together," he says, explaining that he harnessed past experience working on food campaigns and at charitable ventures to launch The Good Kitchen, a project with the principal aim of feeding struggling locals.

In some ways, a community kitchen is suited to the Sicilian way of life. Food – and a proclivity for hospitality – is part of *la dolce vita*. The island's farmland is generous with its harvests: durum wheat in summer, thick-skinned tomatoes in August, olives and grapes come autumn. Families own *campagnas*, small strips of land that they use to grow produce. But the depopulation of





Mussomeli has disrupted the renowned intergenerational Sicilian family structures: elderly residents have been left without support; families, struggling with the shadow of unemployment.

It's a hidden poverty tucked behind doors and disguised by a reputation for boundless generosity. In the end, McCubbin's decision was easy. The €1 house wasn't for him – it was for The Good Kitchen. The building would become its permanent home, a place to teach visiting chefs about community cooking, host supper clubs and run classes for vulnerable children. A successful crowdfunder followed, but renovations have been delayed by the pandemic. So, when we arrive, The Good Kitchen is housed in an old butcher's shop on the main square, watched over by two cigar-smoking brothers, Mario and Pino. They puff away on a bench outside, explaining to curious passers-by why an Aussie bloke is cooking for Sicilians in this tumbleweed town.

When the kitchen launched, McCubbin advertised the meals as for disadvantaged people – and few turned up.

He took stock, spoke to local charities and realised food wasn't the missing necessity in the town – people were. Changing tack, the focus shifted to supporting the increasing numbers of elderly residents who were lonely and isolated. "It's not about the numbers," he says. "It's 'are we reaching the right people?'" Now, he still runs the lunches, but they're open for everyone, including other €1 homeowners. McCubbin also delivers to those in need and is organising a buddy-up system for caregivers and the elderly. Members of the older generation help run the children's cookery classes. Food has become the catalyst for a new kind of gathering, knitting the oldest inhabitants of Mussomeli together with its recent arrivals. "It's important to not be fixated on one thing, to try things out," says McCubbin. "These projects have to fit the town. I've listened, and I've asked questions."

Hidden up a slope in the rickety Sant'Enrico district is the Savarino family home. When we arrive, we are greeted by a scene so Italian, I half think it's a joke. The three brothers, Silvio, Gero and Giuseppe, are lined

up in front of the house, their elderly mother, Angelina, at the window. One brother holds a bulging green tote, packed with a large jar of unctuous fig jam and handfuls of almonds and walnuts, grown on the family's campagna. As we sit down in the scrubbed kitchen, sipping lip-burning espresso and scoffing a plateful of sweet pastries, other treats are snuck into the bag. More nuts, then homemade tomato salsa, carefully stored in an old Beck's beer bottle. When we leave, the leftover pastries are slid gently in, too, to join the rest.

"For the people in the town, donations are a way to give to the community," says McCubbin. In 2020, he bought a second property in the town. The Savarinos are his new neighbours and strong supporters of The Good Kitchen. They look out for McCubbin, inviting him into their home for meals, company and friendship. Often, he'll arrive home to a bag of food on his front step. I ask Silvio what he thinks of McCubbin. "He's a beautiful person," he says, grinning. "The produce we give him? It's just what we do."

At the Savarinos' campagna, the fertile Sicilian soil is thick, sticky and tumultuous, the tilled crust gripping my boots. We drove here, following Silvio's Italian flag-printed helmet as he sped along on a blue Vespa, picking up lunch on the way: fat, creamy arancini balls stuffed with beef and mozzarella and soft, flat panelle – thick, deep-fried discs of chickpea flour. We eat, drinking in the panorama. It's a tired land, much loved and laboured, the fields like a worn patchwork quilt laid over the hills. In the distance, trickles of smoke from burning stubble tarnish the endless pale sky.

The family campagna slopes downhill. We make a meandering descent under olives, quinces, pears and apples. Silvio has known the land since he was a boy. He points out a picturesque ruin further up the hill where his father was born, explaining that, in his childhood, the farmlands were also populated. Now, though, they're even emptier than the town.

"The main event here is always food," says Giusy, his softly spoken Italian-English wife. "It's the glue. Our community is close-knit, everybody knows each other, but when Danny arrived, we were intrigued. He's helping us to help people beyond our immediate family. He's listening and showing, not telling."

With the olive harvest on the horizon, it's likely a fair few bottles of Savarino oil will arrive at The Good Kitchen, joining the walnuts, the almonds and the homemade salsa.

"If you want to kill a Sicilian, don't give him any food," says Franko Amico, laying his knife and fork down on an empty plate. We're having lunch with the local mayor, a young Czech family and McCubbin, who has just whipped up enough pasta to feed a town – quite literally. Amico is a local photographer and Mussomeli's go-to fixer for green newcomers unsure of where to find help renovating their €1 houses. He also happens to be McCubbin's biggest cheerleader.

The lunch is in full flow: pesto, made with the Savarinos' walnuts, fresh basil, bulky wedges of parmesan and a dash of olive oil poured from a water bottle with a hastily attached label: oligo. It's another donation – one of a dozen bottles of family-pressed oil on the shelves. There's no lemon in the dish; instead, the raw oil adds the necessary peppery kick. There's bread, too, donated by Enzo, a local baker, and a homemade apple tart dropped off in the morning by Calogera, who has been running the cookery classes for disadvantaged children.

"They all keep calling me a chef," says McCubbin. "I have to keep telling them I'm not one." It falls on deaf ears; each meal is judged against a Sicilian kitchen's towering standards. The lentil burgers he whipped up a few weeks ago didn't go down well, apparently, but this penne pasta gets the nod of approval from Amico, though he suggests that a bottle of red wouldn't go amiss. ▶▶



SILVIO SAVARINO



GIUSY SAVARINO





It feels distinctly familial. People drop by. Gianluca, a local lawyer, sticks his head through the door. Someone else arrives to guzzle down a plate outside the door, reluctant to take a seat at the table and conversing only in Sicilian, the local dialect. The kitchen shelves are packed with donations of lentils, pasta, salsa, dried herbs from a local farmer, Gero, and homemade preserves.

I ask Amico why the town has been so welcoming of its Aussie inhabitant, thinking of how, elsewhere, relations between tourists and locals can at times be icy. “Danny is doing things people don’t do – brushing the main square, things like that. They appreciate that. He’s joined the community. We appreciate that.” With every “appreciate”, Franko’s head cocks a little further to the right. “We aren’t used to what he does. People in this town are proud and they don’t want to be seen with handouts. This is all new to us, but we’ll get used to it.” It’s telling that donations to

the kitchen are more plentiful than diners; the biggest challenge has been finding the people who need support. Famous Sicilian pride can make sitting in the main square eating a free meal seem – at first – like airing dirty laundry. But McCubbin is charming and has a knack for enticing them inside. The excellent food helps, too.

As he leaves, the mayor embraces McCubbin and says something in his ear. The Sicilians laugh. Amico translates: “He says it’s a *really* good kitchen.”

The sky is unnervingly low on our way to the Anna Tasca Lanza Cookery School, rain clouds riding the hills and skittering across a ghostly sky. When we pull up outside the stately farm buildings, we’re buffeted by a healthy wind that carries on it the joyful barks of Felice, a tearaway little terrier. ▶▶





FABRIZIA LANZA WITH FELICE

McCubbin and Fabrizia Lanza have been digitally dancing for a few months; this is their first in-person meeting. We find her hawk-eyed and stately, sunk into a deep sofa in a darkening, lamp-lit sitting room heavy with history. An oil painting of a delicate woman and a boy dominates the room; one wall is floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.

Started by Lanza's mother in 1989, the school has had a pioneering influence on impressions of Sicilian food culture beyond the island. A cookery course here is no ordinary watch-and-learn. "Boring time is essential," says Lanza. "It takes four hours to peel the tomatoes and during that time your hands take on wrinkles from the wet ingredients." On immersive courses, residents get a taste for Sicilian cooking but must also grapple with the origin and context of the food. "You need a couple of generations of full bellies to enjoy a vision," quips Lanza. Her dry humour quickly dissects the challenges facing those in the area: loss of rural workers, lack of infrastructure and a failure to recognise the value of the agricultural heritage that's being swallowed up by the march of modernity over Sicily's rolling fields.

The pandemic has had consequences here, too. Courses stopped and staff were let go. The garden became a little rambunctious and new thoughts were seeded. "I began to recognise the importance of the people who provide the produce and continue our heritage," says Lanza. "You can have great olives, but if you smash them wrong, the oil is bad. It's not that olive picking is endangered, but the heritage of the agriculture is going away."

Like McCubbin, Lanza turned to her local community, organising a network of some 20-odd producers in creating a tourism itinerary – a pathway across the landscape highlighting the heritage of agricultural traditions. "It's putting at their disposal what my team and I have learned over 20 years," she explains. The idea

is to instil the value outsiders see in the Sicilian way of life into the community, just as the new €1 house owners are falling for the historic value of Mussomeli's crumbling homes, which has faded in the eyes of Sicilians seeking larger rooms and better air-conditioning.

Sitting down for lunch, I'm struck by the simplicity of the food: penne with a vibrant tomato salsa to start, then slices of grilled aubergine, embellished by anchovies and a grating of parmesan, served with green beans and salad leaves picked from the gardens. Dessert is cassata, a classic Sicilian Easter cake that Lanza demonstrates making for us. Lined with delicate marzipan, it's a sandwich-like structure made from layers of cake doused in heady bergamot liqueur and sweetened ricotta, topped with candied fruit. Sicilians rarely use butter, so ricotta takes the place of cream. This is food that holds the narrative – and the history – of the landscape.

Earlier, Lanza had told us that the much-exalted saint-day celebrations in Sicily often see food hanging about for hours, ruining the cooking. The real celebrations of Sicilian produce aren't those showy events; they're the simple, everyday lunches, the family meals, the offerings to neighbours and donations to strangers. Here, loving thy neighbour is a simple kindness that's best shown by leaving a jar of homemade fig jam on a doorstep.

THE LOWDOWN

Follow The Good Kitchen's progress on Instagram @dannyforgood or visit goodforgood.com

One-night stays at the Anna Tasca Lanza cookery school cost from £435, including a cooking lesson, accommodation in a single room, meals and wine. Visit annatascalanza.com