

DO THE LITTLE SHOE

You haven't experienced Italy until you've been
to Tenuta Regaleali, the beating heart of Sicily

BY SHY PEREZ-SALA / PHOTOGRAPHS BY @CAPSULEFORTYEIGHT

549 hectares of
breathtakingly beautiful
vineyards, farmland,
olive, and almond
orchards—right in the
center of Sicily.



BE CAREFUL, or it might kick you, I thought to myself. My travel companions just finished milking their sheep and I was next in line. We were all in the milking room by 7 a.m., so we could catch up with Toto, the estate’s shepherd, before he finished with most of his flock of Comisana “red headed” sheep. They were engorged, frisky, and eager to be milked, so there was a lot of excitement in the room. As I sat down for my turn, the task proved surprisingly easier compared to my previous, and very limited, experience with milking cows. Perhaps it helped that I was a mother who also nursed her daughter for several months? Who knows. But, all my earlier apprehension just melted away and to this day, I still consider this one of the highlights of my stay. It was a thrilling morning indeed, because as soon as Toto had collected the expressed milk, he hoisted them all onto his Vespa and brought them to the cheese making room. There, he showed us, his utterly fascinated audience,

how he made the three cheeses: *tuma*, *primo sale*, and finally, ricotta. By 9:30 a.m., we were enjoying a breakfast feast with our freshly made ricotta, and I must say that it was simply the best I have ever had, full stop, bar none. You just can’t get any fresher than this farm-to-table goodness and it puts any store-bought cheese to shame!

This is the essence of Tenuta Regaleali, a self-sustaining estate, whose owners have a keen sense of preservation and respect for nature—a perfect union between agriculture, technology, and conservation, all for the benefit of future generations. In fact, they actually consider themselves the “custodians” rather than the owners of this property. According to Alberto Tasca, CEO of Tasca d’Almerita, “We didn’t receive the gift of our lands from our fathers, but as a loan from our children.”

The Tasca d’Almerita family of Sicily has owned Regaleali for eight remarkable generations, since 1830. The main house, Case Grandi, has seven lovely rooms, each uniquely designed, with all the modern

comforts and conveniences. The most striking feature is the liberal use of a particular hue of blue. After a trip to Tunisia in 1930, patriarch Count Giuseppe Tasca fell in love with this predominantly used color in the Northern African nation. Inspired, he had all the shutters and doors painted this beautiful blue upon his return. It’s now known by its Pantone color (Tasca Blue), trademarked by the Tasca Family.

There are no daily menus, and don’t expect formal, white-gloved, Michelin-star service either. Tenuta Regaleali is warm and friendly, gracious and authentic, flexible and accommodating. And, never annoyingly obsequious. Their cuisine can more than hold its own against any top-ranked restaurant. The flavors are honest and the food is real—served from recipes hundreds of years old, enhanced by the techniques of today.

The biggest culinary surprise for me was their *fiori di zucca fritti ripeni* (fried zucchini flowers stuffed with mozzarella and prosciutto). If I weren’t being so polite, I would have eagerly finished the whole plate all on

Opposite page: The Tenuta Regaleali estate cradled in the embrace of its fertile and abundant lands. **This page, from top:** The trademark of Regaleali—Pantone Tasca Blue on all the estate’s shutters and doors; everything served on the table is grown in the estate’s fruitful farmlands; entrance to Tenuta Regaleali, along with directions to Case Vecchie, home to the Anna Tasca Lanza Cooking School.

Clockwise from right: Perfect combination—Pantone Tasca Blue and bougainvillea fuchsia; entrance to Case Vecchie, home to the Anna Tasca Lanza Cooking School, a ten minute drive from Case Grandi; two of the seven rooms at Case Grandi, the main house of the estate; a buffet feast in the alcove leading to the main dining room.



my own! My other favorite was their *panelle* (chickpea fritters), so simple yet so divine. And their cannoli, made with the freshest ricotta, was the best I've ever had. Even their breakfast omelette stuffed with zucchini was perfect. No exaggeration—theirs is still the omelette which tops all omelettes.

A stay at this elegant country manor will spoil you not only with these wonderful meals from the family's personal cooks, you will also have exclusive access to their award-winning wine cellar as well as daily cooking classes at the world-renowned Anna Tasca Lanza Cooking School, owned and operated by their cousin Fabrizia Lanza, a quick 10-minute drive away, all within the same estate. It is the cooking school that has firmly placed Sicily on the culinary map. Look, if it's good enough for Grant Achatz and Alice Waters, it should be good enough for everyone else!

Guests are also more than welcome to join the daily wine tastings and other activities such as cycling, hiking, swimming, and horseback riding excursions in and around this breathtakingly beautiful 549-hectare estate which comes with many secret spots for those surprise picnics (or even a marriage proposal or two).

During my stay, I could not tell the

difference between the employee and the employer. And believe me, this is a good thing. What I look for, in every establishment, is ownership. This intangible quality is very hard to find, because oftentimes people who are not the owners are not empowered by their employers. I firmly believe that if everyone is empowered, and aligned in their main goal, then all the good stuff will just naturally follow. In all my travels, to almost all the corners of the globe, I have only encountered two places which have achieved this, and one of them is Tenuta Regaleali.

And, unlike many other properties, the Tasca family has made it a point not to list Regaleali on any online booking portals. They prefer to keep it as exclusive as possible so they can vet, vouch for, and personally look after their guests. Rare and special access, indeed.

Aside from the beautiful home and the delicious cuisine, without a doubt, the stars of Regaleali are its wines. The estate produces an award-winning array of reds, whites, sparkling, rosé, and dessert wines. In the late 1950s, the family made the fateful decision to become the first winery in Sicily to produce quality wines, at the time when most were bottling in bulk. Its flagship Regaleali Rosso del Conte, cre-



ated in 1970, was the island's first single vineyard vintage and introduced the world to one of Sicily's indigenous grapes, Nero d'Avola. Since then, other producers on the island have followed suit and more people have discovered the other lovely Sicilian wine grape varieties such as Inzolia, Cataratto, Grillo, Perricone, and many others. I personally enjoyed their Nozze d'Oro, a blend of Inzolia and Sauvignon Tasca. And, I love the history about this vintage even more, as this was first produced in 1984 by Count Giuseppe Tasca in celebration of his and his wife Countess Franca's 50th year wedding anniversary. You can't get any more romantic than that!

What makes Regaleali even more unique is the fact that the estate is situated smack dab in the middle of Sicily, compared to the rest of the wineries who are all along the coast. Its location in the center of the island is actually great for the grapes. According to Regaleali's resident oenologist and winemaker, Laura Orsi, "Here at Regaleali we are 550 meters above sea level. Our vineyards begin at 350 meters and go up to 800 meters. A high altitude is important for all grapes but especially for the whites because the coolness of the high altitude gives freshness and delicate flavors. But it is also good for red grapes, because it gives the red wines a good ageing potential and a good acidity, unlike the wines made on the coast."

In 2010, the Tasca d'Almerita family was also the brainchild behind the much lauded SOSain project. They were already



Clockwise from above, far left: Fabrizia Tasca Lanza showing the author and Janice Leung-Hayes a fun and easy way to make 'involtini di carne' (meat roll-ups stuffed with ham, cheese, and pistachios); perfect pairing—'panelle' (chickpea fritters) paired with a glass of Regaleali Le Rose; 'ponata di melanzana' (eggplant 'caponata')—hearty and delicious; just some of Tasca d'Almerita's award-winning wines produced from the Tenuta Regaleali wine estate. From left to right: Regaleali Le Rose (rosè), Nozze D'Oro (50th Anniversary Wine, white), Catarratto Antisa (white), Rosso del Conte (Flagship Wine, red) and the Grillo Cavallo Delle Fate (white); Fabrizia Tasca Lanza coating our 'involtini di carne' with breadcrumbs before grilling; 'cannoli' stuffed with the freshest ricotta cheese.





Above: The magnificent magnolia tree in the courtyard of Case Grandi, the main house. This tree has welcomed several generations of family members and guests over the centuries. Right: Fabrizia Tasca Lanza showing us how to cook authentic, amazing, farm-to-table, Sicilian cuisine. Far right: Toto, the estate's shepherd, making ricotta cheese from freshly expressed sheep's milk.



Clockwise, from above left: Farm-to-fork fresh produce —100% organic, 200% Sicilian!; the author milking the sheep at 7 a.m., and by 9:30 a.m. having the best and freshest ricotta cheese for breakfast; the Regaleali estate is under the watchful and caring eye of the Virgin Mary, perched atop the stainless steel wine tanks.

BEST TIMES TO GO: May to June and September to October.

HOW TO GET THERE: From Palermo or Catania, it's 2-2.5 hours direct via private car. Or, by train to Valledlunga Station and then a private transfer to the estate. Access to Palermo and Catania airports are via flights from Rome, the UK or Dubai.

WHERE TO STAY: Tenuta Regaleali Estate, Sclafani Bagni, Sicily, Italy.

WHERE TO EAT: A stay at the Tenuta Regaleali Estate is on full board basis, inclusive of all meals, standard drinks, and daily wine tastings.

WHAT TO DO: Daily wine tastings, vineyard and cellar tours, cooking classes, and other activities such as cycling, hiking, swimming, and horseback riding excursions. Out of town visits to Agrigento's Valley of the Temples and wine tastings nearby can also be arranged. And, of course, milking the sheep to make the freshest ricotta for breakfast!

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known as being forward-thinkers in the Sicilian viticulture industry, but this endeavor further cemented their reputation and commitment to being the “custodians” of their land. SOStain is “aimed at measuring and reducing the impact of all company activity on the territory’s resources.” Here are a few of the many concrete examples from this project: usage of renewable energy, decreasing the weight of their wine bottles during manufacturing and transportation, zero use of pesticides and herbicides, and cultivation of crops and grapes during the right seasons. The timing could not have been more perfect since Sicily’s location and climate make it especially vulnerable to climate change and global warming. Better now than be sorry later!

In return, nature has been more than generous to Regaleali. They are not only blessed with amazing wines, but also hectares upon hectares of olive and almond trees used for their olive oil and their pastries, and their seemingly endless fields of wheat. An ancient wheat is grown there for the production of bread and pasta at their chic Aeolian Island resort of Capofaro. It is so good that they won Gambero Rosso’s “Best Bread on the Table” award for 2018.

Speaking of bread, or food for that mat-

ter, I also had the privilege of spending a few hours learning from one of the loveliest and most patient of cooking teachers, Fabrizia Lanza of Regaleali’s Anna Tasca Lanza Cooking School. During one of our mornings, my travel companions and I were taught how to make the hearty *involtini di carne* (meat roll-ups stuffed with ham, cheese, and pistachios), the healthy *caponata di melanzana* (eggplant caponata), and the utterly delicious *panelle* (chickpea fritters). Everything was so tasty that I just had to buy several signed copies of Fabrizia’s cookbook *Coming Home to Sicily*. Whenever I travel, I make sure to bring home personal memories, and signed books are always a keeper and such perfect gifts.

It’s these special, off-the-beaten, road-less-traveled but equally amazing paths that make it so endlessly fascinating to me, as well as the people, the smells, the sights, the tastes and textures, the sounds, and the memories. Tenuta Regaleali, you have truly epitomized the great Italian term I have recently learned: “*fare la scarpetta*” (literally translated: “Do the little shoe”). It simply means to lick your plate clean of oh-so tasty food with a piece of bread. And with this, I would gladly mop up every last life-giving, eye- and heart-opening drop of your secret sauce! 🍷