

A quest for Sicilian zest: The citrus farm that allows visitors to sample a traditional way of life

By Rob Sharp

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A sprightly, miniature blue bird flits across the area around a cool, clear swimming pool. To one side, a lizard crawls into a small alcove beneath a stone wall that meanders across a verdant lawn. An orange grove wafts its citrus smell across the surrounding countryside, which basks in the shadow of Mount Etna, just visible through a distant haze.

In spring, there are worse places to be than Villa Aranjaya in San Giorgio, a 30-minute drive west of Sicily's second-biggest city, Catania. At this time of year, the villa – a residential complex within a working farm producing oranges, lemons and tomatoes – is popular with those who are keen to sample fruit straight from the tree, or who want to enjoy the solitude, colours and atmosphere particular to this dramatic Italian island.

I'd travelled as a guest of Tropicana, purveyors of fine fruit juice to our breakfast tables, to try one fruit in particular: the blood orange. There are around 67,000 hectares of orange groves in Sicily, 70 per cent of which grow blood oranges, during their January to May growing season. A journey to the source was a chance to sample a rarefied fruit in its natural environment.

The groves here have a unique microclimate provided by the brooding volcano of Mount Etna. Warm days and cool nights allow Sicilians to produce what many feel are the best blood oranges in the world – and then Tropicana harvests them and processes them into juice.

After a short drive from Catania's airport, the Villa Aranjaya complex greeted me from behind high iron gates. A drive weaved its way up to a series of brand-new buildings designed in the Italian masseria, or traditional farmhouse, style – the agro-tourism element of what is a working farm. The surrounding landscape was dotted with the distinctive silhouettes of cypress trees.

The dozen or so rooms here lack modern conveniences such as televisions, but instead boast colonial-style fans, antique furniture and wooden shutters and floors. The furniture includes quirky antiques selected by the farm's owner, Rudolf von Freyberg, including a lamp with a stand like a zebra foot.

"I wanted people to feel like there was a personal, Sicilian touch," says von Freyberg. "It is hugely important to me that my guests are at home, as if they were a local, staying with a local, as one of my friends."



Get into the grove: Rob Sharp tries a blood orange at Villa Aranjaya in San Giorgio

Taking him up on his offer, I walked outside to a communal area between the complex's dining room and the swimming pool and quickly settled in to spend half a day reading in a hammock and watching the wildlife: Spanish sparrows and various types of swifts and gulls swooped down to flutter among the massed ranks of orange trees.

You can't miss what the farm is really here for. The groves contain a mixture of different varieties of orange, including pigmented oranges (varieties with names such as Moro, Sanguinello and Tarocco), sweeter forms (Washington Navel), mandarins and clementines, as well as blood oranges. All thrive on the temperature variations specific to the area surrounding Etna – 24C during the spring days, 5C at night – as well as soil fertilised by volcanic rock.

I convinced some of the farm's managers, who oversee the legions of local workers enduring gruelling 12-hour days in the sunshine, to take me around the farm. They did so, pointing out the various citrus breeds in broken English. The trees are planted in rows, making up football pitch-length orchards; men in blue overalls go from tree to tree, quickly working their way up and down ladders to fill plastic crates with the brightly coloured produce.

I borrowed a knife from one man and cut an orange in two, savouring its fresh sweetness as sticky juice coated my hands. "The soil is a mixture of mineral-rich decomposed lava, along with lots of limestone," said Carlo Ragonese, a quality and tasting expert working for Herr von Freyberg. "It is washed down the volcano by winter rain, and spills into the Simeto River, which feeds the Etna Valley. It is the highest quality you can get."

I threw another segment of orange into my mouth and moved on to admire the king of orange trees, the blood orange variety, a grove of which lay a short walk up a nearby hillside. The fruit's skin is dappled with patches of purple and deep red, its smell creates a wall of zingy perfume. The flesh of the blood orange is scarlet, its flavour intense, with a minimum of pith and plenty of juice.

Walking back to the villa I spotted rosemary, thyme, borage and asparagus growing at the roadside – I picked the latter and chewed on it, marvelling at its herbaceous, bitter taste. Above me kestrels, larks and turtle doves wheeled in the sky.

That evening, I settled down to a feast: the villa's food is prepared by Tunisian cook Naima in a separate lounge, dining and kitchen area that looks over the pool. Beyond there is an impressive view of the orange groves and Etna. Fish is a big part of Sicilians' lives, with spicier North African elements infusing modern versions of the island's traditional cuisine (fish soup, for example, with chilli).

The food at the villa mixed Italian staples – pasta, tomato sauce and fresh vegetables – with tuna, swordfish, sardines, olives, pine nuts and capers. Anchovies, whitebait, halibut and octopus also featured heavily. One of Naima's specialities was, yes, blood orange jelly: tangy and refreshing.

The island's signature wine is Nero d'Avola (Avola is a city in the south of the island). It is plummy, full of tannins and comparable to a shiraz. I found its thick, almost treacly intensity too much, despite a mid-level alcohol content.

The next day, I drove to the hilltop town of Taormina, about an hour to the east, which is connected by cable-car to the seaside resort of Mazzaro hundreds of feet below. The highlight is the Teatro Greco, which despite its name is a Roman amphitheatre. From the partial ruins there is a clear view down to the town's beaches; I sat on the top steps and marvelled at the mist-shrouded foothills of Etna before heading to the 14th-century Palazzo Corvaja. This houses a folklore museum, the interior of which is lined with black and white basalts creamed from long-since-cooled lava flows.

Wandering down the town's pedestrianised central street, I ignored the designer clothes shops and grabbed an espresso at the San Domenico Palace Hotel – a plush, if expensive, former Dominican monastery with sea views and a central courtyard of olive trees.

Later, I explored the Piazza del Duomo in Catania itself, which contains one of the grandest projects by the city's municipal architect, Giovanni Battista Vaccarini: the city's Baroque Duomo. I spent an hour inside, walking around its rich series of chapels before venturing out to catch the last of the sunlight. Then it was back to the orange groves, and the real and unmistakable scent of Sicily.

Travel essentials: Sicily

Getting there

- * The writer travelled to Villa Aranjaya with Tropicana, the long-term partner of the Sicilian orange growers.
- * Tropicana uses blood orange juice to blend its Tropicana Sanguinello juice, available in Waitrose stores from 17 May.
- * British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com) flies from Gatwick to Catania.

Getting around

- * To reach San Giorgio, you can hire a car at the airport (08713 849 847; europcar.co.uk) but you can also ask your villa's management to arrange a transfer.

Staying there

- * Villa Aranjaya, San Giorgio, Scordia, Sicily (00 39 335 109 7146; aranjaya.com). Double rooms start at €150, including breakfast.

Further information

- * Agriturismo.net lists agri-tourism schemes in Sicily.
- * Italian Tourist Board: 020-7408 1254; italiantouristboard.co.uk