

PALATE | INTERNATIONAL FOOD

## La Variante Sultano

—*Duomo Ristorante, Sicily*

MY DRIVE ALONG the SS 115 from Modica to Ragusa is breathtaking. I have crossed one of the tallest viaducts in Europe into a unique corner of the world filled with carob trees and citrus groves. Once in Ragusa Ibla, the city's heritage district, I wander through the sloped piazza before the striking Duomo di San Giorgio. It's clear why the baroque architecture in Ragusa Ibla and seven of its neighbouring Sicilian towns have together earned UNESCO World Heritage status.

I continue along the winding cobbled street toward our destination, Duomo Ristorante. This is the home of one of Sicily's most acclaimed chefs, and the only chef on the island with two Michelin stars: Ciccio Sultano.

Combining contemporary elegance and an intimate ambience, Duomo Ristorante has the hallmark of true excellence. It is must-visit for culinary connoisseurs. Duomo Ristorante offers innovative, sensual twists on classic Sicilian cuisine with subtle flavours of the terroir. His indispensable ingredients range from natural, sun-dried sea salt, known for its purity, to exceptional olive oil. Creative flair and a delicate finesse are the hallmarks. Sultano breaks the formal traditions of Italian cuisine, adopting Arabic influences in carefully crafted and artistically presented dishes. (He is currently working on a range of glass plates and dishes with Alessandro Di Rosa, a local craftsman and food-lover, who, Sultano says, understands exactly how to set off his creative cuisine.)

Our first course arrives: an *amuse-gueule* of truffle gelato, served in a sandwich of salted toast with a touch of extra virgin olive oil—inventive and surprising. I am then presented with a series of tasting spoons so that I can sample a wide range of the restaurant's specialties that embody the richness of the Sicilian sea. First, *ricciola*, or amberjack. Next, a spoon of sea urchin floating on a cloud of fresh salted ricotta, under a dollop of caviar. The secret weapon, I discover, is the finish—a drizzling of bitter honey, Miele Amaro di Corbezzolo, on the bottom of the spoon, which hits the palate with a unique sweetness, followed by a slightly bitter aftertaste. Finally, a spoon of



a raw local shrimp known as *gobetto*, bathed in almond milk and ginger.

Our next dish is a Sicilian classic, spaghetti with red tuna *bottarga* (cured fish roe), marinated anchovies and lemon sauce. Delicious. Then, *caponata*, an aubergine stew. The second course ends gloriously with *pesce spada* (swordfish) crusted with pistachios and topped with streaks of tomato-basil sauce. And finally come the *dolci*, Sicilian cannoli with fresh ricotta cheese in a warm prickly pear soup, served with almond

sorbet—perfectly complemented by Marco De Bartoli's Vigna La Miccia, a sweet, opulent Marsala Superiore Oro of impeccable quality.

Duomo is a genuine destination restaurant, and Sultano is more than a great chef. His cuisine embodies the essence of Sicily, a place renowned for its food culture. He is a chef passionate about promoting this cultural history; simply put, this is *la variante* Sultano.

—Paul Ross