

Flavour with Benefits: Sicily & Calabria

Cathy Connally

Charley Best

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Vivacious and celebratory, the cookbook Flavour with Benefits applies a plant-based twist to the tastes of Southern Italy.

Set amid a landscape of Grecian ruins, volcanoes, olive groves, vineyards, and stunning blue seas, Cathy Connally and Charley Best's engaging cookbook *Flavour with Benefits: Sicily & Calabria*, features plant-centric and pescatarian recipes inspired by Italy's southernmost regions.

Partners with a shared commitment to healthy eating, Connally and Best adapt traditional dishes to create new variations of southern Italian flavors. Photos abound as the book tours West and East Sicily, along with Calabria, often called the "toe" of Italy's famed "boot" shape. The book's tone is expansive and informative, as when it covers bustling Palermo, a city influenced by ancient Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Arab, Norman, and Byzantine civilizations. Among the many vegetable and fish vendors, the spirited Vucciria Market takes its name from the word for "chaos" in Sicilian. Calabria's intriguing, rocky terrain is covered, as is the Costa degli Dei, or Coast of the Gods. And Calabria's distinctive bergamot orange crop is revealed as integral to the worldwide production of Earl Grey tea.

The book deviates from classic Italian cooking methods in opting for plant-based substitutions to dairy and meat. Its recipes make minimal use of fat, too—even excluding Italy's ubiquitous olive oil. The Biscotti Regina are made with flax egg alternatives, almond butter, almond milk, sesame seeds, and saffron. The Arancini (rice balls) are baked, not fried; the meatless meatballs (polpette) incorporate minced vegetables, lentils, and couscous or quinoa. The Chocolate and Carob Cannoli are also baked rather than deep-fried, with a whipped chocolate almond ricotta filling and garnish of pistachios and optional powdered sugar.

As exceptions to the meatless theme, the book features recipes for spicy swordfish sautéed with capers, olives, and raisins, and a pasta dish made with grilled sardines and peaches for a salty-sweet contrast. Chickpea fritters and a couscous salad with cucumbers reflect the Middle East's impact on Sicilian cuisine, and the Stuffed Calabrese Bread, filled with potatoes, mushrooms, and hot peppers, is an updated version of a traditional workman's lunch.

The recipes are divided by region and include detailed nutritional information, including caloric, fat, cholesterol, sodium, protein, and carbohydrate content. Whole-grain flours and wheat pasta are preferred, while the "Alternative Ingredients" section includes instructions for preparing vegan versions of sausage, Parmesan and mozzarella cheeses, ricotta, and whipped cream.

Though the book's primary objective is to promote a healthier diet, the vivacity of the Italian lifestyle is not lost in the altered recipes. A bubbly Prosecco rhubarb aperitif can be sipped while enjoying beet carpaccio and a slice of Pizza Dell'Isola, with "its crunchy strong crust." Sicily's abundance of pistachios and citrus influences the pistachio ravioli and lemon-basil fettuccine. And Connally, the descendant of Calabrian immigrants, notes that early twentieth-century socioeconomic factors forced millions of Southern Italians to leave their homeland for the United States and Canada.

Combining nutritional focus with culinary exuberance, *Flavour with Benefits* is an adventure in plant-based Italian cuisine.

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