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Al Fresco, bistro in Palermo: the story of a dream that became reality

🕒 31 AUGUST 2020 👤 MICHELA MARCHI

Today I am going to tell you the story of Al Fresco, a story I know you will want to read and share. As I am sure you will want to go and see (and taste) with your eyes (and taste buds) what it is, just like it happened to me, who from my village of Barbagia in Sardinia, I am looking for the fastest way to reach Palermo and meet Nadia, Lucia and their entire crew in person. This is their story, and if you do not feel hungry or at least the desire to go to Palermo after you have finished reading, it means that I have to change jobs.

P.S. of the introduction: I am also sure that you would have fun (and in certain passages, you would be moved as it happened to me more than once) a lot listening to the audio of our phone call, an exchange of island accents that we carry with us with pride.

I do not (yet) know Nadia Lodato and Lucia Lauro in person, but, as often happens, when you are lucky enough to come into contact with people of overwhelming humanity, you immediately understand what they are made of. In this case, they insist until exhaustion in telling me that they are not the protagonists of this story, but the boys. However, to get to the boys, you have to go through their stories.



Nadia left Palermo at the age of 18 to study Political Science in Florence. Her degree in Human Rights took her to Albania, to an unpaid three-month internship that turned into a three-year project. But, as she tells me “Albania is tough. To put together a salary, I worked four jobs, while putting together a few short missions in Africa. Then in 2004 I went back to Palermo, and started working in the field of territorial education and job placement of inmates and former young adult prisoners.”

Lucia is a social worker, she takes care of minors who have suffered from abuse, especially pedophilia, and the creation and management of innovative social projects. Since 2012 she has been working with job placement for adolescents and youth from difficult backgrounds. And it is there that she met Nadia when she went to meet the boys from the “Malaspina” juvenile prison in Palermo, through the Lisca Bianca project *

“My specialization is in the planning and management of social services and social start-ups. Let’s say that Nadia is the prison and planning expert, and I am the organization expert. She’s the geek, I’m the pragmatist. In fact, we can no longer do without each other.”



Lucia Lauro e Nadia Lodato

And so they combine their skills to allow those who are inside not to be invisible, “To be able to prove their worth to themselves and others,” says Nadia. And they give life to Cotti in Fragrance, a bakery (with very good products) within the Penal Institute for Minors in Palermo.

Their goal is to offer courses and learning paths aimed at creating a social enterprise that is both sustainable and based on precise ethics of responsibility: “We all started from scratch, we and the kids. We have attended a series of training courses that have given us the keys to think about our identities. Above all, the boys were involved and participated in all stages of the process. Imagine how happy a boy, who has to serve six years, must be to tell his family that they can find the cookies he made at Coop.”

And here I no longer held back the tears. The first shortbread is called Buonicuore, a symbolic name because: “From the institute, boys come out with the hearts of children,” says Lucia, and Nadia confirms: “We wanted a name that would show these boys are good-hearted.”



Good, clean and fair: the ethics of the product and the relationship between food and the environment explained to the children

Right from the start, Nadia and Lucia addressed the importance of product ethics: “This is why we approached Slow Food and turned to Presidia producers. And we did it for two reasons: to give young people different tools to read reality and show them that they can aspire for excellence, understanding that behind a good product there is care for oneself, for the environment, and for everything around us. Explaining to the kids the link between food, climate, and the environment through an ingredient. These are difficult concepts, we have tackled and we will continue to do so.”

The biscuit factory, however, is not enough for a project that wants to give children the opportunity to start over, with a job placement that can give them back daily normality.

The laboratory outside the walls

“The bakery is a place for the youth to serve their sentence. We also want the boys, once they have served, to live outside their condition as free people because it is important to think about a future outside. A thought of freedom that helps with the daily work.”

In 2016 they opened a site outside the prison, at Casa San Francesco, a 17th-century convent, in the Arab Norman route, where Cotti in Fragrance has transferred the packaging business, the organization of catering, fresh food, and take-away food. And where the meals distributed at the Poles for the reception of fragile people in poverty and without a fixed abode start: “It is wonderful for young people to have the opportunity to perform these reparative gestures: the crime creates a great tear, we want to try to mend this tear, helping people who live in difficult situations is an important act of reparation.”

And finally the bistro: Al Fresco

And if staying inside the prison is “a necessary and indispensable political gesture to carry out activities of true inclusion, training, and re-education,” so is creating new opportunities outside. Thus was born Al Fresco, “a green treasure chest in the heart of Palermo,” where the cloister of the convent was located, today lives the San Francesco house. A bistro that we can proudly say is part of our Slow Food Chefs’ Alliance:

“Al Fresco is a space created with the aim to give back to citizens. A meeting place where we organize cultural events for adults and children, creative readings for children with the Dudi bookshop, photographic exhibitions, and a place to find a small library, for example.” Leading the crew in the kitchen is chef Francesco Gandino who, together with the kids and thanks also to the support of the local Slow Food network, offers a gastronomic choice that makes use of: local, sustainable, and strongly identifying products.

“We are proud of hand-made preparations, such as fresh bread made by us with a mother yeast handed down for two generations, and dishes that are the result of excellent collaborations, such as the panelle with “anti-mafia” flour from Libera Terra,” says Gandino.

We can look to the future with confidence

“We won a local grant with the proposal “Svolta All’Albergheria!” and we can use it to expand the activities of Cotti in Fragranza, involving other prisons through the creation of a structure accommodation in the same building of great historical value: 5 tourist lodgings of various types, a garden and a co-working,” says Nadia, who is filled with ideas, “we will work with immigrants at risk of exclusion. An area we really care about.”

And we can only wish a well-deserved success for these ongoing projects as well.

Il giardino di Al Fresco

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