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IN MY KITCHEN

# Home Cooking With Michelin-Starred Chef Ciccio Sultano

The chef on coming home to Sicily, how he cooks on the weekend and the recipe for a perfect summer picnic



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ISLAND TIME | Ciccio Sultano in the kitchen of his home in Ragusa Ibla, Sicily FRANCESCO MILLEFIORI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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**PART FARMER**, part self-professed dandy, Ciccio Sultano, 43, grew up in Sicily and worked as a chef at Felidia in New York before returning home and settling in the Baroque mountain town of Ragusa Ibla. An enthusiastic ambassador for his island's famously satisfying food, he is also a historian of its Spanish, Moorish and Norman influences. He opened his restaurant, Il Duomo, in 2000, earned his first Michelin star in 2004 and scored a second in 2006. Mr. Sultano is known for spinning classic Sicilian ingredients—anchovies, pistachios, bottarga, Nebrodi lamb, fennel—into whimsical dishes that express both his connection to the land and his mastery of contemporary techniques.

Recently, the chef began hosting bimonthly English-language cooking classes in his home kitchen, just steps from his restaurant. When he's not working, he spends time with his wife, Gabriella Cicero, the restaurant's director of events, and his 15-year-old daughter, Carla, as well as any friends who happen to stop by, cooking simply and relaxing. A few weeks ago, over coffee in his home, Mr. Sultano showed off his kitchen's gorgeous view of the Iblei mountains and discussed his many passions, from locally produced cheese and wine to a much-loved, bank-busting Armani aviator jacket.



The view from Mr. Sultano's kitchen FRANCESCO MILLEFIORI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**To avoid temptation**, and to maintain my figure and my palate, I keep an empty fridge at home. Working in the restaurant, I eat before my clients arrive. If I went home and ate again, I'd become enormous.

**If I'm really starving** after work, I'll make myself a simple plate of pasta—we always keep spaghetti and paccheri from Gerardo di Nola in our pantry—with Frantoio Sallemi olive oil and a bit of Ragusano DOP from the local cheese producer Dipasquale Formaggi.

**We'd never use** a processed oil. Extra-virgin olive oil is the only thing for us. We also use Épices Roellinger spices, like coriander seeds, cardamom and kawa powder [a blend of cinnamon, ginger, pepper, cardamom and other spices].



Spices in pantry FRANCESCO MILLEFIORI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**In summer**, my favorite thing to eat is raw fish, or fish very lightly sautéed. I love our local tuna, but I'll eat any fish our fishmonger brings us. I keep it as simple as possible, marinated with olive oil, lemon and salt, and some greens. Or we slice it very thinly and make a carpaccio.

**If I only had five ingredients** to make a meal, I'd choose garlic, red pepper flakes, oil, spaghetti and a small baby goat, cooked

whole on the grill. Nothing relaxes me like barbecuing in my garden, over olive, carob and mulberry woods from my trees.

**Cooking in the restaurant requires** a kind of military rigor. I have the technology to make branzino that melts like butter. At home I'm much more relaxed—though my kitchen is very organized there, too. I have a mini Kitchen-Aid empire, from a microwave to a steam oven. Our house is half modern and half country, a blend of the present and the past.

**My ideal weekend**, apart from being with Carla and Gabriella, always involves inviting friends over. I cook everything, because if I don't, it's the only time Gabriella and I fight. Sometimes we go to our tiny house on the beach, where we eat chicken breast sandwiches on a roll, the way children do.

**For a great dinner party**, I'd say call me, because I cater! But if you can't, my tips are: Plan ahead. Prepare some things the day before, so you can enjoy the party. Make an orange salad with spring onion, fresh parsley, red chili peppers, olive oil, salt and a bit of water, and let it rest. When people arrive, offer cocktails, like one made by our sommelier, Valerio Capriotti—a combination of tonic water, carbonated Lurisa mineral water and Solerno, a blood orange liqueur.

**For a picnic, I really love fresh things:** wild strawberries, watermelon, salads. And a nice bottle of chilled sparkling Sicilian wine. I fill old plastic water bottles with water and freeze them, and they keep my wine bottles cool.



From left: Dipasquale Formaggi Ragusano DOP, Épices Roellinger coriander, Solerno liqueur, Tasca d'Almerita Rosso del Conte F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (LIQUEUR), LES MAISONS DE BRICOURT (CORIANDER), DIPASQUALE FORMAGGI

**A wine that fascinates me** is the Rosso del Conte from Tasca d'Almerita. It reminds me of the late Marchesa Anna Tasca Lanza [who founded a famous cooking school in Palermo]. I had the privilege of knowing her and her sisters. Theirs was a world of antiquity, and the wine evokes that spirit for me. It ages beautifully. I drink it often, and when I do, I feel the history.

**An overrated ingredient** is anything that isn't accessible to everyone. For example, lobster. Now it's so expensive, like caviar. If we're not careful, all fish will be like that. Foods that are too expensive don't make sense.

**An undervalued ingredient** is beans, which have dignity and a great capacity for transformation.

**I love Sicilian food** and want to make it more modern. It's sensual, voluptuous, but it is no longer the food of yesterday: It's lighter and less fried. We're all more attentive about fats. Even a caponata can be light. Typical Sicilian food, made well, is very digestible and not very fattening.

**If I weren't a chef,** I'd be a DJ, because I love music. I have a passion for jazz, classical music and even pop songs. I have my music console at home. It's a release from work.

**The way I dress** depends on my mood: Sometimes I want to be elegant, sometimes more like a country gardener. I have a passion for shoes. I love Arfango [oxfords] by Alberto Moretti, but at work I wear Blundstone sneakers. When I was 19, I earned 700,000 lire a month, and a pair of shoes was 800,000 lire. But I'd go to Florence and go shopping. I bought these English handmade Barker shoes in robin's egg blue. I guess I'm a bit of a dandy.

**My greatest splurge** was an Armani jacket, a brown aviator that cost four times my salary. I bought it more than 20 years ago, and I still have it.

**My greatest steal** was a case of antique Caltagirone ceramics. I use them to eat on, and they're also decorative.

**When I go to someone's house,** I like to bring a bottle of wine like Cerasuolo di Vittoria [a Sicilian Nero d'Avola/Frappato blend] from the producer Paolo Calì, or Saia Sicilia [a Nero d'Avola] from Feudo Maccari. If I know my hosts well, I'll give them ceramics from my collection.

**The best gift I ever got** was a Misono carving knife from a Japanese chef.

I've never really had mentors, but I love the book "Modern French Culinary Art" by Henri-Paul Pellaprat. If I could choose a chef to cook for me, it would be Michel Bras. I don't know him, but I'd want him to make me vegetables.

If I could cook for anyone living or dead, I'd cook for my four deceased grandparents. They have no idea what I've become. My mother's mother really was the one who gave me my ambition.

The smartest thing I ever did was deciding to come back to Sicily. It's exhausting, and sometimes it feels limiting, because the economic opportunity here is very small compared to Milan or Florence, or other countries. But it's a choice tied to my emotions.

The biggest mistake I ever made? I don't know, but I live without regrets. Even my errors have taught me, and I've never hurt anyone or treated anyone badly. When I fall down, I get back up.

—*Edited from an interview by Jackie Cooperman*

## Ciccio Sultano's Sicilian Orange Salad

Total Time: 10 minutes Serves: 4-6



Ciccio Sultano's Sicilian orange salad FRANCESCO MILLEFIORI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

### Ingredients

2 oranges, peel and  
outer pith removed

1 tablespoon plus 1  
teaspoon chopped  
chives

1 teaspoon  
chopped red  
jalapeño or  
tabasco chili

½ cup chopped

Italian parsley

5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

¼ cup water

2 pinches salt

### What To Do

Separate oranges into segments. Add all ingredients to a wide salad bowl and toss gently to combine. Let salad rest at least 30 minutes before eating. Serve with crusty bread to soak up dressing.

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