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RESTAURATEUR VINCENZO CONTICELLO: No more “Pizzo” in Palermo

Text ©2009 by Lucy Gordan

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Owned by the Alaimo/Conticello family for five generations, since 1834 L'Antica Focacceria San Francesco (Via A. Paternostro 58, tel. 011-39-091-320264) has been an institution in Palermo, and since 1939 a national monument. With a university degree in political science and a long career in tourism outside Italy, its present owner, 49-year-old Vincenzo Conticello, is a man of great courage and strong moral fiber. In 2005 the Mafia began asking him on a regular basis for protection money, known as “pizzo” in Palermo. Conticello repeatedly refused to pay and reported every incident to the police in the hopes that other businessmen in Palermo would follow his example. Unfortunately, up to now, 4 years later, this has seldom happened.

Before long these “requests” changed into intimidations: major damage to his clients (numerous purse-snatchings or scippi immediately outside the Focacceria and burned-out cars); to the Focacceria itself (flooding, glue in the locks of the front door, smashed windows, gas, water and lights cut-off); to the Conticellos' lawyer (family cars burned-out, his personal computer stolen from his office); and to Conticello himself (his car burned-out, his home robbed, and frequent death threats). Yet Conticello “stuck to his guns” and continued to say “no” even on November 25, 2005.

That day Giovanni Di Salvo, a member of the “Di Salvo” family, paid him a visit with two accomplices, Francolino Spadaro and Lorenzo D'Aleo. They wanted jobs at the Focacceria for their friend and collaborator, Vito Seidita, and Seidita's wife as well at 500 euros a month in protection money, or “pizzo”. Without their knowledge, of course, this “conversation” was taped and filmed by undercover agents disguised as diners.

These first pieces of evidence led to the arrest of these three criminals on March 16, 2007. Six months later, on September 18, they were sentenced on charges of extortion: 16 years in jail for Spadaro (the son of Boss Tommaso of the “La Kalsa” neighborhood of Palermo), 14 for Di Salvo, and 10 for D'Aleo, when Vincenzo Conticello, without the slightest hesitation or doubt, identified Di Salvo in court. Seidita was tried separately and sentenced to 8 years behind bars.

Since that fateful day, Conticello, who instituted a civil suit against his extortionists, lives under police escort 24 hours a day. He granted this interview to Lucy Gordan, Epicurean-Traveler.com's correspondent in Italy, in a secret location in Rome and under the strict surveillance of his police escort.

A brief history of Antica Focacceria San Francesco?

VC: Salvatore Alaimo and his son Nino founded L'Antica Focacceria San Francesco in 1834. In actual fact only Nino should be considered the founder because his father simply “inherited” its location from the *Principi di Cattolica*. Today's Focacceria had been the chapel of the Benedictine monks who were the tutors of the Prince's children. These rooms were ceded to Salvatore who was my great-great grandfather.

Salvatore received these rooms “in payment” for 25 years of service as the palace cook to the *Principi di Cattolica*. Before 1834 the Princes gave room and board to Salvatore and his family, but never a

salary. However, when the reigning Prince had to escape from Sicily after receiving death threats from the revolutionaries of Italy's *Risorgimento* or Unification Movement, he decided to "make a present" of part of his palace (known as "San Francesco" after the church of the same name across the square) to his ever-faithful servant. We still conserve the "deed of sale" of this tiny section of the huge palace. Our little piece is around 500 square meters.

So it's always been at the same location?

VC: Yes. I'm extremely proud that the *Focacceria* has always been a symbol of Palermo's vitality; that with exceptional skill and style, my family has successfully kept united rich and poor, the plebs and nobility, which has always been the custom in Palermo. We can count Garibaldi, Francesco Crispi, Luigi Pirandello, Lucky Luciano, and the anti-Mafia judges, later assassinated, Falcone and Borsellino, among our best-known guests.



Famiglia Conticello

The names of each generation of owners?

VC: At the time of the "gift" or "sale," Antonino was 16 years old, but he was the business brain. His father Salvatore was already old; it was Antonino who believed that these rooms could become the family business. He didn't have the money to turn them into a restaurant right away, so he opened a *focacceria*, the equivalent of a pizzeria today. The wood-burning stove, where we still make our pizzas, already existed; the Benedictines had built it to make extra money by baking biscuits.

Nino Alaimo was the father of my paternal grandmother, Ermalinda Alaimo, a hard-working, no-nonsense, shrewd battle-axe. It was she who constantly advised me never to pay the "pizzo." So the owners have been Salvatore, Nino, Ermalinda (the mother of Nino, who is my father), Nino with his brother Baldo, and now me with my brother Fabio. Ermalinda Alaimo married my grandfather Vincenzo Conticello. I'm named after him.

Ermalinda must have been an impressive if not overpowering person, both at the *Focacceria* and in the home, right?

VC: Yes, *Nonna* Ermalinda was a matriarch. In 1902, after 60 years of activity, *La Focacceria* added "*L'Antica*" to its name. Then in 1939 the Ministry of Culture decreed it "a historical business of cultural interest" along with the *Caff  Greco* in Rome and *Il Caff  Pedocchi* in Padua.

But to get back to *Nonna* ...At the end of World War I she'd lost her two brothers, Mario and Salvatore, who had run the *Focacceria* with their father Nino. She found herself alone and having to man the business with her two younger

sisters. Moreover, she took over bringing up her orphaned nieces and nephews, two in particular: Nunzia and Mario, and put them to work in the *Focacceria*, where they literally remained working to their dying days.

Instead my father never worked in the *Focacceria*. He has a university degree in economics and became a civil servant at the Ministry of Agriculture. In fact, in 1979, *Nonna* Ermalinda made a will and left the *Focacceria* to me, not even to Fabio. I decided to cede 50% to Fabio because not even I had the slightest desire to run the business. I was living abroad and had a completely different profession. Truthfully-speaking, Fabio, who is a born-athlete, wasn't interested either. He's always dedicated himself heart-and-soul to sports.

So, in 1979, my father felt obliged to retire and with his brother Baldo, who also retired from his job at the Bank of Sicily, they decided to help their elderly mother (she didn't die until 1994 at the ripe old age of 98), since yours truly here, a loose cannon, wouldn't return home. I wanted to stay in South America.

Out of respect, even after *Nonna's* death, Papà and Uncle Baldo kept everything the way their mother had left it. They made absolutely no changes, not even to the menu. Nothing! And I mean NOTHING! They served the same dishes that *Nonna* had added after World War II when she switched from being a simple *focacceria* to a full-blown restaurant. In addition to *focacce*, *arancine*, *panelle*, and *sficioni*, in 1951 she'd added *pasta con sarde*, *pasta con melanzane*, *involtini di melanze e con sarde a beccafico*, *la caponata*, 6 or 7 dishes, which we still serve today along with additional local dishes.

Besides your grandmother, her sisters, and her niece Nunzia, which other women in your family worked at the Focacceria?

VC: To please their elderly mother-in-law, my mother and my aunt helped out every so often — on holidays when there was extra work in the kitchen. My mother was a teacher and my aunt a bank employee.

What changes have you and your brother made?

VC: The architectural appearance of the *Focacceria* is exactly the same as 1902, when it was spruced up. Nothing has been changed since then.

When I took over in 2001, I changed the managerial know-how, the day-to-day organization. I involved Fabio, who's six years younger than me. I told him: "Papà wants to sell. We are not going to sell. We're going to run this business together no matter what the outcome." Fabio agreed to my plan because in two, it's easier.

We relied heavily on our different past experiences in other types of businesses and in less than two years, we had quadrupled the profits. From 1,200,000 lire or 600,000 euro in 2000, our profits in 2003 were 2,500,000 euro.

Needless to say, it was a notable increase in income, but also the main reason for the start of our problems with the Mafia, which wanted a chunk of our success. They wanted to keep us under their control by forcing us to employ their "faithful" and by "advising" us to buy products from their "faithful" merchants, something I complied with out of ignorance until I realized the misjudgment I'd made, how I'd been used. They wanted to infiltrate, to become "insiders" so they could take over and push us out of our 5-generation



La Nonna Ermalinda



Vincenzo and Fabio

business.

How do you divide the management responsibilities with Fabio?

VC: Fabio's in charge of finance, the administrative sector, relations with banks, with our suppliers, with our financial consultants, with our administrative consultants,

My responsibilities cover running the business in-house on a daily basis: relations with our employees, with our clientele, public relations, advertizing, the day-to-day organization of our kitchen, of the menu, of *Nonna's* recipes. I'm the custodian of *Nonna's* recipes. I transcribed them all. I'm going to publish them someday. She dictated them to me when I was a little boy.

Your first memory of the *Antica Focacceria*? Of food?

VC: It's connected to smells and playing with my cousins, who are more or less my age. *Nonna* lived on the floor above. I remember the drawers where *Nonna* hid candies. She used to hide the key in a niche in the wall and we used to climb up to find it and unlock the drawers.

As for the smells — *caciocavallo*, *arancine*, *crocché*, fried foods in general; they are still part of my soul.

Do your parents still come here every day?

VC: Papà, yes. There's never been a day when he hasn't come. Even though he's retired and is 77 years old, coming here keeps him alive.

Is he pleased or does he criticize the changes you and your brother have made?

VC: Let's say that up until a year or so ago, he criticized our changes, particularly the huge increase, from 15 to 65, in personnel. He didn't understand my reasons. However, when he saw our huge increase in profits, I think he was proud.

How long has the "Street Food" kermess [festival] just outside in the square existed? Whose brainchild was it?

VC: The first kermess of "Street Food" in Piazza San Francesco was my idea and took place on December 23, 2007. It was inspired by a similar event, called "The Festival of Street Food," which was thought up by me and by "Slow Food" Emilia-Romagna and Brà. Since 2000, it takes place every other September in Cesena and is a huge success.



Street vendor of the kermess

photo by Lucy Gordan

After all the episodes organized by the Mafia against *L'Antica Focacceria* I wanted to give the piazza outside new vitality. So at first, every Sunday we organized this kermesse with the young people who started "Addio Pizzo" (www.addiopizzo.it). From the beginning it was a huge success; hoards of people

started coming, maybe because, in addition to food, we had live music, acrobats, and storytellers. Then on March 30, 2008, we did a repeat performance in Campo de' Fiori in Rome. In only 10 hours we served 30,000 meals of *arancine*, pasta *alla Norma*, pasta *con sarde*, and cannoli.

When I ate there last April with the Oldways group, both the *Focacceria* and the kermesse were packed with people; how many meals do you serve each day?

VC: On average 700 meals a day. On Sundays, because of the kermesse, we can serve as many as 2500.

The size of your staff?

VC: Out of a total of 65, 18 are cooks.

Your most popular dish?

VC: It's a toss-up between pasta *con sarde* [sardines] and *la fantasia degli involtini*, a traditional dish of the *Focacceria*: a roll of sardines, another of *melanzane* [eggplant], a third of meat *alla bavarese* [with a vanilla sauce], and a fourth of swordfish. Each *involtino* is filled with breadcrumbs, pine nuts, chopped orange peel, and Sicilian raisins. We have about 3,000,000 requests a year for pasta *con sarde*; only a slightly lower number for the *involtini*.

Your personal favorite?

VC: Left-over pasta with tomato sauce and then stir-fried with *caciocavallo* [a type of cheese] until it's crispy. *Nonna* used to make this too. I adore it. As you can see, I'm a *buongustaio* or gourmand. I eat all our dishes and more.

***Antica Focacceria* is famous not only for its traditional *palermitani* dishes, but also for cous cous, sushi, and paella. How did that come about?**

VC: At *L'Antica Focacceria* we serve only dishes from Palermo or Sicily, street food, and *Nonna*'s recipes. Next door I have another restaurant called *Hamani* where I serve mostly Japanese dishes. "*Hamani*" means "the blooming of cherry tree flowers during the full moon." It's considered a very lucky occasion in Japan. It happens only every ten or fifteen years. The blooming of cherry tree flowers last only three days, so obviously it seldom happens when there's a full moon. When it does, a national holiday is declared.



Cassata

Gelato di Melone



Arancine

Pasta alla Norma

Speaking of international cuisine, you represented Italy at the Beijing Olympics, some details please.

VC: I've been going to China once a year for the past four years. The Olympics was my fifth trip. Before them I'd catered events for the Italian Ministry of Economic Development and ICE or the Italian Foreign Trade Commission. I also trained 3,000 Chinese chefs in how to prepare Italian cuisine.

During the Olympics, 300 of these 3,000 young chefs, cooked menus I'd put together at the Games's ten Italian food stands. They used the best possible ingredients from every region of Italy. In addition I organized three special events: one was to promote Italian fashion where we served my typically Sicilian specialties; another was sponsored by CONI, the Italian Olympic Committee, and dedicated to sports; and again at the third, sponsored by Italy's Ministry of Agriculture, I proposed Sicilian dishes.

Special events since the Olympics, and upcoming in the near future?

VC: At the end of November [2008] we began selling a few of our antipasti and cakes at a bakery on the corner of Campo de' Fiori in Rome. At the end of April, 2009 we're participating in the first international anti-Mafia event which will take place over 4 days in Central Park, in collaboration with the FBI and the New York State Government. Almost a million people are expected to attend. In October I spent several days in New York making the preliminary arrangements.

Antica Focacceria's website has a "Catering" entry which says that you are willing to cater occasions all around the world; where do "Catering's" most frequent clients live?

VC: In New York and New Jersey, but also for the Italian embassy in Washington and the Italian consulates throughout the USA.

When you cater outside Palermo, do you bring everything from Sicily, or do you collaborate with local restaurants/caterers?

VC: We bring very little from Italy: only Sicilian capers, wild mountain fennel, and raisins. In New York you can find everything you might need. For example, the Arab fruit vendors in Brooklyn have the best chickpeas in the world.

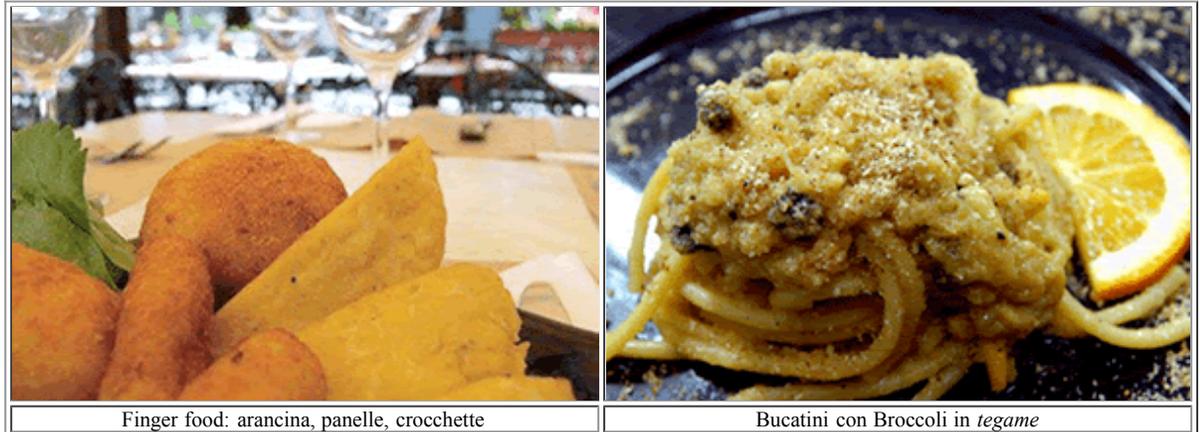
Since September 2007, when you identified your would-be extortionist in court, there's been a police car parked outside Antica Focacceria all the time, and you have body guards. The extortionist and his two accomplices are all three now in jail for sixteen, fourteen, and ten years, but aren't you and your brother afraid anyway?

VC: Our lives are always in danger, so naturally we're afraid.

How many other businessmen in Palermo have followed your courageous example?

VC: Out of Palermo's 90,000 businesses, those who voluntarily reported extortion requests to the police, we are only five. So we're a pathetic number. Another thirty went to the police after their names and the amounts they paid were discovered in the ledgers of the Lo Piccolo family, after the top boss was arrested. The national newspaper, *La Repubblica*, published a list of 170 names. They were all summoned by the police; out of 170, only 30 testified to paying the "pizzo." The others denied, and still

deny it. As a matter of fact, 22 preferred incrimination as “collaborators of the Mafia.” So, you see, Cosa Nostra is still strong and still succeeds in intimidating everyone.



Finger food: arancina, pannelle, crocchette

Bucatini con Broccoli in tegame

I’ve read that up until 2005 your family was never threatened. Can you explain the escalation?

VC: We received a “warning” in 1990. I wasn’t in Italy, but *Nonna*, Papà, and Fabio found glue in the locks of the *Focacceria*’s front door. *Nonna* called the police immediately and reported the episode. Afterwards, until 2005, they left us in peace. We were too complicated, too much of a risk. They’d figured out that they couldn’t intimidate us.

Nonna was very good at running her business and in dealing with the Mafia. The Mafia came often to eat. The Mafia of a certain level, of the Di Salvo, Greco, Bagarella, and Liggio Families, was our clients. Big names, the top brass! When they came to eat, they spent a lot of money. Their bills came to 400 or 500 thousand *lire*. *Nonna* customarily gave them a “discount.” She’d say something like, “Signor Salvatore, your bill comes to 400,000 *lire*, but for you it’s 300,000.” Technically-speaking, *Nonna* wasn’t paying the “*pizzo*,” instead she was giving a discount to a loyal client who always spent lots of money. As far as she was concerned, she wasn’t doing anything wrong.

This way of handling things worked until Fabio and I started in 2003 to make huge profits, which were also appetizing to the Mafia. The so-called “discounts” were no longer enough. They wanted to slowly squeeze or worm their way into our business and then they take it over, pushing us out.

You alone testified in court; was your brother not present at the extortion attempt?

VC: No, Fabio never had any direct contact with the Mafia. Never! Fabio came to court when I identified Di Salvo to confirm the wire-tapping of a phone conversation between the two of us, in which I tell him about a “*pizzo*” request. Fabio only had to testify that the voice on the wire-tap was his, that it was he who was talking to me.

By training you are a political scientist and worked on eco-tourism projects for about seventeen years in Central and South America. What did you miss about Palermo when you lived abroad?

VC: I lived in Nicaragua, Ecuador, Cuba, Argentina, and settled for 9 years in Venezuela. I specialized in setting up eco-tourism projects. I usually worked as a consultant for international cooperation projects, usually for the Spanish Government, in projects to protect national parks and for “environmentally-sustainable” tourism. For example, in Ecuador, at Fort Darwin on the Galapagos Islands, I worked on a project of “hospitality for scientists,” setting up shelter and a cafeteria for them when they studied the turtles. In Argentina I persuaded the whale hunters to become tour guides instead of hunters, that if on their boats they took out tourists to take photographs of the whales, they’d make more money than as hunters, so they wouldn’t need to kill the whale.

As for Sicily and Palermo, I missed their smells: of the *arancine*, *caciocavalli*, and obviously I missed my loved ones, even if I’ve always adapted well to wherever I am.

Many restaurateurs, for example Thomas Keller, Alain Ducasse, and Gualtiero Marchesi, own more than one restaurant in more than one place; have you never been tempted?

VC: Yes, of course. In fact, I’m waiting for an answer from some possible American investors. I’d like to share my know-how with a bank or a financier so as to have the financial backing and the managers to develop my ideas further. I’ve already thought up the line-of-action, but I’m always very careful not to take a step longer than my leg.

Of course, I could have already set up a restaurant or two in the United States without any problems, but that's not my ideal. The only Italian restaurateur to open restaurants abroad with success is Cipriani. His brilliant top management runs New York like London, etc., etc. and magnificent events everywhere.

If you export an Italian restaurant, which is tops at home, abroad it is always a mediocre copy and on the same level as a mediocre local restaurant because, no matter where it opens abroad, it clones the same errors everywhere. Cipriani stands alone. Its namesakes abroad are perfect copies of the original.

I'm well aware that *L'Antica Focacceria* is not at a level yet to be cloned perfectly abroad and it would risk being a hybrid. *L'Antica Focacceria* is successful because of Vincenzo Conticello. To make a perfect clone abroad, I would need a top management who would use my advice and know-how to make it work. That achieved it, would make no difference if Vincenzo Conticello was on the premises or not.

I still have to find investors. I don't want to open 1,000 *Antiche Focaccerie*; seven or eight almost exact copies would be ideal as far as I'm concerned, in major cities around the world — New York first and foremost; in Europe: London, Paris, Madrid, and Munich; in Asia: in Tokyo, which is a booming market, and Hong Kong or Shanghai; not in Beijing (the inhabitants haven't yet reached the level of appreciating fine things). The winning concept is the one we already have in Palermo.



Cannoli siciliani

photo by Lucy Gordan

You and your brothers must travel a lot. If not in Palermo, where would you like to live?

VC: On a boat sailing around the world. At the beginning of November I moved house to a sailing ship. Shortly I will begin a 2-or 3-year world tour, even if I won't be overseas full time. My plan is half a month onboard; half a month in Palermo. I'm setting up a state-of-the-art office on board so I can be in instant contact with Palermo. As for my police escort, the same men will protect me when I'm in European waters; abroad local police forces will take their place.

After three years, I foresee that the boat will become my permanent home. It's being built at the Wally shipyards near Ancona. I'll travel around the world for a project I thought up and sold to the Italian government. It's called "*Le Eccellenze d'Italia*," or "First-Class Italy." In thirty different places worldwide, I'll promote the best Italy has to offer: in scientific research, in the struggle against the Mafia, in food and wine, and in made-in-Italy, from Maseratis to Ducatis, from parmigiano-reggiano to prosciutto from Parma.

For a tourist coming to Palermo, what are the musts?

VC: Visits to the Cathedral of Monreale, the Palatina Chapel, the church of San Francesco across the piazza from the *Focacceria*, the church of San Giovanni dei Lebbrosi, *Lo Spasimo*, which is an old hospital where lepers were taken and where there's a very unusual purposely roofless church since the 1600s. It was believed that by leaving the church roofless the lepers would be washed and cleansed by the rain and therefore wouldn't be contagious. The church is now used for events—plays, concerts...

Then there are the *kanàt*. Their entrance is underneath Palermo's old insane asylum, which is a beautiful 17th century building. In its park there's a grotto which opens onto a maze of canals. *Kanàt* means canals; some are still navigable, others have dried up. From here they spread out under the whole

old city of Palermo. They aren't well-known, but they're visitable with a speleologist/guide. It goes without saying that such a visit might not be to everyone's taste. It's not advisable for anyone who suffers from claustrophobia. You also need high rubber boots.

Any restaurants besides *Antica Focacceria* you can recommend?

VC: *Charleston* in Mondello, Palermo's beach resort, for an *aperitivo* or an ice-cream before going on to lunch or supper at *Da Calogero*. In Palermo, *Piccolo Napoli*, *Primavera*, *Sant'Andrea*, *La Sicilia in Bocca*, *Capricci di Sicilia* are all restaurants which have maintained the traditions of Palermo's cuisine.

Your greatest professional satisfaction?

VC: Professionally-speaking, the Beijing Olympics, especially at the opening buffet attended by the Chinese top brass. You can't imagine how proud I felt to watch them taste my dishes with so much pleasure and advise their colleagues to try them too. There were 25 areas serving regional Chinese dishes, but my little Italian corner was the most sought after.

The greatest good fortune of my personal life was surviving with my daughter, then wife and only one other passenger, a plane crash while landing at Caracas in Venezuela in 1991.



Ingredients and preparation of *sficioni* at kermess

photos by Lucy Gordan



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