

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

I will bet you can't locate "Hora e Arbëreshëvet" on the world map. I can now — because I visited there in mid July.

"Hora e Arbëreshëvet" looks like many other small, sleepy towns in Sicily: cobblestone streets, a prominent First World War memorial, shuttered houses abandoned by those who long ago left for North and South America or more recently for Northern Italy and Northern Europe, numerous churches, and old men wearing *coppolas* (typical tweed flat caps) sitting on straw-seated chairs in the shade with no women in sight.

Yes, believe or not, "Hora e Arbëreshëvet," in spite of its name, is located in Sicily, on a plateau at 2,600 feet above sea level surrounded by high mountains some 15 miles due south of Palermo, and it's a special place because of its history, its artisanry, and its gastronomy.

"Hora e Arbëreshëvet," with a population today of some 6,200, was founded in the late 1400s by a large group of Albanian refugees whose descendants still live there. They speak *Arbërisht* or Albanian with pre-Ottoman Renaissance grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and literature. It derives from the Tosk dialect spoken today in southern Albania. In fact, all the municipal documents and road and shop signs are bilingual here and in the some 20 "Albanian" nearby towns. Since 2017, with the support of the Republic of Albania and Kosovo, an application for inclusion of the Arbëreshë people as a "living human and social immaterial patrimony of humanity" has been submitted to the UNESCO List.

In 1482-85, after several attacks from the Ottomans, the Christian Albanians were forced to the Adriatic coast where they hired ships from the Republic of Venice and managed to reach the island of Sicily. On August 4 or 30, 1488, Spanish-born Giovanni Borgia, the bishop of nearby Monreale, granted them land in his fiefs, known initially as the "Plain of the Archbishop," and allowed them to preserve their Orthodox Christian rite. At first the local population referred to the Albanian refugees as "Greeks" because of their Orthodox faith and the Albanian settlement was known as "Piana dei Greci" for over 400 years. In 1941, when Mussolini invaded Greece, he changed the name to "Piana degli Albanesi," a literal

## PIANA DEGLI ALBANESI HERITAGE AND CANNOLI



Stephen Novelli's illustration

translation of "Hora e Arbëreshëvet," in the hopes of gaining the locals' support for his fascist regime's imperialist intentions towards Albania.

Recommended sights are several churches: The Cathedral of St. Demetrius Megalomartyr, Church of the Eparchy of Piana degli Albanesi, built between 1498 and 1590, preserves some frescoes by the highly respected local painter Pietro Novelli (1603-47), nicknamed by his contemporaries the "Raphael of Sicily," and the icon of the Madonna and Child (1500); the Church of St. Mary Odigitria on the main square, the only architectural work by Pietro Novelli (1644), preserves a Virgin Odigitria icon said to have

been brought here by the earliest Albanian refugees in the 1480s; and the Church of St. George, built in 1492, the oldest church in town, preserves some remarkable frescoes.

Also well-worth a visit is the Museum of Nicola Barbato (1856-1923), who was a native son medical doctor and politician, especially for its collection of jewelry and magnificently-embroidered women's dresses. Especially noteworthy are the wedding outfits and the solid silver belt buckles given by future mothers-in-law to brides. It's possible to purchase modern versions and splendid jewelry hand-made by the Lucito family since 1965 as well as other local handicrafts at *Gli Oro di Piana*, Via P.M. Costantini 3 or online at [www.oridipiana.palermo.it](http://www.oridipiana.palermo.it).

Another local jewel: Piana's *cannoli* made by Marco Cuccia, considered to be the best in the world. During a visit to his restaurant and bar, *La Casa del Cannolo* on Via Kastrioti 48, he told me that Cicero, while *questor* (tax collector/magistrate) in Sicily, wrote the very first description of *cannoli*. He told me his were the world's best because his shells are filled with ricotta KM.0 made with sheep's milk. And he says that the most appropriate beverage to accompany his *cannoli* is *Marsala Ambra*.

Speaking of wines, be sure to stay at the nearby (in Santa Cristina Gela) elegant winery resort, *Baglio di Pianetto*, with tastings, spa, magnificent grounds, and world-class restaurant. The best times of year to visit Piana are Christmas, Epiphany, and Carnival, but especially Easter and during *vendemmia* or the grape harvest. ☺

From left to right: Chef Marco Cuccia; raw cannoli shells; bilingual Sicilian road sign; Cardinal Giovanni Borgia; and a Sicilian wedding dress belt

