

Brain Health Retreat in Eastern Sicily

With Annie Fenn, MD



The first time I visited Sicily, I went in search of relatives in the tiny town of Santa Caterina. What I found exceeded my expectations—not just a handful of relatives, but an entire village of them. Everyone I met in my grandparents’ hometown carried my family name. I fell hopelessly in love with everything Sicilian—the culture, the food, the mountains, and especially, the people.

Since then, I have returned repeatedly to this magical island to bike through its farmlands, hike its mountains, and train in its kitchens. Now I am thrilled to invite you along on my next trip to Sicily.

Join me on a 6-day culinary tour and deep dive into the Mediterranean lifestyle, all through the lens of brain health. I’ve teamed up with author and Italian food expert Elizabeth Minchilli to curate the perfect tour for us.

When: October 13-19, 2024

Where: Ortigia (Siracusa), Sicily

Nearest airport: Catania, Sicily

Our Week Together

What and Where



Our tour is based in Ortigia. We'll start the week gathering local ingredients at the farmers market for a cooking class of classic Sicilian dishes (that happen to be brain healthy, too). Each day after, we'll join some of the most highly-rated local Sicilian guides to explore another facet of Sicily — from its almond groves and Greek temples in the south to its active volcano in the north, tasting and learning every step of the way. The days will be full, but don't worry—we've also built in time for exercise (I'll lead an optional daily power walk) and lots of time to relax and explore beautiful Ortigia on your own.

Throughout the week, besides having fun and tasting all that Sicily has to offer, we'll focus on cultivating the habits of a brain-healthy life. What does it mean to follow a Mediterranean diet? How does this translate to dementia-free longevity?

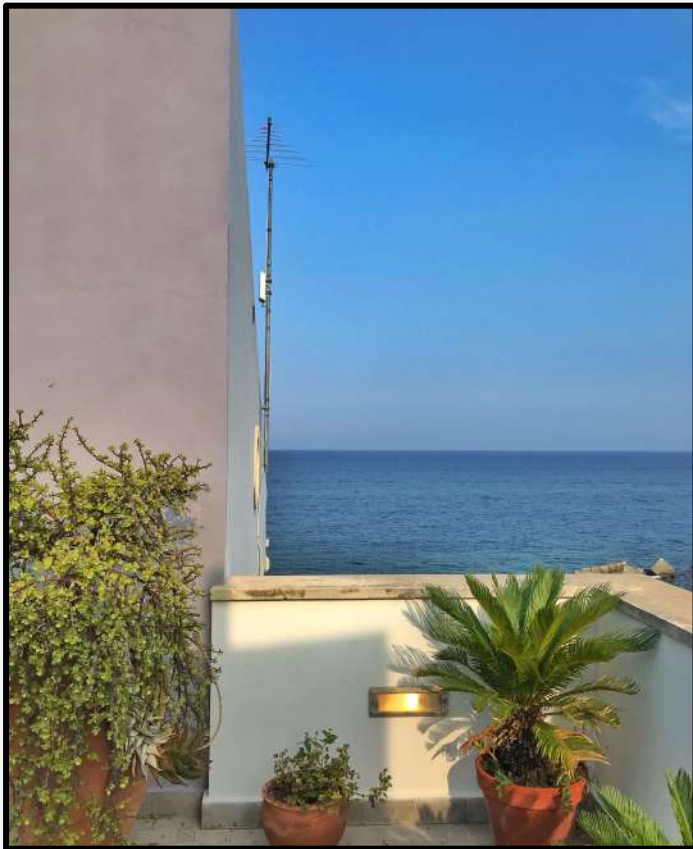
How do you approach travel with a brain health mindset? How does travel help build your cognitive reserve? We'll discuss these topics and more while touring around, walking, and at the table. In addition, I'll offer Aperitivo Talks (over drinks), and printed *riassuntos* (recaps).

In addition, after you get home and have had a chance to 'digest' everything, I will offer follow up, individual consults (included in the overall price) to each guest, to address your specific concerns.

This is the trip of a lifetime for anyone who is curious about cultivating lifelong brain health, all while being immersed in the Mediterranean lifestyle. I can't wait to show you my Sicily.

Sunday | Arrival & Introductions

Welcome to Sicily



Hotel

We will be based in one of Sicily's most beautiful cities: Ortigia, the small ancient island off of Siracusa. We will be staying in the 3-star Hotel Gutkowski, a small, family-run, charming boutique hotel that we love, located right by the sea. You will have a chance to settle in before we meet up later that evening.

In your room, you'll find a copy of your schedule for the week, a branded canvas tote bag to carry any goodies you may pick up during the week, and a guide to Ortigia with Elizabeth's favorite places to eat and shop to help you plan your free time.

Drinks and introductions

We will meet for a drink to start our week. If weather permits, we will be on the panoramic rooftop of the hotel or else the cozy *salone* on the ground floor. You'll meet Annie and Salvatore, a licensed tour guide of Sicily who will be with us the entire week.

After we all introduce ourselves, Annie will start out the week with a talk: How Mediterranean is Your Diet? (followed by a fun pop quiz)

Dinner

We then make our way to our welcome dinner at a modern bistro just down the road that puts a fresh spin on seasonal and traditional dishes.

Monday | Cooking & History

Brain Health Theme: Learn the BHK Brain Healthy Food Groups



Morning walk

Optional morning walk with Annie.

Market walk, cooking class, and lunch

It's our first day in Sicily, and we will spend the day discovering our 'home' for the next week. After breakfast in our hotel, we'll meet our friend Alessia for a walk through the alleys to the famous vegetable and fish market. We will stop by several stands at the market, including a famous salumeria, for a tasting of local prosciutti, cheeses, and a glass of wine! We will also pick up some fresh produce to take back to our cooking class and have a hands-on lesson, making a few dishes for our lunch.

Tour of Ortigia

In the late afternoon, we'll be meeting up with another friend of ours, Alessandro (who we think

is one of the best guides in all of Sicily!). He will take us on a *passaggiata* through the town, talking about its ancient roots, stopping by a few of the bigger churches as well as exploring the Jewish heritage of this town. This walk will help orient you for the rest of your week as well as provide important context.

Aperitivo

We will end our walk at one of our favorite bars. Italians take their aperitivo very seriously, and you are free to order whatever you'd like. Spritz? Negroni? Prosecco? We'll have lots of nibbles too.

Printed riassunto

BHK food pyramid + Comparison of MIND and Medi dietary patterns

Tuesday | Architecture & Almonds

Brain Health Theme: Build Cognitive Reserve



Morning walk

Optional morning walk with Annie.

Noto

Today we are heading south to visit one of the most beautiful towns in Sicily: Noto. We'll meet up with our guide who will tell us about the history. After being destroyed by an Earthquake in 1693, the entire town was completely rebuilt in a style of baroque unique to this part of Sicily. Made from a local honey-colored stone, the entire town looks a bit like a wedding cake. We'll have a leisurely walk, and free time to try a pastry from a famous Noto cafe.

Almond farm

At the end of the morning, we will head south to an area that is world re-known for its almond cultivation, the Val di Noto. We will spend the afternoon at a farm, learning all about their traditions.

After being welcomed with almond milk and salted almonds, we will walk through the almond grove, where they grow the Romana and Pizzuto varieties of almonds.

Lunch

Our lunch will feature almonds in everything from pasta to dessert.

Aperitivo talks

We'll meet up for a glass of wine and discuss Sleep and Your Brain

Dinner

After a full day out (and lots of eating!), you are free this evening.

Printed riassunto

5 Tips for a Good Night's Sleep

Wednesday | Volcano & Wine

Brain Health Theme: Move Like a Centenarian



Etna

After an early breakfast, we head north and spend the day beneath the volcano of Etna. We will explore with our friend Ben Spencer, the author of *The New Wines of Mount Etna*. With Ben as our guide, we will learn what makes the wines of Etna so special. During the course of the next few hours, we will visit a winery, learn about the varietals, see how the lava-enriched soil and special climate affect the grapes and wines, and see how the wine is made. We will have a vineyard walk, winery visit, and tasting.

We then take a drive along vineyards in the shadow of Etna, driving past historical lava fields that define this sometimes hostile, yet fertile, landscape.

Randazzo

We'll then head to the medieval town of Randazzo, and have a walk through this town built in dark lava stone.

Lunch

For lunch we are going to Ben's favorite trattoria, where we'll pair the wines we learned about with local dishes. Afterward, a short walk for a coffee and one of the best granitas in town.

Evening

After a long day, you are free this evening.

Printed riassunto

The Blue Zones Power 9 Principles

Thursday | Farm Visit

Brain Health Theme: Eating with a Brain Health Mindset



Morning walk

Optional morning walk with Annie.

Late morning

Today we head into the countryside. We will spend the day with our friend Giuseppe and his family at his farm in the Hyblaean Mountains west of Ortigia.

As we make our way to the farm we will drive through a landscape that dramatically frames the livelihood of this area: agriculture of cereals, and farming of cattle and sheep.

Giuseppe's unique farm celebrates biodiversity, creativity, and sustainability in one of the most beautiful and remote areas of the island. We will

meet his family, learn about the ancient grains that he grows, and see how they are used in making local pasta and bread.

We'll take a tour of this glorious property to meet his herds of cows (and horses, dogs, and cats). We will then have a wonderful feast, featuring all local products from the farm as well as paired wines from some of the most interesting wine producers in Sicily.

Evening

After this long day, you are on your own for dinner, or to just digest and sleep.

Printed riassunto

The Four F's of Brain Healthy Food

Friday | Ruins & Olive Oil

Farewell Dinner



Morning walk

Optional morning walk with Annie.

Neapolis

After breakfast in our hotel we visit one of the most important archeological sites in Italy: the Neapolis park just outside of Siracusa. Our guide will take us on a tour of the Greek and Roman amphitheaters, as well as the other sites dating back to the 5th century BC.

Lunch

We then get on our bus to visit a farm just a half hour away. The owner, Dario, will show us around his estate and introduce us to the world of Hyblaeen olive oil. We will see the olive grove, and he will explain what makes the land so unique, its cultivars (Tonda Iblea, Nocellara, Biancolilla, and Ogliarola), and the harvesting techniques.

In the tasting room, we'll enjoy a guided professional tasting of the different olive oils produced by the farm. We then have lunch with delicious products from the farm.

Afternoon and farewell dinner

You have some free time on your own this afternoon before we meet for a final dinner. A fishy feast of shared plates at one of our favorite restaurants in Ortigia.

Printed riassunto

BHK Guide to Cooking Oils.

Saturday

Departure



Check-out

Our tour is officially over, and after one last breakfast, you will be checking out of the Hotel Gutkowski.

You may check-out between 7 am and 12 pm.

About This Tour

Important information: please read



The culture of food

This tour is about Cultivating a Brain Healthy Life. We will be exploring this theme through the Sicilian culture of food. This means that almost all of our activities are food related. You can expect big lunches and often snacks in between. We ask that you come with an open mind and a big appetite for trying new foods.

Food intolerances

Since we are in southern Italy the cuisine is focused on the Mediterranean Diet, and so there will be plenty of vegetables and grains. That said, our meals revolve around local food traditions, and may include fish, meat, or cheese. If you are a vegetarian or lactose intolerant you will not go hungry. But please let us know so we can arrange something for you.

Activity level

Each day we will be exploring a new town or village. Our days are often long and will involve walking up to an hour or more. While the level is never overly strenuous, you must be able to keep up with the rest of the group.

Experience

Our days will be spent exploring the culture of food through visits to farms, markets, and more. If you are thinking about bringing along a traveling companion (friend, spouse, relative, partner) please make sure they are aware of the types of things we will be doing. If they are not interested in food, visiting farms, eating in rustic settings, etc. then they may not enjoy this tour.

Details

Dates and Fee



Dates: October 13-19, 2024

Price:

€6400 per person (double occupancy)

€7200 per person (single occupancy)

For more information and to book this tour please email minchillitours@gmail.com

Since our tours are based on small family-run businesses, we reserve the right to vary the specifics of the itinerary. We may switch days, add/change activities, or substitute locations. We send out an updated itinerary within 30 days prior to the start date.

Each tour is limited to 12 participants

The fee includes:

- 6 nights in Hotel Gutkowski *
- Buffet breakfast in hotel
- Snacks in your room
- All of the meals, activities and transportation outlined above
- Coupon for a one-on-one virtual consultation with Annie valid for two months after the tour ends
- Coupon for dinner at Gutkowskino (restaurant in our hotel)

Not included:

- Transportation to and from Italy
- Transportation to and from hotel

* We love this quirky family-run hotel. It is comfortable, cozy, and stylish, but not luxurious.

About Us

Your guides for the week

Annie Fenn, MD

Annie is a physician who spent 20 years as an OBGYN. She is now a chef focused on Alzheimer's prevention. In 2015, she founded the [Brain Health Kitchen](#), an evidence-based online resource about how and what to eat to resist cognitive decline. Brain Health Kitchen Cooking School is the only school of its kind focused specifically on fending off Alzheimer's and other dementias. She collaborates with numerous organizations to promote the role of lifestyle and diet in preventing Alzheimer's and has taught for many years at the Culinary Academy at Monteverdi in Tuscany, Italy, the Sempre Sano Wellness Retreats, and at Rancho La Puerta, Mexico. Annie writes about food and brain health in her popular newsletter, on her website, and in [her new book, a brain health cookbook published in 2023 with Artisan](#).

Elizabeth Minchilli

Although not joining the tour, Elizabeth has carefully curated this week. She has been writing about the joys of Italian life for the last 30 years and is the author of 9 [books](#) on Italy. Her popular [blog](#) and [newsletter](#) is where she shares her passion for Italian food, writing about recipes, meals and restaurants. She has been creating food tours since 2011 and today runs her [business](#) along with her two daughters, Sophie and Emma.

Alessandro Rustico

Alessandro is the founder of Uncovered Sicily. He has a degree in archeology but has expanded his knowledge to food, wine, and the culture of Sicily. We will be spending time with Alessandro in Ortigia. He is considered by many (including me!) to be the best guide in Sicily.

Benjamin Spencer

Ben will be taking us around Etna. He is the director of Etna Wine School and author of the award-winning *The New Wines of Mount Etna*. He holds a diploma from the London-based Wine & Spirit Education Trust. Ben is a journalist, wine judge, and professional winemaker with two decades of experience working with artisan and internationally traded wines.

Alessia Liistro

Our friend Alessia is a chef, teacher, and tour guide and will share her passion for the food of her home through the market walk and cooking class we will take with her in Ortigia. She is a powerhouse and one of the most spirited and optimistic people I have met.