

Brain Health Retreat in Western Sicily

With Annie Fenn, MD



I first visited Palermo years ago to see relatives in my grandparents' hometown. I immediately fell in love with this vibrant city—its architectural beauty, the street food, the beaches, 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 be hosting a brain health retreat in a place very close to my heart.

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.

The days will be full, but don't worry, you'll also have some downtime to head off on your own to explore.

When: October 27-November 2, 2024

Where: Palermo, Sicily

Nearest airport: Palermo, Sicily

Sunday | Arrival & Introductions

Welcome to Sicily



Hotel

We will be based in one of Sicily's - and Italy's - most vibrant cities: Palermo. Our home for the week is the luxurious Grand Hotel et des Palmes. This historic hotel has recently undergone a 2-year renovation, making it the best hotel in Palermo. You will have a chance to settle in before we meet 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 personal guide to Palermo with Eizabeth's favorite places to eat and shop to help you plan your free time.

Introductions

We will meet in the hotel's *salone* (or, if weather permits, the rooftop terrace) for some drinks to start our week and get to know each other.

Dinner

Our first dinner is a short walk away to one of the most beautiful private palaces in Palermo. The owners of this palazzo have invited us into their home for a tour, private concert, and dinner.

Monday | Making Cheese & Orientation

Brain Health Theme: Learn the BHK Brain Healthy Food Groups



Farm visit

After breakfast at the hotel, we are heading out of town to the Jato Valley. This verdant landscape, a short drive from Palermo, is home to a rich tradition of agriculture. We will spend the day at a historic farm in Piana degli Albanesi, where we will see ricotta and caciocavallo cheese being made by the owner. We then sit down for lunch in their home, which will include the farm's cheeses, seasonal vegetables from the family garden, and the traditional bread "furr me dru." We will also learn about the local culture, founded by Albanians centuries ago, and learn some words of the Arbëreshë language.

After lunch, we will return to Palermo for a rest back at the hotel.

Walk around Palermo

In the late afternoon, Salvatore will lead us on an orientation and historical passeggiata through town. We'll stop by a few of the more significant sites so you can get your bearings and learn some of the rich historical context of this complex city.

Light dinner

Since we'll have had a big lunch, our dinner will be light. We'll stop at one of the best food stores in town, and will take over one of the tables they set up at dinner time for a drink and a light dinner.

Tuesday | Market & Marionettes

Brain Health Theme: Build Cognitive Reserve



Market and cooking class

After breakfast, we will head to the market. The colorful and noisy markets of Palermo are world-famous, and we will meet our friend Michael, who runs one of the best cooking schools in the city. We'll have a walk around, choose our ingredients and then head back to his kitchen. There we will cook a full meal, learning how to cook some Palermitano dishes before sitting down to lunch.

Puppet theater

After lunch, you have a bit of free time before we meet up to learn all about the Opera dei Pupi. Recognized by UNESCO, this 'opera of puppets' is a theatrical presentation that dates back to the early 19th century and is one of Sicily's most important expressions of history and culture.

After a visit to the workshop where the marionettes are crafted, we will attend a private performance in the tiny theater.

Wine

Later, we will walk to a nearby enoteca where, over dinner of small shared plates, we'll enjoy an introduction to Sicilian wines.

Wednesday | Salt & Pastries

Brain Health Theme: Move Like a Centenarian



Salt pans

Today we head out of Palermo to the western coast. We will spend the morning at the salt pans of Trapani, where the process of salt harvesting has been going on for thousands of years. We visit the learning center of SEI, where we'll see how windmills still run the local process, and have a tasting of the salt itself, learning how to use the different varieties of this 'white gold.'

Lunch

Our next stop is Erice. This small medieval town is located 2460 feet above sea level overlooking Trapani. We will make the dramatic drive up, enjoying the amazing view out over the coast. After a tour of the charming town, it's time to learn about one of the specialties of this part of Sicily: couscous. Nowhere is the intersection of Italian and North African culture more evident- or

delicious - than this traditional dish. We'll have a demonstration of how couscous is made before sitting down to lunch.

Dessert

Erice is known for its pastries. Home to an orphanage that housed young girls, the orphans were taught trades, including the art of pastry making. Maria learned her baking skills there and now owns and runs one of the most famous bakeries in Sicily. We will visit the shop and also have a demonstration of her skills at creating Frutta Martorana, or marzipan fruits. And have a tasting, of course!

Dinner

After a long day out, you are on your own for dinner. We are happy to help you make plans.

Thursday | Ancient Temples & Olive Oil

Brain Health Theme: Eating with a Brain Health Mindset



Segesta

After breakfast, we head way back in time, visiting one of the great archeological sites that dates back to when the Greeks ruled this part of the world. With our archeological guide, we will explore the dramatic site of Segesta, visiting the dramatic Doric temple and acropolis.

Lunch

For lunch, we head to our friend Daniela's *baglio*. A *baglio* is the Sicilian word for estate farm, and we will be spending the afternoon at her home, learning about olive oil, which Daniela produces. We will also be invited into the family kitchen for a cooking demonstration (where we will try our hands at filling our own cannoli) before sitting down to lunch in the family dining room.



Dinner

After a long day out, you are on your own for dinner. We are happy to help you make plans.

Friday | Artisans & Street Food

Farewell Dinner



Ceramics and hats

This morning we will focus on the handmade artisanal traditions of Sicily. Our first stop is the beautifully quirky Museo della Majolica. The small ceramics museum is located on the third floor of a private palace. The collection focuses on hand-painted tiles from the 15th to the 20th century and contains over 5000 examples.

The Sicilian Coppola is the hat you see on almost every Sicilian man of a certain age. We will visit one of the last remaining artisans who still crafts these newly stylish hats by hand.

Lunch

Palermo is known for its vibrant street food scene. Small stands and shops supply hungry Palermitani with things like arancini (rice balls); sfincione (focaccia); panelle (chickpea flour fritters); and the famous Pani Ca Meusa (spleen

sandwich). We'll take a stroll to try some of these as we make our way to our next destination.

Dessert and coffee

Santa Caterina d'Alessandria is a gorgeous convent located in the heart of Palermo. We will be visiting the dazzlingly decorated church and the rooftop, which includes a view of all of Palermo. Then we will head to the cloister to visit the nun's private rooms before heading to the brightly tiled cloister to try some of the pastries traditionally made by nuns. Afterwards, we will stop for coffee across the street at the best coffee roaster in town.

Dinner

You will have some free time on your own this afternoon before we meet for our final dinner at one of our favorite places in town for a final fishy feast before saying goodbye.

Saturday

Departure



Check-out

Our tour is officially over, and after one last breakfast, you will be checking out of the Grand Hotel et des Palmes. You may check-out by 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 Price



Dates:

October 27-November 2, 2024

Price:

€7800 per person (double occupancy)

€8200 per person (single occupancy)

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 Grand Hotel et des Palmes
- Buffet breakfast in hotel
- 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
- A branded canvas tote

Not included:

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

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

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.

Salvatore Equizzi

Salvatore, our tour leader for the week, had formal training as an art historian, worked for years as an actor, and ran a program of cultural events for an independent bookshop in Palermo. His passion for sharing cultural events through social context led him naturally into his current career as a guide. He not only brings deep knowledge to his work, but he also helps his guests immerse themselves in the historical and cultural atmosphere of the places they explore together. As a native Sicilian, he aims to help visitors feel, taste and understand the complex and rugged beauty of this island.

Gianluca D'Alia

Gianluca, who will be joining us for some of our activities, is a licensed tour and nature guide of Sicily and a travel consultant specializing in rural tourism. He has studied politics and Sicilian history in Palermo and Amsterdam and is passionate about Sicilian food, wines, history, archaeology, and culture. He is proudly a member of ONAF, the Italian organization of cheese tasters. He loves planning new itineraries and leading guests to experience the most authentic and beautiful Sicily.