

Episode 35: Markets in Palermo

Summary

Nick and Wendy are in the Sicilian capital Palermo. They talk about the famous Ballarò produce market, the unusual vegetables you can find there, and how it's different from markets in their home countries.

Transcript

Nick: We've been talking recently about our trip in southern Italy, which is still ongoing¹. Today we're coming to you from the island of Sicily, uhh, having come here from the Aeolian Islands, which are just north of Sicily. We then came onto the mainland of Sicily and now we're in Palermo, which is a very fascinating city.

Wendy: It is, yeah. It has some amazing sights, uhh, but more than that, umm, there's a lot more to it than just the standard tourist sights that you would go to see. It's also really the life of the city and, you know, living inside the city and being part of it, uhh, is an amazing experience. So we've had four days here and I think it was really worth taking several days to get to know the city a little bit.

Nick: Yeah, and so, because it's still in southern Italy, it's got that life and that charm and that fascination in a similar way to Naples. I don't think it's as chaotic as Naples.

Wendy: No, I would agree. And, umm, yeah, it doesn't have quite as much of an edge. It doesn't feel as dangerous, basically, as Naples. I feel a bit more at ease² in Palermo than I did in Naples. But it's still ... it's definitely the south of Italy.

Nick: Yeah, and Palermo - and Sicily as well - has been a kind of melting pot³ for different cultures for many, many centuries, who have come here, sometimes in peace, sometimes not in peace. But you still have that feeling as well, that people are coming here. Sometimes you have a little bit of a Middle Eastern feel about it, umm, being so close to North Africa as well.

¹ ongoing: in progress, continuing

² at ease: unstressed, comfortable, able to relax

³ melting pot: a place where different cultures mix

Wendy: Right, yeah, so historically there was a very strong Arab influence and also Norman and Byzantine influence and now in modern times again, umm, you have immigrant communities here from Africa - North Africa, also sub-Saharan Africa⁴ - and then from India and Sri Lanka, so, uhh, yeah, there's a really interesting cultural mix here.

Nick: And so one of the great aspects of this street life or the street energy that we've been talking about are all of the markets that you have in Palermo.

Wendy: Umm-hmm.

Nick: And there's, uhh, one market in particular which is quite famous and it's always listed among - even in guidebooks - as one of the things that you have to visit when you're in Palermo and it's a produce⁵ market and it's in the old, uhh, area of Palermo, basically right close to where we're staying.

Wendy: Umm-hmm. Yeah, so the market that you're talking about is the one called Ballarò, uhh, which, yeah, is full of fruits and vegetables and also meat and fish and some other, kind of, prepared foods as well, like street foods if you want to eat something quickly there or if you want to take it away you can also do that. But it's great to just wander around and check out the sights and the sounds and the smells, 'cause there's plenty of all of those to go around.

Nick: Right, because in the English-speaking world, the idea of daily produce markets where you would go and buy the things that you needed to cook for the day - uhh, that disappeared long before we were born. And, you know, led by the American way of thinking about shopping and thinking about convenience while shopping, the idea of going to produce markets, umm, died out like I said and instead was eventually replaced by the supermarket...

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: ...which is where you go and get everything you could possibly want in one shop.

Wendy: And there's no seasonality because you can always get any kind of fruit and vegetable at any time of the year and, umm, sure, it's very convenient but it's also very out of touch with, uhh, with the reality of how food is produced.

⁴ sub-Saharan Africa: Africa south of the Sahara desert, excluding the five countries of North Africa. In English we do not call it Black Africa, as it is called in some other languages (e.g. French).

⁵ produce: food that is 'produced' agriculturally, typically fruits and vegetables. Notice how Nick and Wendy pronounce the word differently because of their different accents.

Nick: And so now in the English-speaking countries, in the last 10 years or so, this new idea has come in and it's almost the return of the produce market and it's called a farmers' market. And so in many places you can go to farmers' markets and buy produce. But a farmers' market is a more upscale⁶, kind of, classy version of a produce market. A lot of the stalls are selling artisanal cheeses and olive oils and this kind of stuff, and so it's very much a 21st century, modern version of an old market, I think.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: I know my parents go to one near where they live in Australia, and they go every Friday, it's a once a week market. And it's actually held in a rugby stadium, or maybe it's in the car park of the stadium or it's in one of the other fields that's right next to the stadium. But people will drive and park in the car park of the stadium and then they'll go to the market. So you can see it hasn't really spontaneously⁷ grown up there, umm, and so it's very much, yeah, an example of this modern type of produce market that we've been talking about.

Wendy: Yeah, whereas Ballarò is very different. Umm, they say that it's probably the oldest market in Palermo, because it was written about by an Arab traveller who passed through here in the 10th century, and wrote about it in his diary. So it's been there for at least 1000 years and maybe more. People have been selling food and buying food there in the same way that they do today.

Nick: And so as you walk through there you see all sorts of interesting vegetables in particular. We saw a couple of things, and we didn't even know what they were...

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: ...and you asked one of the guys and they said it was a zucchini. And they had, apart from regular zucchinis, they had two other different types, one which is very, very long, and they call it the long zucchini, and the other one which is also quite long, not as long, but it has these curly⁸ bits at the end, and it's just a crazy looking vegetable.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, and I saw several different vegetables that looked, you know ... I recognised them as being more or less the same vegetable that I was familiar with, but it was obviously a very different type, a very different, umm, species or, umm, variety of these fruits and vegetables. Uhh, so broccoli, for example - there were quite a few stands that had this large vegetable and all of the signs said

⁶ upscale: fancy, classy, expensive

⁷ spontaneously: naturally, organically, without planning

⁸ curly: not straight, wavy, circular

broccoli, they were calling it broccoli, but to me it looked like a cross between broccoli and cauliflower, umm, so it had very much the texture of cauliflower but it wasn't a white colour, it was a green, but not a really dark green like broccoli, it was more of a light green colour. And it was huge! It was, like, bigger than my head. Umm, so, yeah, that's just one example of, uhh, the different varieties of foods that you see here.

Nick: Right, and they also have the purple eggplant as well as the more standard black one, and I think the purple eggplant we even call Sicilian eggplant.

Wendy: Umm-hmm, probably.

Nick: And so, yeah, you see all of these things. And with the zucchini, I guess, we shouldn't be surprised because zucchini is an Italian word and we don't have a word in English for this vegetable, so you and I call it zucchini and in British English they call it courgette which is the French word for the same vegetable.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: And so, yeah, you just have all of these really interesting vegetables, really huge vegetables and, yeah, different sizes, different varieties, umm, it's just a big mess of confusion. All of the sellers are yelling out what they're selling and their prices and there are motorbikes that are going through and creating lots of noise and, sort of, wreaking havoc⁹ everywhere, and it's just really fun to be a part of it.

Wendy: It is, yeah, yeah. Umm, yeah, at the same time I felt like we were very welcome there. Umm, I didn't feel like ... like I said, I don't feel like I'm on danger in Palermo at all. And a lot of times when I'm in a crowded market I'm very careful to keep my bag close to me, because I know it's a place where pickpockets hang out, and maybe they do there too, but I just didn't have any sense that we were ever in danger. And, you know, we were taking lots of photos, we were making some videos, and no one seemed to mind that at all. Sometimes sellers can get a little bit touchy¹⁰ about that if you're, you know, taking photos of their produce and maybe not ... and maybe you don't want to buy their broccoli, you just want to take a photo of their broccoli. Umm, but everyone was really friendly and no one seemed to mind at all that we were just there to enjoy it.

Nick: Yeah, I think it's become quite common that tourists do go there even though, yeah, they often don't really want to buy these kinds of things because they're not cooking for themselves while they're here. Right on the edges of the market there are now a couple of little stalls with souvenirs and things like that, so it is maybe

⁹ wreaking havoc (idiom): causing trouble or chaos, ruining something

¹⁰ touchy: slightly offended

trending that way, but it's got a long way to go before it gets taken over by those types of stalls, but there are a couple of souvenir type of stalls.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And so hopefully that doesn't become too much a part of what it is, because there's another produce market in Rome, in Campo dei Fiori, uhh, which we used to like going to, and now it's been completely overtaken by this artisanal, tourist kind of stuff, rather than the fruits and vegetables that it used to have. But I think with this market, hopefully that won't happen or at least it won't happen for a while.

Wendy: Yeah, I mean, the tourist industry in Palermo is much smaller than the tourist industry in Rome. There aren't that many tourists here, it still feels very much like a real city, like an authentic Italian city, and so I think that won't happen for a while.

Comprehension Questions

1. What does Wendy say is the main difference, for her, between Palermo and Naples?
2. What are farmers' markets like in the English-speaking world, according to Nick?
3. What did Nick and Wendy find most interesting about the Ballarò market?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. They're twins but they're very different. For example, when they travel, one of them likes staying in cheap hostels, while the other prefers _____ hotels.
2. Kids think that if you eat the crusts of sliced bread, it will give you _____ hair.
3. He gets a bit _____ if you make fun of his model train collection. It's very important to him.
4. London is perhaps the world's biggest _____. People from all over the world live there.
5. She's been to North Africa three times but she's never been to _____.
6. He has lived in France for 20 years but he has never been truly _____ there because of language and cultural issues.
7. The building renovations are _____. I don't know when they'll be finished.
8. I try not to get my _____ at the supermarket because I don't think the quality is very good. It's so convenient though!
9. They _____ decided to take a road trip over Easter. Because they hadn't planned it, they had difficulty finding accommodation.
10. The birds are _____ in my garden. Every day they come and destroy the plants and flowers.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Do you usually shop at produce markets like Ballarò or at supermarkets? Why do you shop where you shop?
2. When you travel, do you like visiting produce markets that cater to locals or do you prefer markets that sell tourist items?
3. Do you like visiting chaotic cities like Palermo or do you prefer cities that are cleaner and more organised? Why?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Wendy feels safer in Palermo than in Naples. She thinks Naples is more dangerous.
2. Nick says farmers' markets are more modern and artisanal and are not traditional produce markets like the Ballarò market in Palermo.
3. The shapes, sizes and colours of the different vegetables that were being sold at the market.

Exercises

1. upscale
2. curly
3. touchy
4. melting pot
5. sub-Saharan Africa
6. at ease
7. ongoing
8. produce
9. spontaneously
10. wreaking havoc