



Giovanni Di Bennardo, an olive oil maker, plans a selling trip to the United States. (Adrian Moser/Bloomberg)

Letter from Europe: Sicilians losing faith in United States

By **A. Craig Copetas** Bloomberg News

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SAMBUCA DI SICILIA, Sicily: Beneath the precious fruit of an olive tree planted in 1776 outside the mountain hamlet of Sambuca di Sicilia, Giovanni Di Bennardo mops summer dust from his brow and explains how he'll make it to America.

"I will only go when I'm a rich man," said the 29-year-old manager of Di Bennardo Olive Oil in Sicily's Agrigento Province, 90 kilometers, or 55 miles, south of Palermo. "Young Sicilians are fearful of America because America is fearful of outsiders without money."

Di Bennardo's vision of the bankroll required to become a 21st-century American isn't unique among young people in this Italian region of some five million inhabitants.

Grand and triumphant tales of their emigrant forefathers no longer resonate amid gnarled olive groves and unemployment lines. Now the talk is of a different America, where money rules and not everyone is welcome - and of Sicilians staying home.

A century ago, my Sicilian grandfather, Salvatore Di Benedetto, would have scoffed at Di Bennardo's travel requirement.

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The impoverished olive grower and stonemason from Agrigento was in his early 20s when he immigrated to the United States with nothing but raw optimism in his wallet. He was part of an exodus of more than 1.5 million Sicilians between 1880 and 1930.

Labeled dirty, diseased and mostly anarchist, Sicily's olive-skinned peasants debarked at Ellis Island speaking Parrati, a patois of Italian, Arabic, Greek and a half-dozen other languages that evolved into a regional tongue with no future tense.

For them, tomorrow was America.

Despite internment camps during World War II, decades of stereotyping and even lynchings, my grandfather's generation never lost its belief that America was the greatest place on Earth.

A portion of their zeal was inspired by Philip Mazzei, an olive grower from Tuscany who immigrated to 18th-century Virginia. Mazzei became friends with Thomas Jefferson and, as the story goes, helped the Founding Father construct the passage "all men are created equal."

Today, as Davide Tidona tells it, that conviction in the Declaration of Independence vanished in the fear-mongering aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001.

"It just seems that America is now against everybody who isn't already an American," said Tidona, proprietor of the Ibl@Cafe in the village of Ragusa Ibla.

Tidona, 29, reckons the America his relatives told him about as a child has turned into a citadel for frightened rich people. "It's no longer possible to go to America and make money," Tidona said with a shrug. "My friends and I no longer see any potential for building a life there."

While the U.S. Homeland Security Department doesn't track the number of Italian immigrants from Sicily, Joseph Chamie, director of research at the Center for Migration Studies in New York, estimates that 300 to 400 a year, at most, have settled in the United States since Sept. 11.

That's 50 percent fewer than before the terrorist attacks and "a small fraction" of the Sicilians who were immigrating to America around 1900, he said.

On a recent visit to the port of Sciacca, John Lonardo, 56, recalled his family's early-20th-century odyssey. "They left poverty for opportunity, repression for freedom," said Lonardo, international vice president of Kerdyk Real Estate in Coral Gables, Florida. "That was the message taught."

Giuseppe Friscia, a Sicilian-American stonemason, says rigid immigration regulations and a scarcity of work in the United States now keep Sicilians at home, even with unemployment at 14 percent, more than twice Italy's average of about 6 percent.

Friscia went to Boston in 1968 and founded a small construction company. He returned to Sciacca in 2002. "America used to be nice," he says. "Now it's all about money, and the place is more dangerous."

Tramping over sharp lava rocks atop Mount Etna, Roberto Caudullo, a 39-year-old geologist, says Hollywood fashioned his earliest perceptions of America. Then came Sept. 11 and his decision to live under the volcano.

"Now I see America on the TV news and my impression is that America is broken," said Caudullo, managing director of the Volcano Trek tour group, based in Catania. "Money is the most important part of American life. That's left Americans poor inside and alone with their money. I want no part of that."

Di Bennardo, the aspiring oil magnate with two gold loops in his left ear, has what he says will make a profit in the United States - "the most expensive olive oil in the world" -allowing him to make his first trip and decide whether to stay.

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Light, fruity and priced at €70, or \$95, a bottle, all 500 liters, or 132 gallons, of Di Bennardo's Superior Extra Virgin Olive Oil flow from trees between 100 and 300 years old.

Di Bennardo says the 1776 tree will contribute about four liters of oil to the 2007 Superior vintage, the bulk of which was purchased months ago by Julius Baer Holding, the Zurich-based private banking and asset-management firm.

With options for 2008 Superior-vintage oil in hand and 20,000 liters of his Premium-brand oil arriving by cargo ship, Di Bennardo's inaugural trip is set for January.

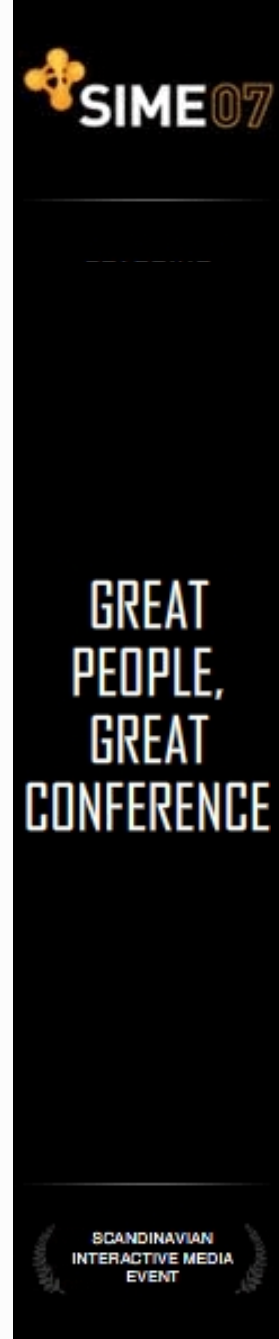
"America doesn't want to invest in immigrants," Di Bennardo says of his immigration policy. "It wants to spend money on a quality brand of foreign olive oil. That's what I intend to give them."

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