

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



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The church of Santa Maria della Pietà in Calascio. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 12.

LEFT:

Calascio. Photos by Anna Lebedeva.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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Ciao a tutti!

Exactly one year ago, I took the plunge and introduced a premium subscription, starting a new chapter in ABRUZZISSIMO's young life. Since then, it has become a 100% reader-supported publication. Thank you! I am humbled by your, dear readers, continuous generous support and fiercely proud of my job – spreading the word about this unsung corner of Italy. Running a small independent publication is no small feat in a region where a multitude of new projects are funded with state and EU money, only to fall into oblivion as soon as the subsidies run out. This is our 29th issue, and I am so grateful that our stories can continue to be told.

In this month's issue, I invite you to visit **Calascio**, a tiny hamlet that is being saved from complete abandon by tourism and has big plans for the future. Emigration hit Abruzzo hard and on page 5 we talk about the **Roveto** and **Nefra Valleys** that are still struggling to recover after the big exodus.

Many foreigners have been moving to the region lately, bringing new energy and ideas to mountain villages. Linda Dini Jenkins tells a story of ex-pats who are actively involved in the local community's life in **Bisenti**.

Have you ever seen *il ballo della pupa*? This daring pyrotechnic dance has been a long tradition at small local festivals. I met two artisans who showed me how they make these colourful firecracker puppets in Fontecchio (see page 9).

Please make sure to renew (or start) your premium subscription to access the full issue. If you want to gift a subscription, this special offer – €10 off if you purchase two, one for yourself, one for an Abruzzophile in your life – will be available for two more weeks.

Enjoy the February issue!

Alla prossima!

Anna Lebedeva, Founder & Editor



INTERCONTINENTAL FLIGHTS COMING TO PESCARA

A tender for the extension of the runway at Abruzzo International Airport was recently concluded, which means intercontinental flights to Pescara will soon become a reality.

The project is worth €5.3 million and involves adding 400 metres to extend the current runway to 2800 metres, which will make it suitable for bigger planes. It will run towards Chieti, skirting the large shopping centres. The regional government announced that it will be a huge step forward for international tourism in Abruzzo, as the airport will be able to operate intercontinental, non-stop flights, and bring hundreds of thousands of people from Australia, Canada, and the Americas. The tender process is being finalised, so the construction site can be opened shortly.

NEW RARE PLANT DISCOVERED IN ABRUZZO

Adonis fucensis was discovered between Amplero and Fucino plains in L'Aquila province. A local naturalist, while walking near the town of **Collelongo**, spotted unfamiliar yellow flowers and sent a photo to friend botanists who, after studying the plant, confirmed it was a new species. With only 65 plants growing in the area, it is at risk of extinction. The discovery was reported in Biology, an international journal on biological sciences.



THE TRAGIC DEATH OF JUAN CARRITO

The young Marsican bear christened by park rangers Juan Carrito was hit by a car and killed on the road near Castel di Sangro on January 23. The tragedy shocked the region, as he had become a celebrity with numerous videos and photos of him wandering around villages, raiding chicken coops, attempting to play with dogs, and drinking from street fountains (read our post about his escapades) being posted on social media.

Juan Carrito was a “confident” bear, which means he lost fear of humans and frequented villages in search of food scraps and easy snacks. Marsican brown bears are an endangered species, with only around 60 of them left in the wild. Another bear was killed on the same road three years ago. Bear conservationist group **Salviamo L’Orso** has been trying to raise funds for building a secure fence along the most dangerous stretches. Help them by donating here.



SANT'ONOFRIO HERMITAGES FRESCOES TO BE RESTORED

The restoration of the 13th century frescoes inside the Hermitage of Celestine V (**Eremo di Sant'Onofrio al Morrone**) in **Sulmona** was given a go-ahead and will begin soon. €20,000 have been assigned by the National Trust for Italy (FAI) to preserve the beautiful artwork depicting the Crucifixion with the Virgin, St. John, Celestine V and St. Benedict, St. Maurus and St. Anthony on the adjacent lunette with a star-studded barrel vault ceiling. The works are expected to start this spring and be finished by December 2023.

CARNIVAL IN CITTÀ SANT'ANGELO

One of the biggest and most colourful carnival celebrations, the Carnival of 'Ndirucce is an important part of local life in Città Sant'Angelo. For two days, February 19 and 21, the town will be filled with music, dances, theatrical performances, and parades. This year's theme is "Weddings of all times and all worlds" and the town's districts worked hard making costumes and floats which they will show off in street parades. Read the full story about this beautiful tradition on our [website](#). The full programme will be published shortly on the town's tourism office Facebook [page](#).

DID YOU KNOW?

THE SUPER-PRISON OF PRETURO



Sicilian mafia boss Matteo Messina Denaro – caught last month after 30 years on the run – has been locked up in a super-prison in **Preturo** (locally known as *le Costarelle*), in L'Aquila province. It is a special, maximum-security facility with the highest number of 41bis convicts in Italy.

41bis are the country's most dangerous inmates: mafiosi from the Cosa Nostra, Camorra, as well as members of militant left-wing organisations and drug traffickers.

Built in 1986 and opened in 1993, it replaced L'Aquila's old city prison, once located in the historic centre of the city, in a former convent. This impenetrable fortress is supposed to prevent the passage of information or any type of communication between prisoners and the organisations they belong to; however, in recent years, the local press has written about cell phones being used by the locked-up mafia bosses revealing that, perhaps, the prison is not as secure as it was meant to be.

Solidly built, the 40,000 square metre structure withstood the earthquake of 2009. Its single cells currently house 12 women and about 160 men. It is Italy's only penitentiary with a female section for the 41bis regime.

There has never been any escape from the prison because of its strict management. At the beginning of the 2000s, the wardens went on strike, demanding better security and a staff increase to deal with the dangerous inmates who have attacked officers on numerous occasions.



GOING TO LA MERICA: ABRUZZO'S GREAT EMIGRATION

By Sergio Natalia

In the first fifteen years of the 20th century about half a million people left Abruzzo, heading to Europe and across the ocean. Waves of emigration continue to this day, emptying small mountain towns and villages.

The boom in Italian emigration occurred from 1871 to 1913, when 13.5 million people left Italy. Emigration mainly affected small mountain towns impoverished by the agrarian crisis, increase in the price of bread, low wages, and the end of the so-called cottage industries. The area where I live, the Roveto and Nerfa Valley in the province of L'Aquila, were among the worst hit and never really recovered.

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the Americas routes were among the most popular because of the high wages and affordable price of steamship tickets, which were much cheaper than a train ticket to France and Germany. In that period, 70% of emigrants from the province of L'Aquila headed to Argentina and Brazil, then to the United States, or "La Merica", as everyone called it in the small villages.

Photo above: Italian immigrants at Ellis Island, 1907. Courtesy of Centro di Documentazione di Cansano

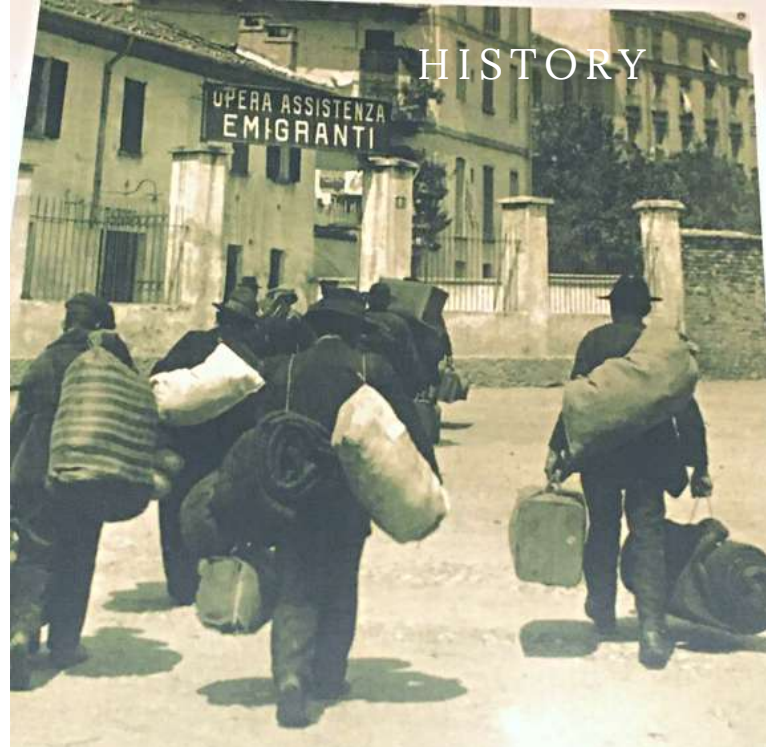
DIRE SITUATION

Every family in Abruzzo, including mine, had an emigrant among its ancestors. This situation was especially true in the isolated mountainous areas, such as the Roveto and Nerfa valleys. Here, the economy was still based on subsistence and agriculture. Seasonal jobs in the Roman countryside brought some meagre earnings to the local families, but no significant economic development. By the beginning of the 20th century, the population was increasing while the resources remained the same. If emigration had not come, people would have had to stab each other for a living, the peasants would have had to tear each other's bread by force, they would have drowned in debt, and civil war would have been most probable.

The Roveto and Nerfa Valley, in line with the rest of southern Italy, faced the new century in a dire crisis, worse than the rest of the region. The towns of Canistro, Civita d'Antino, San Vincenzo, Morino, Balsorano, and many others were poor and isolated from the world. Like in other southern provinces and Sicily, in the province of L'Aquila there were municipalities lacking proper roads and were only accessible by a maze of ancient mule tracks, dating back to the Italic period. In the area criss-crossed by the Liri River and numerous streams, bridges were rare, especially in the lower Roveto Valley. The arrival of the steam train in 1902, which connected the Valley with the town of Sora in Lazio, did not bring the hoped-for benefits but, on the contrary, only worsened the situation, contributing to depopulation. *Jo ciuff-ciuff* as the train was called in dialect, was used by peasants to reach the port of Naples where they would embark on a journey to *La Merica*. The number of people leaving Abruzzo was so high that it was even suggested to introduce fourth-class wagons, uncovered and without seats.

THE GREAT EXODUS

Emigration from these small towns of the L'Aquila province was part of the phenomenon of the great Abruzzese emigration to America in the early 20th



Emigrants departing for the USA, early 1900s.

Courtesy of Centro di Documentazione di Cansano

century. From 1901 to 1920 Abruzzo became the Italian region with the highest number of emigrants leaving their homes every year: 33.7 per thousand, surpassing regions of historical emigration such as Calabria, Basilicata, and Veneto. At the end, between 1876 and 1894, the total number of expatriates from Italy amounted to 26.5 million, of which over one million were from Abruzzo.

Before the advent of the railway, Abruzzese people reached Naples on horse carriages and on foot, walking along an old sheep track for more than two days. Some of them, along the way, worked or sold small goods to scrape together money for the ticket.

Arriving to the port of Naples was only the beginning of a journey fraught with many pitfalls. There were swindlers, the so-called *gabbamondo*, an army of agents and sub-agents (roughly, estimated at 20,000 people) speculating on the poor emigrants, most of whom were illiterate and only spoke their local dialect. In Naples, they were subjected to a strict medical examination (and many sent home) and only then the formalities of expatriation began. Abruzzese peasants raised the money for the trip by selling pieces of land, family possessions, the dowry brought by the women in the family, or by borrowing money, often

at usurious rates. The cost of the ticket for the ocean crossing varied from 195 liras for the United States to 230 liras for South America, a very high price if you think that at the time the average annual salary was less than 500 liras.

From Naples people embarked on large transatlantic liners. For shipping companies, transporting emigrants was a very lucrative business. On the ships, our peasants were crammed together like flocks of sheep, in the bleakest and most uncomfortable spaces, in cramped, fetid third-class cabins where the hygiene conditions were deplorable and often the cause of disease outbreaks. After about 12 days at sea, they arrived in New York.

THE NEW WORLD

After a quarantine on Ellis Island, where Abruzzese were counted as Southern Italians, they went to look for jobs and places to live. In the United States, our emigrants mainly worked as labourers, farmhands, miners, or workers in the metal industry, while in South America they were mainly employed in agriculture and, sometimes, as tailors, shoemakers, and merchants. In 1910, New York was the “fourth largest Italian city” in terms of Italian population, after Naples, Rome, and Milan.

The housing problem became the most difficult in *La Merica*. The emigrants stayed in dilapidated hovels almost always lacking services and water. Local

Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, ca. 1900. Courtesy of New York State Archives via Empire State Digital Network



racist chronicles of the time wrote that where the Italians lived, “dirty as pigs”, the stench was unbearable. Our grandparents lived isolated, folded in their religious traditions, and marginalised for a long time, but many preferred to remain in the new world, sometimes leaving behind their children and wives (“American widows” as they were called in Valle Roveto). Most, however, after earning enough money to buy land or a house, returned to their hometowns.

In America, emigrants could earn in a few weeks what they could scrape together in a year back home. Most of them sent home 800-1,000 lire annually. Emigration brought money to Abruzzo and the annual number of deeds of sale of land and houses increased sharply.

LATER EMIGRATION WAVES

After World War II, the transatlantic emigration almost dried up, but departures towards Australia, Germany, Switzerland, France, Great Britain, and the Benelux countries gradually increased.

The L'Aquila province was hit hardest by continuous depopulation to the point that the massive exodus cancelled out the demographic boom of the 1931-1951 period. From the end of the 1950s, emigration left numerous villages and towns in Abruzzo’s mountains empty. Our emigrants followed the so-called “chains of recall” built by the relatives and friends who had left earlier for greener pastures and helped the new arrivals to find work.

1972 became the turnaround year, when the trend reversed and the return began. Many emigrants felt that their hometowns had changed, the standard of living was better, and even the dialect was almost Italianised, certainly more evolved than the one they still spoke. Feeling a strong bond with their place of origin, they started building houses in their hometowns where they periodically returned to spend summer holidays.

BRAIN DRAIN

In the first decades of the new millennium, another type of emigration emerged in Abruzzo, the so-called "intellectual emigration", fuelled by many young people, often with high educational qualifications, who moved to Rome and Milan or abroad. In the last twenty years, 2.15 million people have left the *Mezzogiorno* (as Italy's southern regions are often called), half of them young people between the ages of 15 and 34; almost a fifth are university graduates. About 16% of these immigrants have moved abroad and many are not planning to return. Unfortunately, according to Svimez (*Associazione per lo Sviluppo dell'Industria nel Mezzogiorno*) data, 35% of new emigrants hail from Abruzzo, the highest percentage in the country. It is still too early to analyse this brain drain from a historical perspective but, undoubtedly, its effects will not be positive.

Sergio Natalia is an expert in territorial cohesion and author of several books on local history. He has served as mayor of Canistro and manager in public institutions.

Translated and adapted from the book *Terre in viaggio* (for more details see page 22).

Brothers Pelone from Rendinara (AQ) in New York, early 1900s. Photo from "Terre in viaggio"

EMIGRATION MUSEUM
IN CANSANO

A collection of letters, documents, photos, and memorabilia is on permanent display at the *Centro di Documentazione di Cansano* (AQ). The town, like many others in Abruzzo, was emptied by emigration: more than 1500 residents out of 1834 left in the early 1900s. The museum tells the story of emigration to America between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. With 500 photos and documents, it illustrates all stages that emigrants went through, including a month-long journey on the ship and the humiliation they often had to endure on arrival on Ellis Island, where they were subjected to medical examinations and psychological tests with questionnaires in English – an impossible task for many Italians. Their illiteracy was often taken for a mental illness, which meant they had to return home.

If you want to visit the museum **email** at info@museocansano.it or call the municipality office at 0039 086 440131. **Address:** *Centro di Documentazione "Ocriticum"*, Piazza XX Settembre, Cansano.





IL BALLO DELLA PUPA

By Anna Lebedeva

No festival in Abruzzo's towns and villages is complete without *il ballo della pupa*, a puppet dance. These pyrotechnic dolls have been part of traditional celebrations for a long time. I visited a workshop of two artisans to see how the giant pupes are made.

For Massimo Piunti it was love at first sight. "I was a little boy when I saw *il ballo della pupa* for the first time," he recalls. "The kids' excitement, the *pupa's* bright colours, the firecrackers – it all looked like magic to me. I still remember that moment." Years later, in 1997, he made his first *pupa* inspired by that childhood memory. It took Massimo many years and experiments with different materials before he came up with the wooden plank frames to make his dolls lighter, easier to wear, and safer to light up the fireworks. In 2007, together with his wife, Silvia Di Gregorio, they opened *Libera Pupazzeria*, a small workshop where they create artistic pyrotechnic doll-puppets.

Photo above: *il ballo della pupa* at a festival. Photo courtesy of Libera Pupazzeria

GIANT PUPPETS

As I enter, an army of giant figures meets me with their unblinking stares. White, red, green, and yellow, they crowd a small room, patiently waiting to be taken for a dance. In a corner, there is an artistic chaos: scattered brushes, tins of paint, rolls of paper, buckets and containers for water and glue. This is Massimo and Silvia's workshop in the village of Fontecchio, where they create pyrotechnic puppets.

Each *pupa* is a female-like figure of about three metres tall, with an ample bosom, hands resting on her hips and a bell-shaped skirt, almost like an ancient Minoan goddess. There are also a few male puppets with moustaches and peasant hats, but they are not as distinguished-looking as their female counterparts, who always take centre stage in pyrotechnic dances. A *pupa* has a light wooden structure covered with painted papier-mâché and a frame attached to it which will support firecrackers connected to each other by a fuse, so that they light up in succession. The hollow inside fits a dancer who holds the *pupa* on his shoulders and dances to cheerful popular music while the fireworks explode. "The dance is made up of bows, turns, jumps. We improvise depending on the location, the space, and the kind of firecrackers we have," says Silvia. "Is it not dangerous?!" I ask. "No dancer or spectator has ever been harmed," she laughs.

ORIGINS

While the first photo of *il ballo della pupa* dates to the late 1940s, the roots of this folk-art tradition go further back in time. "The *pupa* is a descendant of ancient end-of-harvest rites connected to the Mother Goddess and fertility of the earth. In archaic times, before the invention of fireworks, these giant female figures were set on fire at the end of the dance and its ashes were scattered over the fields as a call for a good harvest," explains Silvia.

The pyrotechnic dancing puppets are not unique to Abruzzo. They can also be found at traditional festivals in Lazio and Basilicata under different names: *Pantasima*, *Signoraccia*, *Mamozia*, *Marmotta*,



Photos: (top) Silvia Di Gregorio and Massimo Piunti in their workshop; male puppets

Marzella. They have always brought a lot of excitement to small villages where no other entertainment was available. Both adults and kids alike would gather on the main piazza to watch a *pupa* dance accompanied by popular melodies, delighted shrieks, and cheers from the crowd as firecrackers shot in all directions.

"I believe, this pyrotechnic dance tradition might have been born in smaller, poorer villages where festival organisers couldn't pay for expensive fireworks displays, so these small scale shows were invented," says Massimo.

POPULAR ART

There are very few artisans remaining in Abruzzo who still make pyrotechnic puppets, and they each have their own style. Massimo and Silvia are true artists and have created many *pupe*, with or without fireworks, brightly coloured or completely white, ghost-like, small to be worn by children or three metres high. They often take *pupe* to local art festivals to perform mesmerising dances on medieval squares and dark narrow streets (you can see a video [here](#)).

The couple also runs workshops for the young and old in remote villages where still, to this day, not many activities are available. "These seemingly crude, grotesque puppets are the maximum expression of the popular creative imagination, a marginalised form of art," says Massimo. "We make popular art, accessible and open to all those who want to participate, in places where art doesn't normally reach."

WHERE TO SEE IL BALLO DELLA PUPA

TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS

Check announcements for festivals in small towns. // *ballo della pupa* is normally performed on the last

Photos: (below) in the *Libera Pupazzeria* workshop; (right) two *pupe* with wooden frames for firecrackers



evening to close the celebrations. For instance, the Feast of Santa Lucia on December 13 in **Francavilla al Mare** and the Feast of Santa Barbara on December 26 in **Lama dei Peligni** always conclude with a pupa dance.

LIBERA PUPAZZERIA SHOWS

Follow the **Libera Pupazzeria** Facebook [page](#) for announcements about upcoming festivals and performances. Silvia and Massimo can be hired to do pyrotechnic dances or *pupa*-making workshops at private parties and celebrations. To enquire about a visit to their workshop in **Fontecchio** email them at silviadigregorio@virgilio.it.

PALIO DELLE PUPE

Since 1975, in **Cappelle sul Tavo** on the evening of Ferragosto, August 15, thousands of spectators gather to watch the town's 14 districts presenting their firework pupa dances. Firecrackers spin in wheels and spout fountains of sparkles while the puppets swirl on stage. The biggest show of its kind in Abruzzo, it is more about pyrotechnics than the traditional *ballo della pupa*, but it is still worth a visit. For the full programme keep an eye on the municipality's Facebook [page](#).





WELCOME TO CALASCIO

By Anna Lebedeva

The ancient hamlet of Calascio is slowly coming back to life, as it welcomes tens of thousands of tourists flocking there to see the majestic ruins of Rocca Calascio.

On a wintry Monday morning, Calascio is quiet and empty. I find the only open bar and get a cup of *orzo* and a *cornetto* before braving the hike to the castle of Rocca Calascio, now draped in snow. Nicola, who runs Calascino Cafè, tells me that in winter very few places are open during the week. “I am not making money on days like this but stay open for the locals,” he says. “Where else would they go for a coffee?” A young couple comes in to have *due espressi* and *pistacchio* cream pastries, then an elderly lady walks in slowly and props her cane on the counter while paying for a small pack of sweets. The bar feels welcoming and cosy with its colourful rows of bottles, a handwritten sign listing *panini* sandwiches of the day and a pellet stove in a corner.

Photo above: The hamlet of Calascio

Calascio is home to only 80 people. There are two bars, a few restaurants, a small hotel at the top, but no school, food shop, or doctor's surgery. "The elderly make up a big part of the population, but we have a small group of youngsters who are actively involved in the local life," says Franco Cagnoli, the president of the cooperative Vivi Calascio. "Until recently, the villagers' main activity was sheep farming and agriculture, but now, because of the growing fame of the Rocca Calascio castle, tourism is becoming the driving force of the local economy."

HISTORY AND ORIGINS

The hamlet of Calascio was first mentioned in the 9th century in a Benedictine order document. Its history had always been connected with the fortress of Rocca Calascio. "An isolated watchtower was probably built by the Normans around 1100 CE," explains Franco Cagnoli. "Below the tower first a fortified garrison developed, today totally in ruins, then the village of Rocca Calascio. In the 16th century, the territory was bought by the Medici, a powerful Florentine family, who settled there to control the thriving wool trade." The fortress was part of an imposing defensive system extended from the Apennines to the Adriatic Sea. It had been reinforced, extended, destroyed by earthquakes, and rebuilt over the centuries.

For a long period, the two hamlets, Calascio and Rocca Calascio, were clearly separated and each had a distinct strategic function: the village of Calascio served as a check point on the road to Santo Stefano di Sessanio and L'Aquila while Rocca Calascio controlled the entire Navelli plain.

The violent earthquake of 1703 destroyed the tower and heavily damaged the village of Rocca Calascio. A large part of the population moved below to Calascio.

The streets of the village are flanked with crumbling noble palaces, one bigger than the next, built between the 15th and 17th centuries: Palazzo Frasca, Palazzo Taranta, Casa Piccolomini.

Photos: the streets of Calascio



Calascio used to be a wealthy village, with over 2000 residents until the early 1900s, but the crises of the sheep industry and emigration emptied its houses and streets.

CALASCIO TODAY

The hamlet's treasure is the castle of Rocca Calascio, which attracts 100,000 visitors a year. On its own, the Rocca is nothing more than a good-looking ruin, but the whole package makes it a winner: the dramatic position on a rocky outcrop, picturesque majestic mountain views, time-worn streets of the hamlet below, a reasonably close distance to Rome (only a two-hour drive), and proximity to Santo Stefano di Sessanio, another tourist magnet as of late. The castle's fame began to grow in 1986 when it became a location for the Hollywood movie *Ladyhawke*, starring Michelle Pfeiffer and Rutger Hauer. Since then, year after year, more and more people have been visiting Rocca Calascio, international magazines and

newspapers have written about it and, finally, a few years ago, *National Geographic* listed it among world's 15 most beautiful castles.

Two years ago, to manage the influx of visitors, a group of locals set up a cooperative, *Vivi Calascio*, "We realised that we could create jobs. For younger villagers who wanted to remain in Calascio, it was a great opportunity to have long-term employment," explains Franco. "Today, the cooperative counts 30 members aged from 18 to 60. We take tourists to the castle on a shuttle bus, do guided tours of the village, e-bike rental and tours in the area, run a souvenir shop in the village, and do a lot of voluntary work such as keeping the streets clean, shovelling the snow in winter, helping the elderly with shopping."

THE FUTURE

Last year, Calascio made the headlines in the national and international press: it was awarded 20 million euros by the Italian government. The village's mayor, Paolo Baldi, announced that a significant part of the funds would be spent on restoring the castle, creating

The castle of Rocca Calascio





dedicated paths so tourists do not damage the archaeological area, opening a sheep farming school, and increasing production of the local *pecorino* cheese. "Several abandoned houses in the village have been already bought to be restored and turned into an *albergo diffuso* (scattered hotel)," Franco Cagnoli tells me. "A spa and fitness area will also be built, farmers' sheds for sheltering flocks will be sorted out, and many other small, but important things will be done."

Some critics at the regional and national level have expressed doubts about the ability of a small village council to handle this handsome sum of money, predicting fraud and mismanagement, but it is still early days to draw conclusions. Calascio's future is certainly tied to tourism, but it is the young, entrepreneurial residents who can bring the hamlet back to life.

WHAT TO SEE AND DO IN CALASCIO

ROCCA CALASCIO

Abruzzo's most photographed and famous location, the castle is located at an altitude of 1460 metres and is among the highest in Europe. In summer, the road to the castle is closed, so you would need to walk or take a shuttle from Calascio. Guided tours are available in English (contact [Vivi Calascio](#)). The castle is crowded on weekends and most days in August, so plan your visit accordingly.

Photos: (from top right) a Fascist era inscription; a street in Calascio; (below) a post box on a gate.



CHIESA DI SANTA MARIA DELLA PIETÀ

A local legend says that the church was built in 1596 to thank the Madonna for her guidance and help in a victorious battle of the local population against a band of brigands who had raided and plundered the area. Closed to the public for a long time, it now has more regular opening hours and can be visited most days in summer. However, make sure to call 0039 351 551 2131 to check if you want to see the church inside.

E-BIKE TOURS AND SNOWSHOEING ADVENTURES

Rent an e-bike to explore the magnificent area around the village on your own or join an organised group tour (in English or Italian). The cooperative offer different options, from easy one-hour rides to a day spent biking around Campo Imperatore for

more experienced cyclists. Prices for guided tours start at €60 per person (e-bike rental included). In winter, you can join small groups for easy snowshoeing adventures. For details contact [Vivi Calascio](mailto:coopcalascio@gmail.com).

EXPLORE THE VILLAGE

The hamlet's narrow streets weave between the early medieval *case-torre*, slender, tall buildings that have withstood centuries. There is a convent, several beautiful churches dating from the 13th to the 17th century with original frescoes, and Renaissance palaces portraying Calascio's prosperous past; unfortunately, most of them are still waiting to be restored after the earthquake of 2009. Mussolini's motivational quotes written on some buildings have been preserved from the Fascist era. You can book a guided tour (in English or Italian) if you want to learn about the history of Calascio at 0039 351 551 2131 or via email coopcalascio@gmail.com.

The convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, 16th century





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BUILDING NEW LIVES IN BISENTI

By Linda Dini Jenkins

What happens when a few ex-pats decide to dive right into the life of a small Abruzzo community? Gemma, Pam, and Sue say everything just gets better – and they can't believe this is where they live now!

Bisenti is a modest town of about 2000 inhabitants, with an ex-pat community of only around 12 members. Located in Teramo province, along the Fino river – and best known as the home of Pontius Pilate (see our article about it [here](#)) – it is not much to look at when you first arrive in the *centro*, especially compared to some of the gorgeous *borghi* that Abruzzo is known for. But look down any side road and take in the flowers, the views, the tidy houses – its inhabitants do the most with what they have, and it feels like home.

That's why our three women – one Irish, one English, and one American – have all chosen to live here and are finding joy in their warm welcome, their stunning surroundings, and their ability to give back to the community. They've become fast friends in Bisenti, and their stories are an inspiration.

Photo above: Pamela Capper (first left), Sue Palmer (second right), Gemma Preston (first right) at a local festival in Bisenti

FROM IRELAND TO ITALY

Gemma Preston and her husband, Derek, moved to Bisenti from Dublin in 2022. They had come to look at houses and found themselves in Vasto, emptyhanded. A call from their agent – the day before they were set to return to Ireland – about one more possible house sent them up north on what they thought would be, in Gemma’s words, “another disastrous house hunting adventure.” But they drove to Bisenti (which they had never heard of) anyway and saw the place. “It was love at first sight,” says Gemma. “We went to the local bar afterwards and had one of the best nights of our lives.”

They cite the overwhelming support and welcome from the locals from “Day One” as a major reason why they love the place, even though Gemma’s Italian was not very good at the time. Gemma runs her female-only strength training business online and has decided to offer classes for locals in Bisenti, creating an environment where women can feel empowered and safe while they get healthy and strong. It’s unusual for Abruzzo, to be sure, and while some men have asked to participate, Gemma says she’s not going to change her business model any time soon. She is currently finishing a gym in her house, expanding the workspace to do more classes, and will eventually offer fitness retreats. She’s working with the *comune* now to find exactly the right spot to grow the business in.

“When I told my friends we were moving to a tiny dot in the middle of Italy, with no Italian language skills, they said, ‘Have you thought this through?’” smiles Gemma. “But when they come visit, they get it right away.”

She and Derek jumped right into the local events of the commune. Everything started up again last year – the first time since Covid – including the town’s *Revival Uva e Vino Montonico* (Wine Festival). Says Gemma, “Just give an Irishwoman a leprechaun costume and a box of wine and see what happens...” They had a float at the *fiesta* last year and will do it again in 2023.



The view from Gemma Preston's house

She names the warm curiosity of the townspeople, their willingness to be patient with her Italian, their raft of dinner invitations, and general help finding tradespeople – “anything we need,” she says – as among the many reasons they’re so happy with their choice. “I never could have anticipated the welcome,” she repeats. “Plus, in terms of beauty, Abruzzo would give Ireland a run for its money.”

FROM CAMPER TO OLD MILL TO LANGUAGE TEACHER

Sue Palmer, a retired accounting software trainer, arrived here from Devon (UK) in November 2020, to beat Brexit. She and her partner, Martin, drove for three months during the Covid summer of 2020 in their motorhome to find the perfect place to settle. They found an old flour mill on the river Fino which needed some renovation and had been empty for four years. Some of the work has already been done on the land which came with the mill, and they have habitable accommodations for now, but look forward to making the project their own.



The town of Bisenti. Photo via Bisentiturismo.eu

“The mill house was the main reason we bought here,” says Sue. “The village of Bisenti was a lucky result.” They have great neighbors and, like Gemma, love being part of the community and taking part in local events like the annual fall wine festival.

Sue also teaches English conversation locally. Her weekly classes are free – she teaches mostly retired people and even some of the local businessowners and has expanded conversational classes to local children. She’s excited about a new library that has foreign language books and DVDs and even a reading group forming.

Lucky Sue received her residency within three days (the town hall was very helpful and rushed her application through), while she was still part of the EU, and she’s here to stay. “None of my cameras capture the beauty of this place,” she gushes. “I still can’t get over that I live here.”

BETTER THAN TUSCANY

Pamela Capper is a single mom with four grown children who always wanted to retire to Italy. Originally from New York City and the Boston area, Pam went to school in Florence 40 years ago and had never heard of Abruzzo. When it was time to retire, she knew she wanted to come back to Italy, but didn’t want Tuscany – aside from the cost, she didn’t want go where she’d hear American English every day.

“Abruzzo was so much more affordable and, when I came over the mountains and looked down at the valley for the first time, my breath was taken away,” remembers Pam. “I wanted a place off the beaten track and away from major tourism, and this fits the bill perfectly.” She bought a house in the *centro* in 2022 and is right at home here.

“There are prettier towns in Abruzzo, but for the most part, nobody is out in them,” she observes. “In Bisenti, there’s always something going on. And I never get over the ‘wow’ of these mountains.”

Because she is not from the EU, Pam is still waiting for her residency to be sorted out in March and will,

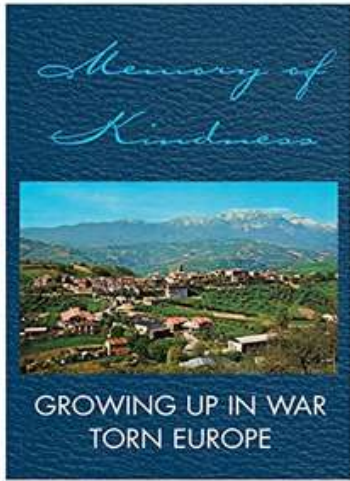
hopefully, have a smooth transition to permanent living in this beautiful part of Italy. While she came here to retire, she, together with Sue, is teaching English to the locals, whom she says have welcomed and accepted her 100%.

HELPING IN THE TOWN

All three agree that they didn’t want to move where they would just hear English and American voices. That said, they are impressed by the number of creative people in Bisenti and are enthused about helping the *comune* bring people here. Bisenti is motivated to attract foreigners, and they believe that language is one way to do this. “If the businesspeople know a little English, they will make the tourists more at ease,” says Sue. “Also, teaching English to young people opens up other possibilities for them, workwise.” Some projects on the horizon include volunteering with the tourist office in summer and helping to market properties in the area.

Bisenti is old-fashioned, they agree, but in the best possible way. Liveable, vibrant, and, oh, those views!

Linda Dini Jenkins is a freelance writer and travel planner. She is the author of [Up at the Villa: Travels with my Husband](#), and an upcoming memoir, [Becoming Italian: Chapter and Verse from an Italian American Girl](#).



MEMORY OF KINDNESS: GROWING UP IN WAR TORN EUROPE

By Gertrude Goetz

The book chronicles the personal account of the author growing up in Abruzzo during the fascist occupation. Together with her Jewish family, Gertrude Goetz was forced to leave Vienna, Austria in 1939. A few years later, when she was eight years old, they arrived in the remote village of Castilenti in Abruzzo, where her father was released from an internment camp nearby.

The little girl was warmly welcomed by the villagers and, despite the lack of food, her mother's illness, and the uncertain future, she found a safe refuge in the rural community. Not only humble peasants but appointed local fascist leaders accepted the long-suffering Jewish family with immense kindness and humanity. The author recalls with warmth the time her family spent in Castilenti and her days at the school there.

As Armistice is announced in 1943, the Goetz family is alerted about their imminent transfer to Poland. Aware of the dangers awaiting the family, the village's fascist secretary helps them escape to the mountains to avoid being arrested by the Nazis.

After a dramatic flight through the mountains and villages, Gertrude and her family reached Chieti in June 1944, then on to Bari and Santa Maria al Bagno in Salento. The whole family left for the USA in 1949 to start a new life.

The book is a tribute to Castilenti and its people who risked their lives to help the Goetz family. In 2012, the author returned to the village to receive the Freedom of the City award.

The book is available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).



TERRE IN VIAGGIO

Curated by Sergio Natalia

The book recounts emigrants' routes from individual villages in the Roveto and Nerfa areas to go around the world, sometimes indefinitely and sometimes with a return ticket bought shortly thereafter, out of nostalgia or for reasons stronger than their own will. Data and statistics are interwoven with stories, direct testimonies, and photos to document the phenomenon that began in the 19th century and still continues to empty Abruzzo's hinterlands.

Castellafiume, Capistrello, Canistro, Civitella Roveto, Civita d'Antino, Morino, San Vincenzo Valle Roveto, and Balsorano – each village has experienced a slow demographic decline over the past century due to departures to all continents. The peculiarities of each of the villages involved have been collected and recounted in detail to keep the memories alive. Even those who live abroad might find it interesting to flip through the pages with the names and photos of the emigrants to see if they find some information about their families who left this part of Abruzzo a long time ago.

The book (in Italian) is available directly from the publisher, [Radici Edizioni](https://www.radiciedizioni.it), and [Amazon.it](https://www.amazon.it).

PECORINO CHEESE FROM ATRI

By Anna Swann

Delicate and fragrant when young, or complex with a sharper piquancy when left to age, Atri's *pecorino* cheese has a distinctive character. The clay hills around the town, with their mild climate, are a traditional pastoral land where flocks of sheep have been grazing for thousands of years. Archaeologists have found a *colino* (displayed in the Archaeological Museum of Atri), a small terracotta vessel with holes, that most likely was used for cheesemaking here as far back as the Iron Age.

The pots and strainers used today have been modernised, but the traditional cheesemaking process has changed little since then: milk is heated to 36-37°C, a small amount of lamb rennet is added, the curd is separated from the whey and then placed in small baskets (*fuscelle*). After 12 hours, the cheese is salted and left to dry in a cool, well-ventilated room for 20 days. Every few days, the cheese wheels are turned and greased with extra virgin olive oil to prevent cracking of the rind. A simple, yet laborious process, requiring skill and patience.

The wheels of *pecorino di Atri* weigh 1-3 kilos and are aged for a minimum of 40 days to a maximum of two years. Every producer has their own style: some rub ash into the rind, giving the cheese a subtle earthy flavour; others immerse small *pecorino* wheels in olive oil (this style is called *pecorino di Montone*) where it matures for 6-8 months, acquiring a delicate pinkish rind and soft texture.

I, personally, like young *pecorino di Atri*, aged for not more than two months. At that tender age, it has a delicate flavour of the fragrant pastures, with a light sweet note. It is reminiscent of the gentle rolling hills around Atri, bathed in a soft breeze from the coast. For stronger, sharper flavours, I choose sheep's milk cheeses from Abruzzo's mountains: *canestrato di Castel del Monte* or *pecorino di Farindola*.



On fresh bread drenched in olive oil, accompanied by *arrosticini*, drizzled with honey or a smudge of fig jam, grated over pasta, or as *pallotte cacio e ova* cheeseballs (see the recipe on page 25) – there are many ways to enjoy this *pecorino*.

At the moment, the standards for production of *pecorino di Atri* are being drawn up to protect it and guarantee its quality.

WHERE TO BUY PECORINO DI ATRI

AZIENDA D'AMARIO E FELICIANI

The only officially registered *pecorino di Atri* producer, this family-run farm has 100 sheep and makes superb cheese of different ages, including excellent *pecorino di Montone* and fresh *ricotta*. Buy directly from the farm (you can contact them on [Facebook](#)).

Address: Contrada Paterno, Atri. Tel.: 0039 329 147 1551.

IL CASALE DEL PASTORE

The small farm has a flock of sheep and produces traditional cheeses, fresh *ricotta*, mutton, and lamb meat. At the moment, they use pasteurised milk only but are in the process of adhering to the required standards for registering as official producers of *pecorino di Atri*. Try their *pecorino al vinaccio* aged in grape must. Buy directly from the [farm](#).

Address: Contrada Piantara, 25, Atri.

OVEN-BAKED FENNEL GRATIN

By Mary Vischetti

In the winter, I make many dishes with fennel – raw or cooked – in soups, risottos, or in the oven. Here in Abruzzo, we make great use of fennel thanks to our local production in the Fucino Plain, where the juicy white bulbs happily grow at an altitude of 700 metres, surrounded by high mountain peaks. *Finocchio di Fucino* is highly prized in Italy for its quality and taste.

I want to share with you one of my favourite fennel dishes: tasty and easy to prepare, it makes an excellent side or main dish and is a perfect option for vegetarians (as well as vegans, if you skip the cheese). If you crave something richer and creamier, you can add chunks of semi-matured *pecorino* cheese or *scamorza* in addition or instead of the grated parmesan that I list below. Whichever way you choose, fennel is always fragrant and delicious!

Mary Vischetti lives in Abruzzo and writes a food blog [Un'Americana Tra gli Orsi](#).

INGREDIENTS

Makes 3-4 portions

- 2 large fennel bulbs
- 3 tbsps breadcrumbs
- 3-4 tbsps *Parmigiano Reggiano* cheese, grated (and/or a few chunky pieces of *scamorza* or *pecorino* cheese)
- Some fennel greens, finely chopped
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Some extra virgin olive oil



PREPARATION

Preheat the oven to 200°C.

Clean the fennel bulbs by removing the harder parts and wash them under running water. Cut into wedges, not too large, and put aside. In a small bowl, mix breadcrumbs with fennel greens, add a pinch of salt and two tablespoons of olive oil. Stir and set aside.

Grease an oven dish with olive oil and spread the fennel wedges one beside another, without overlapping. Season lightly with salt and pepper and add the breadcrumb topping on top. Sprinkle with grated Parmesan cheese (and/or top with other cheese chunks if using). Drizzle with a little oil and bake for about 30 minutes or until a golden crust has formed.

Serve hot or warm as a side or main dish.

Do you have a family recipe you would like to share with our readers? Please email it to editor@abruzzissimo.com

PALLOTTE CACIO E OVA

By Anna Swann

Poor man's meatballs, as *pallotte cacio e ova* are called sometimes, have just a few simple ingredients (meat is not one of them). This old traditional recipe has become somewhat fashionable in recent years and almost every trattoria and restaurant in Abruzzo serves *pallotte* as a starter or main course.

Most restaurants serve *pallotte* in a *sugo semplice*, plain tomato sauce, but a friend's mother, Jolanda from Serramonacesca (her *pallotte* are the best I've ever tried!), taught me to add peppers and makes them extra special.

The secret of the perfect *pallotte* is the texture: the cheeseballs should be soft and springy, but not rubbery. They freeze well and can be cooked later in the tomato sauce without thawing.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 4 portions (16 cheeseballs)

For the *pallotte*

- 120 g stale bread without the crust, finely crumbled
- 75g Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, grated
- 75g Pecorino cheese, grated
- 6 eggs
- 1 garlic clove, crushed
- 100g white flour
- Some parsley, finely chopped

For the sauce

- 1 l passata sauce
- 1 red or green bell pepper, chopped into short strips
- 5 tbsps olive oil
- A few leaves of basil
- Salt and black pepper to taste



PREPARATION

In a bowl, mix breadcrumbs, Parmesan and *pecorino* cheese, chopped parsley, and crushed garlic. Season with salt and pepper.

In a separate bowl, beat the eggs and add them to the rest of the ingredients. Mix everything with your hands until you obtain a soft but homogenous mixture and put it to rest in the fridge for 30 minutes.

In the meantime, make the sauce. Sauté bell pepper in olive oil for 5-7 mins, stirring occasionally. Add passata, cover the pan, and leave to cook on low flame for 20-25 minutes.

Once the dough for the *pallotte* has rested, take it out of the fridge and make small balls, about 30g each, shaping them with oiled hands. Roll them in flour.

In a pan, heat the oil (sunflower or rapeseed oil) and fry the balls until golden brown. Drain them and put them in the bubbling sauce. Cook over a low heat for about 20 minutes with the lid on until the sauce has thickened. Do not stir *pallotte*, as you can break them.

A few minutes before finishing simmering the *pallotte*, add basil leaves and a pinch of salt. Serve hot.

FRIED CARNIVAL CHIACCHERE

By Alba Henderson

When I was little, my mother Maria always made *chiacchiere* this time of year. February is the time to indulge in fried and sweet foods, as it is the time of Carnival in Abruzzo. With just a few ingredients, my grandmother cooked amazing treats, but *chiacchiere*, thin crunchy strips of fried dough, were by far my favourite. I make them to treat my grandchildren every time they visit. In this recipe I add some orange zest to the dough, which is a deviation from the classic recipe, but that is how my mother made *chiacchiere* and how we love them in my family.

Chiacchiere means 'chatter' in Italian. I am not sure why this Carnival treat is called like that, but, probably, the name comes from the noise (a lot of it!) that the oil makes when you put the dough strips in it.

Alba Henderson lives in Toronto She has been an ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine's reader and supporter from its first publication.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 30-35 *chiacchiere*

- 300g flour
- 2 eggs, whisked
- 40g sugar
- 30g unsalted butter, melted
- 60g white wine
- 3 tbsp rum
- Zest of one orange
- A pinch of salt
- 0.5l sunflower oil for frying
- Some icing sugar



PREPARATION

Mix the flour with sugar, salt, previously beaten eggs, and white wine, rum, butter, and orange zest. Knead until the ingredients are well mixed and the dough is smooth. It should be firm but malleable. If your dough feels too soft, add a little more flour. If it is too hard, add a tablespoon or two of water. Make a dough ball, wrap in cling film and leave to rest at room temperature for 30 minutes.

Then divide the dough into 3 equal portions and work each one individually. Slightly flatten the first portion with the palm of your hand, flour it and roll it out (you can use a pasta machine) into a 2mm-thick rectangle. Repeat with the other two portions of the dough.

On a well-floured surface, using a scalloped pastry cutter, cut out 5x10 cm rectangles.

Bring oil to boil in a large pan and gently place 2-3 rectangles in it, turning them after 3-4 minutes until golden brown. Put the fried *chiacchiere* on a plate lined with absorbent paper. Once they cool down, sprinkle them generously with icing sugar.

Chiacchiere are best eaten fresh, as they lose their crunchiness, but they can keep for 2-3 days in an air-tight container.

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