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# ABRUZZISSIMO

## MAGAZINE

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TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD WINE

# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



**Lettomanoppello,  
The Town of White Dust  
and Singing Stones**

*page 8*

**Watch The  
Documentary La Vita  
De'Na Vota**

*page 19*

**The Phantom of The  
Forest: The Apennine  
Wolf**

*page 22*

# CONTENTS

**02. EDITOR'S NOTE**

**03. NEWS & EVENTS**

**04. DID YOU KNOW?**

**05. THE ENDURING  
FASCINATION WITH THE  
DAUGHTER OF IORIO**

**08. LETTOMANOPPELLO,  
THE TOWN OF WHITE DUST  
AND SINGING STONES**

**13. THE DISAPPEARING ART  
OF CERAMICS FROM L'AQUILA**

**15. ONCE UPON A TIME**

*A filmmaker who preserves untold  
stories of Abruzzo.*

**19. WATCH THE FILM  
LA VITA DE'NA VOTA**

*Exclusive access to the documentary  
for our readers.*

**20. LA DOLCE VITA IN  
A SMALL VILLAGE**

**22. THE PHANTOM OF THE  
FOREST: THE APENNINE  
WOLF**

**26. FOOD & WINE**

*Where to find dishes with Maiale  
Nero, traditional sandwich feast,  
pipindune e ove recipe.*

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## ON THE COVER:

Two wolves in the Parco Nazionale  
del GranSasso e Monti della Laga.  
Photo by Mauro Cironi



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Magazine

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# Ciao a tutti!

Spring always brings hope. Here in Abruzzo, the almond and apricot trees are in full bloom, the sun is shining, and everyone is looking forward to the new season, hoping it will bring welcome changes.

This month I asked some Abruzzese experts to talk about the history of the region's most famous painting, *La Figlia di Iorio*; the disappearing art of incision ceramics from L'Aquila; the humble town of Lettomanoppello with its ancient tradition of stonecutting; the elusive Apennine wolf; and the vanished tradition of the farmers' *sdijuno*. This is a truly unique issue of ABRUZZISSIMO, as most of these topics have never been covered in English before.

I am so excited about another exclusive offer for ABRUZZISSIMO readers: on March 13-15, you will be able to view online – for free – an award-winning documentary about life in Abruzzo in the old days, *La Vita De'Na Vota* (Life Once Upon a Time), by Julian Civiero and participate in a virtual talk with the filmmaker (see page 19).

As always, I want to thank those of you who have sent donations. ABRUZZISSIMO is the only publication in English about the region, and I love bringing you high-quality, exclusive content, but I need your support to continue to do so. Please become a supporter of ABRUZZISSIMO and contribute to the magazine's upkeep [here](#).

If you have a story you want to share, drop me a line at [editor@abruzzissimo.com](mailto:editor@abruzzissimo.com).

Enjoy reading the March issue!

***A presto,***

Anna Lebedeva

Editor



## AROUND ABRUZZO ON FOOT

A new circular route around the region is being developed by Il Cammino d'Abruzzo and the University of Teramo. The walk will be 660 kilometres long and divided into 33 legs connecting existing trails in the hills, mountains, and on the coast in all four provinces and take walkers to the most beautiful landmark places in 70 towns and villages. Walking holidays are becoming more popular every year and the region hopes that the new route will attract outdoors enthusiasts from across the globe.

## SLOW PIZZA

Good pizza takes time to make. Gianni Giannini and his wife Floriana Ambrosio, the owners of PIZZA 200, a small pizzeria in Chieti, spent seven years perfecting their innovation – slow-leavened and matured dough. It is the only place in the world where it takes at least 72 hours of leavening and at least 9 days (sometimes even 21 days!) of maturation before the dough is turned into pizzas. The result is a new twist on fast food that is delicious and easy to digest. Despite the unfortunate opening timing, a month before the national lockdown last year, the pizzeria has survived and does home deliveries.



## EXCLUSIVE VIEWING FOR OUR READERS

This month, we are offering an exclusive viewing of the documentary *La Vita De'Na Vota* (Life Once Upon a Time) by the award-winning filmmaker Julian Civiero. In the film, most elderly residents (many in their late 90s) of several small towns in the area around Fagnano Alto share their memories of the religious festas and describe in detail what life was like when they were young. You can access the documentary online on March 13-15 only. Join us for a virtual talk with Julian Civiero on March 14, 6pm CET/12pm EST/9am PST (we email all our readers the link to the virtual room and a reminder closer to the date). See page 19 for full details.

## PECORINO GRAPE ALE

There are dozens of excellent micro-breweries in Abruzzo, but Birrificio Majella, located in Pretoro, is famous for its dedication to local ingredients and their innovative original flavours. The brewery has just launched a new grape ale called Transumanza (named after transhumance, the seasonal movement of sheep flocks practiced in Abruzzo for many centuries). Light and spritzy, the ale is brewed with Pecorino must (pressed juice from the native grape variety).



## MAKE TRADITIONAL DESSERTS

Do you want to learn how to make traditional *bocconotti* and *uccelleti ripieni* cakes? Join Mary Vischetti, an Abruzzese food blogger, for a virtual class on March 18. In another online lesson for adults and children, on March 25, you can learn how to make giant colourful *Pupa* and *Cavallo* Easter cookies. Only eight places per class are available, so book in advance. See the details and book the classes on the [Abruzzo With Gusto website](#).

DO YOU ENJOY READING  
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## DID YOU KNOW?

### THE FAIRY-TALE CASTLE OF ORTUCCHIO



The 14th century Castle of Ortucchio (*Castello Piccolomini*) was once only accessible by boat. Located on a small island in Italy's third biggest lake, Lago Fucino, the fortress had a dock inside the walled structure, so arriving boats would enter under a huge arch and disembarked visitors accessed the castle directly from the water. It was the only structure of its kind on the territory of today's Italy. The Scaligero Castle in Sirmione on Lake Garda has a similar dock inside the walls, but it is located on the lakeshore rather than on an island.

Today, there is no more lake – as the Fucino was drained 1878 – but the castle is still standing in all its splendour. Badly damaged over the centuries by sieges, earthquakes, and years of neglect, it was restored a few decades ago. Visitors can climb up the tower to see the Fucino Plain with its patchwork of cultivated fields stretching into the horizon and imagine what it was like when the castle was surrounded by water. Across the road, in the town's communal park, is the Laghetto di Ortucchio, a small shallow patch of water, all that remains from the mighty lake that the Fucino once was.

## THE ENDURING FASCINATION WITH THE DAUGHTER OF IORIO

By Marzio Maria Cimini

A painting so beautiful that it won the first edition of the Biennale of Venice, in 1895. So beautiful that it was bought immediately and taken to Germany to be exhibited in the National Gallery of Art in Berlin for almost four decades. A painting for which the city of Pescara paid a handsome sum of money to bring it back to Abruzzo. *The Daughter of Iorio (La Figlia di Iorio)* by Francesco Paolo Michetti remains Abruzzo's most beloved artwork.



***The Daughter of Iorio (La Figlia di Iorio)***  
by Francesco Paolo Michetti

Michetti, who was born in Tocco da Casauria in 1851, painted his masterpiece in 1895. It took him several months of intensive work to finish the huge painting, which measures five and a half metres in width and almost three metres high. But before he put the brush to canvas, the artist painted the masterpiece in his mind over and over again, for 15 years.

### INSPIRATION

The famous poet Gabriele d'Annunzio, Michetti's friend, described how the idea of the

painting was born when he and the artist were together in Tocco da Casauria one day: "All of a sudden, we both saw a screaming, dishevelled, young shapely woman burst into the square, chased by a mob of peasant harvesters drunk from the sun, wine, and lust. The scene impressed us strongly. Michetti captured the moment in his canvas and I re-elaborated in my spirit, for years, what I had seen on that square. Finally, I wrote the tragedy." D'Annunzio recounted the episode in his famous tragedy, *The Daughter of Iorio*, in 1904.

Michetti chose Orsogna as the location for his masterpiece. It was done in one breath. Eight

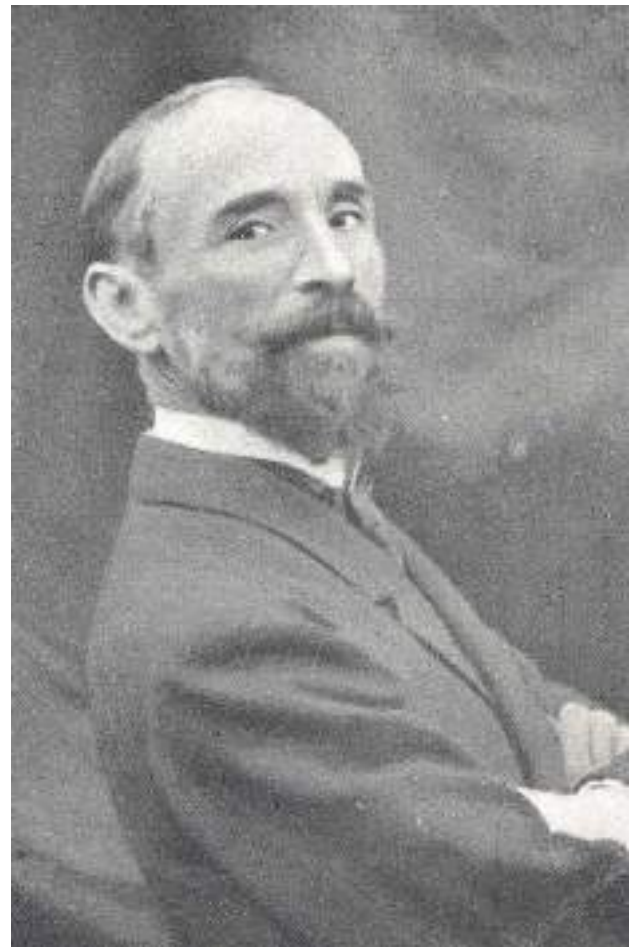
characters in Orsogna's traditional costumes, with the majestic snow-capped Majella mountain in the background. The artist did more than twenty studies for the canvas and countless photographs. Michetti was among the first artists in Italy to own and use a camera and one of the first in Abruzzo to own a car, which he drove to many remote villages of the region.

## FAME AND GLORY

After the Venice Biennale in 1895, a German art dealer named Ernst Seeger bought *La Figlia di Iorio*, along with about 200 other works by Michetti, for a hefty sum of 300,000 Italian lire (in today's money it would be something between €600,000 and €900,000). The painting made its way to the National Art Gallery in Berlin, where it was exhibited in a grandiose room until 1932. Unlike many other famous artists, Michetti earned impressive amounts of money during his life and his canvases were valued much more than nowadays.

Three years after Michetti's death, in 1932, the painting was brought back to Venice to exhibit on the occasion of the 18th Biennale. Times had changed, the world had changed: when *The Daughter of Iorio* was painted, Germany and Italy were enemies, but in 1932 the two countries were allies. Giacomo Acerbo from Loreto Aprutino – then Minister of Agriculture of the Mussolini government – even visited the exhibition (Michetti and d'Annunzio were witnesses at his wedding in 1928). When Acerbo saw the painting, he felt a pang of tenderness and jealousy. He wanted the painting back in Abruzzo.

Being a powerful man, he was in a position to immediately initiate talks with the Nazi government about bringing the large canvas back home. In Pescara, a large Government Palace was being built and one room was designed specially to house the magnificent *La Figlia di Iorio*. On September 21, 1932, the sales contract was signed, and 169,200 Ita-



**Francesco Paolo Michetti. Unknown author.**  
From *L'illustrazione italiana* 1900

lian lire exchanged hands. The painting that was considered the most Abruzzese masterpiece ever created returned and was hung in a spacious room where it remains to this day.

## BACK HOME

However, the return of Michetti's most famous painting to its homeland also marked in some way a certain downturn of his fame and prestige. During his life, Michetti was an authentically European artist. He travelled to every corner of Europe and always returned to Abruzzo, the land that inspired and stimulated him. Many of his artist friends who he gathered with in his house in Francavilla al Mare had European fame: d'Annunzio wrote a drama in French staged in Paris; Francesco Paolo Tosti of Ortona became Queen Victoria's piano teacher and was knighted by King Edward VII. However, by the end of World War II their stardom faded. Although Michetti's works can be





**Above: Restoration of the painting (via Soprintendenza Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio dell'Abruzzo). Right: Palazzo della Provincia in Pescara, an old postcard.**



found in major public and private art collections in Italy, they do not have the prestige and great value of other 20th century European artists.

In 1943, Pescara was almost completely destroyed during the bombardments by the Allied Forces. Luckily, the government building was spared, and *La Figlia di Iorio* survived. A group of ten people from the nearby town of Penne managed to take down the large canvas and hide it from the looters lurking around the city's ruins until the war was over.

## RESTORATION

Over the course of 125 years the painting has been restored several times, mainly because the painter used a new paint mixture, which proved to be problematic because it detached from the canvas and pulverized. Numerous transportations didn't help: the first journey from Venice to Berlin caused some paint to detach so much so that an intervention had to be carried out. During the return from Berlin to Pescara, with a stop in Venice, the painting was rolled up (too big to be transported flat!), which caused some serious damage.

In Abruzzo, *La Figlia di Iorio* remains everyone's favourite to this day. The latest conservation intervention was finished in December 2020 (watch a short video of the restoration [here](#)) and the painting was returned to its honorary place in the *Palazzo della Provincia*. The colours are shining again, the almond tree's bloom is bright, the red sheep wool cloak of Iorio's daughter seems to have regained its thickness, and the peasants sprawled on the lush green grass are bathing in the warm sun after a long harsh winter.

**The painting *La Figlia di Iorio* can be seen during business hours in the *Palazzo della Provincia*, Piazza Italia, 15, Pescara.**

*Marzio Maria Cimini is an art and literature enthusiast and author. He has written several books and curated an exhibition about the life and work of Gabriele d'Annunzio.*

## LETTOMANOPPELLO, THE TOWN OF WHITE DUST AND SINGING STONES

By Maria Giovanna Palermo

Located on the mountain slopes in the heart of the Maiella National Park, Lettomanoppello has been known as a town of *scalpellini* (stonecutters) for a long time. Walk along the streets of this unassuming place to discover the old tradition, and much more.



### Lettomanoppello and carved stone decorations in the town

There are places that ask to be understood, to go beyond the first superficial impression, and Lettomanoppello is one of them. Here you will not find magnificent architectural gems. The town is not a fancy *bomboniere* for distracted visitors; it can even, at first glance, appear dull and uninteresting, with no story to tell. Yet, that cannot be further from the truth. More than

in many other places, the town of stonecutters continues its rich oral and visual traditions that have been passed on through the skillful carving of the local Majella stone.

### LITTLE CARRARA

While first mentions of stone carvers date back to the Middle Ages, it is from the late 1800s - early 1900s that Lettomanoppello tapped into this industry, transforming

from a rural community into an artisan society with the entire town involved, directly or indirectly, in the working of the stone. There were *scalpellini* (stonecutters), quarrymen, and carters to transport stone blocks to the workshops in the town, as well as the local women, who brought their men in the quarries lunch and filled their baskets with smaller chunks of stones to take back. Back then, Lettomanoppello was often called a “little Carrara”.

There are still elders in the town who will tell how they started learning to find good Majella stone blocks going to the mountains when they were little, a shovel and pickaxe in hand. How they were taught to see the natural stone vein of the mountain, to make a good cut, and even recognize the quality of a stone by the sound it made when you knocked on it with a little hammer. Yes, the locals know the stone’s song and can tell before cutting a block if it is empty inside, if the stone is good for carving, or if it hides a capillary nod – a “spider,” they call it – which can cause a breakage later.

#### Stonecutter's tools in the La Bobba workshop

The elders here still remember with affection the white dust of the Majella stone that covered hands and clothes of the stonecutters, the dust that told the story of a place and tradition.

### HISTORIC WORKSHOP

If you want to hear the stone’s song for yourself, head to the historic workshop of Gennaro D’Alfonso; he passed away 10 years ago, but his family kept his shop unchanged to tell the story of the craft. In this small magical place, still covered in white stone dust, you will find many cuts of the Majella stone in different colours (very few people know, but it can also be black), see Gennarino’s (as the artisan was called by friends and family) creations for clients and, just for fun, and try to understand the distinction between a stonecutter and a sculptor.

Here, next to a big carved seat, almost like a throne decorated with flowers, you will find Gennaro’s sketches of columns and capitals, a huge carved bed headboard, figurines



changing in style in search of a new and more immediate form of expression. Before leaving, take a metal rod from the workbench and “play” the slices of stones hanging from the ceiling, gently striking them, one after another. Each responds with a different sound, so you can now understand what the local stonecutters mean when they say they can tell a stone by its sound. The ones with a longer, more melodic tone are the best for carving.

## THE TOWN

From the workshop, walk along the streets, paying attention to the details: a doorway decorated with a carving, a balcony with a relief, a stone clock on the central piazza, beautiful carved acanthus leaves on the façade of the town hall – they look so supple you want to touch them to feel their softness.

At the top of the town, there is a tiny church, *Chiesa dell'Iconicella*, where you will find one of the sweetest and most moving nativity scenes you have ever seen, the work of local stonecutters. Outside the church, on a little piazza, stands an opulent artichoke flower, carved in such detail that you can spend hours admiring it.

**Gennaro D'Alfonso's historic workshop**



**Gennaro D'Alfonso, photo in the workshop**

## THE FAMILIES

In Lettomanoppello, every family has a nickname that tells a story from the past, from the times of their great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents. The Zuppaune family can tell you how one of their ancestors went to sell the Majella stone and spent all the money he had earned in



a trattoria devouring one bowl of soup (*zuppa*) after another, so good that he couldn't stop. The La Bobba family has put their nickname on their house façade as a reminder that the stone brought them abundance, securing a hot meal (*la bobba*) on the table.

Just outside the town, is the La Bobba workshop where Claudio di Biase, a stonecutter with a pedigree, carries on the tradition of four generations of *scalpellini* started by his great-great-grandfather, Antonio Di Biase, in the 1800s. His is a workshop-school where students come to learn the trade. Here you can see and touch the simple tools of a stonecutter: a hammer, chisels, and roundels.

**Below: La Bobba workshop in Lettomanoppello.  
Right: Claudio di Biase.**

You can see how to create a particular texture on a stone surface and listen to the tireless Claudio telling stories about the Majella, the mountain beloved by his father, his grandfather, and the entire town of Lettomanoppello.

## NATURE AND HISTORY

For such a small town, Lettomanoppello has a lot to offer to those who are patient enough to discover it. Apart from the centuries-long stonecutting tradition, it boasts a stunning landscape with many hiking trails reachable from the town's centre. They will take you to medieval hermitages, to the caves used as hideouts by brigands and soldiers, and to the ancient shepherds' huts called tholos which were built from stones gathered in the mountain to clear land for grazing and cultivation. There are many of these beautiful stone huts





### Dry stone huts in Parco dei Tholos

above Lettomanoppello, with waymarked touristic paths in the area named *Parco dei Tholos* (the trails CP, C1 and C2).

There is also the Grotta Sant'Angelo cave dedicated to Saint Michael (the trail S; not well maintained). Fragments of a stone pavement are still visible there reminding us of an ancient church that once stood in the cave and was mentioned in a document from 1844. It is known that Christian saints replaced pagan ones, so Saint Michael took the place of Hercules Curinus. A copy of the original 13th century statue of the Saint is inside the cave; the original is preserved in the *Museo delle Genti D'Abruzzo* in Pescara.

It is hard to tell the history of Lettomanoppello in one short article, but this can be a point of departure to discover a place that asks us to see beyond appearances, to learn about the stories and people before they disappear forever.

## FESTIVAL

If you want to see quarrymen and *scalpellini* at work, come to Lettomanoppello for the *10 giornate in pietra* (Ten days in stone) festival held every year at the end of August and into early September. The town transforms into an open-air workshop and

gallery, with Italian and international sculptors and stonecutters creating their works on the streets. For more information, check the festival's [Facebook page](#).

## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

### HISTORIC WORKSHOP OF GENNARO D'ALFONSO

Call Marina, Gennaro's daughter, and she will open the workshop for you: 0039-3477329006 (no English, only Italian spoken). **Address:** Via Nino Bixio, 42, across the road from Parco Santa Liberata.

### CHIESA DELL'ICONICELLA

**Address:** follow the road to Passo Lanciano, the church is marked on Google Maps

### LABORATORIO LA BOBBA

Call or message Claudio to book an appointment at 0039 3337441724 (no English, only Italian spoken). **Address:** Via Prati di Tivo.

*Maria Giovanna Palermo is an art historian and tour guide. Follow her [Facebook page Sull'Arte](#). Photos by Anna Lebedeva and Maria Giovanna Palermo.*

## THE DISAPPEARING ART OF CERAMICS FROM L'AQUILA

By Enrica Di Battista

L'Aquila's tradition of incision ceramics goes back to the Middle Ages. Their production requires time, patience, and special skills. Today, only one artisan continues this ancient art in the city.



### Traditional ceramics from L'Aquila by Stella Lucente

The art of ceramics from the city of L'Aquila is not as famous as that of Castelli. Very few historical traces remain of this ancient tradition, which is at risk of disappearing. Stella Lucente, with her laboratory, *L'Aquila Ceramiche*, is the last remaining ceramist to know the traditional L'Aquila ceramics technique which she, singlehandedly, has been keeping alive. Her biggest worry, however, is not being able to pass it on to the next generation. There is no school to learn the technique

and the costs of taking in an apprentice are too high for an artisan like herself.

Stella took a course in ceramics in 2002, learning the trade from masters of Castelli, Abruzzo's famous town of ceramists, where the technique is different from that of L'Aquila. She then worked in the historic studio of San Bernardino in L'Aquila, which has since closed. After the earthquake of 2009, Stella set up a workshop in her house. With her great precision and clean incision lines, she has since had a steady stream of work making furnishing objects, favours, plates, mugs, and house

number plates for those who return to live in the buildings rebuilt in the centre of L'Aquila.

## THE TECHNIQUE

Adding delicate incisions to ceramics is an ancient technique characteristic for ceramics made by masters from L'Aquila. Stella studied old photographs and spoke to locals to learn about this tradition. The manufacturing process is long and laborious. "After creating a shape on the potter's wheel, I immerse the piece in a bath of liquid white clay. Then it is left to dry, and when its texture resembles leather (still soft but not too much), a pattern of incisions is made with a metal tip to reveal the contrast between the darker base clay and a layer of white clay," explains Stella. "Then the ceramic piece is left to dry for a few days before going into the kiln. After the firing, the product is coloured by hand with a brush." Then the piece is glazed and put back in the oven for 12-14 hours. After patient research, Stella managed to reproduce some traditional pigments used in the past: a straw yellow, a delicate blue.

## THE LAST CERAMIST

Stella is well known and mostly works to order. "Making ceramics is a passion and it is rare that in the morning you wouldn't want to get up and go to work," says Stella Lucente.

### Traditional patterns made with incisions



**Stella Lucente**

"You won't become rich, but it is a trade that is enough to make a living. To make a piece you need a lot of time and it is not always compensated financially, but you get pleasure from creating an artifact."

Stella is worried about the future. "I have spent a lot of time to revive this art of ceramics with incisions, but I don't have a possibility to teach it, to pass the technique down. I can work from my workshop at home, but taking in an apprentice here requires a financial commitment. I would have to have a workshop compliant with certain norms, I would have to pay the apprentice, and all that is unrealistic for an artisan like myself. I am happy enough with my earnings but, unfortunately, cannot afford the costs of teaching another person." She says that to make sure the ancient art of L'Aquila ceramics is not lost, regional authorities and associations should fund schools and courses. "Otherwise, like with any other traditional artisan trade, the risk of losing it is very high."

*Enrica Di Battista is an Abruzzo-based journalist working for the Italian news agency ANSA. She is the founder of [Abruzzo Travel and Food](#).*

*The article was first published on [Abruzzo Travel and Food](#). Translated and edited by Anna Lebedeva.*



# ONCE UPON A TIME

By Linda Dini Jenkins

Anglo-Italian filmmaker Julian Civiero had the talent — and the heart — to take on a project that we all know intuitively is the right thing to do, but few of us have any idea how to get it done. In his latest feature film, *La Vita De'Na Vota* (Life Once Upon a Time) he uses that talent, local connections, and purpose to shoot a film about Abruzzo that is so beautiful, so heartbreaking, and so human that it is impossible to watch without tears.

Born in Rome to an Italian father and an English mother, Julian Civiero has been working in cinema and television since the 90s. When he was two years old, his nonna Valentina moved to Colle di Sassa in the L'Aquila province of Abruzzo; soon after, his parents bought and renovated a house nearby. He fell in love with Abruzzo and now he and his wife and daughter split their time between homes in London and Fontecchio.

## EARTHQUAKE

Julian bought his home in Fontecchio in 2006. Three years later, the earthquake happened, and he saw first-hand the destruction and death that followed. He witnessed the incredible changes that were taking place right before his eyes. "I was at a loss. I had no professional equipment with me, no video camera, but I started to record sounds," he says. "The fountain splashing, the birds, men playing cards, whatever I could find." Then he started recording some of their stories and this turned into a short black-and-white film called *23 Seconds*, which caught the attention of Pro Loco Fagnano Alto, a volunteer non-profit organization that approached him in early 2018



Julian Civiero (right) during the filming of *La Vita De'Na Vota*

and asked him to record, and thereby preserve, the untold stories of Abruzzo.

"They basically gave me "carte blanche", complete creative freedom, but, more importantly, they gave me access to people: opening doors which would have been closed to me, especially to the women," he admits. "They put all their trust in me, and they paved the way for the village people to trust me, too, and I am so grateful."

## SMALL COMMUNITIES

Shot over the course of 18 months, the film takes us on a year-long journey from winter back to winter, introducing us to the most elderly



**A scene from the documentary  
*La Vita De'Na Vota***

residents (many in their late 90s) of several small towns in Abruzzo in the area around Fagnano Alto. The locals recount their childhood memories of the town's religious festas, many of which have all but disappeared and, in the telling, we learn so much more about life once upon a time: the hardships, the status of women and men, the poverty, the strong faith, the joy of the festa mornings and, of course, the centrality of the land. They show us what life was like when money was not the driving force, when everything revolved around the small community and, most important, when people instinctively took care of one another.

## MEMORIES

"Life has changed so much for these people," says Civiero. "You have to remember that there was no running water in most of these towns until the late 1960s, no electricity and roads until the 1970s . . . what they had was respect for one another and an inborn willingness to help each other and share what little they had."

Julian takes us on a journey to about 10 villages in the L'Aquila province including Frascara, Ripa, Castello, Vallecupa, and Pedicciano, some of which either no longer exist or are barely inhabited. The strongest memories that the elderly villagers shared were of the religious festas. But tied in with them are also the memories of life as it was then: how the *prosciutto* bone was passed from family to family . . . how one pig could sustain a family for a full year . . . why the birth of a daughter was often compared to a death in the family . . . why the mother-in law checked the newly-weds' bed after the first night.

"We didn't have money, but there was really no need for it," says one woman from Campana. "There was real harmony, it was something beautiful in those days." A former Termini resident says, "We abandoned the villages where we grew up, and something's missing."

For Julian, this film is personal. Money is not the driving force behind these projects, but passion is. "I remember some of what's in the film from my own childhood, and I didn't want these stories – or these people – to be forgotten."



Above: An old photo from the documentary.  
Right: A scene from the film

## NEW PROJECTS

Julian's most recent short project documents the memoirs of 90-year-old Donato Mucciante of Castel del Monte, a *transumanza* shepherd from the age of 10. He hopes that it will become part of a larger project being developed about the historical memory of the transhumance. Beyond that, he is embarking on a longer project which he describes as a "love poem to the cinema" about the lost tradition of the *cinemari* – the men who, since the 1930s, brought films to small communities during local festivals.

*La Vita De'Na Vota* has rightfully earned many awards in 2020, including BEST INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY at the Cutting Room International Short Film Festival in New York, and BEST FILMMAKER at both the Venus Italian International Film Festival in Las Vegas and the Procida International Film Festival.

You can watch a trailer of the film [here](#) and, thanks to a generous offer from Julian,



readers of Abruzzissimo Magazine will have an opportunity to view the film on March 13 and 15 (see next page for access details).

Trailers to Julian's other documentaries about Abruzzo are available on [his website](#).

If you'd like to own your own copy of the film, you can purchase the DVD by contacting Pro Loco di Fagnano via their [Facebook page](#). The cost is 20E (plus postage) and they will ship it anywhere in the world.

Linda Dini Jenkins leads small tours to Italy and blogs about travel at [Travel Italy The Write Way](#).

# LA VITA DE'NA VOTA

MEMORIE DI UN ABRUZZO MONTANO

UN FILM DI JULIAN CIVIERO

In collaborazione con



PROLOGO  
FAGNANO ALTO

## EXCLUSIVE VIEWING FOR ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE READERS MARCH 13-15

and

*a virtual Q&A session with the filmmaker Julian Civiero*

*– March 14, 6pm CET/12pm EST/9am PST*

Once upon a time, life was very different. No electricity, no plumbing, no big roads. The people of Abruzzo struggled, for sure. Yet in spite of all this, there are wonderful stories of family, faith, and sharing, and filmmaker Julian Civiero has brought us these stories in his latest film, *La Vita De'Na Vota* (Life Once Upon a Time).

Unforgettable characters – some close to 100 years of age – will delight you with the memories of local festivals and describe in detail what life was like in the villages around Fagnano Alto when they were young. The film is in Italian with English subtitles.

We will host a virtual Q&A session with Julian Civiero on March 14. Keep an eye out for an email from us with the link to the virtual room which we'll send the day before.

**ACCESS THE FILM FROM MARCH 13, 10AM CET/4AM EST  
TO MARCH 15, 10AM CET/4AM EST**

To watch the documentary go to [this link](#) and enter the password:  
Abruzzissimo2021 (case sensitive!)

Make sure you click CC in the right bottom corner for English subtitles.

**Please note, the access password will only work on the dates indicated above**

## LA DOLCE VITA IN A SMALL VILLAGE

By Anna Lebedeva

Julie and Peter Thorpe quit their busy careers and moved from the UK to a small village in the south of Abruzzo. Now they have the best of everything on their doorstep.

“We had been coming to Italy on holiday for many years, mainly up in Tuscany and Umbria, but fell in love with Abruzzo, the people, and the lifestyle when visiting friends who had settled there,” says Julie Thorpe. “Here the best of everything is within a half an hour journey: the stunning mountains, the coast, and the rolling classical Italian countryside.” In 2014, the couple took the leap and moved from the UK to the small village of Limiti in the province of Chieti.



Julie and Peter Thorpe

### STUNNING VISTAS

Julie took an early retirement, but to make ends meet, the Thorpes needed to generate an additional income. Since they both enjoyed meeting new people, setting up a hospitality business was a good solution. “We bought three properties beside each other, which sounds grand, but it is not really. The one that we use as a holiday let now was a complete ruin and we had to rebuild it. The other two were attached, with one side habitable by sort of 1950s standards, while the other one was a ruin,” recalls Julie. They turned the dilapidated buildings into a 3-bedroom family home and a small villa for guests, [Casa della Zia](#), catering for couples.

Julie says she just can't get enough of the views from their house. “When you look out, you see the classic hilltop town of Palombaro, with a backdrop of the mountains, olive groves, and vineyards. It is fabulous at sunset. Even in winter, on a warm day, you can sit out on the balcony enjoying breakfast or a glass of wine while looking at the snow-capped mountains.”

### RELAXED LIFESTYLE

Julie describes their business as laid back and relaxed, a contrast to their previous hectic life. “In summer, our busiest season, we have breakfast, tidy up around



**Casa della Zia with panoramic views**

the pool, chat with guests. We clean rooms once a week and, occasionally, cook dinner on request. Our schedule is flexible. We can do what we want when we want; it is a very relaxed lifestyle we have here.”

The couple has plenty of free time to travel around Abruzzo. “We love exploring new places, from the coast to the little towns in the mountains. Here each area has its own festival and there is always something going on,” says Julie. “Near us, in the small town of Pennapiedimonte, they have a living nativity at Christmas. You go around the town and see different scenes and at the end there is a big meal. In another town in the area, Altino, we like the peperoncino festival, *Festival del Peperone Dolce*, in summer. Local restaurants do a menu where everything, including desserts, is made with local red pepper.”

Another pastime that the Thorpes enjoy is tending their land. They have 100 olive trees, which they learned to prune with the help of a neighbour.

## AFFORDABLE

Julie and Peter say *la dolce vita* in Abruzzo is very affordable. “Our monthly budget is €1200-1300, which includes food, utilities, gas, and other basic things. Our weekly grocery shopping bill comes to €75, which includes pet food for our cats and dogs,” says Peter. “Food is amazingly good and cheap here,” adds Julie. “There are many restaurants near us with a fixed price lunch menu for €15 a person. There are some more expensive restaurants for special occasions where you could eat nicely for €40-50 per person.”

## FRIENDLY COMMUNITY

The couple found it easy to settle down and integrate into the small local community. “People around here are very friendly and welcoming. What we love the most about living in Abruzzo is the sense of community. Everybody knows each other here,” says Julie. “When we arrived, our neighbour Antonio, in his 80s, came up to teach me how to prune olive trees. Our other neighbour, Diamante, always gives us fresh chicken eggs or local waffles called *pizzelle*.”

Julie and Peter admit that there is a lot of bureaucracy in Abruzzo but, luckily for them, the house restoration went smoothly. “We didn’t hit much bureaucracy personally, but you do encounter it here. You have to accept it and go with the flow and not let it send your blood pressure sky high,” says Julie. “For all the little frustrations that you have here, you get so much good to balance it out.”

# THE PHANTOM OF THE FOREST: THE APENNINE WOLF

By Mauro Cironi

Centuries of merciless hunting had brought the Apennine wolf to the brink of extinction. But one of this animal's characteristics is an incredible adaptability to changes, even the most radical ones, meaning that the wolves managed to survive, despite the odds.



**The alpha male in the wolf reserve in Civitella Alfedena**

Nowadays, wolves are present almost everywhere in the territory of Abruzzo and yet, these shy predators are not easy to spot in nature. When hiking in the mountains and forests, you can be sure a wolf is never too far away, observing the inhabitants and visitors to his kingdom while remaining invisible, like a phantom spirit of the wild.

## PAST AND PRESENT

The wolf's amazing ability to adapt allowed the species to survive the continuous onslaught and ever-shrinking habitat. The Apennine wolf (*Canis Lupus Italicus*) resisted, retreating to the most isolated corners of the ancient forests in the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise (PNALM).

When the *lupari* (wolf hunters who received rewards for each animal killed) and poachers backed out, the last surviving families slowly recolonized new territories, silently regaining their kingdom. Today, the population of the Italian wolf is estimated to be 1600 strong across the country with about 100 of them in the PNALM.

A widespread abandonment of cultivated land and the countryside, as well as the re-introduction of large mammals such as deer, roe deer, and wild boar in the national park, meant that the wolves finally had the space and food to thrive on. One of the evolutionary mechanisms that helped the endangered species to bounce back was the so-called "dispersing." When young wolves grow and reach sexual maturity, they are chased away by the dominant Alpha pair and begin a journey,

**Two wolves in the reserve in Civitella Alfedena**

sometimes covering hundreds of kilometers, looking for other wandering wolves to create a new pack and colonise a new territory.

## MAN VS. WOLF

The relationship between humans and wolves has never been easy. Shepherds hated the predator, citizens feared it, and animal rights activists praised it. We need to understand how important wolves are for the environment. Conservationists have demonstrated that killing wolves has the opposite effect: weakened packs move closer to farms and cities in search of easy food instead of hunting in the wild.

The regulatory role wolves play in an ecosystem has been demonstrated in the Yellowstone Park in the USA, where this beautiful predator's reintroduction helped to recover the whole natural system.







### **A wolf following imprints of chamois in the Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo**

In the absence of wolves, large herds of bison and deer trampled and devoured plants and tree buds causing a considerable loss of biodiversity, to the point that even riverbanks started eroding, causing flooding because there was no riparian vegetation. In a ripple effect, reintroduction of the grey wolf changed everything: the selective predatory pressure on large herds restored their general health, contained the number of herbivores, and, therefore, indirectly protected the prairies, vegetation, and rivers. The park has seen its ecological status improve exponentially since the arrival of the wolves.

In Abruzzo, living so close to human beings, wolves must be managed: electric fences around farms, well-trained *pastore abruzzese* sheep dogs to guard the flocks, and a well-

functioning system of financial compensation to farmers who lose their stock due to the predators' attacks. All these measures have shown to bring peace to the centuries-old conflict between the man and the wolf.

## **GETTING TO KNOW THE WOLVES**

There are several sanctuaries and wildlife centres in Abruzzo where visitors can observe wolves. It helps to educate both children and adults alike, raising awareness and understanding of this amazing animal. Observing the interactions and behaviours within a pack in the Civitella Alfedena reserve makes you realise how complex the wolves' hierarchy is. Their pack hunting techniques are so sophisticated and effective that army generals could learn a lot from them.



**Wolves feasting on a cow carcass in the Parco Nazionale del GranSasso e Monti della Laga**

## WHERE TO SEE THE APENNINE WOLVES IN ABRUZZO

### WOLF VISITORS CENTRE IN POPOLI (PE)

Find guided tours and educational activities at the Wolf Visitor Centre. The centre provides sanctuary to wild animals which have been found injured in nature, carries out scientific research, and educates visitors about wolves. Visits in English can be booked in advance.

**Address:** Località Inpianezza, Popoli. Tel.: 0039 085 9808009. [Il Bosso Website](#)

### WOLF RESERVE AND MUSEUM IN CIVITELLA ALFEDENA (AQ)

Start your visit at the small museum to learn about the wolves' habits and biology. In a four-

hectares enclosure above the museum you can observe a small pack of wolves living there permanently. The reserve has played an important role in studying the predators' social interactions.

**Address:** Via Santa Lucia, Civitella Alfedena. Tel.: 0039 086 4890141  
E-mail: [lupo.civitella@parcoabruzzo.it](mailto:lupo.civitella@parcoabruzzo.it)

### WOLF SANCTUARY IN PRETORO (CH)

A temporary home for injured wolves with a small number of permanent residents. The animals live in a three-hectares fenced area. Tours in English available. Booking essential.

**Address:** Meeting point - Via Fonte Palombo, 36. Tel.: 0039 335 5995995 or e-mail Fabrizio at [info@ilgrandefaggio.it](mailto:info@ilgrandefaggio.it)



### A wolf in the Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo

If you want to go wolf-watching in the wild, join one of the guided hikes organised by the following tour companies:

#### **ABRUZZO WILDERNESS**

Tours in the Gran Sasso National Park.

Tel.: 0039 3396931376

[www.discoverabruzzo.it](http://www.discoverabruzzo.it)

#### **TREKKING ED ESCURSIONI NEL PARCO**

Tours in the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise. Tel.: 0039 335 805 3489

[www.labetullaonline.com](http://www.labetullaonline.com)

#### **WILDLIFE ADVENTURES**

Tours in the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise. Tel.: 0039 339 839 5335.

[www.wildlifeadventures.it](http://www.wildlifeadventures.it)

*Mauro Cironi is a mountain guide and an amateur photographer. He is involved in two conservational programmes – the Life Coornata project and the Salviamo l'Orso.*

Have an idea for an article or want to become a contributor? Email us at [editor@abruzzissimo.com](mailto:editor@abruzzissimo.com)

## RETURN OF THE BLACK PIG

By Anna Swann

In the old days, farmers in Abruzzo raised only a local pig breed called *Maiale Nero D'Abruzzo*, or Abruzzese Black Pig. In 1926, there were 128,000 black pigs in the region, farmed mostly in small herds. With the advent of industrial farming, the heritage black breed was forsaken in favour of a commercial breed (*maiale chiaro industriale*). In 2004, when the breed was on the brink of extinction, a local veterinarian named Simone Angelucci started the revival of *Maiale Nero*. Since then, many farmers – with a support from Slow Food and European funds – got involved in the project. Today, 30 farms in the region raise up to 800 black pigs per year.

Farming the *Maiale Nero* is everything that industrial farming is not: the pigs live in small herds (25 animals per hectare) in the open, with some farmers raising them in oak forests, and no use of antibiotics or hormones is allowed. Black pigs cost more to raise, as they grow more slowly and sows only have up to seven piglets at a time compared to commercial breeds with litters of 10-13 piglets. The *Maiale Nero's* meat is also different from what industrial farming offers: it has a distinctive rich taste and has a higher percentage of muscle fat classified as "good fat," which is lower in cholesterol and, due to the pigs' healthy natural diet, contains high levels of Omega3 fatty acids.

Black pig meat is used for making rich traditional dishes, prosciutto, and sausages. It is more expensive than conventional pork, but is worth every penny. In the last few years, *Maiale Nero* products have made their way not only to upmarket delicatessens but also to supermarket shelves. Some restaurants have excellent black pig dishes on their menu and you can buy fresh meat from specialised producers. Check out these addresses if you want to taste the *Nero D'Abruzzo*:



### LOCANDA DEL BARONE

An excellent family-run restaurant which offers a more sophisticated take on traditional local cuisine. They always have a few *Maiale Nero* dishes on the menu and once a year organise a thematic lunch dedicated to the heritage breed in conjunction with Slow Food. English spoken. **Address:** Contrada Case del Barone, 1, Caramanico Terme. Tel.: 0039 085 92584

### VILLA MAIELLA

This one-Michelin-star restaurant has its own farm where black pigs are raised and fed on local grains. Call ahead if you want to make sure something with *Maiale Nero* is available. **Address:** Via Sette Dolori, 30, Guardiagrele. Tel.: 0039 0871 809319

### COSTANTINI SLOW

This is a farm, rather than a restaurant, specialising in raising *Maiale Nero D'Abruzzo*. You can buy cured and fresh meats directly from the farm or on their online shop (check out this delicious, albeit pricey prosciutto). They also supply Conad supermarkets in Tortoreto (Via Leonardo Da Vinci) and Alba Adriatica (Via Duca D'Aosta, 45). **Address:** Via Rovano, 21, Mosciano Sant'Angelo.

### SAPOR DI MAIELLA

A no-frills restaurant serving traditional dishes (can be hit and miss). They always have excellent cheeses and cured meats made at the family farm. Call beforehand to inquire when dishes with *Maiale Nero* are served. You can also go directly to the farm, *La Tua Fattoria* (Contrada Colle Serra, 29, Serramonacesca), to buy black pig sausages or chops. **Address:** Via Monte Velino, 2, Manoppello Scalo. Tel.: 0039 328 0588403

## TRADITIONAL... SANDWICH FEAST

By Connie De Vincentis

I have always known about the tradition of *lo sdijuno* (or *lu sdejun'*) in our farming communities in Abruzzo. When I moved here from Australia almost 40 years ago, it was still the norm, but has since unfortunately disappeared.

The *sdijuno* was the first abundant meal of the day in the rural Abruzzese tradition. Farmers would wake at around 4 am and have a quick, light breakfast, often just a glass of milk. They would then head out to work in the fields or tend to their farm animals.

Mid-morning, which for farmers was between 9am and 11am, they would start their *sdijuno*, which means "breaking the fast." It was their first full meal of the day, having eaten a frugal dinner the evening before, at 6pm (farmers went to bed early in those days), so it meant they were fasting for at least 14 hours every day. Some scientists and doctors say this might be the key to their longevity.

*Sdijuno* meant simple but hearty food: *frittata* with sweet peppers, *baccala'*, bread, lots of bread, cheese, prosciutto, eggs, and, of course, the wine. It was a panini sandwich feast with all the food being eaten on slices of bread without the bother and wasting time to put plates and cutlery out. The farmers had to go back to work as soon as the meal was over!

One of my favourite *sdijuno* sandwiches is with *pipindune e ove*, or fried peppers and eggs. Easy and tasty, I use any excuse to make it as often as possible. I put the filling, while it still hot, between two slices of fresh crispy bread and I am in heaven.

Most people here do not do *sdijuno* anymore, but it is interesting to see that following traditions, or a habit, you will always see some Abruzzese eating something savoury mid-morning. So here is to health, longevity and hard work!

*Connie De Vincentis runs a [home restaurant and cooking school](#) in Tocco da Casauria where you can book an authentic *sdijuno* brunch.*



## PIPINDUNE E OVE

### INGREDIENTS

Makes 6 portions

400 gr of bell or horn peppers, cut in strips  
 4 medium potatoes, finely sliced (optional)  
 1 medium onion, finely sliced  
 4 eggs  
 50 gr of grated pecorino  
 ½ tsp salt  
 4 + 3 tablespoons olive oil

### PREPARATION

Warm 4 tbsps of oil in a thick-bottomed frying pan and sauté the onion.

Add the peppers, fry for 3 minutes. After 3 minutes cover the pan and fry on a low heat for another 20 minutes.

In the meantime, if you are using potatoes, fry them in olive oil until golden. Remove from pan and place on kitchen paper to remove the excess oil.



Beat the eggs in a bowl with the grated pecorino (parmigiano works well, too). Add the cooked potatoes and season with salt and pepper. Pour the eggs over the peppers without stirring and cook for about 2 minutes. After 2 minutes stir from the bottom up all around the fry pan so that you have chunky eggs rather than scrambled.

Keep stirring occasionally on low heat for about 4 minutes or until the egg chunks are firm. Use it as a sandwich filler or served hot on a plate.

**Variations:** This recipe works well with grated or finely chopped zucchini, if you prefer a more delicate flavour. Zucchini cook quicker than peppers, so reduce the 20 minutes to 10.



ISSUE NO. 11 • APRIL 2021

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD WINE

# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



**A Weaving Rebel from  
Campotosto**

*page 5*

**A Day in Civitella  
del Tronto**

*page 8*

**Walking in  
Shepherds' Steps**

*page 23*

# CONTENTS



**02. EDITOR'S NOTE**

**03. NEWS & EVENTS**

**04. DID YOU KNOW?**

**05. A WEAVING REBEL FROM  
CAMPOTOSTO**

**08. A DAY IN CIVITELLA DEL  
TRONTO**

**12. A TREASURE HUNT IN  
PRETORO**

**16. FROM FINLAND TO  
FALLO TO RESTORE AN  
OLD HAMLET**

**19. FULL CIRCLE**

**23. WALKING IN  
SHEPHERDS' STEPS**

**27. ASK THE EXPERT:  
HEALTHCARE  
IN ABRUZZO**

**28. FOOD & WINE**

*The best Italian rosé is made in  
Abruzzo, Easter recipes: pizza di  
Pasqua, fiadoni and fraungelle*

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## **ON THE COVER:**

A street in Civitella del Tronto.  
Photo via [Comune di Civitella del  
Tronto](#).

## **LEFT:**

Treasure hunt in Pretoro, page 12.



# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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Magazine

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*Ciao a tutti!*

Life's simple joys, family recipes, and centuries-old traditions are the main themes in this issue of ABRUZZISSIMO.

Easter will be more intimate and quiet this year without the usual big celebrations in Abruzzo. Everyone is staying in the safety of their homes as we are still waiting for normal life to resume. However, that doesn't mean we cannot enjoy comforting family feasts of traditional hearty dishes. In this issue, we share with our readers three of Abruzzo's best Easter recipes: *pizza di Pasqua* from Magliano de' Marsi, *fiadoni* and *fraungelle*.

We take you to Campotosto to meet a rebel who has been reviving the local weaving tradition to create beautiful textiles and garments. Walk with us around Pretoro in search of hidden treasures and discover the town's long history. Climb up to the formidable fortress of Civitella del Tronto. Sample the world's best rosé wine – made in Abruzzo. Read about a Finnish couple who live a simple rural life in a *borgo* that they've been slowly restoring, stone by stone, learning one skill at a time.

I have been getting many emails from readers asking about the practicalities of moving and living in Abruzzo, so I decided to start a new column where experts will answer your queries. In this issue, we start with healthcare options available in the region. Send your questions to me at [editor@abruzzissimo.com](mailto:editor@abruzzissimo.com) and I will invite professionals to cover the topics in detail.

Thank you to everyone who has sent donations to ABRUZZISSIMO. You are helping me to grow the publication and bring you high-quality content in English not available anywhere else. If you want to become a supporter of ABRUZZISSIMO and contribute to the magazine's upkeep, [donate here](#).

Enjoy the April issue!

***A presto,***

Anna Lebedeva

Editor

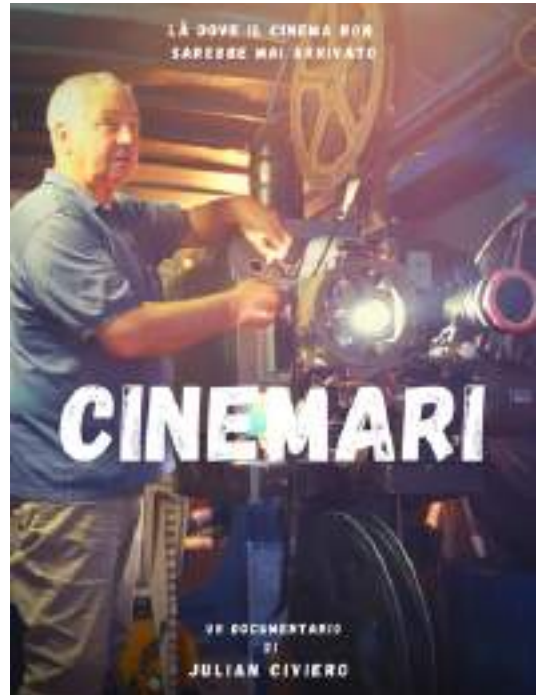
## WEBINARS ON MOVING AND LIVING IN ABRUZZO

ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine is organising a series of webinars for those who want to move to Abruzzo and renovate a property here. We will be inviting leading experts to talk about elective visas; the 7% tax regime and other tax relief for non-EU citizens; the towns that are best suitable to choose if you want to take advantage of tax breaks; house reconstruction financial incentives such as Superbonus 110%, Ecobonus, and others. Keep an eye on our [website](#) for the upcoming webinar announcements.



## NEW ITINERARY FOR SLOW TRAVEL

The tour cooperative [Il Bosso](#) has developed a new route for exploring Abruzzo. The 100 km-long itinerary runs through the region's most picturesque corners: Valle del Tirino, Rocca Calascio, the towns of Ofena, Castel del Monte, Santo Stefano di Sessanio, Navelli, and Capestrano. It can be followed by bike, foot, or on horse back. Watch their detailed [presentation video](#) in English to learn some interesting facts about the area, plan your next trip, or simply dream about the times when we can travel and explore again.



## HELP TO PRESERVE MEMORIES OF ABRUZZO'S CINEMARI

More than 1200 households across the world tuned in for an exclusive viewing of the documentary *La Vita De'Na Vota (Life Once Upon a Time)* by the award-winning filmmaker Julian Civiero that we organised for our readers.

Julian is working on his next documentary, *Cinemari*, that follows the journey of cinema in rural Abruzzo. In the 1940s and 50s, long before television arrived in small villages, the *cinemari* were the men who brought outdoor cinema to village festivals. Every Abruzzese has their own memory of the *cinema in piazza* – it's part of the traditional life of the village. Their stories illustrate a time of innocence when the magic and mystery of *cinema* was a world away from the hard lives of labour in the fields.

Julian Civiero is running a [fundraising campaign](#) on Kickstarter to finish the film. By contributing even as little as €12 you can help him to capture history unique to Abruzzo and record the stories of the dying art of *cinemari*. The campaign is "all or nothing" – so unless we help Julian reach the goal, he won't get the money. See the trailer for the documentary and donate [here](#).



## TRADITIONAL BAKING WITH OLIVE OIL

With just a few humble ingredients, you can make delicious centuries-old dishes. Join Abruzzo With Gusto's virtual cooking classes on April 15 and 22 to learn how to make two versions, sweet and savoury, of *tarallucci al vino* and different types of the ancient *pizza scima* with just flour, olive oil, wine, and a few other simple ingredients. Only eight places per class are available, so book in advance. See the details and book the classes on [Abruzzo With Gusto website](#).

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## DID YOU KNOW?

### WELCOME TO JURASSIC PARK... ABRUZZO STYLE

An imprint of the biggest theropod dinosaur that ever lived in the territory of modern-day Italy has been found on the slopes of Mount Cagno, near the town of Rocca di Cambio in Sirente Velino Regional Park.

A number of imprints were found there in 2006, but only a few years ago researchers from the National Institute of Geophysics and Vulcanology managed to study them in detail with help of a drone. They realised that one imprint belonged to an enormous theropod, similar to the Velociraptor or Tyrannosaurus (like the ones in the *Jurassic Park!*), which roamed the local beaches about 120 million years ago during the Cretaceous period – when the climate in Abruzzo was similar to that of the Bahamas. Palaeontologists believe that the dinosaur was resting, as they can clearly see the metatarsus bones and the ankle joint in the imprint, which measures over 135 cm in length. Other indentations around it also belong to theropod dinosaurs, albeit smaller ones. Most likely they were walking slowly in shallow waters on a soft, muddy surface.

The site is at an altitude of 1900 metres in a remote location but can be reached on foot in summer. The trek is not particularly difficult, but is long – over six hours – and not marked, so it is better to tackle it with an experienced mountain guide. [Abruzzo Wild](#) organises small group treks to see the famous dinosaurs' imprints. Local authorities hope to develop the trail as a tourism attraction in the near future.

## A WEAVING REBEL FROM CAMPOTOSTO

By Enrica Di Battista

More than twenty years ago, Assunta Perilli left her job as an archaeologist to devote herself entirely to fabric weaving, yarn spinning, and researching the traditional fabrics made over centuries in the hinterland of Abruzzo.



**Assunta Perilli in her workshop. Photo by Nicola Dipierro**

Entering Assunta's small but welcoming workshop, La fonte della tessitura in Campotosto, in the province of L'Aquila, is like stepping back in time. In a small room heated only by a wood stove, surrounded by her creations – colourful local yarns, fabrics dyed with natural colours, warm hand-made jackets or cosy slippers – Assunta tells her story to customers and many journalists who visit her. Assunta is

somewhat of a celebrity, since she made the kilt given to Prince Charles of England in 2017 by the association *Casa delle Donne* from the nearby town of Amatrice.

### GRANDMOTHER'S LOOM

Assunta Perilli began weaving in 2000, when she found her grandmother's loom, forgotten and fallen into pieces, in her cellar. Despite never having seen a loom before, she managed to assemble and

repair the 19th-century apparatus. She convinced some elderly local women who knew the art of weaving to teach her the secrets of the trade. Assunta intentionally chose not to go to a weaving school but to learn from the oral tradition, as it was done in the old days.

The relationship with the elderly ladies was not idyllic at first. It was as if they had to test Assunta's true commitment to learning this art but, after a while, they became like a family and Assunta calls them "my grandmothers."

Over the years, Assunta has become an expert traditional yarn and fabric weaver, renowned for her skills in the mountain areas between Amatrice and Scanno.

In 2017, in the aftermath of the earthquake, she was left without her beloved loom for a year and had to transfer her workshop to a wooden hut because her previous studio was damaged during the tremors (and still has not been restructured).

**Making linen yarn by hand. Photo by Claudio dell Osa**



**Linen textiles woven by Assunta Perilli**

She works with two collaborators and is keen to emphasise that it is her choice to remain a small artisanal operation instead of, perhaps, transferring the business to a big city. It doesn't make sense to follow the weaving traditions of the mountain villages away from this environment, she says. Not selling her creations online is another decision she made consciously. Her philosophy is "if you are interested in my work, come to Campotosto, get to know the place."

## NEVER STOP LEARNING

Assunta never stops learning and trying new things. After studying and cataloguing the local wool supply chain, the tireless weaver reconstructed and catalogued the traditional flax to linen supply and production chain, from cultivation to spinning. When a centenarian from the village, nonna Laurina, died her granddaughter found a sachet of flax seeds that she gave to Assunta, inspiring her to begin experimenting with flax cultivation.

Perilli also collaborated with the faculty of experimental archaeology of the University of Rome La Sapienza to study spinning and weaving methods of prehistoric men and Etruscans. In 2018, she reconstructed and wove an old traditional costume, which she showed in a fashion show along with other dresses from fabrics woven on the loom by her and her collaborators – a success that took months and months of work.

## QUIET REBELLION

Nowadays, we often wear fabrics mass-produced by underpaid workers or, worse, by child-slaves on the other side of the world, and sold in rich countries at bargain prices; weaving on a loom and making a living from it is like going against the tide and a choice to be admired.

“Working on the loom is revolutionary, an act of rebellion. It has been my firm belief since I started weaving, and people thought I was crazy,” says Assunta. “My mother was not happy about it because everyone in the village was saying, ‘*She has graduated university and now wants to work on the loom?!*’ because weaving was always seen as a tiring job for women, not even a job but a pastime, for subsistence. Even my ‘grandmothers’ believed it at the beginning and when they heard that a client commissioned a blanket would wonder why they didn’t buy a ready-made one. The nonnas knew how much work it was going to be making one and thought I would get too tired.”

## REINTERPRETING THE CAPE

Nowadays, many of Assunta’s clients in big cities wear what she calls the revised Abruzzese cape. “In the past, in villages of the Monti della Laga area, women’s place of origin could be identified by the colours and type of the cape (*mantarella*) they wore,” she explains. “In Campotosto, the *mantarella* was black with white stripes and one red stripe. I weave fabrics in those colours to make skirts,



Weaving wool textile

scarves, or tippetts. With the blessing of my ‘grandmothers,’ I reinterpret the traditional garment from my town in Abruzzo’s hinterland into clothes that can be worn anywhere.”

Despite the earthquake and depopulation that have been ravaging many towns and villages in the Apennines, life goes on in Campotosto. Every year, Assunta Perilli organizes the Flax Festival and the Mazzapuregliu Festival. The *mazzapuregliu* in traditional beliefs is a mischievous gnome with a red cap. This magic figure recurs in childhood memories of all locals: when any unpleasant event happened, it was blamed on the *mazzapuregliu*. During the festival, participants make *mazzapuregliu* and the best one is chosen at the end.

For more information about Assunta’s workshop, visit her [blog](#) and [Facebook page](#).

*Enrica Di Battista is an Abruzzo-based journalist working for the Italian news agency ANSA. She is the founder of [Abruzzo Travel and Food](#).*

*The article was first published on [Abruzzo Travel and Food](#). Translated and edited by Anna Lebedeva.*

## A DAY IN CIVITELLA DEL TRONTO

By Linda Dini Jenkins

One of the most beautiful towns in Italy, Civitella del Tronto sits at the uppermost edge of the Teramo province. With about 5,000 inhabitants (only 150 in the *centro*), it is a stunning walled medieval gem — and a true culinary destination — that should not be missed.



**Civitella del Tronto. Photo via [Comune di Civitella del Tronto](#)**

Located on the northern border of Abruzzo, less than 20 km north of the city of Teramo, Civitella del Tronto sits 600 metres above sea level, affording panoramic views that include the Adriatic from your perch on the city's main piazza, Piazza Francesco Filippi Pepe. Hopefully, you'll have a spritz or other refreshment as you take in the view. Because, aside from seeing the incredible fortress and squeezing yourself through *La Ruetta d'Italia*, the narrowest street in Italy, the best things to do in Civitella del Tronto are relax, eat, and drink.

The origins of Civitella are a bit unclear, but there have been traces of human existence in the area as far back as the Neolithic age. Because of its strategic location between the Kingdom of Naples and the Papal States, the town has played a key role in the political affairs of the territory and has withstood long sieges during the 13th – 16th centuries. In fact, during the Risorgimento in the 19th century, the fortress was the scene of the last stand of the Kingdom of Naples against the armies of Garibaldi and the Piedmont. The fall of the fortress in 1861 – the last one to fall – paved the way for the unification and the ultimate creation of the Kingdom of Italy.

## WHAT TO SEE

### LA FORTEZZA DI CIVITELLA DEL TRONTO

The elliptical shaped Fortress of Civitella is the largest fortress in all of Italy and the second largest in Europe (the largest is in Salzburg, Austria). It is located on the top of a rocky cliff, stands about 500 metres long and 45 metres wide, and can be seen for miles around. Building began in 1564 and took 12 years to complete. The fortress remains largely unchanged since its original layout, although some restoration occurred, most importantly when the power shifted from the House of Hapsburg to the House of Bourbon in the 1700s.

According to Luciano Di Gregorio, writing in *Italy: Abruzzo*, "Its dominance over the surrounding area ended with the struggles over the birth of the modern Italian state . . ." Largely ignored until the early 1970s – when a restoration program began which lasted 10 years – the fortress has been open to the public as a museum since 1985 under the auspices of the Historical Society of L'Aquila.

The best way to see the fortress is with a guide, who will lead you through the history, the ruins, and the still in-tact rooms which include well-curated displays of weaponry, cannons, uniforms, maps, and historic artifacts dating back centuries. With its large

**La Fortezza di Civitella del Tronto . Photo via Comune di Civitella del Tronto**



outdoor venues, conference hall, and exhibition spaces, the fortress is used for many different kinds of events throughout the year including concerts, weddings, and historical pageants. After your tour, walk around the walls for some stunning views of the valley below and, on a clear day, the sea. You can tour the fortress [online](#) from the comfort of your home.

**Tours in English** can be booked in advance. Tel.: 0039 320 8424540. E-mail: [biglietteria@fortezzadicivitella.it](mailto:biglietteria@fortezzadicivitella.it)

### LA RUETTA: DO IT BEFORE YOU EAT!

Civitella del Tronto, one of the best-preserved villages in Italy, is home to many beautiful cobblestoned streets, a few notable churches, and lots of historic, charming buildings. But it is also famous for being the site of the narrowest street in all of Italy, known locally as *La Ruetta*. Everyone has to try to squeeze through (usually, sideways) and have a photo taken. It's just one of the things you do. In your navigator enter the address "Via della Ruetta, 4" to find it.

### MUSEO NINA

Civitella's textile museum is a unique collection of more than 3,000 pieces, relating to all aspects of the decorative arts, created to preserve and celebrate the city's noble past. Located not far from La Ruetta, the museum holds one of the largest collections of Italian textile and fashion history, spanning the late





18th century to the post-World War II period. It also features a wide range of objects, including Murano glass pins, sewing machines, and even the green silk blanket that was used during the Bourbon King Ferdinand II's visit to the city in 1832. Tours are in Italian, but Guido, the museum's director, is fluent in English and can help with translating.

**Address:** Corso G. Mazzini, 75. Tel.: 0039 086 191258 (ticket office), 0039 351 5355800 (for guided tours in English).

**Web:** [www.museonina.it](http://www.museonina.it)

### CHURCH OF SAN FRANCESCO

Recently restored, the Church of San Francesco dates back to 13th-14th century but was transformed in the 18th century to its current Baroque interior style. Its bell tower, exquisite rose window, Baroque interior, and 15th century wooden choir stalls make it a visual delight.

**Address:** Via Guglielmo Marconi, 1.

### CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA DEGLI ANGELI

Near the Museo NINA, the tiny church dates back to the 14th century, and some claim it is the oldest church in town. You'll find it wedged between some of the beautiful alleys, not far from the town centre. It is decorated with frescoes and houses a dramatic wooden sculpture of the dead Christ.

**Address:** Via Giuseppe Mazzini 58.

### Museo NINA



A street in the town. Photo by Clare Lusher.

## WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

### HOTEL ZUNICA 1880

For four generations, the Zunica family has been welcoming guests to this extraordinary former 17th century palace. It was opened as a hotel in 1880 and has been run by the Zunica family ever since. Current owner Daniele Zunica, along with his front-of-the-house manager Maurizio Neri, and his two amazing young chefs – Sabatino Lattanzi and Luca di Felice – provide world-class hospitality and incredible cuisine based on traditional recipes. They also have a welcoming bar for *aperitivi* and *amari* if you want to relax after a day of explorations.

**Address:** Piazza Filippi Pepe, 11. Tel.: 0039 086 191319.

**Web:** [www.zunica1880ristorantehotel.it](http://www.zunica1880ristorantehotel.it)



The town from above. Photo via  
Comune di Civitella del Tronto

### RISTORANTE DA ENRICO

Hearty local dishes and friendly atmosphere. The restaurant is famous for its excellent mushroom dishes and *baccalà*.

**Address:** Via Case Degli Angeli, 22. Tel.: 0039 329 069 6833.

### RISTORANTE COLLE SANTAMARIA

A short simple menu with traditional dishes such as *timballo teramano* (a local lasagna) and *chitarra con le pallottine* (pasta with tiny meatballs). Book a table on their terrace to admire the stunning views over the surrounding countryside. Located only one kilometre from the fortress, so you can drive or walk to the restaurant.

**Address:** Loc. Santa Maria dei Lumi. Tel.: 0039 0861 918210, 0039 3486283456.

### ILLUMINATI WINERY

Make a point of driving out to the countryside to visit the DOC Controguerra wine region. One of my favorite wineries here, Illuminati, has a very popular Cabernet-Montepulciano blend, a Pecorino, and several rare white blends. It's definitely worth the trip for a tasting. The wines are not cheap, but they're perfect for special meals. All in all, it's a brilliant accompaniment to a magical stay in Civitella del Tronto.

Guided tours and tastings in English can be booked in advance.

**Address:** C.da S. Biagio, 18, Controguerra. Tel.: 0039 086 1808008.

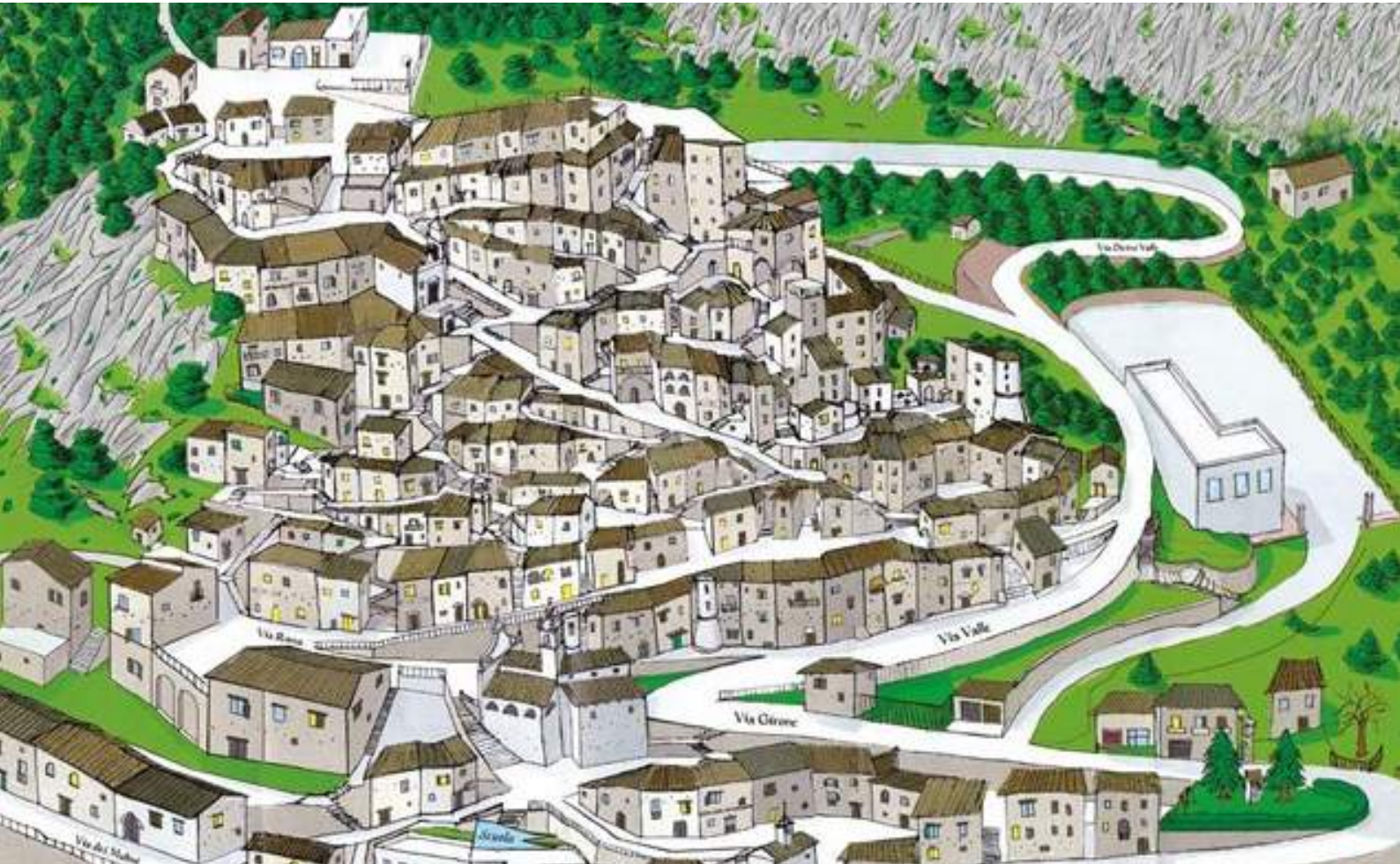
**Web:** [www.illuminativini.com](http://www.illuminativini.com)

*Linda Dini Jenkins leads small tours to Italy and blogs about travel at [TravelItalyTheWriteWay.com](http://TravelItalyTheWriteWay.com).*

# A TREASURE HUNT IN PRETORO

By Michela Portacci

Pretoro is a small, picturesque town perched on the eastern slopes of the Maiella Mountain which offers an exciting itinerary for families, young and adult explorers alike.



Map of Pretoro (via [Visitpretoro.info](http://Visitpretoro.info))

It takes strong legs to climb up from the first house to the top of the town, as there are more than 1,407 steep steps, but it is certainly worth the effort.

Pretoro is located in an ancient beech forest, with trees up to 35 meters high (as tall as a 10-storey building!). The oldest one is believed to be 500 years old and is known as "The Great Beech." As a result, woodworking has always been the main activity in the town. Local masters made spindles, kitchen utensils, and chairs. It was said that in all of Abruzzo and beyond

there were no better woodturners than the ones from Pretoro for making spindles, which were used for spinning sheep wool into yarn.

## HIDDEN SPINDLES AND NOOKS

To celebrate this traditional craft and to guide the tourists in their discovery of the town, the local tourist office (Pro loco) has placed wooden spindles around the old part of Pretoro for curious visitors to find them. **How many spindles can you find? See the total number of hidden spindles at the end of the article.**

Walking through the narrow streets flanked by medieval stone houses, you can glimpse beautiful views of the distant sea and stone lions observing you from the balconies. As you walk, you might hear music coming from some windows, as many of the 875 town inhabitants play at least one musical instrument, and many of them play in the famous local marching band.

There are several ancient archways, *gli sporti*, that were used as rock shelters where townsfolk would accommodate seasonal workers coming to prune trees. They used to cook and sleep right there, during cold medieval winters. If you look carefully you will see under those arches iron rings, nooks to store food, cellars for collecting snow to be used in summer as cold storage. **Try to find a food nook in the town and check its location in the answers below.**

## WOODEN CREATIONS

There are two places in Pretoro where you can admire the craftsmanship of local woodturners. In the small Art Museum, you will find a permanent exhibition of Pretoro's most famous craftsman, Mastro Tonino. His wooden models of the Sagrada Familia, Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, the local St. Nicholas

**Clockwise: An ancient nook for storing food; photo by Fabrizio Chiavaroli. Spindles by Mastro Tonino; the woodturner in his workshop; photos via [Mastro Tonino/Facebook](#)**

Church, and many others are true masterpieces. You can also visit his magical workshop, where the 90-year-old Mastro Tonino, surrounded by old tools, wooden toys, and other creations welcomes visitors with a smile and shows off his work.

## ST. DOMINIC AND THE WOLF

Pretoro's most famous legend is that of Saint Dominic, a Benedictine monk who lived in the mountains nearby in the 11th century and was renowned for his miracles. According to legend, two peasants came running to him asking for help: their child had been taken by a wolf. Saint Dominic talked to the wolf and the predator returned the child to his parents. The whole town rejoiced, and the miracle is still celebrated every year, on the first Sunday in May, with the festival – one of the oldest in Abruzzo – *Festa di San Domenico e Il Lupo*.

The celebration starts at 8am with a *serpari* (snake catchers) competition (St. Dominic



was also known for saving people from snake bites). Men of Pretoro pass their snake-catching skills on to their sons to mark their transition to adulthood. There are four categories for four different snake species and four prizes are given to the *serpari* who caught the heaviest specimen. The snakes are safely released back into the wild after the competition.

Later in the morning, locals perform a play, *La Sacra Rappresentazione*, representing the miracle of San Domenico. There are four main characters: the farmer, his wife, the wolf, and the baby – always played by the most recent newborn in the town. When the wolf carefully places the infant in the basket (not an easy job, as the actor holds the baby in his teeth!) the spectators always applaud. You can see a video of the play [here](#) (fast forward to 39'00").

Head to the Wolf Museum to learn about the story of St. Dominic and see photos of the play and the costumes worn by the actors every year.

## WOLF SANCTUARY

At the top of the town, you will find a large wildlife area, home to Apennine wolves in need of care. At the moment, there are four injured wolves living there. Some of them might be released into the wild; others will remain here for the rest of their lives. It is possible to spot

**Pretoro. Photo by Letizia Colasante**



**A scene from the play with the wolf carrying the baby. Photo via [Proloco Pretoro](#)**

the resident animals during the guided tour with a local environmental organisation, *Il Grande Faggio*, which manages the sanctuary. One of the wolves released recently with a GPS collar is already wandering in the region of Campania, more than 200 kilometres away, where he made his way in a short period of time. Try to book your tour in the afternoon in winter or in the evening in summer months when the wolves are fed, so you can observe them.

## OLD WATERMILLS

Below the town runs the Foro River. If you follow the path (E2 on the Maiella National Park's map) it will bring you to the babbling river. It is very quiet and you probably won't meet anyone on the path but, until 100 years ago, it was busy with men and donkeys carrying grains and legumes to the watermills. The water from the river moved heavy stone wheels to make flour. Pretoro had many mills, with the first ones dating back to year 1000, as old documents attest; you can see the ruins of some of them hiding between the trees. Book a guided tour to learn their history and learn how the mills worked.

The guide will take you inside one of the old mills to show the name of the last owner of the mill carved in the stone: Pietro Colasante, year 1936.

## IF YOU GO

You can rent e-bikes at the tourist office in Piazza Madonna della Libera and enjoy the ride towards the mountain. Once you are at the top, you can enjoy a view to the sea that you will never forget.

The detailed map of Pretoro is available in the Pro Loco (Tourist Office in Piazza Madonna della Libera) or [online](#).

There are many events and festivals throughout the year (when the current restrictions are lifted): *Notti di San Lorenzo* in August (traditional crafts, food, music), *Maiella Uttobeer Fest* (a beer festival) in October, and a nativity scene contest in December. For further information, check the [local tourism office page](#).

## ADDRESSES

**Art Museum**, St. Andrew's Church, via Sant'Andrea.

**Bottega di Mastro Tonino**, via Fonte Palombo. Wolf Museum, Via IV Salita Purgatorio, 10.

**Wildlife Area of the Apennine Wolf**, meeting point at Via Fonte Palombo, 36. Guided tours only (temporarily suspended due to the current restrictions, English spoken). You can request customised tours in the area. For details and bookings call Fabrizio Chiavaroli at 0039 335 5995995 or email [info@ilgrandefaggio.it](mailto:info@ilgrandefaggio.it).

**Watermills**. Guided tours in English and Italian. For details and bookings call Maurizio Fanciulli at 0039 327 2845473.



An old watermill. Photo by Maurizio Fanciulli

## ANSWERS

**1. Hidden spindles.** If you find:

- less than 10 spindles: beginner explorer
- from 11 to 20: good job!
- more than 20: advanced explorer
- 30 spindles: CHAMPION!

**2. The food nook is here:**



*Michela Portacci works in the regional government and is passionate about promoting Abruzzo and its traditions.*

## FROM FINLAND TO FALLO TO RESTORE AN OLD HAMLET

By Minna Lymi

A search for a simple, genuine life brought a Finnish couple to a small village in Abruzzo where they have been learning new skills and bringing abandoned houses back to life.

In 2016, we sold our house in Finland and decided to move to Italy. I was a news editor in the second biggest newspaper in Finland and my husband Mikko worked as an engineer at a paper mill. Our kids were grown up and I realised that I didn't enjoy my job anymore and wanted to do something else. We talked about the places that made us feel happy and Italy was on the top of the list. We thought we'd give it a try and if it didn't work we could always go back.

First, we went to Sicily but instead of a house we found a stray puppy who we adopted. Then we spent some time in Massa Carrara but couldn't find the house of our dreams. After a year of searching, when I was fed up with our search, an old stone house in Abruzzo advertised online caught our attention. It was the one and only property we looked at in Abruzzo and knew straight away it was right, so we bought it.

### PICCOLO SALVO

The moment we arrived in Abruzzo, saw the mountains and the village of Fallo in the province of Chieti, we fell in love. We bought a small hamlet (*borgo*) and called it Piccolo Salvo, after the stray puppy we picked up in



**Minna and Mikko Lymi with one of their dogs, Pipa**

Sicily. Piccolo Salvo is three houses, two ruins, and 1770 square meters of land, myself and Mikko, our three dogs, and the many cats that we feed.

There is also an elderly neighbour, Giovanni, who lives on our small piazza. His daughter wanted him to move in with her, but he said: "Don't worry, Minna and Mikko will take care of me here." When we found out about this unknown-to-us agreement, we laughed but didn't mind at all. That's how it is done here, everyone takes care of each other.

The houses that we bought are around 200 years old and, according to the villagers, were



**The hamlet of Piccolo Salvo**

lived in until the 1960s. It was a poor part of the village. The families who lived here had some farm animals, a small olive orchard. Then they moved somewhere else in Italy, the United States, and Canada, so the houses were left to crumble.

You have to be a bit crazy to live like we do. Our only heating is a wood stove which we also use for heating water. I used to have long hair but decided to it cut short because it is easier to manage. Do we regret moving here? Not for a second! Every time I come out of the house, look at the mountains all around, and talk to the people in the village, I feel happy.

## LEARNING NEW SKILLS

Going through the Italian bureaucracy was the biggest challenge. It took us a long time to find an engineer, understand what we could do with our property and what we couldn't. We were very frustrated. But, eventually, it all settled, and we accepted certain ways because

it is just how things are done here and we have to live with that.

We decided to do as much reconstruction work by ourselves as possible. Bigger structural jobs are done by a builder, but everything else is on us. We recycle as much material as possible here. It is a slow process and makes us feel good.

In my previous life all I did was write about other people, so It has been an amazing experience to acquire new skills. I have learnt how to point stones, make stone walls, grow tomatoes, take care of chickens, milk goats, make ricotta and *pizzelle* waffles like the old ladies in the village.

## THE VILLAGE

Fallo is small, with only about 70 people living here full time. We have a hotel, a very good restaurant, a bar, post office, hairdresser, and a pharmacy. There are also two churches, which bells ring every quarter. The hour rings low, the quarters ring high. In the village we have many benches where the locals sit down to exchange news.

The people are here very warm and friendly. From the moment we moved here, they embraced and welcomed us to their community. My Italian is terrible, but it doesn't seem to be a problem for any of them.

In summer, the village becomes very international as hundreds and hundreds of people from all over the world come back to their holiday homes. We have South Africans, Canadians, Russians, English, French, and Americans here. Some of them had parents or grandparents from Fallo and they retained a strong connection to the place; others just like the village. Even Michael Madsen, the Hollywood actor of *Kill Bill* fame bought a house here a few years ago! With so many people, summers in Fallo are like one long happy festival.





Scenes of local life in Fallo



## THE PROJECT

A local stone mason, Settimio, is helping us to restore the houses. He is teaching us traditional building techniques and one day we thought, "Wouldn't it be great if he could also teach other people how to restore old stone houses?!" So the idea of the project Fallo Old School was born. We got in touch with a European Union Leader group in Finland where I knew people. They put us in touch with a GAL (*Gruppo di azione locale*), a grassroots organisation in our area, who liked the idea. We want to bring students from Finnish building schools to learn the skills of local artisans. The plan is to provide work for the people in the village because what is good for them is good for us. We are hoping to bring here foreign tourists who have already seen Rome and want to discover and do something new, as well as Italians who want to disconnect and escape from big cities.

With the current travel restrictions, we have to adjust our plans and focus on small workshops in English for anyone who buys old houses in Abruzzo and wants to restore them. Hopefully, we can start doing them this summer.

I have a lot of dreams and plans for our life in Fallo. I want to get chickens, goats, and a horse. Mikko bought a hammock which he nicknamed "Minna's Shangri-La." He laughs at me because I am always talking about putting it up on our olive trees and having a long nap in it on summer afternoons. The hammock has been in our basement for a while, as we are always busy. During the week we are working on rebuilding the house; on weekends I always find other things to do: planting something, pruning olive trees. But one day, when everything is done, I will nap in that hammock!

*You can follow Minna and Mikko's renovation project on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) or [their blog](#). Photos by Minna Lymi.*

# FULL CIRCLE

By Ermelinda Mancini

The author emigrated from Abruzzo to Canada when she was a little girl, but her natal village draws her back again and again through visits, stories, and songs.



Illustration by [Leslie Agan](#)

Iolanda lifts her head and smiles as she sees me approaching, and quickly shoves her work aside, extending her arms in greeting. As I bend down to return the hug, I hear the tinkling of her crochet hook as it bounces on the flagstones and comes to rest at my feet. I stoop to retrieve it and sit beside her on the wooden bench next to the shed.

It is a warm November afternoon and Iolanda reminds me again about how lucky we are to reside on a hill in the village, catching the sun's last rays before it sets behind the Apennine peaks. Taking the crochet hook from me, she picks up her work and resumes from where she has left off, her fingers a blur as she weaves the yarn in and out, and over and under, while conversing with me at the same time. I am in awe.

The intricate snowflake design she is copying is not out of a pattern book, but rather from the identical doily that rests beside her. Occasionally, she puts her work down and picks up the sample version and studies it carefully, her thumb and forefinger separating the stitches and calculating the numbers required to replicate the elaborate pattern. I compliment her on her talents and embarrassingly tell her that I don't have the knack to create such keepsakes. She promises to teach me.

I recognize the familiar shuffling as her husband Peppino approaches, still limping from his recent knee replacement surgery; the knee is getting better, he nods, in answer to my query. The cane that aids his gait is held firmly in one hand – the bandaged hand – the hand that three days ago underwent surgery to treat carpal tunnel syndrome. He grimaces and I know that the wound is still tender. He hobbles towards us, saying he needs to get the tractor geared up and attach the wagon. The olive harvest is tomorrow. He has already delayed the picking due to the surgeries, and he can't postpone it any longer.

As Peppino readies the equipment, I volunteer my help and that of my husband's (in absentia). As a biologist, my husband is happiest when he is immersed in nature and being amongst the olive groves would be nirvana for him.

Peppino goes silent for a moment and stares off into the distance, pointing in the direction of the snow-capped peaks. "Your father, may he rest in peace, now *there* was a worker," he reminisces, as my offer to help triggers

memories from the past. "He toiled from dawn till dusk up in those woods, creating arable land where none existed."

Peppino chortles then. "There was no mistaking your father coming back to the village after being out in the woods all day. He would waddle home with the hoe and shovel hoisted over one shoulder and firewood over the other; the hem of his pants and the cuffs of his shirt tied tightly with twine and bulging at the seams. Inside his pant legs and down the sleeve of each arm he had filled with fruits and nuts, which he shared with us. Those were hard times. You were too young to remember," he says, his eyes misting at the memory.

I picture my father looking somewhat like the Michelin Man. Ironically, I can also picture my mother admonishing him for "looking like a fool" as she was wont to say, when she thought he was embarrassing her. Appearances were important to my mother and my father being the laughing-stock of the neighbourhood would not have gone over well, although partaking of the fruits of his labour would have more than made up for his tomfoolery, and mother was very forgiving.

Peppino welcomes my offer to help and tells me to be ready at 8:00 a.m. the following day. When I make my husband aware of what the next day's agenda looks like, he is thrilled and morning can't come soon enough for him.

"Do you realize that this just might be the highlight of our trip?" he beams. Personally, mine was the day we spent in Monte Carlo, but I am careful to not say so.

We wake up at daybreak, and eager as children on Christmas morning, we rush through breakfast in our haste to get out the door.

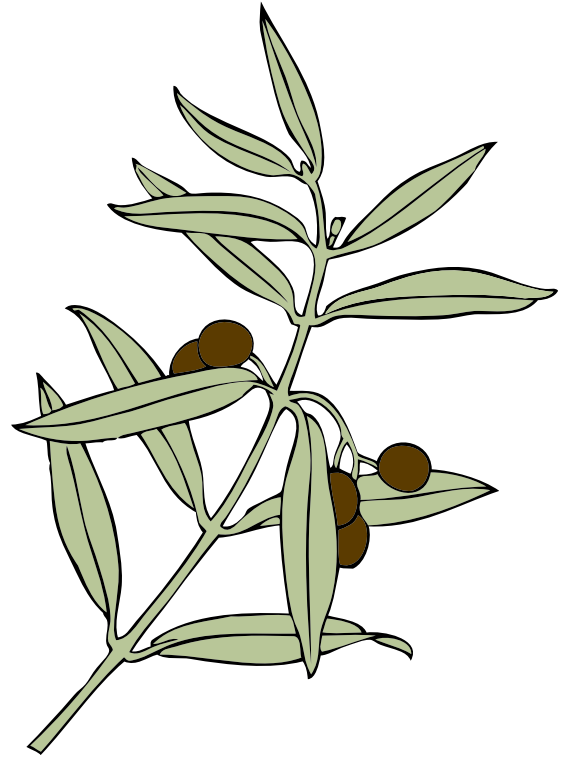
I hop in the back of the wagon and Peppino guides the rickety old tractor slowly down the hairpin curves, sharing the road with city buses, municipal trucks, and other vehicular traffic. Iolanda and my husband follow behind in our car, careful not to overtake us.

Unlike me, Peppino is oblivious to the horn-tooting and near misses, having navigated these roads for nearly 50 years; it's only in the last 30 years though, that the tractor replaced the donkey and cart. He laughs and says the donkey moved faster.

Peppino brings the tractor to a halt at the base of a hill. I look up...way up. I had assumed that we would be picking olives on flat *terra ferma* and not perched on hillsides like mountain goats. The incline reminds me of the nose-bleed sections in concert stadiums, but neither Iolanda nor Peppino seem the least bit perturbed.

We begin the climb up the steep slope, and it takes my husband and me a while to get our mountain legs. After our huffing and puffing subside, we help lay out the netting under the olive trees. With a hand-held rake, we comb the branches, sending the ripened olives tumbling to the nets below and working up an appetite.

Lunch is a welcome break, with roasted red pepper *frittata* on home-made rustic bread, an over-abundance (never) of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo wine, and apricot jam-filled *torte*.



Iolanda must have been up at sunrise to prepare such a spread and we are most grateful.

As we sit devouring our feast, I notice that the gauze on Peppino's bandaged hand is seeping, but he is unmindful.

When lunch is over, we continue our chores. As the afternoon comes to a close, Peppino is not pleased with this year's harvest. He blames it on the past summer's dry, hot spell. Wanting to put myself in my father's shoes and live his experience somewhat, I shove heaping handfuls of olives down my pant legs and coat sleeves. Peppino is on to me and winks, saying I have a long way to go before I am my father's daughter.

It is not easy descending the hill being weighted down as I am and, unlike my father, I am not carrying farm implements and firewood on top of it all. I am relieved to be rid of the extra load when I reach the



bottom of the hill, where I empty my clothing's contents into the wagon.

We head back to the village, exhausted. Once home, my husband and I slump on the sofa tired, but with a renewed appreciation and respect, not only for the family's patriarch, but also for the simple things in life – the non-complicated things, the natural things – where you can see your achievements at the end of the day and pat yourself on the back for a job well done. Our bodies ache, but there is nothing weighing heavy on our minds. We sleep soundly that night.

Three days later, lolanda is at our door. "I have something for you," she says smiling, extending a box my way. "It's to thank you for your efforts up in the hills." Inside are five litres of cold-pressed, extra-virgin olive oil. One bottle is beautifully wrapped in a white doily. I recognize it instantly and touch it to examine the intricate work.

There are two weeks left on our vacation and we know the days will fly by.

"Before you go, I will teach you to crochet so you can make a doily even better than mine," lolanda beams, confident in my abilities to duplicate her talents. We are humbled.

As we pack our suitcases for our return trip to Canada, we carefully nestle between our clothes a litre of the precious yellow-green liquid, the one we so proudly had a hand in making, knowing that every drop we consume will take us back to the hills of Abruzzo and the simple and healthy lifestyle there. In my carry-on bag is my own doily with the elaborate snow-flake pattern. Thanks to a great mentor, I too can now copy the complex design and, with patience and practice, perhaps even make creations of my own.

As we exchange goodbyes with lolanda and Peppino, we secure a spot for the next year's harvest.

*Ermelinda Mancini was born in Serramonacesca and emigrated with her parents at the age of seven. She lives in Ottawa, Canada.*

Do you have a story you would like to share?

Email it to  
[editor@abruzzissimo.com](mailto:editor@abruzzissimo.com)

## WALKING IN SHEPHERDS' STEPS

By Anna Lebedeva

A new six-day walking itinerary, *La Via del Tratturo*, connects Abruzzo and Molise. Although still in the early stages of development, the walk offers an exciting opportunity for hikers to follow shepherds' trails and learn about the ancient tradition of transhumance.



### An Abruzzese shepherd with his flock

For centuries in autumn, herders took part in transhumance, a seasonal droving of livestock, moving their large sheep flocks from Abruzzo to the plains of *Tavoliere delle Puglie*. They followed the network of tracks covering the regions. In spring, they went back following the same roads. The main route, *il Regio tratturo*, or *Tratturo Magno*, ran from the city of L'Aquila to Foggia. Its width was well defined: 60 Neapolitan steps, an equivalent of 110 metres. Although local shepherds do not do transhumance any-

more, the trails still exist and, last year, a group of hiking tour guides created *La Via del Tratturo*, a 112km multiday walking itinerary from Pescasseroli in Abruzzo to Campobasso in Molise for the outdoor enthusiasts who want to discover the world of transhumant trails.

"Last year, while walking for a week on the ancient track from Pescasseroli to Campobasso, I realized the potential of this route and put the wheels in motion," says Luca Gianotti, the project's coordinator. "My

30 years of experience as a walking tour guide and creator of six other trails gave me the necessary tools and strategies for getting the project off the ground.”

## CENTURIES-OLD TRADITION

Harsh winters of the Abruzzo’s mountains and the torrid summers in the plains of Apulia forced the shepherds to move their flocks, so the sheep had grass to graze on all year around and produce quality wool, milk, and meat. In autumn, on September 29 – the day dedicated to St. Michael, protector of shepherds – the flocks began to move towards Apulia and return to Abruzzo at the beginning of summer. It took about fifteen days to arrive to the destination. Boys as young as 8 years old joined their fathers to learn the skills necessary for *transumanza*.

Ancient Romans started the tradition of seasonal droving of flocks from the high

### On the trail

mountains of Abruzzo to the plains of Apulia and it brought riches to the Empire’s treasury.

It was revived in 1447 when Alfonso the Magnanimous, King of Naples, established the customs house in Foggia and created a thriving herding industry based on the production of wool. By King’s order, the plains of *Tavoliere delle Puglie* were reserved for transhumant shepherds in winter and cultivated by local farmers in summer. In some years, up to five million sheep were moved, so customs duties represented an important source of revenue for the Kingdom of Naples.

The last transhumant herders walked the transhumance tracks in the 1960s.

## WALKING THE TRAIL

*La Via del Tratturo* runs through some of the most beautiful towns of Abruzzo and Molise, along mountain trails, dirt tracks, and secondary paved roads with little or no traffic. It is



walkable all year round, with the highest point at an altitude of 1200 metres and is suitable for any fitness level, although longer legs of the journey are more arduous.

So far only the first two parts of the itinerary, in the Abruzzo National Park, have been marked with white and red signs and the letters "RT" (*Regio Tratturo*). Before setting off you will need to download GPS tracks from the dedicated [website](#).

"We have launched a volunteering campaign to mark the trail and are hoping to finish the job in May," explains Luca Gianotti. "But we would still recommend using the GPS tracks as it normally takes a few years to adjust the route and add waymarks. In the next four years we hope to finish the part of the walk from Campobasso to Apulia." All information about the walk is available in Italian only but Luca says they would be happy if someone helped them to translate the website into English.

You can tackle separate legs of the itinerary as one-day hikes, if you are not ready to go on a six-day adventure. It is necessary to book your overnight stays before setting off. On the website you will find a list of recommended B&Bs, and there are other options available if you do your own research.

The tour company [La Compagnia dei Cammini](#) organises a few small groups to walk *La Via del Tratturo* throughout the year.

## THE ITINERARY

If you are planning to do the full itinerary, take a small stamp book at the starting point in Pescasseroli. At the end of each leg, you



### Civitella Alfedena

can get it stamped and receive a certificate of completion in Campobasso to frame and proudly display on a wall in your house.

### DAY 1: PESCASSEROLI TO VILLETTA BARREA

**Distance:** 19,5 km, takes six hours. 580m ascent, 700m descent.

On this leg of the hike, you will walk in a pine forest and easy ancient mule tracks, through the small towns of Opi and Civitella Alfedena where you can visit a wolf reserve.

### DAY 2: VILLETTA BARREA TO VILLA SCONTRONE

**Distance:** 17 km, takes five hours. 380m ascent, 450m descent.

You will walk along the Sangro River towards Lake Barrea. Make sure to stop in the town of Barrea to see the medieval castle and enjoy the panoramic views over the lake from above. A few kilometres outside of the town you will see an 18th-century boundary stone with a carved cross marking the ancient trail.



### DAY 3: VILLA SCONTRONE TO AGRITURISMO "IL TRATTURO"

**Distance:** 23,5 km, takes seven hours. 800 m ascent, 600m descent.

Walking on secondary paved roads you will reach an abandoned building where once was the *Taverna della Zittola*. Here shepherds used to stop to rest, eat, and exchange goods while their flocks grazed in the surrounding meadows.

### DAY 4: AGRITURISMO "IL TRATTURO" TO CIVITANOVA DEL SANNIO

**Distance:** 18,5 km, takes six hours. 500m ascent, 660m descent.

This leg of the trail is especially beautiful in late spring when the meadows are covered with blooming wild orchids. In the village of Pescolanciano you can see an ancient drinking fountain where sheep quenched their thirst.

**Below: Taverna della Zittola; right: 18th-century boundary stone outside Barrea**

### DAY 5: CIVITANOVA DEL SANNIO TO CASTROPIGNANO

**Distance:** 16 km, takes five hours. 530m ascent, 500m descent.

An easy part of the trail that will take you to the small sleepy towns of Duronia, Faito, and Castropignano with its magnificent *d'Evoli Castle*.

### DAY 6: CASTROPIGNANO TO CAMPOBASSO

**Distance:** 17 km, takes five hours. 560m ascent, 460m descent.

You will cross the River Biferno and see several transhumant churches and arrive to the north of Campobasso where you can hop on a bus to visit the city centre.

For the full itinerary go to [La Via del Tratturo website](#). A detailed guidebook (in Italian) for the route will be published this month, available from the Ediciclo Editore [website](#).

*All photos by La Via del Tratturo.*



## HEALTHCARE IN ABRUZZO

***My husband and I have dual citizenship. We are planning an early retirement next year and will be moving in Abruzzo. What is healthcare like there? What options will we have?***

***Linda P., Toronto, Canada***

In WHO's World Health Report 2000, Italy ranked second for the quality of its healthcare system. However, healthcare is fragmented in Italy and one cannot expect the same speed and level of treatment in much of the underfunded South as in a wealthier city in the North.

I have two cousins, both medical doctors from Abruzzo, who helped me understand what the region has been going through recently. Unfortunately, the accounts are of a collapsing system, with promises of new hospitals and renovation of current ones getting lost in political battles and trade union vetos. Add to this long waiting lists for specialist visits and surgery, underfunded and understaffed hospitals, inefficient IT platforms, and the odd case of poor hygiene, and the picture can seem bleak.

However, a very positive note can be said of family doctors who have put in much overtime to care for patients and send them in the right direction. This has been the case in the smaller towns and villages. It is certainly thanks to their knowledge, goodwill, and contacts that one's medical experience in Abruzzo can be positive.

In Italy, the constitution enshrines the right for citizens and residents to receive healthcare (for foreign citizens, you must first become a resi-

dent and sign up to the national health service, the Servizio Sanitario Nazionale). This will not change, but one cannot expect the same level of treatment as 30 years ago, so Italians are opting more for out-of-pocket private visits and surgery. This also explain why residents in Italy are increasingly taking out private health insurance.

If you have time on your hands, you can scour the information available on the Internet to find what's right for you. Your Italian needs to be good, since there is very little information in English and you might need an insurance broker or wealth planner to find the best suitable options.

The cost of private insurance can vary significantly. From my personal experience, most people are paying between €1.500 and €4.000. Two examples of insurance companies with competitive premiums in Abruzzo are [AXA](#) and [Italiana Assicurazioni](#).

Another interesting option which is gaining popularity in Italy is the mutual aid company. It offers the possibility to become a "club member" where everybody has the same rights. The factors that affect the cost of an insurance policy do not apply here, meaning the head of family and its members can get covered for approximately €2.000 and never worry of the cost ever rising. [Mutual Basis Assistance](#) (MBA) has incorporated many other mutual aid companies in the last decade and is Italy's largest.

*Alessandro Antibo is a wealth planner at Milan-based Solutions Capital Management SIM (SCM). His mother was born in Abruzzo and he retains a close connection with the region. You can contact him directly at [a.antibo@gmail.com](mailto:a.antibo@gmail.com).*

## THE BEST ITALIAN ROSÈ IS MADE IN ABRUZZO

By Anna Swann

Last month, rosè wines from Abruzzo triumphed at the prestigious Concours Mondial di Bruxelles competition winning 16 medals. The judges blind-tasted more than 1000 wines from all over the world and Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo DOC made quite an impression.

Cerasuolo is made from Montepulciano d'Abruzzo grapes using the white wine vinification. The fruit are harvested earlier than those for red wine in order to preserve a good level of acidity and the fresh notes typical for Cerasuolo. The grapes are pressed and skins, stalks, and seeds are removed immediately or after a short maceration, up to 30 hours. Montepulciano d'Abruzzo grape skins have a dense dark colour which lends a stunning intense shade of pink to Cerasuolo. Each producer tweaks and adjusts this basic procedure (skin contact time, the press type, etc.) to add a special character to their rosè.

In 2010, Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo DOC was recognized as a separate category (*denominazione di origine controllata*) with a specified production area, methods, and guaranteed quality standard.

There are only two other regions in Italy which make quality pink vino: Apulia and Veneto. Despite the centuries-long tradition of Cerasuolo, Abruzzo has been lagging behind, quality-wise. Until now. The thirst for rosè has been rapidly growing worldwide and Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo DOC is gathering accolade among international wine connoisseurs. At Concours Mondial di Bruxelles, 16 Abruzzo's producers won medals, second to only the region of Veneto, a long-time pink wine leader.

Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo has a good structure and lovely tannins, unlike its many interna-

tional blush-coloured cousins, so it pairs well with strong pasta dishes and grilled meats. So, get your fornacella out, cook a few dozens of *arrosticini*, and pop a bottle of chilled Cerasuolo to celebrate Abruzzo's winemakers' skills and spring's arrival. Here I list a few of the winners that received medals in Brussels last month.



### 1. CERASUOLO D'ABRUZZO DOC, TERZINI

Named "The best Italian rosè in 2021" and also won the Gold Medal among all international rosè selection at Concours Mondial di Bruxelles. Fragrant and fresh with persistent notes of cherry and raspberries.

**Buy:** directly from [Cantina Terzini online](#).

**Price:** €9.50

### 2. CONTESA ROSATO, CONTESA

Floral aromas of rose, violet, and a hint of pomegranate. On the palate, this wine is fresh and well-balanced. Pairs well with sushi.

**Buy:** directly from the [producer](#) or on [Abruzzowine.it](#).

**Price:** €11

### 3. LE MURATE ROSÉ, FATTORIA NICODEMI

A symphony of fruitiness: elegant notes of strawberries, raspberries, and pomegranate. Pairs perfectly with local cured meats.

**Buy:** [Fattoria Nicodemi online](#).

**Price:** €8-9

### 4. CERASUOLO D'ABRUZZO DOC, TENUTA SECOLO IX

An elegant fresh bouquet of cherries and roses with a hint of vanilla. Drink it with a rich fish stew brodetto or local cured meats.

**Buy:** Tenuta Secolo IX [online shop](#) or [Wineowine.it](#).

**Price:** €12-15



TRADITIONAL  
EASTER RECIPES

FROM  
ABRUZZO



BUONA PASQUA

# PIZZA DI PASQUA

By Giulia Pietrobattista

I want to share with ABRUZZISSIMO readers a recipe for our Easter cake called *pizza di Pasqua* or, in the dialect of my town of Magliano de' Marsi, *pizza alla pala*. The name derives from the fact that the pizza was baked directly in the wood-fired oven, without using a sheet pan, and that the tool used to put the pizza in the oven was the *pala*, a pizza shovel.

Like all traditional recipes, this one varies slightly in different areas because each family makes its own version.

In my town, *pizza di Pasqua* is eaten for breakfast on Easter morning with local salami, boiled eggs, mint *frittata*, lamb *coratella* (innards cooked in a frying pan), and chocolate.

## INGREDIENTS

1.5 kg flour  
 4 potatoes (boiled, peeled, and mashed)  
 24 gr dry quick yeast, divided in two parts  
 a pinch of salt  
 600 ml water (lukewarm)  
 250 gr sugar  
 2 eggs at room temperature  
 125 ml milk (lukewarm)  
 50 ml olive oil  
 30 ml rum  
 1 teaspoon of cinnamon  
 zest of one lemon  
 150/200 gr raisins  
 200 g other dried fruit, e.g., apricots, figs (optional)  
 75 g dark chocolate, cut into small chunks (optional)



## PREPARATION

To make this pizza, part of the dough has to be made the night before. Start by combining and stirring together 500 gr of flour with two potatoes, half of the yeast (which has to be dissolved in the water) and salt. The dough should remain very soft, almost liquid.

Let the dough sit overnight in a bowl covered with a kitchen towel.

The next morning you start by making a flour "fountain," which means you put the remaining flour on a wooden board and make a small well in the center, where you will put and combine together the remaining ingredients.

Start by adding the sugar, the remaining potatoes, the eggs, the dough from the previous day, oil, yeast (dissolved in warm milk), rum, cinnamon, lemon zest, raisins, candied fruits, and chocolate. Mix everything together until you get a soft dough that doesn't stick to your hands.

With this dough you will get about three very big pizzas or five smaller ones, so you should divide the dough according to the size you want your pizzas to be. Once you section the dough, make oval *filoni* (loaves).

Put each loaf on a baking tray lined with baking paper. Put baking paper on top of the loaf and cover with a kitchen towel. Let the dough rise somewhere warm for at least five-to-six hours.

Once the loaf has risen, remove the kitchen towel and the paper from the loaves and bake at 180°C for 50-60 minutes (depending on the size of your loaf).

As soon as you remove the loaves from the oven, brush the top of them with a mixture of water and sugar (let the sugar dissolve in the water first), let them cool down a bit and, finally, enjoy them!

*Giulia Pietrobattista lives in Magliano de' Marsi. She is an amateur photographer who is passionate about traditional food and travel.*



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*Giulia Pietrobattista lives in Magliano de' Marsi. She is an amateur photographer who is passionate about traditional food and travel.*



# EASTER CHEESE PUFFS

By **Connie De Vincentis**

During Easter celebrations we, Abruzzesi, eat a lot of *fiadoni* and *fraungelle*, traditional cheese puffs, one savoury and one slightly sweeter. They can be found all year round in some bakeries, but especially during the Easter period they are prepared at home and exchanged as a gift.

Historically, when domestic kitchens were very frugal and ovens were rare, they would be prepared at home in huge quantities and taken to a local bakery to be cooked, where a slot had been previously booked. A lot of people in my town still remember women carrying large trays on their head full of *fiadoni* and *fraungelle*. The town was filled with the fragrant scent of the freshly baked cheese puffs when the women walked back home with their treats.

Two main Easter ingredients in Abruzzo are cheese, especially pecorino, and eggs. You will find these in abundance in almost every Easter recipe. For *fiadoni* and *fraungelle*, you will need hard cheeses to achieve the puffy effect. A mix of cow's and sheep's milk cheese is preferred so that they are not too delicate and neither too strong. A *rigatino* cheese mixed with pecorino is the most common combination.

*Fiadoni* and *fraungelle* have been included in the official list of Italian Traditional Agricultural Products (P.A.T.) by the Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies.

Happy Easter, everyone! May the spring bring you joy, health, and abundance!

*Connie De Vincentis runs a home restaurant and cooking school in Tocco da Casauria.*



## FIADONI

### INGREDIENTS

#### For the filling:

300 gr grated *rigatino* cheese (or *parmigiano reggiano*)  
300 gr grated *pecorino* cheese  
2 medium eggs

#### For the pastry:

500 gr plain flour  
½ glass of olive oil  
½ glass white wine  
2 eggs + 1 egg for the egg wash  
A pinch of salt

### PREPARATION

Place flour on a board and make a well. Pour oil, water, the two eggs, and a pinch of salt in the well and mix with a fork. Start bringing the flour towards the liquid, and knead to create a firm dough. Leave to rest while you prepare the filling.

In a bowl, mix grated cheese and eggs. You should obtain a soft but not runny mixture that stays firmly on a spoon.

Roll out the pastry into a thin sheet. You can use a pasta rolling machine for this. Cut round discs the size of a cup.



Put a tablespoon of the cheese filling on each disc, fold it over and seal the edges to obtain a ravioli shape. Make a small cut in the shape of a cross in the middle of each *fiadone*. This allows the *fiadoni* to puff up and the cheese will ooze beautifully from the cut. Beat up one egg to make egg wash and brush *fiadoni* with it.

Bake in at 180C until golden and puffy (around 15 to 20 minutes).

*Fiadoni* will last a few days. I place mine in baskets lined with cotton or linen and cover them with a towel.

## FRAUNGELLE

### INGREDIENTS

#### For the filling:

200 gr grated *rigatino* cheese (or *parmigiano reggiano*)  
 150 gr grated *pecorino* cheese  
 150 gr sheep's milk ricotta  
 2 medium-to-large eggs  
 Orange zest  
 3 tbsp sugar

#### For the pastry:

see the ingredients for *fiadoni* pastry  
 1 egg for the egg wash

### PREPARATION

The procedure for the pastry is the same as for *fiadoni*.

To make the filling, mix well all ingredients in a bowl.

Create you discs slightly larger than for *fiadoni* (using a cookie cutter or a cup) to leave room for the "pinching."



Putting egg wash on *fiadoni*



#### Fraungelle

Place one tablespoon of the filling in the centre of the pastry disc, leaving a wide border.

Form the pastry into a small basket around the filling by pinching the pastry every 1 cm or so (see the photo).

Cut thin strips of pastry and use two strips to form a cross over the filling.

Place *fraungelle* on a lined oven tray, brush the cross and the borders of the pastry with the egg wash.

Bake in a 180C until golden and puffy (around 15 to 20 minutes).

**Do you have a family recipe  
you want to share with us?**

Send it to  
[editor@abruzzissimo.com](mailto:editor@abruzzissimo.com)

ISSUE NO. 12 • MAY 2021

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD WINE

# ABRUZZISSIMO

## MAGAZINE



**Memories of The  
Transhumance**

*page 5*

**The Last Judgement of  
Santa Maria in Piano**

*page 12*

**The Badlands of  
Atri**

*page 21*

# CONTENTS

**02. EDITOR'S NOTE**

**03. NEWS & EVENTS**

**04. DID YOU KNOW?**

**05. MEMORIES OF THE  
TRANSHUMANCE**

**09. ABRUZZO'S MAGIC  
CREATURES: PANDAFECHE,  
FAIRIES,  
AND MAZZAMURELLI**

**12. THE LAST JUDGEMENT OF  
SANTA MARIA IN PIANO**

**16. LIFE'S SIMPLE  
PLEASURES IN  
COLLE ZINGARO**

**19. RESTORING A  
NOBLE PALACE**

**21. THE BADLANDS OF ATRI**

**24. ASK THE EXPERT:  
ONLINE BANKING  
IN ABRUZZO**

**25. FOOD & WINE**

*Where to eat the best timballo alla  
teramana, traditional baccalà and  
pallot' cac' e ove recipes*

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## ON THE COVER:

Sheep and a pastore abruzzese dog.  
Photo by Pietro D'Antonio

## LEFT:

The church of Santa Maria in Piano.  
Page 12. Photos by Anna Lebedeva



# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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*Ciao a tutti!*

ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine is one year old! When I started working on the first issue 12 months ago, I couldn't imagine how fast and big the publication would grow. As of today, ABRUZZISSIMO has over 3,500 subscribers from all over the world: we have a reader in New Caledonia, a few in Tasmania, Hong Kong, many in Australia, United States, Canada, United Kingdom and, of course, in Italy. It has brought together many people who love Abruzzo. I want to thank Linda Dini Jenkins, my tireless copy editor and author, who believed in the project from the start and has helped me with every single issue of the magazine. I am also happy to have a small but dedicated team of regular contributors who, one article at a time, share their immense passion for the beautiful region that Abruzzo is.

This magazine would not exist without you, our loyal readers and supporters. It is time consuming and intense to produce 10 quality issues per year, but I am committed to it and your kind emails and donations make it worthwhile. If you haven't yet, please consider becoming a supporter and contribute to the magazine's upkeep by [donating here](#).

In this issue you will learn about the magic creatures *pandafeche*, *fate*, and *mazzamurelli* and how to keep them happy. We will explore the surreal clay landscapes of the badlands in Atri and visit the little-known church of Santa Maria in Piano in Loreto Aprutino to admire a rare 14th century fresco. On page 5 you will read an interview with one of the last shepherds to walk a transhumance trail to Apulia and back. We share two recipes of traditional *baccalà* dishes and tell you where to eat the best *timballo alla teramana*. And for an authentic taste of Abruzzo in the US, we take you to Le Virtù in Philadelphia.

Enjoy this issue!

***A presto,***

Anna Lebedeva

Editor

## ORTONA VIRTUAL TOUR

As the restrictions on moving within Abruzzo lift, we can continue our virtual live tours on the ABRUZZISSIMO Facebook page. We have scheduled a tour of Ortona for May 6. Our guide Kharen Dell'Arciprete will take you around the historic part of the town to see its grand palaces, churches, and the magnificent castle overlooking the sea. Tune in at 3.30pm Italian time to join us and ask questions or watch the recorded tour video later on our [Facebook page](#).



## RED ROADHOUSES UP FOR GRABS

ANAS (the national road network) is offering concessions on its iconic red roadside houses (*case cantoniere*, which were used by construction and maintenance workers) for a symbolic price. Ten of the houses are located in Abruzzo (Pineto, Pescara, Alfedena, Roseto Degli Abruzzi, Francavilla al Mare, Ortona, and Rocca di Mezzo). The tender is open to entrepreneurs with sound business projects who could turn the *case cantoniere* into restaurants, guest houses, shops, or cultural centres. The deadline for proposals (in Italian) is June 15. For more details and the list of houses available go to the ANAS [website](#).



## MAJELLA BECOMES UNESCO GLOBAL GEOPARK

The territory of the Maiella National Park has been given the prestigious title of a Global Geopark in recognition of its unique geological characteristics combined with biodiversity and sites of cultural and historic significance. The Majella (spelt with a "j") UNESCO Global Geopark territory covers a surface area of 740 km<sup>2</sup>, featuring more than 60 peaks in the Majella Massif. It is carved by a series of canyons, many rivers, and a few perennial lakes that are essential to supporting wildlife. With remnants of human presence going back about 600,000 years, the Geopark contains 95 geosites, including one of the oldest archaeological geosites in Europe. The majority of these have considerable educational and touristic value. It is hoped that the recognition at the global level will help develop sustainable models of living and tourism in the area.

## TAKE AN ELECTRIC BUS TOUR AROUND L'AQUILA

An exciting new city tour has been launched in L'Aquila. A small open electric bus will take up to six people around the main sights in the historic centre, with a few stops. The tour lasts 90 minutes and costs €10 (a promotional price for the month of May). In the coming weeks, a tasting of local delicacies will be added to the itinerary. Tours in English are available on request for a minimum of four people. For further details and bookings, call 0039 379 1508492, 0039 086 2295927 or contact [WelcomeAQ](#).



## MAY IS THE MONTH OF LE VIRTÙ

The soup of virtues, or *le virtù*, is a famous spring dish from the city of Teramo. The traditional recipe calls for seven types of each of these ingredients: legumes, vegetables, meats, herbs, and pasta. This rich, thick soup is traditionally eaten on May 1 and its preparation coincides with the spring pantry cleaning to use up the remaining winter foodstuffs. If you don't have friends or relatives in Teramo who can cook up *le virtù* feast for you, head to [La Cantina di Porta Romana](#), which will serve the iconic dish during the month of May. Make sure to book ahead.

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## DID YOU KNOW?



## KING MANFRED'S TREASURE

Legend has it that in the 13th century Manfred, King of Sicily, hid a huge chest of copper, gold, and silver coins in one of the caves in the Salinello Gorges, not far from his Castle Manfrino, in the modern-day Teramo Province. The entrance to the cave is closed with an enormous rock and is guarded by a fairy dressed in white. Whoever finds the treasure, must first take the copper coins and return after three years for the silver ones and, only after three more years, take the remaining gold coins. Locals will tell you that, over the centuries, a few people have lost their lives trying to take the golden coins first. The gigantic rock seals the cave's entrance, leaving the greedy treasure seekers inside to die.

Last month a group of hikers found 308 silver alloy coins while walking in the woods in Valle Castellana, along the ancient road that connected the Salinello Valley and the famous Manfrino Castle. Archaeologists have provisionally dated the coins to the 11th-13th century. Could they be part of King Manfred's treasure?! Put the Salinello Gorges on your list of places to see. And don't forget to pack a metal detector in your bag. The chest of treasures is waiting for you somewhere in Abruzzo, the land of castles, kings, and fairies.

## MEMORIES OF THE TRANSHUMANCE

By Davide Boccia

This article is based on a video interview taken in 2017 with Patrizio Ursitti, one of the last shepherds from Opi to walk the transhumance route connecting the mountains of Abruzzo and the green plains of Apulia. He recalls the customs and little adventures of shepherds during the long months of transhumance.



**Shepherds in Apulia, 1965. Photo by Udo Sprengel**

**At what age did you do your first transhumance (*transumanza*)?**

I started following *tatà* (father) towards the end of the war. I was still a child back then and one of my first tasks was to protect a flock of one hundred sheep from the Germans and bears during the night. Then when autumn arrived, on the first

Sunday of October (the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary), we left for Lucera in Apulia. While walking with the sheep, we slept under the stars, in the open: our only shelter was the mule's saddlebag under which I slept covered with blankets made of sheepskin. If it rained, I got soaked. Walking during the day was uncomfortable because when I started doing transhumance, we still wore *jè patitè* (shepherds' wooden clogs) which hurt my

heels. In fact, it was better to walk with no shoes on, wearing just two or three socks. That way you could get to Lucera without any pain in your feet!

### How many days did it take to get from Opi to Lucera?

We walked 11 days to get there, travelling 15-20 km per day. At the end of September, we had to hurry up because otherwise the sheep would begin to give birth along the way. However, some lambs were born during the journey and we put them in bags on mules. But it was also necessary to hurry so as not to be overtaken by the *marchittë*, the shepherds from the province of Teramo. If the *marchittë* passed in front of us, their sheep would eat all the best grass on the route. We had to avoid the pastures that had already been used by other flocks to avoid the risk of our sheep catching diseases. We always did the same route and in some places there were churches built to give shelter to shepherds.

### Where did the transhumance path run?

We went down from Mount Tranquillo, crossed the area where today there are

**Shepherds milking sheep, 1966.**  
Photos by Udo Sprengel



**Transhumance routes from Abruzzo to Apulia.**  
Image via CC BY 3.0

campsites, and followed the state road Marsicana up to Zittola, near Castel di Sangro. The oldest transhumance path there went behind the cemetery in Opi, reached Val Fondillo and continued under the Mount Amaro and Camosciara.

### What did you do in Apulia?

We stayed in the winter in Apulia because the warm climate makes the grass grow all year round. We always returned to the same areas, San Severo-Lucera, where we rented a farm building and 50-60 hectares of land for the sheep to graze on.





### When did you come home?

We returned home in May. I still remember the joy of seeing Mount Marsicano from afar! On our return, every morning, we milked our flock of 600 sheep, which gave us 70-80 litres of milk to make 15-20 kg of cheese. People knew it and in the villages that we passed through on the way, they were waiting to buy our freshly made cheese. When we returned to Opi, the sheep were taken to the mountains where their pens were in Pescasseroli, Opi, and Villetta Barrea. Back then, the *quënëcina* (fortnight) system existed: after 10 days of work with the flocks, the shepherds could go down to the village for four-five days. *(Until the middle of the last century, the pay of the shepherds involved in the transhumance was mainly made up of food products intended for immediate use such as bread, oil, wine, milk, and ricotta - author).*

### How was the work of shepherds organized?

The *massarë* (head shepherd) controlled the *pëquëralë* (other shepherds), assigned to the

flock. The transport of household goods and the mounting of the enclosure nets were handled by the *vùttara*, the mule handlers, who always went ahead. This way, every evening, the shepherds found the enclosure for the flock already assembled. *(In the last years of the traditional transhumance, the mules were replaced with cars - author).* During spring, in the morning, shepherds milked the sheep and in this activity they were helped by the *bbëscinë*, the boy who sent the sheep towards the gate of the enclosure. The *casciërë* was responsible for processing the milk and cheese making.

### What did you eat while doing transhumance?

At the end of September, when we left home, we ate well because we had meat, cheese, and bread. However, after a few days, the meat was finished and we were left with only bread and cheese. We ate simple things like *lë panëcöttë*: the bread was softened in hot water and then mixed with oil and vegetables. When we were in the mountains at the sheepfold, we made *mëscišca* (sheep's meat), salted and dried in the sun for long conservation.

### Making cheese, 1966. Photo by Udo Sprengel



### Which families from the Valley sent their flocks to Apulia?

When I started doing the route, in Pescasseroli there were still the Gentiles who sent many sheep to Candela in Apulia every year. In Opi, there were only the Ursitti, while in Villetta Barrea there were the Graziani and Di Loreto and they, too, went to Candela every year. Some owners, towards the end of the transumanza era, took the train and trucks transported the sheep to Apulia but, at the end, left without staff, they sold their flocks.

### When did you do your last transhumance?

The last time I brought the sheep to Apulia was in 1970. By then everything had changed. We no longer went on foot with sheep because there were cars on the streets and the paths had disappeared in some areas.

Before, in Molise, you could see the sheep path even from afar! It was 60 paces wide (111 meters) and was entirely owned by the state. Then, when the sheep no longer passed through, they began to build along the route. In Pescolanciano they built a palace in the middle of the sheep path! They did it right where we once walked with the sheep!

*This article was first published on [Pescasseroli è W.](#)*

*Translated and edited by Anna Lebedeva.*

*Photos by Udo Sprengel, a professor at the Hamburg University, who in 1965-1966 joined the Ursitti family to walk the transhumant trail. He later published his observations and photos in the book "Die Wanderherdenwirtschaft im mittel ñ und sudstitalienischen Raum" by the Geographical Society of Hamburg.*

**Selling cheese, 1966. Photo by Udo Sprengel**



# ABRUZZO'S MAGIC CREATURES: PANDAFECHE, FAIRIES, AND MAZZAMURELLI

By David Ferrante

Local folklore stories are filled with creatures that steal your breath, bring messages from the dead, help to find treasures, and tangle up your donkey's mane for fun.



**Pandafecche steals your breath while you sleep. Illustration by Leslie Agan**

I still remember that night from my childhood when I woke up feeling paralyzed. I was at my grandparents' house, the place where I used to spend my summer holidays. In the middle of the night, I opened my eyes...and could not move. It was as if my body was glued to the mattress! I was so terrified, I tried to scream "Grandma! Grandma!" but couldn't. My mouth was wide open, but no word or

sound came out. I could only feel that strange, suffocating sensation. I felt as if I had something heavy pressing my body and not letting me breathe. Luckily, by chance, my grandma woke up and came into my room. She caressed my forehead and I relaxed and fell asleep again.

The next morning, in between a slice of tarallo (a sweet cake) and a sip of warm milk, I told

my grandparents about the nightmare, and so began the first of many tales about magical and mysterious characters, inhabitants of my homeland, of which I had never heard before.

## PANDAFECHE

That night, as my grandma explained to me, the *Pandafeche* came by. It is a nocturnal creature that slowly lies down on the body of people who are sleeping, stealing their breath and impeding their movements. She is believed to be the ghost of an evil woman who is damned to wander around villages at night.

Some ancient remedies may help to prevent this nightmare. If you put in the room a sorghum broom or a bag full of legumes, the curious *Pandafeche* will count the twigs in the broom or the beans in the bag till the sunrise, when she will have to run away. If you wake up and find the *Pandafeche* on top of you and want to stop her, grab her by the hair and when she asks, "What do you have in your hand?" you must answer "Horsehair!" To free yourself from her for good, you must hurt her slightly and wait until she spills nine drops of blood.

## FAIRIES

In our grandparents' tales, there were not just frightful beings and nocturnal monsters, but also woodland creatures: spiteful, but beautiful and likable. *Fate*, or fairies, were among them. They usually show up as beautiful young women, sometimes small and fluttering in the air. At times, they have human features and at still other times, who knows what they might look like? My grandparents used to tell me about how, during the night, their mules' and donkeys' manes and tails were interlaced into little braids that were difficult to untangle. They said it was the fairies doing it out of spite – or just for fun.

If you ever find a little bundle full of tiny foods under a tree, do not pick up or eat it: it is the fairies' food. A theft of this kind will make you into the target of their revenge. If you want to have lunch under a tree, you should greet them – before sitting down – by



**A sorghum broom or a bag of legumes will keep Pandafeche busy.**

saying, *Buongiorno fate!* and, before eating your food or drinking from a fountain, you should ask them for permission, saying, *Buongiorno! Posso bere e mangiare?* (Hello! Can I eat and drink?). There is a story about a greedy and unaware woman who found a fairy's little bundle under a fig tree. She gobbled up its contents and climbed up the tree to devour the fruit. But, before she could eat any fig, the woman slipped and fell from the tree, breaking her bones. The local witch recommended the poor woman to find the head fairy and apologise to her.

Fairies' revenge can be more serious. It remains unknown why, but in the early 1900s, in Roccacasale, a village situated in the L'Aquila province, children disappeared from their homes on different occasions and reappeared in the meadows near the village. There is still a locality called Colle delle Fate (the Fairies' Hill) in Roccacasale where, according to the ancestors' stories, those magic creatures used to meet.

## MAZZAMURELLI

And then I came to know about the *mazzamurello*. It was possible to hear knocks from far away in the countryside: knock knock knock. I was told it was them, the *mazzamurelli*. A *mazzamurello* is a little elf who lives in Abruzzo's forests. You know about his presence from a rustle in the grass, a quick glance of a red pointy hat running away, or from the feeling of being watched through the branches of a bush by two little, lively eyes. They can also be spotted in a house, either abandoned or inhabited. The knocking sound gives away the presence of a *mazzamurello*. The elf always has a stick with him, which he bangs against walls, trees, and other surfaces. In fact, the origin of the name *mazzamurello* might come from *mazza* (stick) and *muro* (wall).

The little elves can also be spiteful pranksters. They know how to read people's hearts and understand their personalities. *Mazzamurelli* can be secret and faithful friends with kind-hearted people and bring them good fortune. But, if they perceive some nastiness, they will be wicked and unkind. Their "knock knock" may indicate the presence of a treasure or warn of an imminent danger, even death. They are the messengers

### Mazzamurelli wear red pointy hats



between the worlds of the living and the dead. Most of the time, it is believed, their knocking brings a message from a dearly departed person who is trying to communicate with us.

## WEREWOLVES

As the night falls, wolves' howls can be heard in the mountains. That could be *lu lope menare*, or werewolf. In Abruzzo, stories of heartrending werewolves' howls tearing through the night are plentiful. According to popular beliefs, those born on Christmas night are cursed forever, because they desecrate the birth of God's son. By no fault of their own, men born on the holy night – once they reach the age of 20 – can become werewolves, while women turn into *pandafeche* or witches. Fathers can help their sons to avoid this sad destiny by engraving with fire a small cross on the unfortunate boys' feet, three nights in a row. If the werewolf transformation has already happened, the man can only be saved by being hurt and spilling some blood. Given the werewolf's ferocity, the only way to do it is to hit him from above, making something fall on him from a roof or a window.

There are many stories about women who, over the centuries, have seen their husbands leave their house at night. They waited for him with the door closed, sitting on the stairs – an impassable place for the cursed as, it is believed, they cannot climb more than three steps – with a bucket of water and a stick in their hands, ready to splash and hit him if he came back as a beast. Three knocks on the door meant he came back home as a man.

*David Ferrante is a writer, sociologist, and a passionate researcher of Abruzzo's culture and traditions. He has written several books which you can find via his website, [Abruzzo Magico](#). Translated by Giulia Pietrobattista.*

*Illustrations by Leslie Agan.*

## THE LAST JUDGEMENT OF SANTA MARIA IN PIANO

By Maria Giovanna Palermo

On the outskirts of Loreto Aprutino, the town rich in history and renowned for its high-quality olive oil, stands the church of Santa Maria in Piano, a small jewel of Romanesque architecture. It is known among the locals as the church of San Rocco because inside there is a beautiful statue of the saint.

Built on the ruins of a pagan temple, the church has undergone numerous renovations over the centuries, taking the current form after the last one in 1500 when the elegant portico with curved arches and the bell tower were added. The octagonal spire is decorated with colourful maiolica (glazed pottery) elements made at the first factories of Castelli. Many church towers in Abruzzo have those green, red, and blue maiolica discs which earned them the name “sister towers.” While its exterior is magnificent, you need to step inside the church to see what makes it truly special.

## VIVID COLOURS

On the counter façade wall, you will find one of the most beautiful artworks in Abruzzo: a depiction of the Last Judgement known locally as *particolare*. It was painted by an unknown master in the third decade of the 1300s and is considered one of the most unusual Gothic depictions in Italy, without equal, although something similar – but not as well preserved – exists in the church of Santa Maria della Rocca in Offida in the Marche region.

**The church of Santa Maria in Piano and its Last Judgement fresco.**

Its vivid colours make some experts believe that the masterpiece was painted using an elaborate encaustic technique. This would involve dissolving coloured pigments in heated beeswax – as opposed to the more conventional fresco painting technique, where the dry-powder pigment is painted on freshly laid lime plaster – which preserves the brilliance of the colours over time, making them look as if they have just been applied.

## NOT YOUR AVERAGE JUDGEMENT

The section of the fresco that depicts Hell has been partially destroyed over time, but the Purgatory and Paradise sections are well preserved. The real peculiarity is found in the lower part, where we see a scene different from traditional Judgement scenes (when the good and the bad are separated). Here, individual souls are judged one by one. What earned this depiction the name “particular” is that it is drawn on the so-called Vision of Fra' Alberico (which is also described by Dante Alighieri in *The Divine Comedy*), a manuscript by a Cassinese monk who lived around 1100 – and not on the Apocalypse of Saint John in the final book of the New Testament, like most frescoes of this kind.



We see the souls taking a test of courage. They are asked to prove their faith by crossing a river of boiling tar over the so-called Ponte del Capello, as thin as a hair. It is one of very few known iconographic depictions rooted in the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism and its Chinvat bridge, or the bridge of judgement, which separates the world of the living from the world of the dead.

The poor, frightened, naked souls flock at the bridge, hesitant to continue. There are those who try to leap forward, those who fall, those paralysed with horror. Only those few not weighed down by sins manage to cross it. Waiting for them on the other bank of the boiling tar river is a psychopomp, an angel who escorts the brave souls to the majestic Saint Michael. The archangel-warrior, having abandoned his habitual armour, wears a precious red cloak, weighing souls. His scale



**Below: Ponte del Capello; right: Saint Michael**



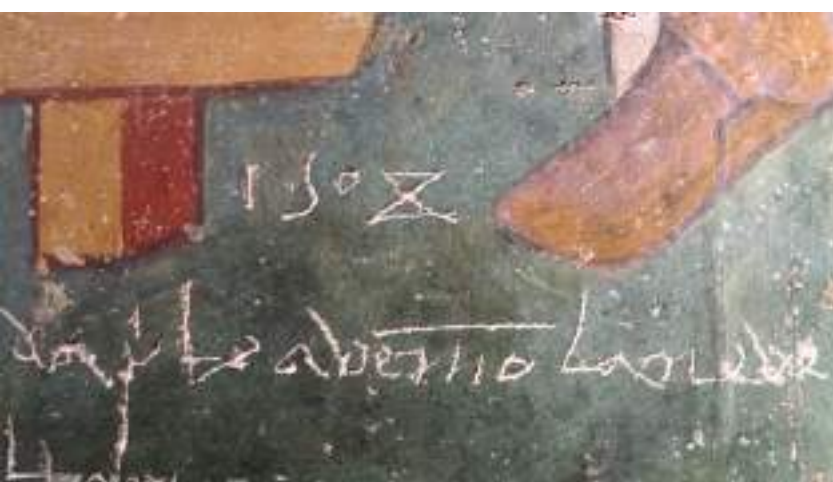


is the final verdict for granting or denying access to the Garden of Earthly Delights and the Tower of Paradise, where Saint Peter guards the entrance. Above, on the clouds, five delightful angels wearing flower wreaths play heavenly music.

## OTHER FRESCOES

The church preserves the primitive layout with a single nave, five simple arches, and side chapels, all decorated with frescoes. One of the chapels is devoted to the life of St. Thomas Aquinas. One particular scene, dated to 1410 and depicting the funeral of the Saint, has attracted the attention of art historians, as they believe it shows a self-portrait of the frescoes' painter standing among religious figures. If you look closer, you will see inscriptions scratched over the frescoes by worshippers over the centuries. One of them mentions a solar eclipse in July 1590: "Adi ultimo di luglio 1590 si oscurò il sole."

**Below: worshippers' inscriptions; right: the Garden of Earthly Delights**



Finally, in the apse, there is a precious gilded wooden altar containing a rare 15th century pietà depicting the Virgin cradling Christ's dead body.

The church of Santa Maria in Piano was damaged by the earthquakes of 2016 and 2017 and is currently closed to the public. Local authorities are hoping to restore the church as soon as possible, so everyone can see this little jewel in Loreto Aprutino. Keep an eye on the municipality's [website](#) and [Facebook page](#) for updates.

*Maria Giovanna Palermo is an art historian and tour guide. Follow her Facebook page [Sull'Arte](#). Photos by Anna Lebedeva.*



## LIFE'S SIMPLE PLEASURES IN COLLE ZINGARO

By Marta Dzikowska

The Dzikowscy family has embraced life in a small rural community in Abruzzo with gusto: they barter jams for eggs, forage, and enjoy some local gossip with neighbours.

One gloomy evening more than eight years ago, my husband Rafal and I were sitting in our house in Ireland, watching the rain lashing sideways, listening to the kids coughing. We began talking about places we could live one day, places with sunshine and four seasons, where we could grow our own vegetables, and where the kids could enjoy the outdoors without catching a cold all the time. We knew Italy ticked those boxes, but which region? We wanted the mountains and forests, somewhere very green, authentic, without herds of tourists and with good food. Rafal googled different places and found Abruzzo – and everything we could wish for. Five minutes later, we started planning our holiday in this unknown-to-us part of Italy, hoping our family of five could move there soon. Which is exactly what we did.

### DREAM HOME

In 2014, during our second holiday in Abruzzo, we viewed many houses and, finally, found our perfect old stone farmhouse. Two houses, actually. The view from the terrace stole our hearts and we made an offer, which was accepted. We packed 11 years of our lives in Ireland into suitcases and boxes, loaded our three massive dogs, a cat, and a piano in the car, put the three kids on a plane and headed for a new chapter of our lives in Colle Zingaro,



**Rafal and Marta with their sons Mathew and Tristan**

a tiny village in the Chieti province overlooking a valley with the majestic Majella mountains above.

Since the move, we have been slowly restoring our properties, built in the late 1800s. We do nearly all the jobs ourselves and, although it is hard physical work, it gives us both a wonderful feeling of accomplishment. My favourite job is exposing and repointing the beautiful old stone walls.

### VILLAGE LIFE

Colle Zingaro has just over 100 inhabitants, plus a little shop, a playground, a church, and an old fountain. The beach is 40 minutes by car; the mountains, 40 minutes the other way. The beautiful Bomba Lake is only a short drive away and we're surrounded by forests.

Most of our neighbours are elderly, always willing to share stories, advice, and gossip. We



Above: Lake Bomba. Right: ducklings at Marta's house

have become good friends with our nearest Italian neighbours, Maria and her family. I bring them baked goodies and preserves, and in return they bring us eggs or the surplus of their garden produce. In our little community we often swap fresh produce for preserves; it is a great way of saving and sharing food and making friends. I remember how, at the beginning, everyone called us *inglesi con i gemelli* (the English with the twins; we are Polish, by the way) and how they could not understand why we swapped Ireland with secure jobs and salaries for Abruzzo. They did not seem too convinced that proper summers and winters, beautiful landscapes, and fresh seasonal food were good enough reasons to make a move.

We are the only expat family living here full-time. There are some foreigners with holiday houses in the area and we have become good friends with many, helping them navigate through some of the more difficult issues that needed sorting out and taking care of their properties while they are away.



## MOVING WITH KIDS

Some people find moving countries challenging, but this was our second big move (first from Poland to Ireland, then to Italy) which certainly helped. When we arrived in Abruzzo, our daughter,



Toricella Peligna is the nearest town. Photo by Antonio Di Renzo

Kaya, had finished primary school; the boy twins, Mathew and Tristan, were about to start the first year, so timing was good. We were worried about them having to learn yet another language. At the start, we had to work really hard to learn Italian and had taken language classes before the move. The teachers and the community were very supportive. Six years have passed, and the kids are trilingual now, have made many good friends, and are loving their cosmopolitan upbringing. We have pasta one day, Irish cottage pie another, and Polish pierogi every so often. We mix all three languages while speaking.

The kids are healthy and appreciate life's simple pleasures like taking a swim in a lake or in the sea or enjoying freshly baked bread with a tomato they picked straight from the garden. We all had to get through some challenging moments, but nothing that a positive attitude, a smile, and a home-made cake couldn't resolve.

## MAKING IT WORK

Finding a way to make a living in Abruzzo can be hard, but we have managed well so far. One of our houses is rented out as a holiday home, [Il Monte](#).

The cost of living here is low, and growing our own food certainly helps. Recently, we bought ducks and a few goats. For the moment, they are just pets, but soon they will also provide us with healthy milk and eggs. Being a keen forager and herbalist, I find a lot of food in the wild, for free. Locals have always done it, and I am learning a lot from them. Realising that many expats in Abruzzo were curious about it, I set up a Facebook group, [Abruzzo Foraging](#), where we share foraging tips and information about preserving local wild foods.

I have enrolled in a project for small entrepreneurs funded by the Abruzzo region to help me to launch my foraging business. Our next big plan is to make healthy, organic foods and cosmetics based on free-range goat milk and the wild plants growing around us. We know it will need a lot of hard work and a little luck, but we will get there.

# RESTORING A NOBLE PALACE: WORKING WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

By Valeria Milano

The grand project of turning a crumbling noble palace in the hilltop town of Casoli into fourteen luxury residences continues. The restoration works have finally started, and the team behind the project is determined to revive the local community.



**Above: work has begun at Palazzo Ricci; right: a rendered image of the future facade**

These last few days have been hugely exciting for us at Palazzo Ricci as our crane, which has an enormous 50-metres-long arm, finally arrived and was installed. There was a palpable air of excitement in the town as the huge parts of it were slowly driven up the hill and then assembled. After two days and many photos and videos later, the crane is in place, towering above the old town,

and the renovation has begun. The painstaking propping of the building, from the basement upward, is being done to ensure the safety of the future works.

## KEEPING IT LOCAL

The local Casolani are enthusiastic about the restoration and intrigued by the refurbishment works. Many of them have told us that they are looking forward to the rebirth of the palazzo, which since the early 1800s was Casoli's

cultural and social hub. I am often stopped by the town's curious shop and bar owners who ask me about the progress. They understand how important a steady stream of new residents will be for local businesses.

From the start of our project, we wanted to work closely with local businesses and artisans. Our builders from Vacri, a town nearby, have many years of experience in restoring famous historic buildings. All the windows and shutters for the palace are being constructed by a local company in Casoli to comply with the tricky requirements necessary for an old grand building in a *centro storico*. Our electrical and plumbing systems are likewise provided by a well-established local firm. We will be specifying and ordering the floors, kitchens, and joinery from trusted suppliers within a short drive from Casoli.

Meanwhile, our painting and decorating works will be carried out by a team of local tradesmen, with Spencer Power, one of our Founding Partners, heading up the specialist painters who will be tackling the more complicated restoration works. The local charity, *La Cooperativa Sociale Casolana*, will supply fine linens and interior textiles woven on antique looms. They will also make beautiful fragrant soaps for every residence in the palazzo. It goes without saying that once the Palazzo is up and running, concierges, housekeepers, gardeners, and drivers will be all from Casoli and the towns nearby.

## LUXURY RESIDENCES

The Palazzo is going to be run as a Private Residence Club comprising fourteen luxury residences in fractional ownership, with nine owners per residence. Apart from owning their share in Casoli, they will also be part of Elite Alliance, a global exchange network which allows its members to spend holidays in 135 other stunning locations around the world throughout the year.

The 126 owners and their families will be immersed in the town's life, enjoying its excellent restaurants, bars, farmers' market, and shops.

Despite the economic upheavals of the last year, our project is on track and moving steadily forward. We already have some fantastic investor-owners who have committed to the Palazzo Ricci project sight unseen and are keen to hop on the plane as soon as Italy opens for visitors. We have our first 2021 "Experience Tour" planned for this month, and if all goes well travel-wise, we will be showing the investors and prospective buyers the palazzo, the town, and all the wonderful sights, as well as taking them on wine tastings, pasta making lessons, even perhaps over the Maiella mountain in a hot air balloon! In this way, they will see for themselves what makes Abruzzo the very best place in the world to live and to visit.

<https://palazzoricci.club/>

## THE BADLANDS OF ATRI

By Anna Lebedeva

The Regional Nature Reserve, Calanchi di Atri, is a fascinating place for outdoor enthusiasts. Explore the badlands' unique landscape on foot, by bicycle, or on horse back, and learn about their ancient history and folklore.



**The badlands of Atri. Photo by Riserva Naturale Regionale Calanchi di Atri**

The Badlands (*calanchi*) of Atri, also known as “Dantesque Pits of Hell” or “Devil's Scratches”, is a 600-hectares protected area with a magnificent landscape of clay erosions shaped into dramatic amphitheatres, spires, gullies, ravines, and sharp ridges by wind and water.

### HISTORY

While the reserve's hilly landscape, rich in sea fossils, can be dated to as far as two million

years back, it is hard to pinpoint the era when the erosion started. “Some scientists believe the badlands' formation started in the Middle Ages or during the Renaissance, when the population in the area started to grow,” explains Adriano De Ascentiis, director of the Regional Nature Reserve Calanchi di Atri. “One of the reasons was the loss of surface soil during the extraction of clay for housebuilding. Large flocks of grazing sheep, about 50,000 heads per year, which were brought to Atri for 400 years (the so-called “small transhumance” when sheep were brought to graze from the mountains to the

hills within Abruzzo – A.L.) had inevitable repercussions on the vegetation and affected the stability of the steepest slopes.” After World War II, the land in the area and in Abruzzo in general was gradually abandoned, which brought wild animals and uncultivated plants back.

## FLORA AND FAUNA

While the steep slopes of clay might seem bare and inhospitable, the nature reserve is home to many plants and trees, such as wild gladiolus, capers, liquorice, willows, white poplar, and elder. You can spot buzzards, kestrels, and sparrowhawks gliding in the air. Many foxes, badgers, moles, hedgehogs, and porcupines live here, as well as frogs, salamanders, and the rare emerald toad. In 1999 Calanchi di Atri became a World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Oasis to protect its rich biodiversity.

In the last few decades, as land cultivation has been abandoned, the shrubs have been

**On a cycling trail in the calanchi. Photo by Riserva Naturale Regionale Calanchi di Atri**

slowly expanding in the reserve, healing the centuries-old scars caused by humans and erosion. Wood coverage here has expanded from 3% to 13%.

## EXPLORE

Over the last 10 years, the municipality of Atri and WWF Italy have created a well-managed six-kilometre network of hiking trails and 29 kilometres of cycling and horse-riding routes within the reserve.

You can choose one of the three walking trails. A short and easy one starting from the visitors’ centre runs for about two kilometres and is walkable in 30 minutes. A longer route will take you to the Stone of St. Paul in a small chapel. According to a local legend, St. Paul the Apostle was beheaded on this stone in Rome, and it has the power to heal bone malformations although, historians say, more likely, it is the remains of a pre-Christian altar used for sacrificing animals. It could also be an ancient road milestone as an important





Roman road, Hatria–Pinna, ran through here with a constant stream of travellers and merchants. With the advent of Christianity, the stone was dedicated to St. Paul, who protected against witches and demons. Families would bring their small children affected by stunted growth which, in traditional folklore, was attributed to witchcraft and the evil eye jinx. Families came to the chapel in silence, placed their naked child on the stone, and washed him or her with purifying wine while the eldest woman in the family recited a ritual dirge. Locals say that the ritual is still performed by some believers but with more discretion, in the small hours.

Those who are not afraid of a slightly more challenging walk can do the six-kilometre trail that in two hours circles the heart of the calanchi. On all three routes you will be able to observe magnificent 10-metre-tall earth pyramids sculpted by rain waters over a long period of time.

In summer, cooking classes, tastings, thematic walks, and many other events are organised in the natural reserve. For updates, check their [website](#) or [Facebook page](#).

## PRACTICAL INFO

The paths are always open and free to enter. To book guided tours (in English or Italian) call 3315799191.

You can download an app with an audio guide to the natural reserve itineraries in English and Italian for Android [here](#).

To book a six-hour excursion on horseback, contact [Cavalcando l'Abruzzo Equiturismo](#) at 0039 388 3407470.

**On the photo: clay formations in the natural reserve. Photos by Riserva Naturale Regionale Calanchi di Atri**



## ONLINE BANKING IN ABRUZZO

*We will be moving to Abruzzo soon. Are there any options for opening a bank account online with little or no fee that we can use there?*

*Yvonne, Oregon, USA*

When I moved to Italy in 2004, one of the first things I needed was a bank account to receive my salary. I was very attracted by the growing movement of online accounts. There were a number of zero-cost options available and choosing was simple. Nowadays, the realms of online banking are certainly mazy, so I hope this brief article can be of use.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it includes some of the most popular choices for Italian residents in 2021.

**WIDIBA**: Monte Dei Paschi's online bank offers a standard current account (Pacchetto Smart) at €9,00 a quarter, which can be reduced by following certain guidelines (such as having a certain amount invested or receiving your Italian salary). There is a special offer on at the moment – if you are lucky enough to get introduced by a WIDIBA client before 21 May, you will receive €100 of Amazon vouchers and a free account for 12 months. The possibility of using the numerous Monte Dei Paschi branches in Abruzzo is a bonus.

**FINECO**: A legendary Italian online bank and, until recently, part of the Unicredit group, offering an account for €6,95 monthly which can be reduced mainly by following a series of rules related to investing. There are 11 Fineco Centers spread around Abruzzo; click here to see the locations. It is also possible to use Unicredit branches, if necessary.

**CREDIT AGRICOLE**: The French giant actually offers *Conto Easy* at no charge and, if you open an account before June 30, you will receive €100 worth of Amazon vouchers. There are no physical branches in Abruzzo.

**WEBANK**: A brand owned by the Italian group Banco BPM, it's possible to open an account at €2,00 monthly. Although you cannot reduce the fee, this is the only account on this list which provides a free credit card, no strings attached. You also have a wide range of Banco BPM branches in Abruzzo, if necessary.

**ING BANK**: The Dutch bank offers two possibilities – a free account, but with a cost of €0,75 each time you draw cash from an ATM, or one for €2,00 monthly that is free if you ensure deposits of at least €1.000 each month. Your credit card is free if you spend more than €500 per month, otherwise it's €2,00 monthly. At the moment, the only branch is in Pescara.

**N26**: This young German bank offers a free account. Your virtual debit card is free, a physical one costs €10,00 once off. The account is very easy to open – the website claims you only need eight minutes on the app to do so! Transfers are possible to and from countries in the Single Euro Payments Area, whereas it is not possible to receive transfers in other currencies. You can send money in other currencies thanks to the partnership with Transferwise. There are no branches anywhere.

To open any one of these accounts you have to be a resident in Italy, US citizens included.

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## WHERE TO EAT THE BEST TIMBALLO ALLA TERAMANA

By Anna Swann

The cuisine of the Teramo province, in the north of Abruzzo, is renowned for its rich, elaborate dishes. In fact, some of Abruzzo's most delicious and interesting recipes come from there. *Timballo alla teramana*, a local type of lasagna, is one of them. What makes this *timballo* special is that instead of pasta layers, paper-thin crepes (*scrippelle*) are used. It is a dish for special celebrations – it takes a while to make a real, old style *timballo alla teramana*.

In the past, boiled chicken meat was used for the filling (the broth was used for another local dish, *scrippelle 'mbusse*), mixed with grated pecorino, small cubes of omelette, spinach, artichokes, and peas. Over time, the recipe became even richer when chicken was replaced with tiny meatballs (*pallottine*), hard boiled eggs, tomato sauce, and either *mozzarella* or *scamorza* cheese.

The bigger the celebration, the more *scrippelle* were used, and the higher the resulting *timballo* was. In the old days, cooks always assembled it in a round dish, so a wedge of *timballo* looked almost like a luscious cake. Nowadays, for convenience, it is baked in rectangular trays. It is a caloric bomb: to make four-to-five portions, you would need 13 eggs, more than one kilo of minced meat, and 700 grams of cheese.

*Timballo alla teramana* is eaten slightly cooled, in order to appreciate the complexity of its flavours and to make sure that you take as big of a forkful as possible. Some true *timballo* purists say that it is best eaten cold the day after.

There are two summer festivals devoted to the iconic dish in the Teramo province: in July, Floriano di Campli celebrates the dish and the town of Tossicia has its turn in August.

Very few restaurants still make *timballo alla teramana* the traditional way, with tiny meatballs and thin *scrippelle* layers. As with many traditional recipes in Abruzzo, each town, hill, and family have their own recipe which they swear by, so it is worth going on a *timballo* crawl, trying a few before you decide which one is your favourite.



Here are a few restaurants loved by locals for their hearty *timballo alla teramana*.

### LA CANTINA DI PORTA ROMANA

One of very few restaurants that makes *timballo* (see the photo above) the old style: with paper-thin crepes and tiny meatballs. Call before you go to inquire if the dish is available, as they only make it on certain days.

**Address:** Corso Porta Romana, 105, Teramo. Tel.: 0039 086 1252257.

### RISTORANTE ZENOBI

Serves typical simple dishes prepared with ingredients from the owners' farm. Choose a *timballo tradizionale* with *ragù* meat and tomato sauce or *timballo bianco* with *scrippelle* and vegetables. Outdoor tables are available.

**Address:** Contrada Riomoro, 132, Colonnella. Tel.: 0039 086 170581. <http://www.ristorantezenobi.it/>

### AGRITURISMO LIDIA

Good, moist *timballo*, although the portions are on the smaller side here. Outdoor tables are available.

**Address:** Ctr. Sardinara, 79, 64100 Teramo. Tel.: 0039 328 6981568.

### BACUCCO D'ORO

Small portions of *timballo* are served as a starter, but you can also order a bigger portion as a main course if booked in advance. Outdoor tables with beautiful views of the sea and the surrounding hills are available.

**Address:** Via del Pozzo, 8, Mutignano. Tel.: 0039 085 936227.

# BACCALÀ: ABRUZZO'S MOUNTAIN FISH

By Marco Soccorsi

One of Abruzzo's traditional foods is salt-cured cod – called “mountain fish,” since it was often used in peasant dishes in the hinterland areas of the region, far away from the sea. Baccalà has a long, centuries-old history that connects the kitchens of our nonnas in small mountain villages to the cold seas of Northern Europe.

Baccalà is cod cured in salt (not to be confused with *stoccafisso*, which is cod dried in the icy North wind). This way of preserving the fish meant it kept for a long time and could be transported easily on ships or mules and donkeys up the mountain trails.

Legend has it that a Venetian merchant, Pietro Querini, was shipwrecked on Røst, Norway, in 1432 with his cargo of spices coming from Crete. There he learnt about baccalà from the local population, and realised the great commercial potential of this tasty and easy-to-transport fish. He returned to Italy and started what today would be considered a thriving import-export business. Baccalà first was sold in Naples

and, eventually, it reached Lanciano's famous fairs in the 16th century. Today baccalà is no longer considered food of the poor peasants and can be found on the menus of some of Abruzzo's best restaurants.

When I was little, my mother used to take me to the market on Piazza Duomo in L'Aquila to buy cod, which was sold already pre-soaked in water, ready to be cooked. I still remember the intense smells coming from the market stalls, and the shouting vendors demonstrating the quality of their goods. In our family – as in many households in Abruzzo – we cooked baccalà in oil with olives, onions, potatoes, some tomatoes, and parsley for Christmas Eve. I love cooking that dish, and its smell takes me back in time.

I want to share with you two simple tasty recipes that I learnt from my mother that were passed on to her by my grandmother.

*Marco Soccorsi lives in L'Aquila. He is an expert mushroom and truffle hunter, avid cook and a passionate promoter of Abruzzese cuisine.*



## OVEN-ROASTED BACCALÀ WITH POTATOES

### INGREDIENTS

Makes 2-3 portions

- 500-600g fillet of pre-soaked and de-salted baccalà (if buying dry, you will need to soak baccalà in a bowl for two days, changing the water a few times)
- 3-4 large potatoes
- 60 ml olive oil
- Salt and paper to taste

### PREPARATION

Preheat your oven to 150°C (300°F).

Peel and thinly slice potatoes. Drizzle them with oil and season with salt and pepper. In a deep oven dish make three-four layers alternating baccalà and potatoes. Bake for at least 30 minutes or until the potatoes start turning crispy and golden.

## BACCALÀ SALAD

### INGREDIENTS

Makes 2-3 portions

- 500-600g fillet of pre-soaked and de-salted baccalà (if buying dry, you will need to soak baccalà in a bowl for two days, changing the water a few times)
- 3-4 tablespoons olive oil
- A handful of black oven-baked olives
- Juice of one lemon
- ½ cup parsley, chopped
- Salt and paper to taste



### PREPARATION

Drop the baccalà into boiling water and cook until fish breaks off easily (15-20 minutes). Strain and cool. After it cools, remove skin and bones, if there are any and break the flesh into medium pieces. Drizzle with oil and lemon juice, and season with salt and pepper. Sprinkle with parsley and serve as a starter.

# LE VIRTÙ TAKES ON PALLOT' CAC' E OVE

By Linda Dini Jenkins

In South Philadelphia — part of the landing point of Abruzzo's diaspora in the USA — you'll find Le Virtù (The Virtues), a down-to-earth trattoria dedicated to the cuisine of the Abruzzo region. Owners Francis Cratil and Cathy Lee were inspired by their experiences at the tables of family, friends, farms, and eateries all over Abruzzo. They proudly serve the cuisine of the shepherds, farmers, and fishermen of Italy's wildest and most unspoiled region.

Francis, who has deep roots in the region — his grandfather was from Castiglione Messer Marino — sources his ingredients from some of Abruzzo's best cooperatives and farms, including cheese from La Porta dei Parchi and Bio Agriturismo Valle Scannese da Gregorio and saffron from Navelli. Their wine list includes Abruzzese varietals as well as a fine selection of *aperitivi* and *digestivi* including house-made *genziana*, *acqua santa*, and other Abruzzo-inspired specialties.

Of course, the name derives from *le virtù*, a rich minestrone made on the 1st of May in Abruzzo's Teramo province. Tradition demands that all that's left in the larder after the hard Abruzzese winter be combined with the newly arriving spring vegetables and legumes and shared (see page 4 for more on *le virtù*).

Francis, with the blessing of his consulting chef — Massimo Conocchioli from Colonnella — offers this recipe of *pallot' cac' e ove* braised egg and cheese croquettes in *sugo finto*, a "false" meat — therefore meatless — sauce to our readers in the same spirit of conviviality. Every *nonna* has her own interpretation of this traditional dish, but here's what you'll find at Le Virtù, which was inspired by Ristorante da Paolino in Pescocostanzo.



## INGREDIENTS

### For the croquettes:

1 cup grated pecorino romano; 2 cups diced rustic bread, crust removed; 1 clove garlic, minced; 3 eggs; 1 tbsp chopped parsley (optional); vegetable oil (for frying)

### For the sugo finto:

4 cups tomato puree, 1 stalk celery, minced; 1 carrot, minced; 1 onion, minced; 1 bay leaf; 4 basil leaves; 5 tbsp olive oil; salt and pepper to taste.

## PREPARATION

In a large bowl, mix together the bread, cheese, eggs, and garlic. Combine until a thick paste forms. Portion the mixture into 2-inch spheres either by hand or by using a portion scoop.

Attach a deep fry or candy thermometer to the side of large heavy pot. Fill the pot with 2 inches of vegetable oil and bring the oil to 350 degrees F.

Carefully drop the egg and cheese balls into oil and fry until golden brown. Remove, and let drain on paper towels.

In a large pot "sweat" the celery, carrots, and onions on low heat until translucent. Add the tomatoes and bay leaf. Season with salt and pepper. Bring to a simmer and let cook for 15 minutes or until the tomato has thickened. Add basil and stir. Then add the fried *pallotte*. Do not stir. Place in a preheated 350-degree oven for 15 minutes or until cooked through.

Garnish with grated pecorino and basil, serve immediately.