

ARCHIVE ISSUES • JUNE-JULY-AUGUST 2021

# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



SUMMER  
2021

ISSUE NO. 13 • JUNE 2021

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD WINE

# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



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Palentini plains in the Marsica area.  
Photo by Giulia Pietrobattista.

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by Giulia Pietrobattista.

# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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Magazine

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## *Ciao a tutti!*

It is so exciting to see life getting back to some kind of normal here: restaurants have re-opened, small outdoor events have resumed, and travel is slowly taking off again. That means we will have more stories to tell you and more beautiful photos from all corners of the region to share.

This issue of ABRUZZISSIMO explores the Marsica area in the province of L'Aquila – which includes the Fucino basin, the Palentini plains, the Abruzzo National Park, and the valley of Sulmona – from different angles: we talk about the Marsi, an ancient Italic people that lived there centuries ago, things to do and see in Scurcola Marsicana, and its magnificent artifacts on display in Rome. I invited an anthropologist to tell you, my readers, about the amulets and talismans that were a big part of Abruzzese culture until not too long ago. An award-winning wildlife photographer will take you to higher altitudes to see nurseries that chamois organise for their kids this time of year. In the Food & Wine section you will find two little-known traditional recipes for rustic pies and a pasta soup with... a shriek.

ABRUZZISSIMO wouldn't exist without your support. Starting from this issue, you can find a list of supporters at the end of the magazine which, I hope, will continue to grow. You can contribute to the publication's upkeep and make a donation, one-off or recurrent, via [this link](#).

Enjoy reading the June issue!

### ***A presto,***

Anna Lebedeva

Editor

## ABRUZZO'S ARTIFACTS IN ROME

Some of the most important historic artifacts from Abruzzo are being shown at Rome's Scuderie del Quirinale. The exhibition *Tota Italia. Alle origini di una nazione* tells about unification of the nation under the Roman Empire through the most significant archaeological finds from pre-Roman Italy – a fascinating mosaic of Italic people and traditions. Abruzzo's museums have loaned three exhibits: the magnificent terracotta statue of goddess *Angizia* found in Luco dei Marsi in 2007 and rarely exhibited to the public, the elaborate carved bone funeral bed from Fossa, and the bronze statue of Hercules Curinus from the god's shrine near Sulmona. The exhibition will be open until July 25.



## WALKING TOURS IN CALASCIO

Explore the village of Calascio and its long history on a walking tour with locals. Società Cooperativa Calascio takes small groups to see historic palaces, churches, and hidden alleyways and shares stories from the village's past. At the end of the tour, you will follow shepherds' trails up to the famous Rocca Calascio castle. Morning and afternoon walks are scheduled for June 6, 20, and 27. English-speaking guides are available. To book call 0039 3515512131 or email [coopcalascio@gmail.com](mailto:coopcalascio@gmail.com).



## BLUE FLAG BEACHES

The number of Blue Flag beaches in Abruzzo has increased from 10 to 13 this year. The prestigious Blue Flag Award is given by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) to the cleanest and most eco-friendly beaches and marinas in the world every year. In order to qualify for the Blue Flag (Bandiera Blu), a series of stringent environmental, educational, safety, and accessibility criteria must be met and maintained. To see the list of the 13 Bandiera Blu locations in Abruzzo, go to [ABRUZZISSIMO website](http://ABRUZZISSIMO website).



## NIKO ROMITO'S REALE RE-OPENS

The famous Abruzzese chef, Niko Romito, re-opens his three-Michelin-star restaurant Reale in Castel di Sangro on June 10 to propose the fixed-price tasting menu that proved to be hugely popular last summer. The self-taught chef is renowned worldwide for his love for local high-quality ingredients and bringing simplicity to haute cuisine. The 15-course tasting menu is priced at €150 per person. To book, go to the [Reale website](http://Reale website).



## ABOARD HISTORIC TRAINS

Hop aboard the carriages built in the 1920s and 1950s to travel on the Sulmona-Isernia railway between national parks and nature reserves, crossing the mountains, valleys, and narrow gorges, with stops in the picturesque towns of Campo Di Giove, Palena, Rivisondoli, and Roccaraso. You can do it in a day or stay in one of the locations overnight, adding guided walking tours or e-bike rides to your all-inclusive package. Prices start from €40 for a simple round day trip; see the summer timetable of Abruzzo's historic trains at the [Ferrovia dei Parchi website](#) and book online.

**DO YOU ENJOY READING  
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## DID YOU KNOW?

### THE CYCLOPEAN WALLS OF MONTE PALLANO

Located near Tornareccio in the province of Chieti, the impressive megalithic walls of Monte Pallano are shrouded in legend and mystery. These massive structures are also known as cyclopean walls because, according to the Greek classics Pliny and Aristotle, they were built by the mythical giant Cyclops. The most famous examples of such walls exist in Tiryns, Argos, and Mykines in Greece.

The presence of man on Monte Pallano goes back to prehistoric times, but historians believe that the mighty wall was built by the Samnite tribe in the 5th-4th century BC. The wall circuit probably extended for four kilometres, but today only a fragment remains, which is 165 meters long, five meters high, and an impressive four metres thick.

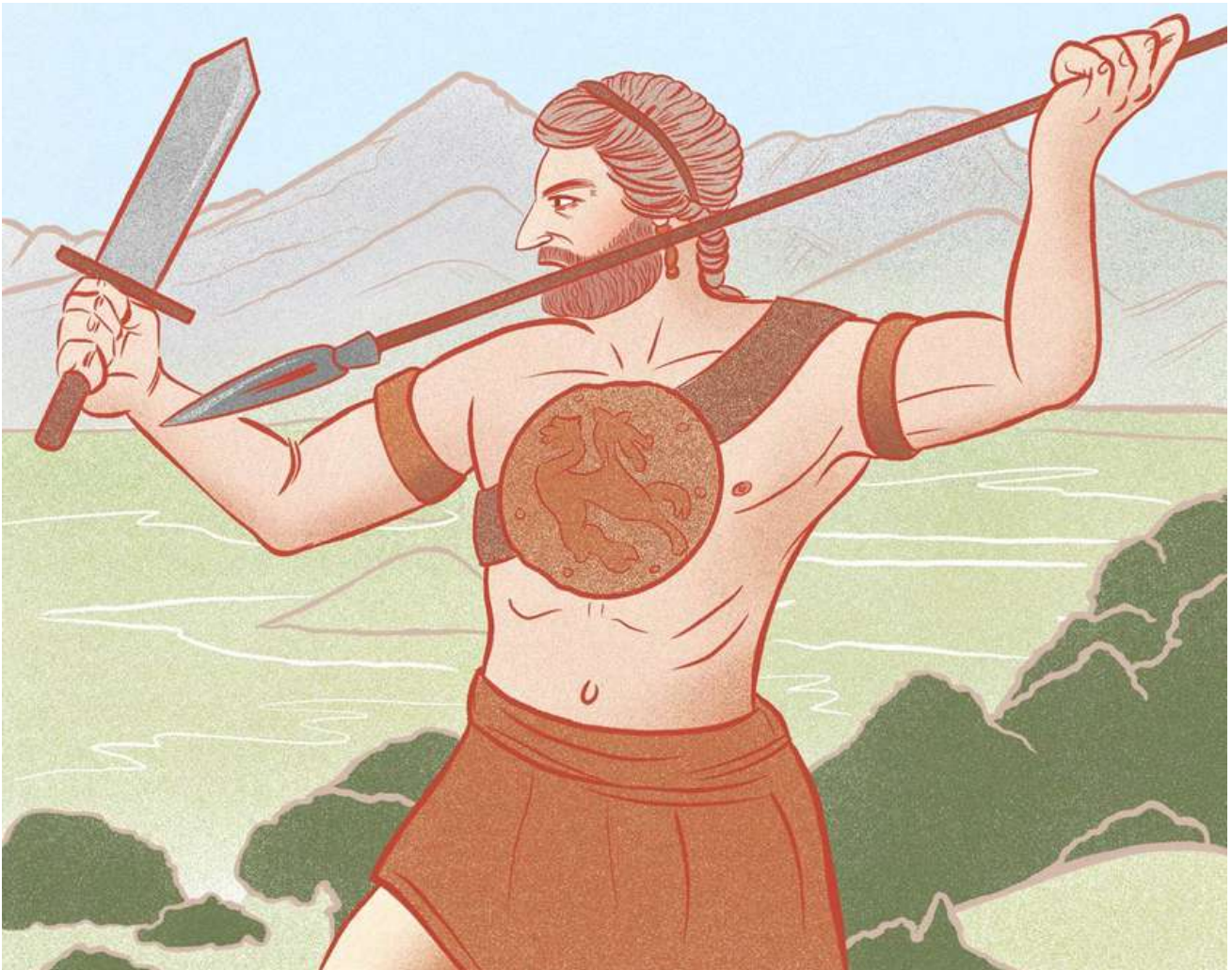
It is thought that the purpose of the cyclopean walls was defensive, with an element of prestige and power show-off, aimed at instilling fear and respect among travellers and possible invaders. There are many legends about the paths, the caves, and hiding places full of hidden treasures, woods populated by goblins, and giant men who lived here in the past. One of these claims that the megalithic walls were built by giant shepherds who used them as a pasture fence. These shepherds, with their great strides, managed to bring their flocks to Apulia every day and then return, every evening, to Monte Pallano. They accumulated so much wealth that they had to hide their treasures in a cave guarded by the devil himself. However, no one has ever managed to find a trace of the treasure.

The [Associazione Monte Pallano](#) manages the site and runs tours in English.

## THE MARSI, ABRUZZO'S ANCIENT WARRIORS

By Francesco Proia

The ancient Italic tribe of Marsi was renowned for its strength, valour, and warfare skills. The Marsi were feared by the enemies of the Roman Empire and were given prestigious jobs as personal bodyguards and intelligence for Roman emperors.



**A Marsi warrior. Illustration by Leslie Agan**

The Italic tribe Marsi lived in the area of Abruzzo that today is called Marsica (it includes 37 municipalities in the province of L'Aquila and is located between the plain of the former Lake Fucino, the plain of Carsoli, and the valley of Sulmona). Around 450 BCE, the Marsi specialised in warfare and mercenary missions, which earned them the name of "Sons of Mars,

God of War." Their bellicose deeds became legendary by 350 BCE, when Rome was confronted with the demands of the Italic people's coalition led by the Marsi who asked for the recognition of their social rights. Even though the Roman army was bigger and better organized, they came close to being destroyed by the bloodthirsty Marsi. It was then that the Roman rulers had to give in to the demands of those indomitable warriors

and were forced to grant the Italic people Roman citizenship, with all the rights connected to it. That way, the Roman Empire also managed to enlist in their ranks the most fearless warriors of the ancient world.

## GLORIOUS VICTORIES

The Marsi became the backbone of the largest and most powerful army in history. The myth of the brave Marsi warriors grew quickly and within a few years, as attested by many historic documents, in every corner in the whole Empire it was known that at least four Roman legionnaires were needed to fight a Marsi warrior. At least one group of Marsi warriors accompanied the Roman army in every military undertaking inside and outside Italy; Rome could no longer do without these formidable allies who helped them to dominate the world. There were several documented cases in which the Marsi brought victory in battles against the terrible Gauls, the Parthians, the Thracians, and the Dacians.

## SAVING ROME

The Roman general and statesman Publio Cornelio Scipione Aemilianus managed to raze Carthage to the ground thanks to the bravery of the Marsi warriors. As soon as he



"Only the loyalty of the Marsi allowed Rome to survive."

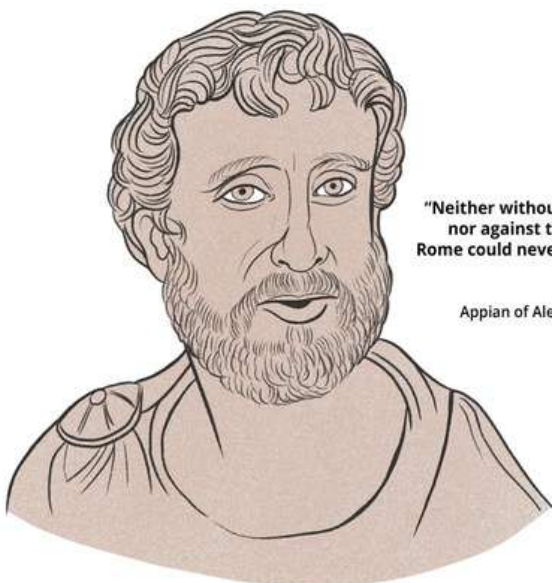
Tito Livio

returned to Italy, as a sign of recognition, he went to visit the ancient capital of the Marsi, the city of Marruvium (today San Benedetto dei Marsi). He filled the city with the best works of art stolen from Carthage and, after that victory, he requested the permanent presence of the Marsi in his army.

Tito Livio, one of the most authoritative historians of ancient Rome, wrote: "Only the loyalty of the Marsi allowed Rome to survive." The most famous saying, known throughout the ancient world to every citizen or slave of the Empire, belonged to the Greek historian Appian of Alexandria: "Nec sine Marsis nec contra Marsos triumphari posse" – "Neither without the Marsi, nor against the Marsi, Rome could never win a war."

## FAMOUS PRAETORIAN

The warriors from Fucino were so fearless that they were often chosen to be the praetorians, the private guards of the emperor. Quintus Naevius Cordus Sutorius Macro was a prefect of the Praetorian Guard in 31-38 CE, serving under the Roman Emperors Tiberius and Caligula. Macro was born in Alba Fucens, a Roman town at the foot of Monte Velino and is still remembered as the one who financed the building of the



"Neither without the Marsi, nor against the Marsi, Rome could never win a war."

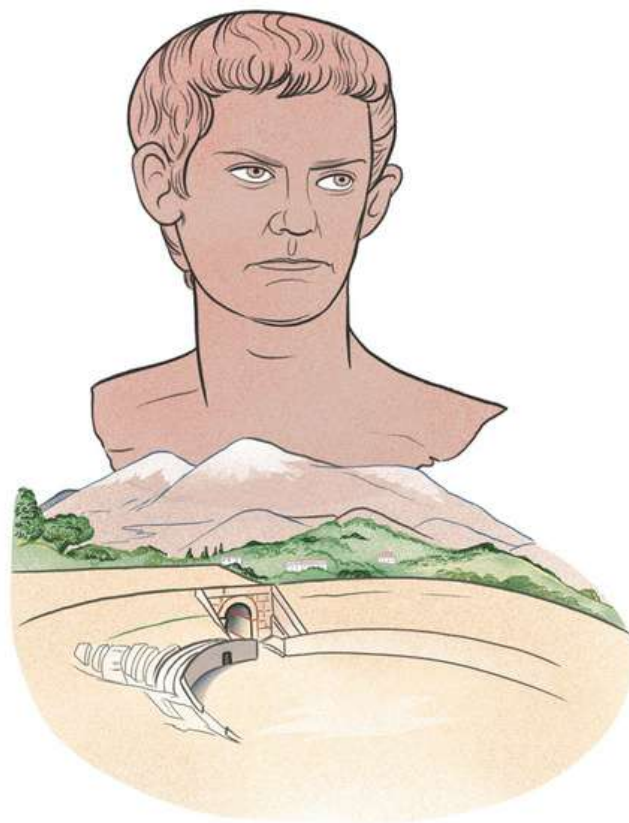
Appian of Alexandria



beautiful amphitheatre that we can still admire today.

When Tiberius died, in 37 CE, the rumour spread that it was he who killed the emperor on Caligula's order. After the death of Tiberius, Caligula became the empire's ruler favouring the prefect Macro and his praetorian guards and immediately doubling their pay. In doing so, he hoped to avoid corruption among the guards. However, that didn't stop the eccentric emperor's temper tantrums and paranoia. Within months, Macro fell out of grace and was stripped of his title. The Roman law at that time required confiscation of assets following a conviction, which is why Macro preferred to commit suicide. In his will, the famous son of the Marsi tribe ordered that an amphitheatre be built in his name in Alba Fucens, his hometown.

Ironically, Caligula was later assassinated by his praetorians. Alba Fucens



**Macro and his amphitheatre. Illustration by Leslie Agan**

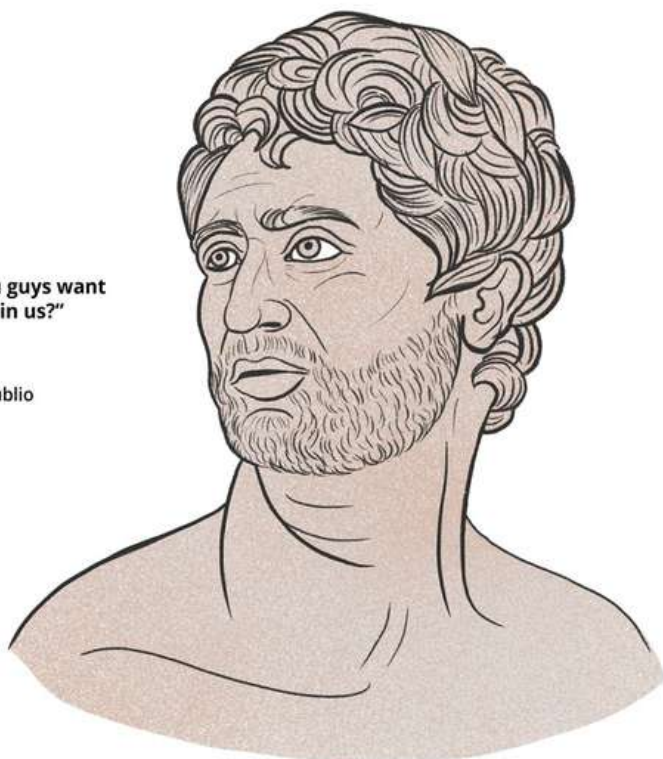
amphitheatre, after thousands of years, is still standing near the town of Massa d'Albe, a testimony to the follies of the Roman emperor. You can see the name of Quintus Naevius Cordus Sutorius Macro, one of the most famous sons of the Marsi, inscribed above the entrance door.

*Francesco Proia is a journalist and director of [MarsicaLive.it](http://MarsicaLive.it). He has written *Il Principe del Lago*, a book that talks about Da Vinci's trip to Abruzzo and his connection with Torlonia. His other books are *Lake Dust* (in English) and *Polvere del Lago*.*

*Illustrations by Leslie Agan.*

"Hey, you guys want to join us?"

Publio



## A TALE OF AMULETS AND TALISMANS

By Adriana Gandolfi

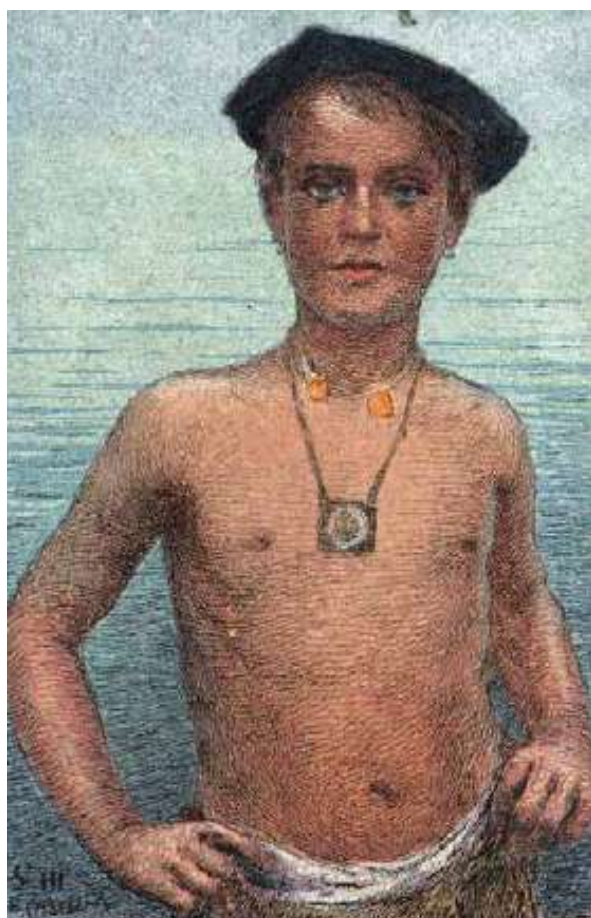
In Abruzzo, amulets were often worn as part of a traditional costume. They signalled the social and civil status of the wearer and were believed to protect and defend from evil influences, as well as attract prosperity and wellbeing.

Different amulets existed for children, men, and women, as well as those of a generic type, still in use today, such as the horn – a phallic symbol of vigour and vitality – which symbolism can be traced back to the prehistoric era. The beliefs connected with amulets combine religious elements, superstitions, and ancient traditions of pre-Christian origin. But nobody could buy a talisman. Instead, in order for it to “work,” an amulet had to be received as a gift or found casually.

### AMULETS FOR CHILDREN

It was believed that childhood was the most vulnerable period of life, as it meant being exposed to diseases, the evil eye, and witchcraft. To defend from these dangers, infants were equipped with specific and multipurpose amulets which sometimes they also used as toys.

The little talismans were attached to the child’s clothes or the cradle and came in many different shapes: a bell, whistle, trumpet, mermaids, sea horses, or unicorns with dangling rattles. According to an ancient custom in Scanno, the paternal grandmother had to provide the newborn grandchild with the first “magic guardians,” called the “three things” (*le tre cose*): the donut (*ciambella*) to strengthen the gums, the rattle for amusement, and the *condrammalòcchje* (against the evil eye). The latter consisted of a tuft of badger hair tied with a silver cap or, for a more



A boy wearing amulets. B. Cascella, postcard, 1900s

complex amulet, the so-called “thirteen” (*il tredici*) with “13” stamped on a central medal and other little symbolic pendants dangling on chains. You can still find *il tredici* pendants in some traditional jewellers’.

The badger hair amulet is one of the oldest and most common. It can still be seen in Pescocostanzo and in the province of



**Above: a boy with amulets, Lanciano, 1883. Right: a modern day child with a badger hair amulet on the pram, Castiglione Messer Raimondo.**

Teramo, where it is handed down from one generation to the next. In addition to protecting from the evil eye, it was believed to fend off witches spells. Old women sewed little red fabric hearts with pinned pendants of badger hair that children wore on the left side of the chest or had it attached to their cradle.

One of the most common amulets for babies and children were little silver keys on a string or chain. There was a widespread belief that if a sick child grabbed a key during a crisis or fit it would bring an immediate relief. In San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore, there was a strong tradition of little keys of Saint Donatus (*chiavucchie de Sande Dunàte*) that were blessed on the saint's feast day.

## SEAHORSES AND SHARK TEETH

For adults, there was a range of talismans with different functions. It was believed that if a woman with a newborn baby had no milk for breastfeeding, she needed a special amulet: a seahorse dried indoors in the shade, tied to a ribbon and worn around the neck.

It was a custom among Abruzzese shepherds, especially those who went to Apulia for

transhumance, to carry objects with special and propitiatory powers, such as human or wolf teeth encapsulated in silver, which were believed to protect from ear pain and dangerous animal attacks.

The so-called "tongues of St. Paul" (*glossopetre*) were fossilized teeth of prehistoric sharks that were found in the ground during ploughing, considered effective against the venomous bite of spiders and snakes. They were mounted in silver and worn mainly by shepherds, laborers, and woodcutters who worked in the areas where the risk of encountering such dangers was highest.

There was a special ritual that had to be observed when someone was lucky enough to come across *glossopetre*. In the area of Lake Fucino, for instance, if a farmer found a tongue of St. Paul stone, he had to kneel down and pick it up with his tongue and mouth to preserve the amulet's magic powers.

Prehistoric stone tools, arrowheads, and the smooth hatchets of the Neolithic period were considered petrified fragments of thunderbolts and were called "lightning stones." Mounted in silver, they were secured to the bed's headboard or worn as a pendant and were

meant to ward off electrocutions from lightning during storms and against various accidents. To avoid direct contact with iron – which would “discharge” the special powers – the stones were kept in small cloth bags and occasionally greased with oil as a sacred relic of heavenly origin. This type of amulet was discovered in the Italia burials at the necropolis of Campovalano in Campi, in the province of Teramo.

## AGAINST ENVY AND EVIL EYE

Jewellery in the old days didn't have only a decorative purpose. It had symbolic associations, often inspired by nature: fish meant health and fertility; a spider stood for industriousness and wealth; grapes meant abundance and fecundity; the crescent moon symbolised regeneration and fertility; and a star signified luck and success.

Women in the small village of Scanno wore necklaces called *chiacchiere* (translated as chit-chat, gossip) consisting of hollow beads made from thin embossed metal plates. When a woman wearing *chiacchiere* moved, the beads made a light noise, like the chitter-chatter of envious and gossipy people, which was supposed to protect the wearer from envy and the evil eye.

In the Frentana area, in the province of Chieti, the so-called *sciacquajje* (derived from the word “fool” used in ancient times) were popular – large, showy half-moon earrings with little noisy dangles. Local women wore them so their jingle would keep the evil eye away. Both *chiacchiere* necklaces and *sciacquajje* are still made by traditional jewellers in Scanno, Pescocostanzo and other small towns in Abruzzo.

Old amulets from Abruzzo can be found in several important museums across Europe, but the most extensive collection is exhibited in the National Archaeological Museum of Perugia (*Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Perugia*). Another display of rare and interesting talismans is housed in the National Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions in Rome (*Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari di Roma*). There are also a



**Tongue of St. Paul, Chieti, late 1800s-early 1900s, National Archaeological Museum of Perugia; *il tredici* amulet, Scanno, 1800s.**

number of fascinating amulets from the Italic and Roman periods in the National Archaeological Museum of Chieti (*Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Chieti*).

*Adriana Gandolfi is an anthropologist specialising in ethno-anthropological research in Abruzzo and Molise. Follow her on [Astra - Associazione Studi Tradizioni Regionali Abruzzesi](#). Illustrations from the book *Amuleti ornamenti magici d'Abruzzo* by A. Gandolfi.*

A photograph taken from a dark, stone archway looking out onto a bright, scenic landscape. The view includes a valley with green fields, a small town in the distance, and mountains under a blue sky with light clouds. The archway is made of rough-hewn stone and frames the scene perfectly.

## A DAY IN SCURCOLA MARSICANA

By Giulia Pietro Battista

The little-known town of Scurcola Marsicana boasts a rich history, magnificent views, and some of the liveliest traditional festivals in the region. Add to that the great restaurants and you have a perfect destination for a day trip.

Set against the beautiful peaks of Monte San Nicola and Monte Velino, Scurcola Marsicana dominates the Palentini plains in the province of L'Aquila. Its strategic position defined the town's history. The name of the town itself derives from its prominent location: it is believed to come from the Lombardic word "skulk" or from the Latin one "excubiae", which both mean a sentry, or guard post.

Battles and natural disasters have defined and shaped Scurcola Marsicana. The present-day town was founded in the 13th century, after the construction of the Santa Maria della Vittoria Abbey. In this area, on August 23, 1268, the battle of Tagliacozzo (also called the Battle of Piani Palentini) mentioned by Dante Alighieri in *The Divine Comedy*, was fought — a crucial conflict during which Charles of Anjou defeated Conradin of Hohenstaufen and took over Southern Italy. In the 16th century, the town was in the centre of a long power battle between two noble families: the Orsini and the Colonna.

The history of Scurcola, and the whole Marsica area, is also sadly tied to numerous earthquakes.

### Scurcola Marsicana and Monte Velino

Two of the most devastating tremors happened in 1456 (which destroyed the Abbey of Santa Maria della Vittoria) and in 1915, both followed by massive destruction and heavy human losses.

Today, Scurcola is a quiet town with beautiful historic landmarks, restaurants, and mountain trails. In summer, Italian tourists, many from Rome, flock here for cooler temperatures, fresh air, and good food.

## WHAT TO SEE

### ROCCA ORSINI

Rocca Orsini is an enclosure castle, a type of construction with a fortified structure made of stone walls and towers. The oldest part of the castle dates back to the 1200s, but it underwent many transformations in the later centuries. The Rocca stands on a hill overlooking the town, with spectacular panoramic views of the Palentini and Fucino Plains. Along the perimeter of the castle it is still possible to see the ancient embrasures that were once used to protect it. Due to restoration works, it is currently not possible to visit the Rocca inside.



## CHIESA DI SANTA MARIA DELLA VITTORIA

Built beside the Rocca fortress, the 16th century church houses treasures that once belonged to the medieval Cistercian Abbey of Santa Maria della Vittoria, which ruins are still visible in the lower part of the town. Inside the church you can see the wooden statue of the Virgin Mary with the Child. It is believed that Carlo I d'Angiò gifted the statue to the abbey and the population of Scurcola after the victory in the famous Battle of Tagliacozzo. The side door on the right side of the church also came from the old abbey.

## CHIESA DELLA SANTISSIMA TRINITÀ

Here is a beautiful 16th century church with an impressive Baroque staircase which has been seriously damaged twice by the earthquakes of 1456 and 1915. Over the centuries, it went through several style transformations and today represents a splendid mix of Baroque and Rococo. In the attached Immacolata Concezione chapel stands the 18th-century organ with an opulent gilt wooden case.

## QUERCIA DI DONATO

Walk or drive along Via dei Cappuccini, where once an old Capuchin convent stood. Before reaching the convent, on the left side, grows the imposing Oak of Donato, one of the biggest in Abruzzo. It is 20 metres high, measures almost six metres in circumference, and its estimated age is 750 years. So it is possible that this tree has seen that important Battle of Tagliacozzo that changed the course of Italian history. The Quercia di Donato is included in the list of Italian monumental trees. Enter "Quercia di Donato" in your Google Maps to navigate.

## FESTIVALS AND EVENTS

### CORTEO STORICO MEDIEVALE "CONTRADE E BORGHI", AUGUST 23

The parade takes place in August, on the eve of the ancient battle of Piani Palentini, in the enchanting alleys of Scurcola. This historical procession makes the audience relive the atmosphere of medieval times. More than 250



Rocca Orsini; the interior of the Chiesa di Santa Maria della Vittoria

participants dressed in period costumes enact scenes from the town's past. There is always a great atmosphere, music, and street food. For updates, check the event's [Facebook page](#).

### SAGRA DELLA CIAMMELLA, AUGUST

Every year in Piazza Garibaldi, in the new part of the city, the town celebrates the festival of *Ciammella* (the dialectal word for *ciambella*, a ring-shaped cake). Many food stands sell, in addition to the delicious cakes, many other local delicacies. During the festival, there is also a parade of carts and people in folkloristic costumes. At the end of the party, the fountain representing Venus on the central square, to everyone's delight, spouts wine instead of water. For upcoming dates, see the [ProLoco Scurcola Marsicana](#) page.

### Chiesa della Santissima Trinità

### FESTA DELLA CIPOLLA, AUGUST / SEPTEMBER

During the Onion Festival, every local restaurant serves traditional dishes with *cipolla scurcolana*: onion soup, onion frittata, deep-fried onions, beans with onions, and even a cake with onions. During the festival there is always live music and a farmers' market with local produce. For the dates and programme, keep an eye on the [ProLoco Scurcola Marsicana](#) page.

### VENERDI SANTO, EASTER

A somber procession takes place on Good Friday. Locals dressed in hooded tunics walk along the town's streets stopping at each of the seven churches. They carry crosses and wooden sculptures representing the different stages of the Passion of Christ.





## WHERE TO EAT

### OSTERIA FUTURO

Located on a pretty alley right behind the main square, *Osteria Futuro* combines tradition and innovation. The chef uses local ingredients and wild herbs to create local dishes with a modern twist. **Address:** Corso Vittorio Emanuele III, 12. Tel.: 0039 0863 561097

### RISTORANTE RENZO

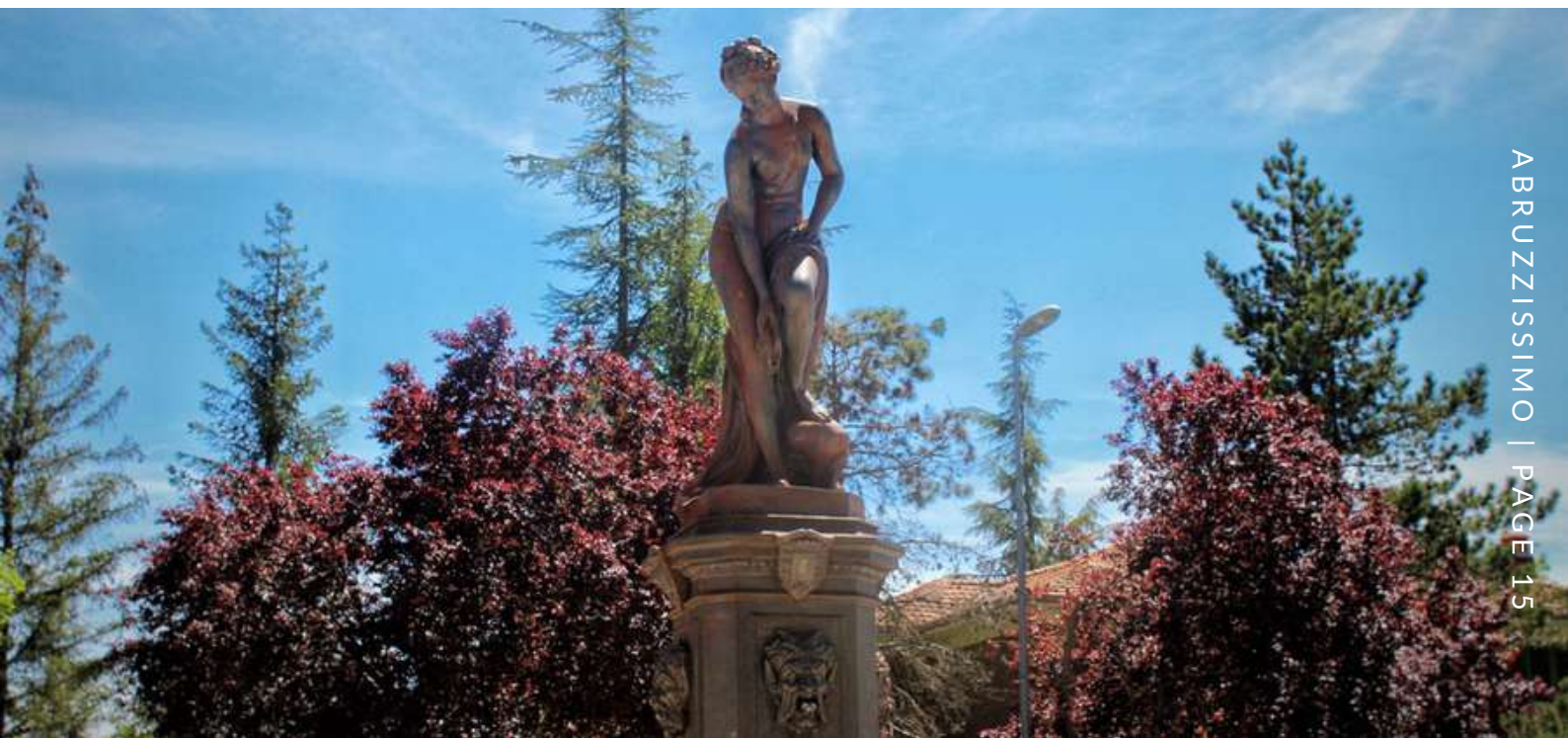
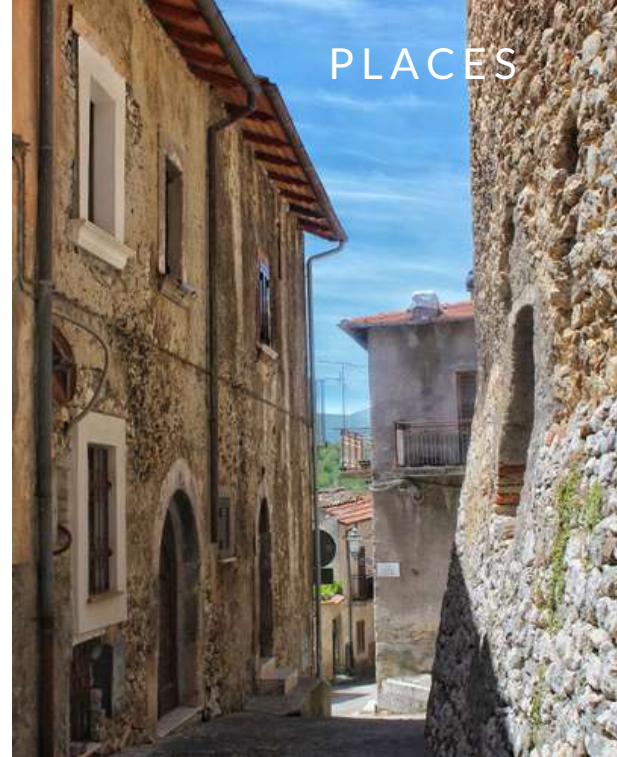
This traditional family restaurant has been serving hearty dishes in a friendly atmosphere since 1922. The specialty of the restaurant is grilled meat, cooked on the huge fireplace that sits in the center of the dining area. **Address:** Via Tiburtina Valeria, Km 110. Tel.: 0039 0863 561030, 0039 3480453646.

### I MUSICANTI DI BREMA

Set in the verdant countryside, the restaurant offers traditional dishes made with fresh ingredients from its farm. Even their pizzas are made using the ancient local Solina grain flour. **Address:** Via dei Cappuccini, Località Quercia di Donato (across the road from the monumental oak of Donato). Tel.: 0039 348 8611859, 0039 348 3021022.

*Giulia Pietrobattista is an amateur photographer who is passionate about traditional food and travel.*

**Below: a fountain detail; right: old streets of Scurcola Marsicana**



## BUILDING A FARMSTEAD IN ABRUZZO

By Linda Dini Jenkins

A city girl from Moscow with deep experience in the travel industry and a Swedish marketing executive have set up a farm in a tiny village in Chieti province.

Julia Mitina and Stefan Axelson met in Moscow in 2012 and four years later bought an old stone farmhouse together in the village of Roccamontepiano. It took about six months to have a new roof and new plaster work done and anti-seismic chains installed. “We are big city people with no previous experience in country living who decided to leave it all behind and become farmers,” says Stefan.

### FARMING LIFE

They rolled up their sleeves and dived right into the deep end buying bees along with the heirloom *Nero d’Abruzzo* pigs, original to Abruzzo and considered nearly extinct less than two decades ago. There are also chickens, goats, sheep, dogs, and cats.

“Our goal was to create a paradise of local products that people could enjoy and would pay up for, due to the high quality, good taste, and zero carbon footprint,” says Julia, whose entrepreneurial titles are President, Minister of Finance, Minister of Culture, Minister of Tourism, and Minister of Defense.

“We wanted to do more,” says Stefan, the couple’s Minister of Marketing, Minister of Agriculture, and Minister of Cooking. “But



**Stefan Axelson and Julia Mitina**

every new thing you add to the mix requires a different kind of approval and license, so we have stopped here for now.” The original plans included fields of lavender for dried flowers and medicinal herbs, but there really isn’t enough land for that. Also, a blacksmith shop. Stefan has a very big anvil on site, but no plans to learn yet another trade at this time.

The couple navigated the bureaucratic process of getting farming permissions with ease. Stefan worked in Milan 15 years ago and spoke some Italian which certainly helped. “Julia and I are not fluent speakers but we get



Above: Roccamontepiano; photo via [INFO Roccamontepiano](#). Right: Fattoria del Prato

by pretty well and learn by speaking with the locals.”

Farm work keeps them busy: having two black pig sows and one breeding male means 25-30 little black piglets every year plus the growing honey production. “Last year we had 12 hives, by the end of this year we’ll have 60 beehives and hoping to make 100kg of honey,” proudly says Stefan. “I look after the bees at the moment but I’ll definitely need help soon.” The plan is to have 300-400 bee families in a couple of years.

Stefan and Julia want to sell their produce online but for now they welcome buyers and visitors at their [Fattoria del Prato](#) in person. Apart from piglets, they also sell farm fresh eggs, dried lavender sachets, honey from their bees, as well as beeswax and bees in their boxes, for those who are interested in beekeeping. “We made about 20 kg of honey in 2020 from our hives, but,” says Stefan.



“We hope to make about 100 kg in 2021.” They are hoping to add small group tours of the bee-keeping operation as well as offering bee-keeping courses for beginners in the future.

## WE’RE NOT IN PARIS ANYMORE..

The two settled into Roccamontepiano full-time in 2019, having moved here from Paris. It was Stefan’s dream to change course – to go,

as he says, “from being an office rat to working with my hands.” What’s it like living in a village of fewer than 2,000 people after you’ve seen Par-ee (as the song goes)? Mostly good.

“There are no fences, and everybody knows everybody,” according to Stefan. Julia adds, “We can (and do) easily get help when we need it.” Of course, the locals are so curious about these *stranieri* and what they’re doing here. “They’re like little kittens,” says Julia. “At first, they watched and then hid . . . now they come over. They appreciate what we’re trying to do and even offer compliments.” They soon learned that the mayor’s grandfather was born on their land, so they are undoubtedly of special interest in the area for that reason alone.

The bad side of rural living includes the notorious wild boar roaming the countryside, which chewed a hole in their pig fence. Now two new *pastore Abruzzese* sheepdogs have put a stop to that, as well as kept the foxes out of the henhouse. And culture? Well, Roccamontepiano isn’t Paris or Moscow, but airlines can solve that when Stefan and Julia finally have time for a break. A move to a rural location often means trading high culture for local community, traditions, and festas, of which there are many throughout Abruzzo.

#### One of the heirloom black pigs at the farm



**Stefan with his bees; extracting fresh honey**

They made several trips to Italy before settling in Abruzzo. They ruled out Tuscany because it’s too touristy; Sicily because it’s not green enough; Puglia came close but at the end they opted for Abruzzo. “Here we have 50 shades of green, 365 days a year,” says Stefan. “It’s just what we were hoping for.”

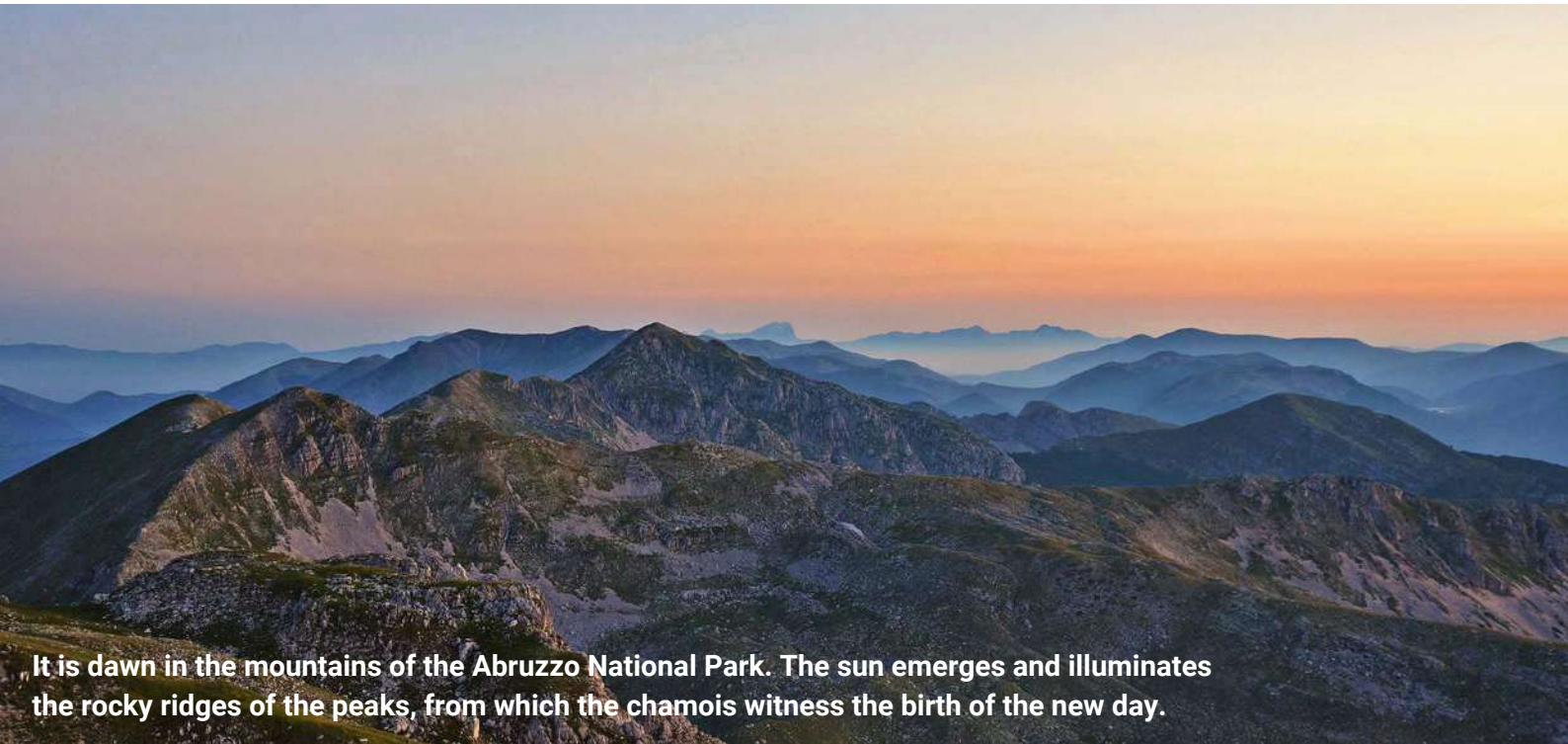
Stefan and Julia say they are happy to be living in a place that is a lot less stressful, and where the summers are long and the winters are not so bad (compared to Sweden and Russia, of course). Their dream of being self-sufficient and sharing the surplus is slowly becoming a reality.

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

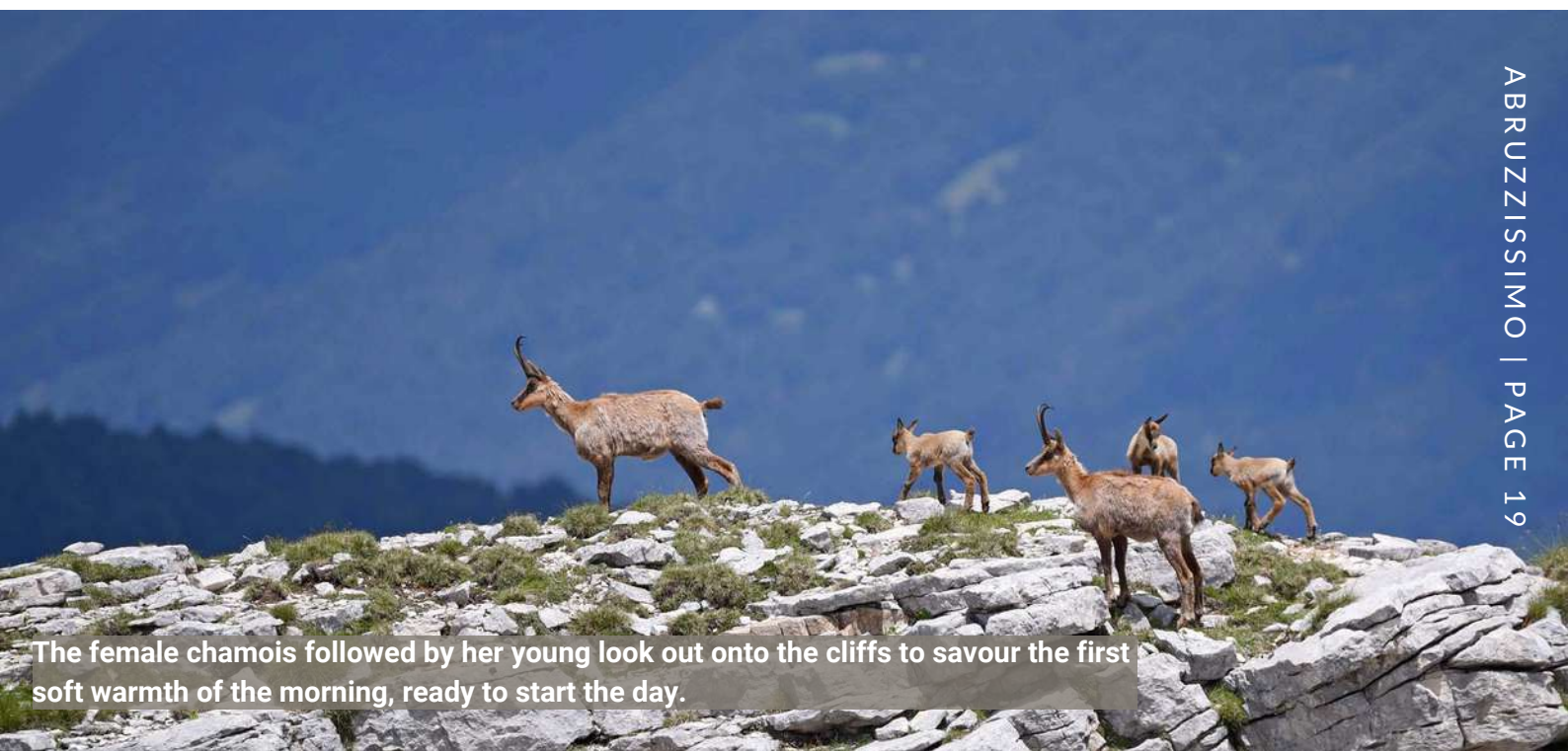
## THE APENNINE CHAMOIS: THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

By Angelina Iannarelli

Abruzzo's mountains are home to the endangered Apennine chamois, and the conservation efforts in the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park have saved the species from extinction. In 2020, around 675 chamois have been spotted and 138 new kids were born on the park's territory. This time of year, newly born kids can be spotted at high altitudes.



It is dawn in the mountains of the Abruzzo National Park. The sun emerges and illuminates the rocky ridges of the peaks, from which the chamois witness the birth of the new day.



The female chamois followed by her young look out onto the cliffs to savour the first soft warmth of the morning, ready to start the day.



The mothers have recently rejoined the herd, taking with them the new kids born in isolated corners among inaccessible rocks. The little chamois can walk a few hours after their birth.



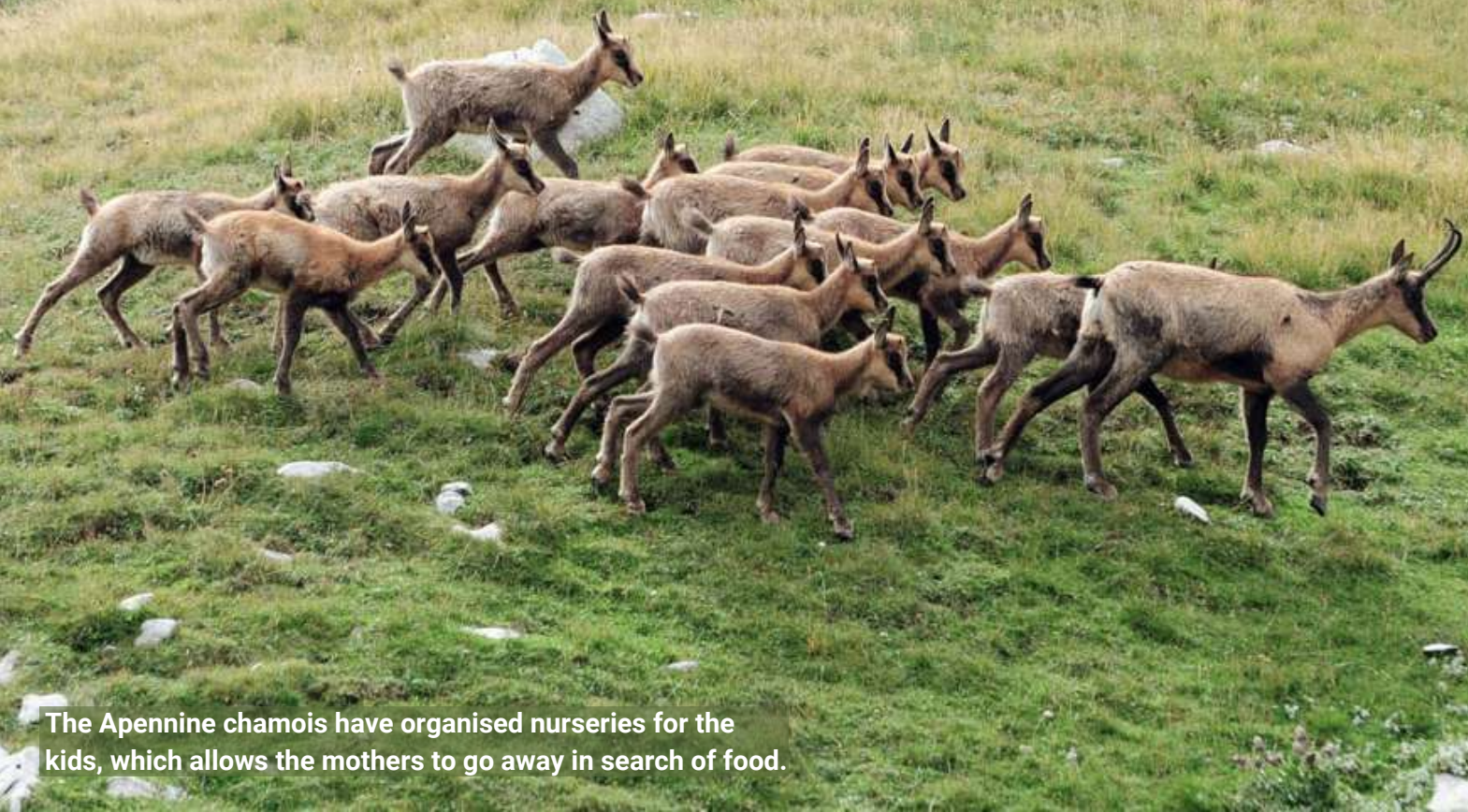
Females are very attentive towards their young – they are always on alert, ready to run for shelter with the kids at the slightest sign of danger.

## WHERE TO SEE THE APENNINE CHAMOIS

You can spot herds of the Apennine chamois while hiking at higher altitudes in the Majella National Park and, at a closer distance, in the nature reserve [La Camosciara](#) in Civititella Alfedena.

In the Abruzzo National Park there is a [sentiero dei camosci](#) ("the path of chamois", marked as I1) which runs from Civititella Alfedena to Val di Rose and Passo Cavuto where you can often observe the chamois.

*Angelina Iannarelli is an award-winning wildlife photographer who spends a lot of time in Abruzzo's national parks. See Angelina's work on her [website](#). She posts wildlife photos regularly on her [Facebook page](#).*



The Apennine chamois have organised nurseries for the kids, which allows the mothers to go away in search of food.



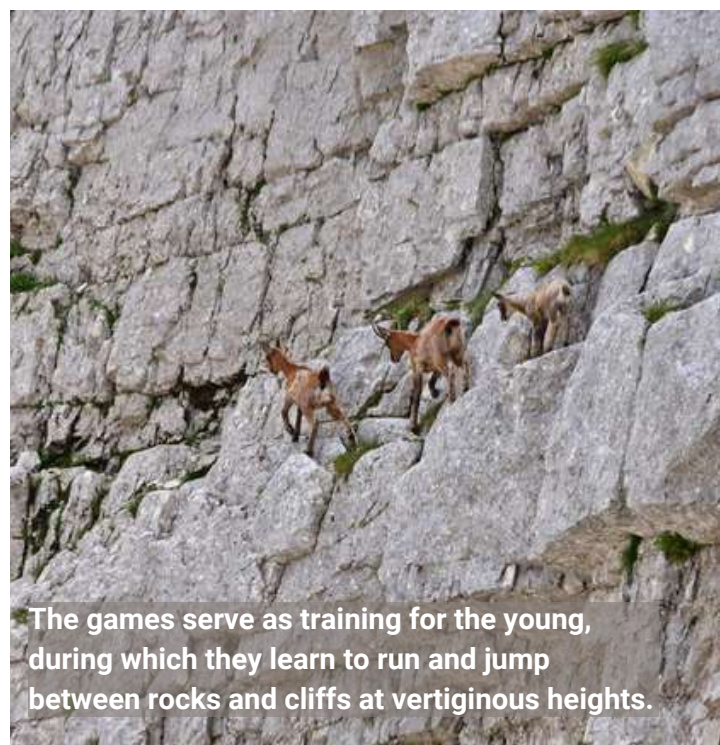
The kids play together, supervised by one or more female chamois, while their mothers calmly graze or control the territory. It is exciting to see so many chamois together moving on the high altitude prairies following a female like an army of little soldiers.



It is not uncommon to see kids attempting to suck the female who is in charge of the nursery. The poor nurse chamois doesn't escape from the greedy kids, but she can't provide milk for them all.



Thanks to the protein-rich mother's milk, kids grow quickly and reach independence within a year, but continue to play together for some time.



The games serve as training for the young, during which they learn to run and jump between rocks and cliffs at vertiginous heights.



# BOOKS



## Richard Walmsley **THE CASE OF THE SLEEPING BEAUTY**

*Inspector Beppe Stancato, driven from his native Calabria by threats from his local mafia, finds himself appointed the chief of police in the city of Pescara, in Abruzzo. The unexpected discovery of a twenty-two-year-*

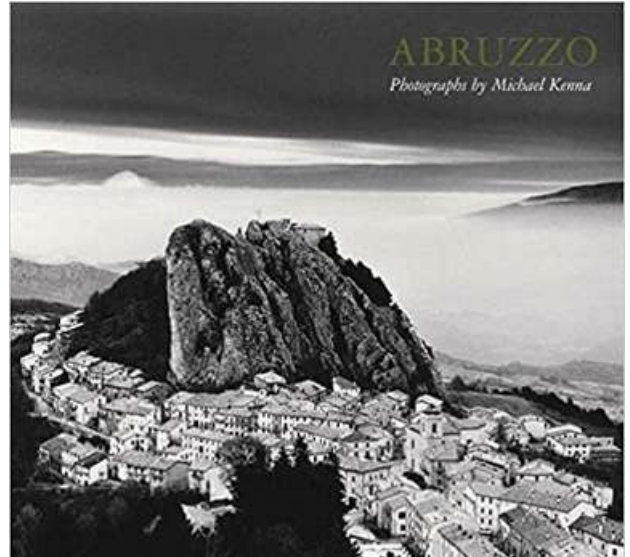
*old girl, lying drugged and unconscious, sparks off a complex investigation involving a seismologist accused of manslaughter and a fugitive mafia boss suspected of involvement in illegal building contracts. Beppe is faced with the task of saving the girl whilst outwitting the crooked seismologist and the wily Mafioso.*

I really enjoyed this book and found it hard to put down. The backdrop is the L'Aquila earthquake of 2009 and the reality that six scientists were convicted of manslaughter for the advice they gave ahead of the deadly disaster. Although the central subject matter of this novel is emotive and weighty, there is a lightness to this book created by the author's characters.

The plot is, in a sense, formulaic on several levels. There is a body (although "the sleeping beauty" is not dead) and we have a crack team of detectives lead by the perceptive *Commissario* Beppe, whose mission is to expose the villains and bring them to justice. Beppe's methods are slightly random and unorthodox but his quiet integrity, determination, and unrelenting pursuit to find the truth commands a great respect from his team and all who work with him.

This story has suspense, intrigue, romance, and very credible characters. Reading about Abruzzo, its towns, villages, and traditions makes people dream. For those like me who know the region very well, the book offers an added bonus, a reassuring and comforting familiarity. You have probably walked past Beppe's police headquarters in Via Pesaro, Pescara, eaten pasta *La Bilancia* near Loreto Aprutino, or watched the twinkling stars create a soft glow to illuminate the dark outline of *La Bella Addormentata* peaks on the Gran Sasso mountains.

Wendy Ridolini is editor of *Sunflower Publishing* in the UK. She spends as much time as she can in Abruzzo, where she has a holiday home.



## Michael Kenna

### **ABRUZZO**

This beautiful monograph by renowned landscape photographer Michael Kenna is a collection of 65 black and white images. Melancholic rural landscapes, medieval ruins, and ancient villages stir up feelings of passing time, of the constantly evolving ties between history and nature. Kenna is famous for exquisitely crafted photographs, which he creates using non digital equipment, with nighttime exposures lasting up to ten hours. The book is richly printed in duotone on matt art paper, and presented in an olive-green cloth slipcase.

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## SMALL BUT MIGHTY – WINE ARTISANS WITH TINY VINEYARDS

By Anna Swann

Living in a wine-producing region means you are never too far from an excellent winery. Before moving to Abruzzo, I bought my vino from specialised shops or (horror of horrors!) grabbed something decent from a supermarket shelf. Now I buy most of my wine directly from producers and I am spoiled for choice: there are at least ten vineyards within a short drive from my house, but it is the smaller ones that I love going to, the ones where I can chat with the producer. To make good wine, it seems, you only need a small patch of land and a lot of passion.

Some of my favourite wine makers in Abruzzo have just one or two hectares of vineyards. What I have learnt drinking their wine is that every year is different. A bottle of good wine will tell you whether the summer was hot and sunny or if it rained a lot. Small producers, the artisans of wine, are not afraid to follow the ebb and flow of nature, with little interference, letting the vines do their magic. You learn to love the winery's philosophy, not just their Montepulciano d'Abruzzo or Cerasuolo, and you accept that every vintage has its highs and lows.

Here I suggest a few of my favourites from the smallest, least-known wineries in Abruzzo. These producers learnt the art of wine making from their parents and grandparents, inherited their small patches of vines, or bought them to follow their passion. Silvano Falone of Cantina Falon has only one and a half hectares of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo grapes in the hills of Rosciano. All his life he worked in education and started making wine upon his retirement, applying the skills he had learnt from his father a long time ago. In Vittorito, Mariapaola Di Cato and her father Francesco work a two-hectare vineyard with a hoe, producing just a few thousand bottles of exquisite organic wines every year. LucaPaolo Virgilio of Azienda Agricola Caprera is a fervent supporter of

organic agriculture. He has just 3.5 hectares of vines and started making wine only two years ago, but his Trebbiano and Cerasuolo are already excellent.



### 1 MALVASIA EUGHENOS RAGGIO DI SOLE, DI CATO

100% Malvasia grapes from a small 67-year-old vineyard. Not stabilized, clarified, or filtered; bottled with the new moon in March coinciding with the spring solstice. Fine notes of aromatic herbs, wildflowers, honey, liquorice; dry and savoury with a light almond aftertaste. Only 600 bottles made in 2019.

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

**Price:** €22

### 2 KELEUTHOS MONTEPULCIANO D'ABRUZZO DOC, CANTINA FALON

Aged for three years in large 10-hectolitre traditional oak barrels. Full-bodied and well structured, with notes of spices, cloves, liquorice and mature red fruit.

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

**Price:** €20

### 3 LE VASCHE CERASUOLO D'ABRUZZO, CAPRERA

100% Montepulciano d'Abruzzo grapes. Made with old-style methods, spontaneous fermentation, not filtered. Rose fragrances and pomegranate accents on the nose, fresh and fruity on the palate.

**Buy:** directly from the [producer](#).

**Price:** €15

# PASTA SOUP WITH A SHRIEK

By Marco Soccorsi

Today I would like to tell you about the pasta soup with a shriek, or *la minestra con lo strillo*, a dish that few people know, but which is both tasty and filling. The key ingredient is *guanciale* (cured pork made from the cheeks of a pig), typical of Roman cuisine, and present in many dishes such as *amatriciana*, *gricia*, or *carbonara* but – contrary to what many people believe – has Abruzzese origins.

In the past, pork was an important part of the *cucina povera* (peasant cooking) and nothing was thrown out. Every bit, from tail to snout, was used. It is believed that *guanciale* originated in the area around the towns of Amatrice and Campotosto – so in Abruzzo rather than Lazio, as that entire territory was part of the province of L'Aquila until 1927. We, Abruzzo's natives, are proud to claim the origin of dishes with *guanciale*. Most likely, they arrived in Lazio (which now considers them part of the regional cuisine) with Abruzzese shepherds who, in the time of transhumance, traded their local products and introduced the humble *pasta alla gricia*, which I call the mother of the famous *pasta alla amatriciana* and the aunt of the *pasta alla carbonara*.

The tomato sauce was added to the *gricia* after the discovery of the Americas, and it became *pasta alla amatriciana*; in more recent times, the *carbonara* was born when, according to some historians, during the World War II soldiers started adding the yolk of an egg to their *pasta gricia*. There are no historic documents to trace the origins of this pasta soup “with a shriek” that I love but, in my house, it has been made and enjoyed for generations. It is a simple version of the *gricia* served with the cooking liquid, like a soup. The *strillo* (which means “a shriek”) comes from the sound that hot *guanciale* makes when the water is added.



## INGREDIENTS

Makes 4 portions

200 g *guanciale*, cut into small pieces  
 120 g *pecorino* cheese, grated  
 200 g spaghetti, white or wholegrain, broken in half length (they'll be easier to manage but if you are a purist, leave them whole) or pasta shape (e.g. rigatoni, penne)  
 1 litre of water  
 Salt and pepper to taste

## PREPARATION

In a pot, brown the *guanciale* for 5-7 minutes. Add water in the pot (that's when you'll hear the shriek that gave the name to this dish). Bring it to boil and throw in the spaghetti. Before serving, add *pecorino* cheese and season with salt and pepper.

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

## RUSTIC PIES WITH GREENS (LU CAUCIONE D'ORBE)

By Mario Di Matteo

This time of year, the *orapi* (wild spinach, or Good-King-Henry) are foraged in the Majella mountains. They grow only in areas frequented by sheep and where the soil is well fertilised by manure. Wild spinach is used in many different dishes but the *caucione d'orbe*, pies with wild spinach, are typical for the small village of Roccamorice. When the *orapi* season is finished, the pies are made with chard or other dark greens.

The recipe that I want to share was passed down from my grandmother to my mother and sister. We live in Roccamorice and the *caucione d'orbe* pies are often made in my house. As with most traditional recipes, when you learn a recipe, the quantities are approximate, and you cook *ad occhio*, which means measuring by eye and cooking by the way something looks. So you don't need to follow this recipe religiously – use more (or less) greens and herbs, follow your taste and instinct, make a few bigger pies or more smaller ones.

### INGREDIENTS

#### To make the dough:

- 400g all-purpose wheat flour
- 125ml olive oil
- 125ml white wine

#### To make the filling:

- 400g wild spinach (alternatively use chard, escarole, chicory), cleaned and chopped
- Mint, wild fennel, garlic greens, all finely chopped



### PREPARATION

Blanch the greens, drain, and let them cool. Mix them with mint, fennel, garlic leaves, adding salt to taste and a few drops of olive oil.

Pre-heat the oven to 180°C.

Make the dough: add the wine and oil to the flour and work the dough gently until it is smooth and elastic. Cut into 4-5 equal pieces. Roll each piece out to a thin round (it doesn't have to be perfectly shaped).

Mound some filling on the lower half of each disk (don't put too much; make sure that the disk closes well). Fold the dough over to make a half-moon and fold the edge around the filling, pressing them to seal. Transfer the hand pies to the prepared baking sheet. Bake for 25-30 minutes or until golden.

*Mario Di Matteo teaches technical subjects at a secondary school. He is a Roccamorice native and a local history enthusiast.*

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TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD WINE

# ABRUZZISSIMO

## MAGAZINE



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Basilica of Santa Maria di Collemaggio, L'Aquila. Photo by Alessandro Calzolaro/Adobe Stock.

## LEFT:

La Giostra Cavalleresca di Sulmona, page 11. Photos courtesy of the cultural association Giostra Cavalleresca di Sulmona

# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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## Ciao a tutti!

*Voglia di vacanze* is an Italian expression meaning a desire to go on a holiday and, this year, it is stronger than ever. It is exciting to see festivals, concerts, and events re-starting in Abruzzo, so there will be plenty to do if you are in the region this summer (see page 3).

In the latest issue, you will read about the magnificent *La Giostra Cavalleresca* event in Sulmona, find a proposed itinerary for a day in the magnificent city of L'Aquila, and learn how to make the traditional dishes of *pancotto* and *surgitte gnocchi* from Teramo. We talk about the fascinating legend of the Atessa dragon, suggest our pick of the most beautiful beaches in Abruzzo, and tell you where to buy the delicious *ventricina del vastese*.

As always, I want to thank all our supporters who contribute to the magazine's upkeep. You can find their names at the end of the issue, and the list continues to grow every month. If you enjoy reading ABRUZZISSIMO, please make a donation, one-off or recurrent, via [this link](#) (it is clickable).

The next issue of the magazine will be in your inbox on September 4 as I am taking a summer break myself to explore new corners of Abruzzo. Please keep an eye out for a newsletter that I will be sending you in early August with a few updates, news, and interesting links. For up-to-date information, be sure to check the [ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine Facebook page](#) and join our very active [Abruzzo Expat Community](#), where members share useful tips on life and travel in the region.

Enjoy reading the July-August issue!

### **A presto,**

Anna Lebedeva

Editor



## PESCARA JAZZ FESTIVAL

The International Jazz Festival in Pescara is turning 52 years old this summer. During the three weeks, from July 8 to 30, there will be open-air concerts in the port of Pescara as well as in the Teatro D'Annunzio. Tickets for some performances sell fast, so don't wait, book them now. Over the decades, the festival has hosted such famous jazz stars as Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis Group, Dizzy Gillespie, Tracy Chapman, and many others. See the full programme on the Pescara Jazz Festival's [website](#).



## IL CATENACCIO IN SCANNO

One of the most beautiful events in Abruzzo, *Il Catenaccio* (or "*Ju Catenacce*" in dialect), a re-enactment of an ancient marriage procession, happens on August 14. Locals, dressed in traditional festive costumes, walk the narrow streets of the medieval village in pairs led by the bride and groom. The women's costumes are made exactly the way they were in the 1700s. The procession finishes in the central square with dances and traditional music. You can see a video of a past event [here](#). Keep an eye out for the programme announcement [here](#).



## JAZZ FESTIVAL IN SULMONA

The Muntagnin jazz festival returns to the Valley Peligna. A dozen concerts will take place from July 16 to August 17. The festival aims to bring music to small mountain locations and this year venues will include Introdacqua, Bugnara, Pacentro, Anversa, Campo di Giove, and Sulmona. Some big names in Italian music, such as Irene Grandi with a blues concert, singer Davide Shorty, trumpeter Fabrizio Bosso, and others will perform this year. See the full programme on the festival's [Facebook page](#) or [website](#).

## CORFINIO MUSEUM REOPENS

The archaeological museum (*Museo Civico Antonio De Nino*) in Corfinio is small, but has some incredible treasures on display, offering a glimpse into the town's glorious past. The museum preserves artefacts found in the area from the Italic period to the Middle Ages. You can learn about life in the ancient city of Corfinium – which was the first capital of Italy – as well as the traditions and beliefs of its people. Here, for the first time ever, the name "Italia" was used on freshly minted coins, and you can see one of them in the museum. To book your visit, contact *Cooperativa La Mosca Bianca* at [info@cooplamoscabianca.org](mailto:info@cooplamoscabianca.org) or call 0039 338 1118944, 0039 3293474760.



## BBQ, STARGAZING AND PICNIC IN CASTELLO DI SEMIVICOLI

The wine resort Castello di Semivicoli in Casacanditella will open its summer events season with a barbeque in the vineyard on July 10 (price €45 per person including wines). On July 25 you can have a picnic among their Trebbiano vines, with panoramic views of the countryside. On August 10, the castle invites astronomy buffs to eat, drink, and do some stargazing in between. During the Rosé Evening on August 27, guests will sample the vineyard's best pink vino and chill out in the castle's swimming pool. For details, keep an eye on the Castello di Semivicoli Facebook page or email [info@castellodisemivicoli.it](mailto:info@castellodisemivicoli.it).

## WILD TOURS OF THE CIVITELLA DEL TRONTO FORTRESS

Both children and adults alike can enjoy guided tours around the fortress of Civitella del Tronto. This year a "wild" element has been added: visitors will be accompanied by wolf dogs, falcons, and owls with local falconry expert Giovanni Granati. Dates are available for summer through September. For more details see the fortress' [website](#).

## LA PERDONANZA IN L'AQUILA

Since 1294, the city of L'Aquila has been celebrating La Perdonanza (The Celestinian Forgiveness). Anyone who enters the Basilica di Santa Maria di Collemaggio between August 28 and 29 is granted plenary indulgence. The celebrations include the Mass, opening of the Holy Door, concert, and the procession carrying the historic 13th-century document, Bolla del Perdono, signed by Celestine V. The Celestinian Forgiveness celebration has recently been declared an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. For details, go to [Perdonanza-celestiniana.it](http://Perdonanza-celestiniana.it).



## CLASSICAL MUSIC IN ALBA FUCENS

The fifth edition of Festiv'Alba started at the end of June and will continue until August 8 in the stunning archaeological site of Alba Fucens and the ancient church of Santa Maria in Valle Porclaneta di Rosciolo (read about the church on page 12). The programme includes concerts of Baroque music, Mozart's Requiem, and Beethoven's masterpieces, with some rock and pop thrown in. See the full line-up and book tickets on the festival's [website](#).



## PORCHETTA FESTIVAL IN CAMPLI

One of the oldest food festivals in the region, *La Sagra della porchetta*, will be holding its 50th edition in August. A dozen Italian *porchetta* producers gather in Campoli to compete for the gold medal and, for several days, the town fills up with the divine smells of roasting pork and the sounds of music, as various bands play Italian pop, rock, indie, and Latin American tunes. *Porchetta* is a moist boneless pork roast which has been made in Abruzzo for many centuries. The exact dates haven't been announced yet, so check the festival's [website](#) and their [Facebook page](#) in the coming weeks.

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## DID YOU KNOW?



## STARGAZING IN MOSCIANO SANT'ANGELO

If meteors, asteroids, and constellations intrigue you, the hills of Mosciano Sant'Angelo are where you'll find plenty of outer space.

There, in the middle of cultivated fields, sits the astronomic observatory Colle Leone, with massive telescopes to help you observe craters on the Moon, or take a closer look at Jupiter, Saturn, and other marvels of our Universe. Apart from cutting-edge optical instruments, it also has one of the biggest planetaries in Central Italy, with space for up to 80 people. The observatory was founded by a local astronomy enthusiast, Fausto Marini, in 1979. Today, his son, astronomist Alessio Marini, continues his work and collaborates with many European research institutions.

The observatory also houses a small natural science museum with a beautiful collection of fossils and meteorites. Fascinating thematic evenings are organised regularly for those who want to get acquainted with the stars and planets and see them in a greater detail.

You can follow the observatory's [Facebook page](#) for future event announcements. Bookings are accepted via phone 340 242 9851 or email [alessio.marini@oacl.net](mailto:alessio.marini@oacl.net)

## THE GIOSTRA CAVALLERESCA WILL RIDE AGAIN

By Lina Dini Jenkins

It's the biggest event of the summer in Sulmona, in the province of L'Aquila. The pandemic stopped it in 2020, but every year since 1995, during the last weekend in July, the city's largest piazza is transformed into a Medieval arena, complete with sand, damsels, galloping horses, and knights, drawing thousands of locals and tourists. And oh, those costumes!



### Sulmona's central square where La Giostra takes place

*La Giostra* is an historical re-enactment from the 16th century. Sulmona residents are deeply involved for many months in the preparations for this spectacular, colorful festival that takes place on Piazza Garibaldi: sewing elaborate Renaissance costumes, rehearsing trumpets and drums, and cooking up a storm. About 2000 people, all volunteers, are involved in organizing and running the event.

Started by a group of locals, the event is based on the historic jousting competition that took place in Sulmona for centuries until the 1600s when it was stopped due to “lack of interest and knights” as attested by a 17th century document. “Nowadays, we re-live the joust adapted to the times: no more errant knights to engage in violent clashes, no broken spears or bleeding wounds,” explains Maurizio Antonini, the regent commissioner of the cultural association Giostra Cavalleresca di Sulmona.



A jockey competing in the joust

## THE JOUST

The *Giostra Cavalleresca di Sulmona*, or Knightly Joust of Sulmona, features tournaments over two weekends in late July and early August. The first weekend joust – *Giostra Cavalleresca di Sulmona* – pits the seven different neighborhoods (3 *borghi* and 4 *sestieri*) of Sulmona against one another in a more-or-less friendly, but intense competition. During the two-day event, each knight competes with four other knights for a total of 14 competitions; at the end, the top four knights meet in two semi-finals and then in the final, to win the coveted *Palio*, once a precious cloth, now a special painting on canvas made by a different artist every year.

The horses are required to run around the complete figure-eight oval in about 30 seconds, while the knights (mostly professional jockeys hired by the neighborhoods) try to pick off rings of various sizes as they ride. The score is determined by the number of attempts that the knights make to insert their lances into the rings; in case of tie,

the size of each ring is considered (the 10 cm ring is worth 1 point, the 8 cm one is worth 2 points, and the 6 cm circle is worth 3 points). In case of another tie, the time is considered to evaluate the score.

These are raucous events, with falls and lots of controversies, and thousands of spectators packing the stands around the piazza, cheering their knights. But that's just the beginning.

Next comes a one-day *Borghi Più Belli d'Italia* tournament, where the most beautiful villages in Italy send their skillful riders. Finally, there's the *Giostra Cavalleresca d'Europa* (European Championship), where each foreign delegation of riders is hosted by one of the local Sulmona neighborhoods.

Almost as spectacular as the jousts themselves are the processions that take place every day of the competition. About 600 participants are decked out in gorgeous (and so heavy for the season!) replicas of 15th-16th century costumes handmade by local seamstresses promenade along Corso Ovidio

to Piazza Garibaldi, accompanied by the waving of colorful flags. And of course, there's the crowning of a Queen.

## COMMUNITY SPIRIT

In 2013, yet another event was added: September marks the *Cordesca*, in which children from ages 8 to 14 become the actors, ladies, musicians, and flag wavers themselves. "Since then, there has been even a greater involvement in the community. Now three, and sometimes four generations, participate in the event. The *Giostra* has become part of daily life of Sulmona locals," says Maurizio Antonini. "In every family there is one or more people who in one way or another are part of the *Giostra*."

The sound of trumpets and drums reverberates for days around this transformed town. Colourful banners mark off the rival districts – along the streets and on the balconies. Nighttime brings neighbors together under the stars for feasting because, after all the hard work of the hot summer day, what could be better than to gather with good food and wine and celebrate the victors?

"Over the years, the number of tourists and enthusiasts who come to see *La Giostra* has been constantly increasing, with about 100,000 people coming to Sulmona in the 10 days dedicated to the event," says Antonini.

### The procession in period costumes

This year, the organisers are hoping to hold *La Giostra Cavalleresca di Sulmona* on September 18 -19. At the time of this writing, the cultural association was trying to decide whether the necessary funds will be raised to run the event in such difficult times. But *La Giostra Cavalleresca d'Europa* has been postponed until 2022.

For the full schedule of events, and revised dates check the *Giostra* [website](#) and their [Facebook page](#).

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

Photos courtesy of [Giostra Cavalleresca di Sulmona](#)



## THE LEGEND OF THE ATESSA DRAGON

By Giovanni Pansa

A giant fossil is preserved in the main church of the town of Atessa. Locals say it is the rib of an evil dragon. What is the story behind it?



**Saint Leucius and the dragon.**  
Illustration by Leslie Agan

In the sacristy of the Cathedral of Saint Leucius in Atessa (province of Chieti) there is a gigantic fossil rib of an extinct animal. Once hung from a ceiling beam, the rib bone was preserved in memory of a miracle performed by Saint Leucius, the town's patron.

### MAN-EATING DRAGON

In the nearby valley of San Giovanni, according to local legend, there was a deep cave which

went around the whole of Abruzzo, with the entrance more than fifty handbreadths wide. From that cave extended a forest of thorns so dense that not even birds could fly through it. An immense dragon lived in the cave whose meals, at first, consisted of sheep, goats, and other animals, but then changed into that of one Christian per day.

The villagers drew lots to decide the name of the unfortunate who was destined to be devoured by the horrible beast. Everyone wept, invoking God and the Saints, but to no avail. If

the dragon was not provided with the usual victim, he went to look for it himself. Even wolves, out of fear, would not enter the woods. One day, Bishop Leucius from Brindisi arrived in those parts and met a crying peasant who was bringing a seven-year-old boy to the dragon. The Bishop stopped him and said, "Where are you going? Why are you crying? Take me to the dragon."

The peasant obeyed and took Saint Leucius to the cave. The Bishop fixed his gaze on the dragon who immediately began to tremble. Then he placed his hand on the beast's head, stroked it gently, and closed the dragon's mouth, from which came the tongue of fire.

"Go and get me seven hanks of meat," said Saint Leucius to the peasant, and turning to the dragon: "Do not move, in the name of God."

For three days meat was brought to the monster; then Saint Leucius put a chain around his neck and dragged him out of the cave. The dragon was seventy-seven handbreadths long and so large that it could not walk. It had a green back, a yellow stomach, and a red mouth like a blazing furnace.

## SAVIOUR SAINT

As Saint Leucius took the chained dragon up the path in the woods, birds sang, doves flew, and the people wept with happiness. Arriving to Atessa, Saint Leucius attached the dragon's chain to a corner of the main square. After seven days he killed the monster, filled jars with its black blood, and distributed them to the people. That blood is still used today to cure bone pain, and pregnant women use it for kidney pain. Saint Leucius also removed one of the dragon's ribs and, together with some of his own rings, handed it to a local priest saying: "Take this rib of the dragon and my rings



Atessa. Photo by Ermess/Adobe Stock

and build me a church on the hill, giving it my name."

The people of Atessa built the church and dedicated a statue to Saint Leucius, at the foot of which they laid the dragon's rib. The rings that the saint had given to the people were inserted on the statue. When the French army arrived in 1799, they destroyed the church and tore the statue to pieces. Only its head was saved, hidden in the church cemetery. A French soldier who took the rings from the statue tried to secretly escape, but his horse was unable to move from the church door. When locals arrived, the soldier was forced to return the rings.

## MYSTERIOUS FOSSIL

The presence of a fossilised presumed rib of a dragon in the cathedral of Atessa is not so unusual. The subsoil of the Majella mountains and the surrounding villages, including Atessa, has many traces of fossil banks. In addition to ancient fish and shells, remains of fossilized invertebrates, petrified bones belonging to large extinct mammals of immense size have been found on numerous occasions. According to some historians, the rib existing in the church of Saint Leucius was part of a heap of gigantic bones found in Atessa, in a place called Valdarno.



The scientists who saw and examined the bones believed that they belonged to the elephants of the ancient Egyptian King Sesostris or to those of Pyrrhus when he came to Italy during the Pyrrhic War or, possibly, to Hannibal's elephants, whose army passed through Abruzzo.

The custom of placing antediluvian remains on doors or inside churches has ancient origin and was widespread in the Middle Ages. It was believed that the bones of animals, suspended as ex-votos in churches, would have been those of the monsters fought by the person venerated as a saint and patron. The fossils always belonged to fantastic creatures such as dragons or crocodiles, with these two species being considered images of the devil. The remains of dragons and crocodiles were carried around in religious processions, on the feast of the saint or patron who had freed the town from their presence.

## LEGEND EXPLAINED

The history of Christianity offers us countless examples of dragon-slaying saints. These legends symbolise the struggle of good against evil, the victory of light over darkness. The story from Atessa about killing of the dragon can be interpreted as the triumph of the Christian idea, represented by the preaching that took place through the work of the holy Bishop, the passage of the oriental tradition of the Saint Leucius cult, and its introduction in Abruzzo by the Basilian monks.

Saint Leucius was born in Alexandria in Egypt, where he was the Patriarch; he then became the Bishop of Brindisi. The legend of Atessa also symbolizes the rebirth of the town when the marshlands in the area were eliminated. The overflow of rivers, swamps, and lake sites bringing malaria



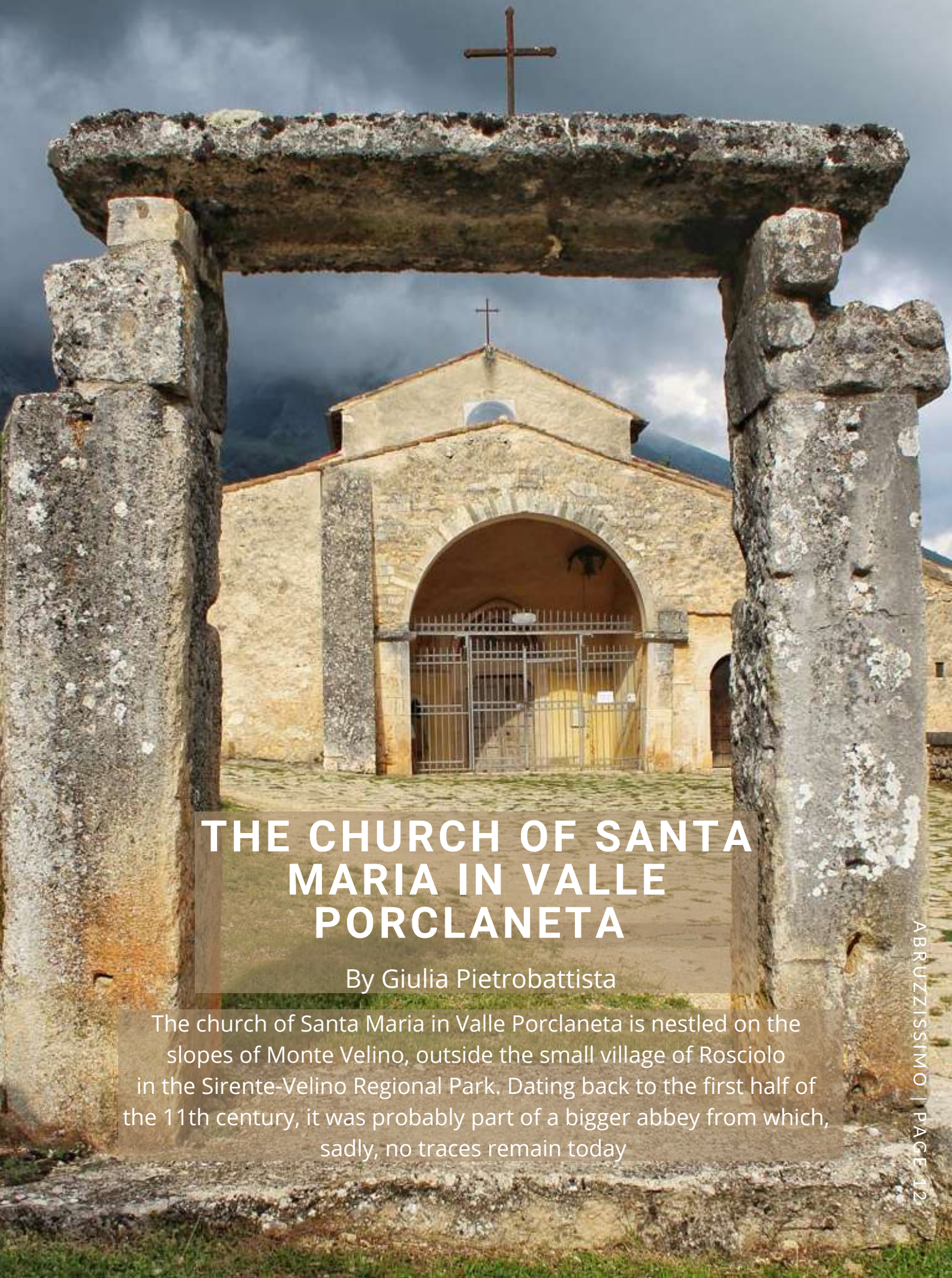
**Atessa. Photo by Ermess/Adobe Stock**

were personified in the figure of the dragon in the Middle Ages.

The local legend of Saint Leucius is confirmed by written documents which help us to explain it. The hollow, or the cave, that originally divided the town of Atessa into two parts would have been nothing more than an enormous precipice, a ravine, filled with swamps and ponds where malaria reigned.

In ancient times, Atessa was surrounded by dense thickets. In the Cronaca Volturnense dating back to the year 988, we read about the marshes located near those woods. We also know that in the middle of the town there used to be an ancient monastery belonging to the order of the Basilians, on the threshold of which the dead dragon is believed to have been found. Historians know that Basilian monasteries were built next to marshy territories in the Middle Ages. The monks' main job was reclaiming the unproductive bad lands and cultivating them.

*Abridged excerpt translated from *Leggende Medievali Abruzzesi* by G. Pansa, Adelmo Polla Editore, 1992. With permission from Adelmo Polla.*



## THE CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA IN VALLE PORCLANETA

By Giulia Pietrobattista

The church of Santa Maria in Valle Porclaneta is nestled on the slopes of Monte Velino, outside the small village of Rosciolo in the Sirente-Velino Regional Park. Dating back to the first half of the 11th century, it was probably part of a bigger abbey from which, sadly, no traces remain today



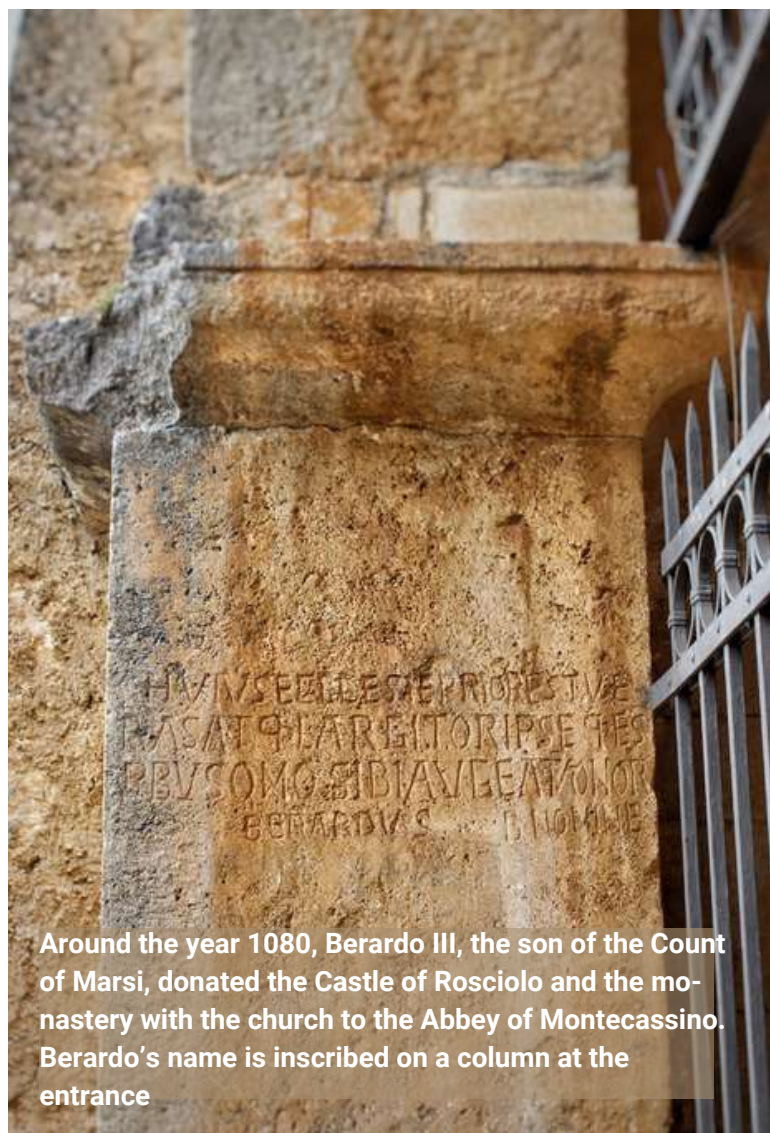
The silhouette of the church repeats the outline of the mountain behind it. Was it an artistic expression or a practical architectural solution?



Over the centuries, the church was destroyed, restored, abandoned, passed from one powerful family to another, disputed by the church, and damaged by earthquakes



Fresco of the Virgin Mary above the entrance



Around the year 1080, Berardo III, the son of the Count of Marsi, donated the Castle of Rosciolo and the monastery with the church to the Abbey of Montecassino. Berardo's name is inscribed on a column at the entrance



The Romanesque church retains its original simple layout, typical for a Benedictine style, with some Byzantine influences



Inside many important sculptural elements and many frescoes by artists from different periods and schools are preserved



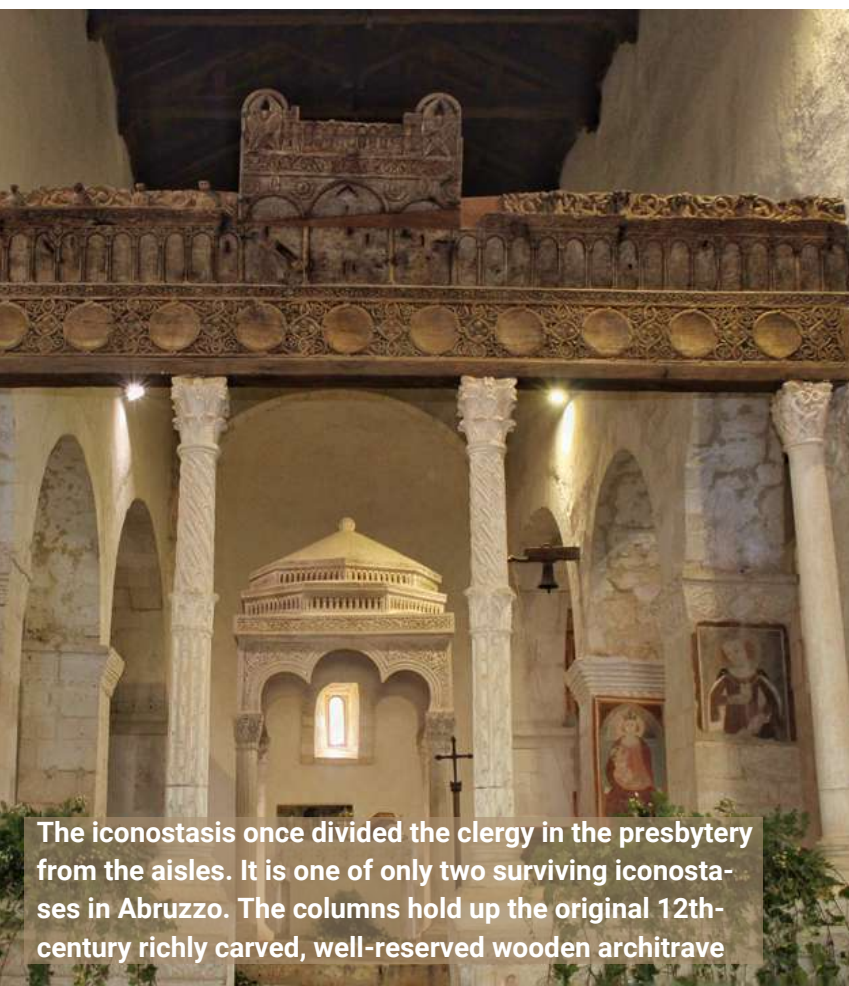
The ambon platform for reading the Bible was built in 1150 by masters Roberto and Nicodemo. It is richly decorated in carvings depicting scenes from the Old Testament



The 12th-century ciborium built by the same masters, Roberto and Nicodemo



A detail of the stone carvings of the ambon



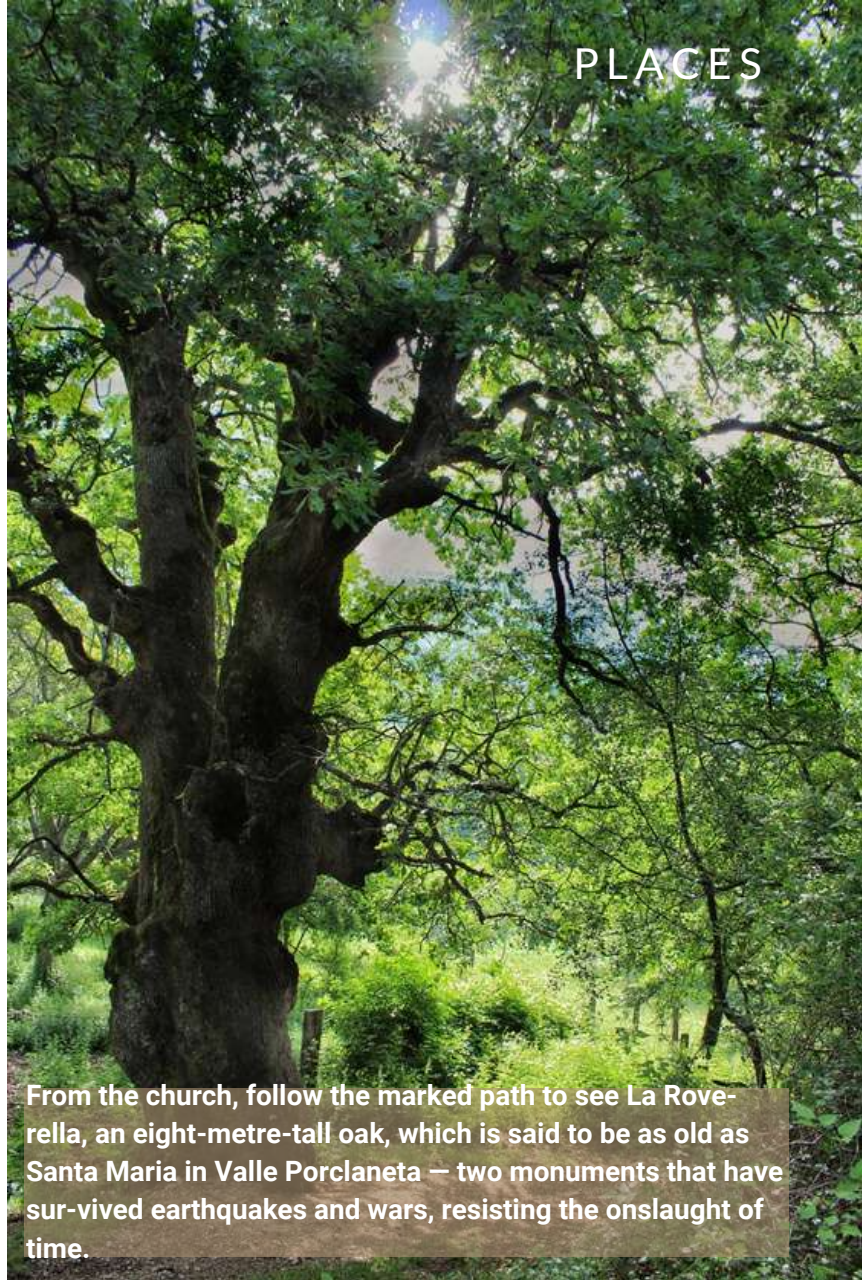
The iconostasis once divided the clergy in the presbytery from the aisles. It is one of only two surviving iconostases in Abruzzo. The columns hold up the original 12th-century richly carved, well-reserved wooden architrave



Fresco of the Virgin Mary on one of the columns inside the church



Fresco of the Virgin Mary on one of the columns inside the church



From the church, follow the marked path to see La Rovella, an eight-metre-tall oak, which is said to be as old as Santa Maria in Valle Porclaneta — two monuments that have survived earthquakes and wars, resisting the onslaught of time.



The village of Rosciolo

**If you go:** The church is open on request only. Contact the volunteers from a local cultural association to book your visit. **Tel.:** 0039 3665902125.

**Getting there:** Enter “Chiesa di Santa Maria in Valle Porclaneta” in your Google Maps to navigate. Immediately after the first houses in the village, turn right on the narrow street Via S. Maria in Valle and follow it till you see the back of the church.

*Giulia Pietrobattista is an amateur photographer who is passionate about Abruzzo's traditional food and travel.*

# A DAY IN L'AQUILA

By Michela Portacci

One day would not be enough to explore the entire city of L'Aquila, but following our itinerary, you will see the main landmarks and, without a doubt, get inspired to plan another visit.



**L'Aquila and its Spanish fortress. Photo by Daniele Di Benedetto**

L'Aquila, Abruzzo's capital, has survived some difficult times, and its past is filled with fascinating stories. According to the city lore, around the mid-13th century, 99 "castles," or small urban settlements in the Abruzzo mountains, tired of paying taxes and suffering the abuse of local lords, decided to build a new capital to claim greater autonomy from the feudal system. In

1254, King of Italy Conrad IV signed the "Diploma," a document which officially founded L'Aquila. It declared that people from the surrounding castles would live together, united by a pact of alliance. Each of the castles contributed to the construction of the city by building a district with a square, a church, and a fountain, and that is why even today, walking around L'Aquila, you will see many squares with their own history and character.

## WHAT TO SEE

### THE SPANISH FORTRESS

Start your visit at the highest point of the city, at the mighty fortress built in the second half of the 16th century by the Spanish conquerors, who transformed the city's shape and character by demolishing part of the defensive walls and some districts to make room for their *Fortè Spagnola*.

Before the Spanish conquest, during the first three centuries of its history, L'Aquila – protected by the walls, up to 10 meters high at some points – had important privileges that allowed it to grow and thrive like other important Italian municipalities. The exemptions from duties on trade attracted rich and cultured Tuscan merchants who established their residences in the city to gain profits from the “red gold” – the famous saffron of Navelli – and sheep trade. Let's not forget that the Italian term *pecunia* meaning “wealth” derives from *pecora* meaning “sheep”. Moreover, L'Aquila had an independent mint to make its own currency, and was home to a *studium*, a

university, one of the first in Italy. The presence of monastic orders contributed to the city's thriving culture and spirituality.

With the Spanish rule in the early 16th century, L'Aquila was transformed into a military city. The Spanish Fortress took 100 years to build and was one of the first in Italy designed to withstand any firearm attack, thanks also to the particularly resistant rounded double walls and the huge moat.

The fort has been closed since 2009 due to the earthquake damage, but the consolidation works are almost finished and soon, possibly in December this year, it will re-open.

### FOUNTAIN OF 99 SPOUTS

Although, according to historical sources, there were only about 70 founding town-castles, the number 99 is emblematic of L'Aquila. The city's iconic 13th century fountain, *Fontana delle 99 Cannelle*, has 99 spouts in shapes of heads, set against the geometric pattern of white and pink stone. The heads – each of them different and some a bit sinister – according to the local lore, represent the faces of the founding castles' lords.

### Fountain of 99 Spouts





## CORSO VITTORIO EMANUELE AND NOBLE PALACES

The elegant Corso Vittorio Emanuele has been the city's main artery since the Renaissance, crossing the length of L'Aquila to reach the splendid Piazza Duomo. Walking along this street, you will encounter beautiful newly restored palaces: Palazzo Cricchi, Palazzo Burri-Gatti, Palazzo Natellis, Palazzo Cappa Cappelli. Don't be shy, sneak in through the open doors to admire the wonderful courtyards and, looking up, the breath-taking frescoed ceilings.

At the intersection with Via di San Bernardino, there is a place known as *dei 4 cantoni*, a crossroads where four beautiful buildings face each other: Palazzo Fibbioni Lopez, seat of the municipality of L'Aquila; Palazzo INA, a remarkable example of rationalist architecture; the majestic 19th-century Palazzo del Convitto; and the 18th-century Palazzo Ciolini Ciampella.

**The wooden ceiling in the Basilica di San Bernardino. Photo by Giulia Pignataro**

## BASILICA DI SAN BERNARDINO

From the intersection, take a detour to visit the magnificent Basilica of San Bernardino. Located in a panoramic position on the top of a long flight of steps, it enchants with its elegant white façade. Once inside, look up at the splendid 15th-century wooden ceiling with gold leaf inlays. The remains of Bernardino da Siena, who lived in the city for a long time, are preserved in the church.

## PIAZZA DUOMO

Return onto Corso Vittorio Emanuele to reach Piazza Duomo, the city's main square. The 13th-century cathedral (*il Duomo*) dominates the square. Dedicated to Saints Maximus and George, it has a neoclassical façade with the upper part and two more recent bell towers dating to the 1920s. Here also stands the church of Santa Maria del Suffragio, which was built after the terrible earthquake of 1703 in memory of the numerous victims. There are also two twin fountains and two excellent bars with outdoor tables that sell delicious ice cream that can easily compete for the title of the best gelato in the city!





**Basilica of Santa Maria di Collemaggio. Photo by Gianni Simone**

### MINI-TRAIN AROUND THE CITY

A tourist mini-train departs from Piazza Duomo which will take you to discover the city's landmarks. It runs along Corso Vittorio Emanuele, goes to the church of San Bernardino, then to the Spanish Fort. On the route you will also see Piazza Margherita (the location of one of the oldest buildings in the city) and the Palazzo del Capitano del Popolo, which was transformed into the Empress Margaret of Austria's palazzo in the 16th century. The train also makes a stop at the Fountain of 99 spouts.

The tours are both in Italian and English. Tours depart every hour (check the timetable [here](#)). Tickets cost € 6 for adults and € 4 for children.

You can also hop on a small electric bus for up to seven people that does tours around the historic centre a few times a day. 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 message [WelcomeAq](#).

### BASILICA DI SANTA MARIA DI COLLEMAGGIO

The iconic Basilica of Santa Maria di Collemaggio, with its unmistakable "embroidered" white and pink cross stone pattern on the façade, is the jewel of Abruzzo's Romanesque-Gothic architecture. The three stone portals each have a magnificent rose window above. Their designs are reproduced by local jewellers in earrings, pendants, and rings. In 2020, the basilica received the prestigious European Heritage Award in recognition of its impeccable post-earthquake restoration.

The church houses the remains of Celestine V, a hermit, Pope, and Saint who lived in Abruzzo in the 13th century. He is known as the "Pope who quit" for having renounced his high title,

but, above all, he was an important historical figure. In the Middle Ages, even though he was a hermit in the Majella mountains, he had thousands of followers and his own monastic order. He built the Basilica of Santa Maria di Collemaggio on the spot where he had a vision of the Madonna and, in 1294, when he became Pope, he insisted that the papal coronation would be held right here, in his church, not in Rome.

In the days when unrestricted sale of indulgences to the rich was widespread, Celestine V made an unprecedented decision: anyone, sincerely repentant and confessed, who entered the basilica between 28 and 29 August, was granted plenary absolution. *La Perdonanza* (The Celestinian Forgiveness) has continued every year since then and, recently, it has been declared an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO.

## WHERE TO EAT

### OSTERIA ANTICHE MURA

Traditional dishes galore. There is no written menu, so you'll be told what is available on the day. Their rustic soups are legendary: *pasta e faggioli*, *zuppa di cicoria*, *lenticchie e farro* as well as grilled *pecorino* cheese and *trippa*.

**Address:** Viale XXV Aprile, 2. Tel.: 0039 086 262422.

### OSTERIA LA GROTTA DI ALIGI

Hearty pasta dishes and good grilled meats with a few less traditional offers such as *pasta cacio e pepe* in a parmesan crust with black truffles.

**Address:** Viale Luigi Rendina. Tel.: 0039 388 1088518.

### DA CAROLINA E GINA

This award-winning *gelateria* offers excellent quality ice cream made with milk from local



### Piazza Duomo

producers. Apart from regular flavours there are some exciting seasonal ones such as lemon and basil, sage, or cherries with rum.

**Address:** Piazza Duomo, 28. Tel.: 086 2292502.

## IF YOU GO

Make a stop at the city's tourist office to pick up a map and get up-to-date information about events. English and French are spoken. Here you can also rent a bike or join a guided tour of the city.

**Address:** Info Point, Piazza Battaglione degli Alpini. **Opening hours:** every day, 9am-1pm, 3pm-7pm. Guided tours start at 10.30am and 4pm. Tel.: 0039 086 21910737; e-mail: [turismo@quilaquila.it](mailto:turismo@quilaquila.it)

You can also find out about sightseeing or book a guided tour around the city at [WelcomeAq](http://WelcomeAq.com).

**Address:** Galleria Irti, Corso Federico II, 58. Tel.: 0862295927, 3791508492

*Michela Portacci works in the regional government and is passionate about promoting Abruzzo and its traditions. Photos courtesy of [Quilaquila.it](http://Quilaquila.it).*

## LEARNING PIANO, PIANO IN LANCIANO

By Raymond Setzer

A retired American couple moved to Abruzzo to learn the language, settle into a slow-paced life, and take on new challenges — fearlessly.

My wife Heidi and I began entertaining the idea of retirement outside of the United States around 2015. We were both accustomed to travel and living in different places, having spent many years living in Alaska, then San Francisco and finally Kenosha, a small town along Lake Michigan in southeast Wisconsin. We wanted to retire overseas so we could spend as much time as possible traveling through Europe.

We had busy lives before our retirement: Heidi was an English professor working with students who were returning to school after an absence of many years, and I was the chief financial officer for a small construction company.

### SWAPPING VILLAGE FOR CITY

We bought a house in Casalanguida, a small town of about 700 people in Chieti province, and lived there for three years. For us, it was a good place to start out, as it forced us to integrate. Everyone knew us, and we still have many people we consider friends in the town. Casalanguida has no restaurants, one small market, one butcher shop, and three bars — quaint, but very quiet. As we became more certain that Italy was going to be our forever home, we realized that we wanted to live somewhere livelier. We put our village house



**Raymond Setzer and his wife, Heidi Podbielski Jenkins**

up for sale and were very, very fortunate to find a large, unfurnished apartment for rent in Lanciano in a modern complex.

Our neighbors welcomed us warmly to the building, and we have not regretted it a bit. Why did we decide to rent instead of buying? As an accountant, I just ran the numbers. Buying this apartment would have been a bit more than paying rent for twenty years. We have no children to leave it to after we are gone, so it made no sense to convert our savings to property.

Now we are enjoying our lives in Lanciano, a medium-sized city of about 35,000 people. It is an old city: under your feet are ancient Roman ruins; the old quarter has structures that go back over a thousand years. The city is compact



Above: Lanciano; photo by Angelo D'Amico. Right: a street in the city; photo by Luca Aless

and walkable, with numerous restaurants and services within easy walking distance from our apartment. People here, as they seem to be everywhere in Abruzzo, are friendly and always helpful.

## MAKING FRIENDS

Americans are not plentiful in this area. Indeed, it seems we are a minority in all of Abruzzo. The British, being the largest group of expats, make up the largest number in our group of friends, but we are delighted to have good friends from all over Europe.

Abruzzese people always mistake us for British at first, but when we tell them where we are from, they always light up and describe relatives who have lived in America, or vacations they took there. And then they always ask: "Whatever are you doing HERE?" To them, Abruzzo does not have the exotic allure that America presents. But when we tell them truthfully that we chose to live here because it still retains much of the traditional ways of Italian life, food, and culture, and still offers us easy access to Europe via the Pescara airport, they nod in agreement.

## CHALLENGES

Life is not without challenges here. For both of us, getting our Italian drivers' licenses brought a



great feeling of accomplishment. Americans cannot exchange their license for an Italian one, so we had to take lessons and sit an exam in Italian. The theory test is forty questions, out of a potential pool of seven thousand, and you are allowed only four errors. Even our Italian friends roll their eyes in despair saying how hard it is. We took endless practice tests and when the day finally came to take the exam, we were elated to have both passed with errors to spare.

A continuing challenge for us is navigating the Italian health system. In Abruzzo, we have found the quality of care to be excellent, but it takes a while to get used to how things are done. You keep your own medical records, call for your own appointments, and will have to pay for the procedure ahead of time if there is a cost to you. That said, even taking the private route is very affordable here compared to America. It gets easier as we go along, but it remains a language challenge, as one is dealing with words and phrases you do not use on an every-

day basis. The ability to be part of the Italian health care system allowed us to retire early, and we pay a small amount each year to use it. In the US, the cost of private health insurance (not through an employer) would have been way too costly.

## DAILY LIFE

We have adjusted to the everyday rhythms and pace of local life. Small stores here close around 1 pm for a few hours, so we do our running around before then. We pop into a small shop in our neighbourhood to pick up fresh fruit and vegetables every few days. In the area there is a pasta shop, a bakery, butcher shops, and a fishmonger, all within a ten-minute walk. Sometimes we have lazy two-hour lunches with friends, sometimes we go down to the sea for a stroll, do day trips around different towns or do some fun activity like canoeing. All in all, we have a pleasant and leisurely life with time to relax on the terrace for an hour or two every day.

They talk a lot about the *piano, piano* pace of life, which means “slowly, slowly.” And indeed, things are far more relaxed than we were used to in America. Italians may be the most social people on the planet. The owners of your local stores will get to know you and chat for a few minutes. When you have eaten in a restaurant a few times, you may get a little digestif for free when you go to pay the bill.

It really is not that hard to relax into life here. It will not always be *la dolce vita*, but when you get to the point where you just shrug at a problem and say, It’s Italy, you will have reached a nice balance point.

## MAKING THE EFFORT

Both Heidi and I have been taking Italian lessons, a bit on and off, but lately more intensely. Now we can deal with day-to-day life and comprehend a significant amount of conversational speed Italian. Being able to converse beyond the initial pleasantries



Ray and Heidi (in the middle row) canoeing

makes a huge difference in how people receive you. You will discover that even though you stumble, people will understand what you mean and be pleased that you showed enough respect for your new home to make the effort.

It can be very easy to self-isolate, but we do not limit ourselves to English-speaking friends. Language barriers, not understanding how things are done, and dealing with all the new paperwork can be overwhelming at first. At the beginning of our life here, I would sit in the car before going into a shop and rehearse what I imagined the encounter would be. Then I went in and, of course, it was not anything like my carefully rehearsed script! But I have learnt to be brave, to be seen. Each and every day, after each and every new thing, you grow in confidence and begin to love your new life.

*DID YOU MOVE TO ABRUZZO  
TO START A NEW LIFE?*

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## THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BEACHES TO VISIT THIS SUMMER

By Anna Lebedeva

Scorching temperatures have arrived and the beach is calling. What are the best, less-crowded places by the water in Abruzzo?

This year, the number of Blue Flag (*Bandiera Blu*) beaches in Abruzzo has increased from 10 to 13 (see the map on [ABRUZZISSIMO website](#)). The prestigious Blue Flag Award is given by the Foundation for Environmental Education to the cleanest and most eco-friendly beaches and marinas in the world every year.

In order to qualify for the *Bandiera Blu*, a series of stringent environmental, educational, safety, and accessibility criteria must be met and maintained (e.g., bathing water quality and local ecosystem information must be displayed, the beach has to be clean and have recycling facilities, drinking water, toilets, lifeguards, or lifesaving equipment, etc.).

There are also plenty of beautiful spots by the water without international accolades that are worth checking out. All the beaches listed below have something that makes them special, whether it is the magnificent views, the crystal-clear water or... an occasional deer checking on the bathers.

### TORRE CERRANO

Located inside a [protected marine area](#) between the towns of Silvi and Pineto, Torre Cerrano is a Blue Flag sandy beach overlooked by the 16th-century tower built for spotting approaching pirates. Stretching for seven kilometres, it has some establishments where you can rent sun-loungers and umbrellas, as well as free beach sections. If summer heat gets unbearable,



**Torre Cerrano. Photo via Area Marina Protetta Torre del Cerrano/Facebook**

you can escape to the shade of the pine grove, marine museum, or the bar in the tower. In spring, the rare Kentish plover nests in the dunes here and dolphins can be spotted frolicking in the turquoise waters in quieter seasons.

**Getting there:** The beach is easy to reach, just enter "Torre Cerrano" in your Google Map navigator and go.

## PUNTA DELL'ACQUABELLA

Once a mooring spot for savage pirates, this idyllic cove, south of Ortona, is part of a nature reserve today. The short stretch of the beach is rocky with some flat stone slabs which are perfect for laying out your towel. The crystal-clear water and a good depth make it a great place for snorkelling. Punta dell'Aquabella can be reached by car or bike on the new coastal cycling path Via Verde della Costa dei Trabocchi. It is a very quiet spot during the week, but can get crowded on weekends.

**Getting there:** The beach is marked on Google Maps. There is no allocated parking, so you will have to leave the car on the side of a small road which is quite steep, so it will take some manoeuvring.

**Below: Punta dell'Acquabella. Right: Spiaggia di Mottagrossa**

## MOTTAGROSSA BEACH

The Trabocchi Coast is full of beautiful spots, and this is one of them, inside the [Punta Aderci Nature Reserve](#).





Spiaggia di Mottagrossa, a wave-smoothed pebble beach is popular with locals on weekends, especially in August, but it is quiet enough during the week. A sign at the entrance states that dogs and cats are welcome, too. The beach has no facilities and little shade – so bring an umbrella, water, and packed lunch. Pick a spot from which you can see the beautiful *trabocco* fishing machine for a truly special experience.

**Getting there:** follow signs for Punta Aderci. From the free parking area, you will have to walk a short distance to the beach, which is situated to the left from the *trabocco*.

## VIGNOLA BEACH

Vignola is one of the quietest Blue Flag beaches in Vasto. Its southern part is pebbly and in the northern section you will find a sandy stretch. The limpid water, with picturesque emerging rocks and reefs, attracts scuba diving and snorkelling enthusiasts to this spot. There are two old *trabocchi* fishing platforms flanking

### Vignola beach

the beach on both ends, but no bars or other facilities unless you want to check in to the luxurious Baia Delphis Resort which offers its guests all modern comforts.

**Getting there:** The beach is marked on Google Maps as “Spiaggia di Vignola”. Park your car along the old railway and walk among the olive trees towards the beach.

## LAKE SCANNO

If you want to escape the heat and salty waves, head to Lake Scanno's Blue Flag beach. It is located at 920 metres above sea level, so the water is cooler and the trees on the grassy lakeshore offer a welcoming shade. The views of the surrounding mountains will take your breath away. The lake's beach has received the Blue Flag several years in a row for all the right reasons: the water is clean and there are all modern comforts. You will find plenty of good bars and restaurants in the area, as well as places to rent sun loungers and umbrellas.

At **Bar La Spiagetta** you can get refreshing drinks, panino sandwiches, rent sun loungers



(€15 for the whole day), and canoes and pedalos (€10 per hour). **Tel.:** 0039 3883746911.

Rent pedalos or electric boats at **Nolo Elena** on the lake. **Tel.:** 0039 3397492385. Prices start from €15 per hour.

**Getting there:** the lake is located on the road to the village of Scanno.

## LAKE BARREA

La Gravara on Lake Barrea is often listed as one of the most beautiful beaches in Italy for its magnificent location, in the heart of the Abruzzo National Park. It is also known for occasional visits from local deer who romp among the beach goers (watch last year's video of such a visit on Instagram [here](#)).

There is plenty of shade under the trees if you don't want to pay for an umbrella; also a bar and restaurant. To rent a sun lounger and umbrella, call at least one day in advance (price €12 per

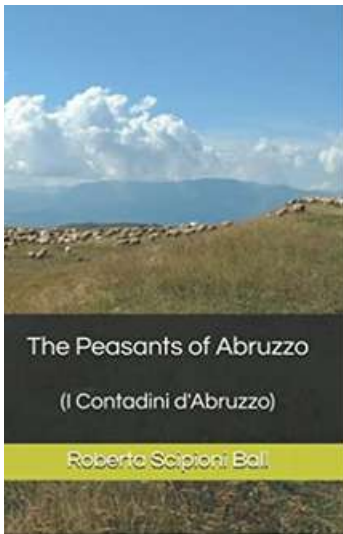
day for two people). Canoe rentals are €10 per hour. Book at Bar Lido La Gravara, tel.: 0039 3382512476.

**Getting there:** La Gravara beach is located on the main road from Civitella Alfedena to Barrea. You will find it on Google Maps.



**Below: Lake Scanno; photo via Comune di Scanno.**  
**Right: La Gravara beach on Lake Barrea**





## Roberta Scipioni Ball **THE PEASANTS OF ABRUZZO (I CONTADINI D'ABRUZZO)**

*The year is 1910. Fifty years after Italy's unification. The southern regions remain destitute, the peasants left with nothing. Living in the remote mountains of Abruzzo, Anselmo Scipioni knows he can either risk*

*starvation or emigrate like millions of others. He marries Angela Tortora, a dutiful girl from a nearby village. Together they immigrate to America and settle in western New York. When tragedy strikes the family, Angela's depression and grief forces the family's return to Abruzzo. Her hope of resuming a life there is destroyed by Mussolini's ruthless dictatorship and the Scipioni family finds itself, once and for all, facing a life in America.*

Roberta Scipioni Ball was born in New York, the third of eleven children. Her father was the son of Italian immigrants. In the book, the author explores the lives of her paternal ancestors. Readers become immersed in the powerful story of the Scipioni family, their life of poverty and their determination to start a new life. The author sets the scene of how Abruzzo, geographically and historically, came to be a region frozen in time. Centuries of isolation left the natives only able to communicate in a dialect poorly understood by others.

I think anyone who has visited Abruzzo or lives there as an expat understands that as a region, it stands alone in its culture, traditions, and attitudes. With a sense of connection and continuity, the author cleverly illustrates the fierce determination of her ancestors and their unyielding resolve to survive. These qualities of character will be a legacy for future generations.

Readers will identify the changes, emotions, and anxieties of starting a new "expat" life.

*Wendy Ridolini is editor of Sunflower Publishing in the UK. She spends as much time as she can in Abruzzo, where she has a holiday home.*



## O. Ranalli, R. Monasterio **ABRUZZO IN FESTA**

This photographic volume is dedicated to Abruzzo's festivals and popular rites. It is a collection of 250 beautiful images created by Roberto Monasterio, a professional photographer, accompanied by texts (in Italian) by Omerita Ranalli, a cultural anthropologist. In the book you will find details of some of the most important traditional events that take place throughout the year in the region such as The Running Madonna in Sulmona, The Snake Catchers' Festival in Cocollo, the barefoot race *La Corsa degli zingari* in Pacentro and many other. You do not need to be fluent in Italian to enjoy this stunning book.

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## THE CHEWY GOODNESS OF VENTRICINA DEL VASTESE

By Anna Swann

*Ventricina del Vastese* is not your average salami. Large – between one and three kilos – round or pear-shaped, this very special pork salami has a strong, intense flavour and bright orangey colour that comes from the added ground red pepper. It has been produced in the southern part of the Chieti province, especially around the city of Vasto (hence the name, “Vasto-style *ventricina*”) since the 19th century. It is the way the meat is prepared that makes it special: not minced, like in most salami but cut with a knife into medium pieces. Lean noble meat parts are used mostly with some, about 30%, fat pieces added. After a night’s rest, the meat is mixed with salt, black pepper, wild fennel seeds, garlic, and red pepper (depending on the producer, it can be sweet or spicy). *Ventricina del Vastese* has a natural casing, normally a pig’s bladder.

After being air-dried for 100 days, it is cleaned from the mold, dipped in lard, and dried for another 3-5 months. In old days, *ventricina del Vastese* was cased in a pig’s stomach lining and each salami weighed a whopping 10 kilos. From a single pig, one or two *ventricine* were made, which were “broken” (*ventricina* was never cut, but broken off in chunks; nowadays, very few people still do that) in the most important moments of peasants’ lives, mainly during crop and grape harvests. Sometimes a 10-kilo hunk of salami was used as a payment to a doctor or lawyer. This precious artisan salami is never produced on an industrial scale because of the costly noble cuts and labour-intensive preparation.

Locals eat *ventricina* in thick chunks with a hot *pizza bianca* (plain pizza base with no toppings) or traditional leavened bread accompanied by sliced tomatoes and Montepulciano d’Abruzzo wine. Chewy and rustic, it might seem a bit tough to a novice, but the more you eat it, the better you appreciate *ventricina del Vastese*. As the taste and flavours vary from one



producer to another make sure you try different ones to find your favourite.

### WHERE TO FIND VENTRICINA DEL VASTESE

**Macelleria La Genuina, Via Provinciale, 8, Carunchio**

Luciano Caracciolo and his wife Domenica have been making excellent salami for a few decades. Their shop is located in a 12th-century convent in Carunchio. You can also buy [online](#) by sending them your order via email.

**Fattorie del Tratturo, Contrada Ragna 61, Scerni**

Last year the farm *Fattorie del Tratturo* from Scerni, a town in the province of Chieti, won the top national prize for its delicious *ventricina* salami in the category for products made from *maiale nero* heritage pig meat. Brothers Luigi and Antonio Di Lello have been making high-quality traditional cured meats since 1993. Their pigs roam free, gorging on wild acorns as well as grains and legumes grown at the farm.

You can buy their salami at the farm [Agriturismo Fattoria Dell' Uliveto](#) in Scerni or order [online](#) (they ship across Europe).

**Ventricina & Dintorni, Contrada Bisceglie, 16, Roccaspinalveti**

Michele Piccirilli is one of the younger farmers who makes excellent *ventricina*. You can buy it at his farm or order [online](#).

# PANCOTTO, AN ANCIENT HUMBLE DISH UPDATED

By Gino Primavera

"The bread is not to be thrown away. It is a mortal sin and, if it falls on the ground, pick it up, kiss it, and eat it" (*Il pane non si butta, è peccato mortale e se cade per terra, bacialo e mangialo*) is an old saying from Abruzzo. Bread was never wasted here: leftover and stale bread was used for stuffing, meatballs, and to make many traditional dishes such as *pallotte casce e ove* and *pancotto*.

*Pancotto* was a popular dish with ancient roots in Abruzzo's traditional cuisine and varied in different areas according to the availability of the ingredients. There are two versions of the dish: pastoral and peasant *pancotto*.

Shepherds cooked dry bread in the whey left from the milk used to make cheese and ricotta and, in spring, they also added wild spinach (*gli orapi*). In the peasant version, scrambled eggs were added. My grandmother made *pancotto* but, nowadays, hardly anyone cooks this dish. However, with some good ingredients and innovative touches, it could be very interesting. The famous chef Niko Romito makes exceptionally good *pancotto* in his 3-Michelin-star restaurant, Reale, in Castel di Sangro.

## INGREDIENTS

Makes 2 portions

- 4 slices of stale bread
- 4 tsp sheep milk ricotta
- 100g wild spinach (can be substituted with conventional spinach)
- a handful of grated pecorino cheese
- 2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- ¼ onion
- a few springs of parsley
- a few bay leaves
- 1-2 cloves garlic, chopped
- salt and black pepper to taste



## PREPARATION

Blanch the spinach in boiling water and toss it in a hot frying pan with olive oil and garlic over low heat for a couple of minutes. Set aside.

Put half a liter of water, with two tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil, onion, parsley, and bay leaf in a large, not high pan, preferably terracotta. Simmer everything on low heat for 15 minutes, add salt and pepper and four slices of stale bread. Leave to cook for another 6-8 minutes.

Put the bread in serving bowls (two slices per person, cut into cubes if desired) with some of the cooking liquid. Top the bread with ricotta and the *orapi*. As a finishing touch, throw generous amounts of pecorino on the plate; stir gently and leave to absorb the flavours for a few minutes before serving.

Pair *pancotto* with a young red wine or a well-structured white wine from Abruzzo (e.g., Jernare Pecorino by Tommaso Masciantonio).

*Gino Primavera is a revered expert on Abruzzo's traditional cuisine. His books include Butto la pasta, Mangio la foglia. He is also a co-author of La cucina della Maiella and Bevo la foglia.*

# SURGITTE GNOCCHI FROM TERAMO

By Antonella Marcantoni

I was born in San Nicolo a Tordino, just outside of Teramo. In 1968, my parents, my brother and I moved to Canada. My mother brought with her not only the desire to make a better life for us but also the treasured recipes she learnt from her mother.

Gnocchi, or what I call *gli surgitte*, is one of many things my mother used to cook when I came home from university. As soon as I opened the door, I could smell her delicious sauce and knew *gli surgitte* were on the way. I learnt this recipe, along with many others, from my mother, Lucia. To me it is the taste of old Abruzzo.

This is my favourite dish... but then again, that's what I say about everything my mother makes. She is 80 years old now, but she still cooks every day.

## INGREDIENTS

### For the surgitte:

- 5 medium size potatoes (I use Yukon Gold)
- 2 cups flour
- 1 egg, optional

### For the sauce:

- 1lb lean ground beef
- 1 celery stick, chopped
- 1 carrot, chopped
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 1 can of peeled tomatoes passed through a food mill/purée sieve (*passatutto*) before cooking
- 2 cloves
- 1 ½ tbsp olive oil
- Salt, black pepper, and chili pepper to taste
- Some grated *parmigiano reggiano* cheese



## PREPARATION

Boil the potatoes with skins on for 20 minutes or until soft. When ready, remove the skins and mash them. Let cool to room temperature.

Once the potatoes are cooled, add flour and mix until smooth. If the mixture is too soft and difficult to handle, add an egg. Do not overwork the dough or the gnocchi will fall apart when cooking.

Cut the potato dough into several equal parts and roll into a tube about ½ to 1 inch thick, depending on the size you want your gnocchi to be. Cut each tube into small pieces diagonally and place on a floured surface.

To make the sauce, put all the ingredients in a deep frying pan or a pot and cook for 25-30 mins.

When the sauce is ready, put *gli surgitte* into a pot with boiling water and cook them for 3 minutes or until they float on the water surface. Scoop them out and serve topped with generous amounts of the sauce and, if you like it, some *parmigiano*.