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TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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Torre Medicea in Santo Stefano di Sessanio. Read the story on page 8. Photo by Anna Lebedeva.

LEFT:

Santo Stefano di Sessanio. Photos by Anna Lebedeva.

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A while ago, I was excited to receive a very special email. It was from one of my heroes – Daniele Kihlgren, the man behind the *Sextantio Albergo Diffuso* project which saved **Santo Stefano di Sessanio**, one of the most beautiful villages in Abruzzo and Italy. Daniele asked if we could talk on the phone about the imminent threat of a new building to be erected in **Santo Stefano di Sessanio** and what damage it could do to the village's image. Over the following weeks we had several long phone conversations, exchanged emails and messages discussing the necessity of preserving small historical villages with their delicate architectural heritage, saving them from the continuous encroachment of new constructions. In this issue, you will find Kihlgren's thoughts on this, as well as my articles about **Santo Stefano di Sessanio** and Valeria Gallese, an artisan who has a small *bottega* in the village.

Many of you might know the fascinating lithographs with the so-called impossible constructions by Maurits Cornelis Escher, one of the world's most famous graphic artists. But did you know that many of Escher's masterpieces were inspired by Abruzzo? In this issue we talk about his visits to the region.

As you know already, ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine is a 100% reader-supported publication. All businesses mentioned in each issue are publicised for free as part of our mission to showcase and promote local enterprises, sharing their stories with the world. We carefully select the ones that we believe deserve recognition and represent the essence of Abruzzo. In this issue, you will find stories about several such local ventures. Please, consider supporting these businesses (and ABRUZZISSIMO) by purchasing their products (please mention that you discovered them through our Magazine) and spreading the word about them to friends, family, and colleagues. Together, let's celebrate and uplift the spirit of entrepreneurship in Abruzzo.

Enjoy this April issue!

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor

PESCARA AND CHIETI SHINE IN ITALY'S CLIMATE INDEX

Pescara and **Chieti** are among the top 10 Italian cities with the best climate in the latest index ranking published by the national newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*. They hold 5th and 7th places respectively. The rankings are based on variety of climate factors culled from the weather site 3bMeteo over the decade from 2013 – 2023. Among the factors taken into consideration are average hours of sunshine per day and average days of extreme rainfall per year.

GOOD NEWS FOR BEARS IN ABRUZZO

After the devastating deaths of two of Abruzzo's beloved bears – Juan Carrito and his mother Amarena – there is good news about the region's rare Marsican bears: the **Abruzzo, Lazio, and Molise National Park** has published a report announcing that 18 new cubs were born last year. These births, from 8 different mothers, were verified by the Scientific Park Service, park rangers, and Forestry Carabinieri. They signal a positive outlook for the future of the animals and the parks. The full report is available here.

CALLS FOR MERGING MOLISE WITH ABRUZZO

A new committee in Molise unveiled a proposal to merge one of Italy's smallest regions with Abruzzo, starting with the incorporation of **Isernia province**. "Directly merging Molise with Abruzzo requires complex steps," explained committee president Antonio Libero Bucci. They opt instead for merging local entities, bypassing the need for a constitutional amendment. A referendum, initiated with a petition, seeks 5,000 signatures. If the plan succeeds, the regional status of Molise with only one province will have to be changed. Proponents explain the move by dire depopulation and lack of adequate healthcare and infrastructure. The region was part of Abruzzi e Molise until it was split into two in 1963. In the meantime, the town of **Montenero di Bisaccia** plans a referendum to vote for merging with Abruzzo.

HERMITAGE OF CELESTINO V REMAINS CLOSED

The 13th-century hermitage of Celestine V (also known as Eremo di Sant'Onofrio) above **Sulmona**, will remain closed until summer's end due to ongoing safety works to secure the paths and rock walls. The works had to be paused last month until July on request by the Maiella National Park to protect the birds nesting in the area in this period. The only consolation is that the hermitage and Hercules Curino's temple will be visible from a distance lit up by two spotlights.

SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE CHURCH IN LANCIANO REOPENS AFTER RESTORATION

Following extensive restoration work, costing approximately €1.1 million, the 12th-century Santa Maria Maggiore church, **Lanciano**'s former cathedral and a national monument since 1902, has reopened for worship. Notable additions include a new presbytery, altar, and ambo in travertine, alongside relics and restored artworks. The church will once again house the magnificent processional cross created by the famous goldsmith Nicola da Guardiagrele. A significant discovery was made during restoration: a 15th-century painting portraying Herod's birthday celebration alongside the martyrdom of John the Baptist.

ABRUZZO SECOND IN ITALY FOR WATER LOSS

According to Istat (the Italian Institute of National Statistics), Abruzzo is the second worst offender in Italy when it comes to water loss. The latest report has determined that the region loses 62.5% of its supply when going from source to tap. At the provincial level, **Chieti** fares most poorly, followed by **L'Aquila** and **Pescara**. The province of **Teramo** fares the best, with water loss capped at 27.9%. Concurrent with this, 64.4% of Abruzzese families consider themselves "fairly satisfied" with their water service.

DID YOU KNOW?

WAS TITIAN'S DANAE A COURTESAN FROM LANCIANO?

Many art historians believe that Titian's famous painting, Danae, found in the Gallery of the Royal Palace of Capodimonte, Naples, depicts Angela Greca, a renowned 16th-century courtesan from Abruzzo.

Angela Greca was born in Lanciano, abducted, and taken to Rome by a group of travelling rogues during one of the traditional city fairs in the late 1400s-early 1500s. Known as Ortensia Greca, she became one of the most beautiful courtesans in the capital. Like many courtesans of her time, Angela played the lute, sang, wrote poetry, and set fashion trends. She was adept at entertaining princes, literati, cardinals, and men of prestige, as she frequented the aristocratic circles of the Vatican for many years. De Alborensis, an affluent Spaniard, in a grand gesture of his affection, bought her a house in Vicolo Cellini 31, just a stone's throw away from the central Via Giulia. The famous Abruzzese beauty was mentioned in *Ragionamento del Zoppino*, an important work of Italian Renaissance pornography published in the 1530s.

In the early 1520s, she ended up in the Papal Court, marrying Count Ercole Rangone, the private chamberlain of Pope Leo X.

Legend has it that one of her lovers, Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, the nephew of Pope Paul III, commissioned Titian to paint Angela Greca as Danae. The Gallery's guides always mention that Angela Greca, the beautiful and famous courtesan from Lanciano, posed for that masterpiece.

A NEW RENAISSANCE: FROM SHEEP TO YARN

By Anna Lebedeva

About a decade ago, a young entrepreneur from Avezzano, Valeria Gallese, embarked on a journey to bring back Abruzzo's forgotten tradition – the art of working with sheep wool. Today, she is celebrated as a pioneer of the revival of the Italian wool making.

In her little *bottega* tucked away in a medieval street of Santo Stefano di Sessanio, she welcomes tourists, the curious, and regulars who want to buy high quality yarn, scarves, hats, and other hand-crafted wool products.
Trained in veterinary medicine, Gallese's passion for sheep wool was ignited during her studies when she delved into flock genetic management. " It was a calling for me. I didn't know how to crochet, or dye wool, I didn't know anything, I just saw the sheep with the wool on them that wasn't used in Abruzzo," she recalls, reflecting on her journey. "So, after university, I returned to the province of L'Aquila to understand why wool was considered a by-product of the farm despite its value and a long history." Here she met Ovidio Damiani, her future husband, a fourth-generation sheep farmer who helped her to immerse herself in the pastoral world.

Photo above: one of the flocks that supplies wool for Aquilana Lana Italiana

RESTORING DIGNITY

Valeria lives with her family in Barisciano, at the foot of the Gran Sasso mountains. In winter, she is busy selling wool online; in summer, when tourists arrive, she opens her *bottega* in Santo Stefano di Sessanio. Both villages have a long history of sheep farming and wool production. In front of Barisciano, in the plain between L'Aquila and Navelli, runs the Tratturo Magno, the highway of Abruzzo's transhumance, which the flocks have traversed to and from Puglia for centuries. From 1579, during the two-centuries-long reign of the Medici family of Florence, Santo Stefano di Sessanio thrived on the production and trade of wool. The flocks grazing on the nearby highland grasslands of Campo Imperatore provided the prized *carfagna* wool, known for its natural brown hue.

While in the past wool was a valuable product, in recent times it has been viewed more as waste. "Upon shearing their sheep, if the wool cannot find a buyer, shepherds were burdened with the expense of its disposal, adding to their financial strain," explains Gallese.

Undeterred by the challenges, Valeria embarked on her mission to breathe new life into the Abruzzese wool industry. In 2012, she turned 50 kilograms of raw wool from her husband's farm into yarn to test the market. Her Aquilana Lana Italiana business was born. "I set up a blog where I told my story, and within three months, I sold everything," she recalls. Through dedication and perseverance, Gallese's enterprise slowly flourished. Since then, she also opened a Facebook page and a group and has been able to double sales every year. Her efforts not only brought back Abruzzo's wool but also empowered local shepherds economically. "I restored an economic dignity for them, helped to balance the books," she explains. "I told them that their wool was worth a lot and could be transformed into a beautiful product. The more I pay the shepherds, the happier I feel and am proud for what I do." Gallese's efforts have not only rejuvenated the local wool industry but also challenged existing perceptions. She has elevated the status of Abruzzo's wool, commanding prices above the national average.

Photos: (from top) Valeria Gallese; her bottega in Santo Stefano di Sessanio

WOOL FROM ABRUZZO

In her quest to revive Abruzzo's wool trade, Valeria processes an impressive quantity of raw material now. "Last year, I collected 16,000 kg of raw wool," she reveals. "To understand, that's two truckloads." This staggering volume of wool not only underscores the scale of Gallese's operation but also highlights the growing demand for Aquilana wool, both domestically and interna-

tionally. As her enterprise continued to expand Valeria began working with other sheep farmers, from Molise and Apulia, bringing the total number of her suppliers to twelve.

The raw wool is sent to Northern Italy, to The Wool Company in Biella, for processing. "The wool supply chain begins with shearing, which takes place in our area between April and May," she explains. "Only the best fleeces are selected and sent to Biella, where the wool is washed, combed, spun, twisted, and wound into large skeins." Then Valeria, in her workshop in Santo Stefano di Sessanio, packages the wool by hand in smaller skeins and dyes them with natural colours. She utilises natural pigments such as Montepulciano d'Abruzzo wine, oak galls, and different types of wood barks.

TRAILBLAZER

Aquilana wool is loved not only in Italy but across the world, with buyers in North America, Japan, and many countries in Europe. Stocked with colourful skeins, hats, scarves, cardigans, shawls, crocheted small gifts and adorable woolly sheep magnets, Valeria's shop heaves with customers in summer months and sales roll in steadily via her Facebook page, group, and email. Several companies make mountain hats with Aquilana wool and spinning mills place orders to add it to their quality yarns. "Aquilana Lana Italiana has become the most talked about wool business at the national level and is recognised as the finest wool in Italy," says Valeria.

Through her pioneering spirit and passion, Valeria Gallese has not only revived a tradition but also inspired a new generation of entrepreneurs and artisans creating businesses in rural areas. "When I started there were only two companies transforming raw wool to yarn in the entire country," says Valeria. "Today, several more followed in my footsteps. For me, it is a beautiful thing, a great satisfaction."

You can find Valeria Gallese's bottega in Piazza Medicea in Santo Stefano di Sessanio. For opening hours contact her via the Facebook page, email at lanaquilana@gmail.com or call at 0039 3452719648.

Photos: (below) Valeria models a shawl made from Aquilana wool; (right) all wool is coloured with natural pigments

Photos courtesy of Aquilana Lana Italiana.

SANTO STEFANO DI SESSANIO: BEYOND THE VISTAS

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva

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