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TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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The view of Lake Scanno and Frattura Vecchia from Monte Cona. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 8.

LEFT:

Frattura Vecchia. Read the story on page 5. Photos by Anna Lebedeva.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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October in Abruzzo is a busy month: Montepulciano d'Abruzzo grapes are ready to be harvested, many farmers are beginning to pick olives, and saffron in the Navelli Plain is bursting into bloom and will be harvested in the coming weeks. I will be heading to collect the famous *Roscetta* chestnuts in **Valle Roveto** and might also squeeze in a trip to **Senarica di Crognaleto** for a stroll in its ancient chestnut groves (read our story about Abruzzo's best chestnuts on page 26).

As always, ABRUZZISSIMO brings you exclusive, fascinating stories about the region's history and traditions and this issue is no exception. Did you know that many centuries ago Abruzzo had an important route for transporting salt from the coast? We talk about it on page 12. I visited one of the most spectacular corners of Abruzzo — **Frattura**, a small hamlet above Lake Scanno — to talk to local farmers about the rare heritage bean variety they grow there (see page 5).

I fell in love with the small town of **Gissi** in the province of Chieti when I visited it for the first time a few months ago. In this month's issue I share a story about its... sparkling buildings. Intrigued? See page 15 to learn more.

We structure most of our features as mini-guides to inspire your exploration of Abruzzo, so be sure to save or print them and set off to enjoy this beautiful region.

Do you have any friends or family members who love Abruzzo? Please invite them to subscribe to ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine by sharing this link or gift them a premium subscription. We are a reader-supported publication, so every subscription counts!

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor

DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS

MORE LAWYERS THAN PLUMBERS

Abruzzo is facing the largest decline in artisans in Italy, with numbers plummeting from 43,766 in 2012 to 30,998 in 2023 — a 29% drop. This trend reflects a broader national decline, with traditional trades such as cobblers and tailors disappearing fast. Notably, there are now more lawyers (approximately 237,000) than plumbers (around 180,000).

The reduction in artisan businesses is partly due to economic crises and a cultural shift away from manual trades, especially in urban areas. As traditional shops disappear, social spaces are diminishing, making it increasingly difficult for the elderly and local communities to access essential services in urban areas.

CHRISTMAS TRAIN SCHEDULE ANNOUNCED

Dates for Abruzzo's Christmas vintage steam train have been announced by the *Ferrovia dei Parchi* (Railway of the Parks). The hugely popular holiday train with cars from the 1920s sporting wooden interiors will journey from Sulmona's central station through scenic mountains to the open-air Christmas markets in Campo di Giove, Roccaraso, and Castel di Sangro.

The first scheduled departure is on November 23 with two departures a day. The train makes two stops along the way, allowing riders to disembark and enjoy the festive atmosphere of each town, have a bite to eat, and shop at the markets.

Tickets will go on sale starting October 28. For reservations and additional information, visit the *Ferrovia dei Parchi* website.

ABRUZZO AIRPORT RUNWAY EXTENSION BEGINS

Construction work to extend the runway at Abruzzo Airport has officially begun after military engineers conducted thorough surveys to identify any remnants of wartime explosives and munitions. This project will add 386 meters to the runway, allowing it to accommodate intercontinental flights, with completion expected by early 2025. The initial phase includes installing new fencing, a perimeter road, and other essential infrastructure upgrades, all while ensuring the airport remains functional. The works began amid growing criticism in the regional press and on social media, with many arguing that the funds should have been instead allocated to increasing European and domestic flights, as well as improving bus connections to the airport.

EXPERIENCE THE GRAPE HARVEST

Fall is grape harvest time in Abruzzo. This season, it will be celebrated by 18 wineries via the *Cantine Aperte in Vendemma* (Open Wine Cellars of the Harvest). The events, which began in September, will continue through the weekend of October 18.

The participating wineries offer visitors a chance to experience the Montepulciano d'Abruzzo grape harvest, learn about the winemaking process, and taste wines. Reservations are needed and should be made directly with each winery. Registration details and full programmes can be found on the *Movimento Turismo del Vino* website.

PARTICIPATE IN SAFFRON HARVEST

Everything is set for the 11th edition of *Raccogli Conosci Degusta*, happening in **San Pio delle Camere** (AQ) on October 27, celebrating the harvest of local saffron, one the world's most expensive spices which has been cultivated in the Navelli Plains since the 1200s. Participants can join local producers to pick the beautiful violet flowers, pluck the prized stigmas, and learn the art of drying them. The full programme will be published shortly on the organisers' page.

JESUIT CHURCH IN L'AQUILA TO REOPEN

The historic Church of Santa Margherita dei Gesuiti in **L'Aquila** is set to reopen by the end of 2024, following extensive restoration efforts funded by €3.6 million since 2015. Renowned for its stunning polychrome and gilded frescoes, the church also houses the urn of Sant'Equirio, the co-patron saint of L'Aquila.

A preview of the restoration was showcased during the recent European Heritage Days, revealing the restored interior and repaired organ. Santa Margherita is the last remaining Jesuit church with an attached college in Abruzzo, tracing its roots back to L'Aquila's founding years.

DID YOU KNOW?

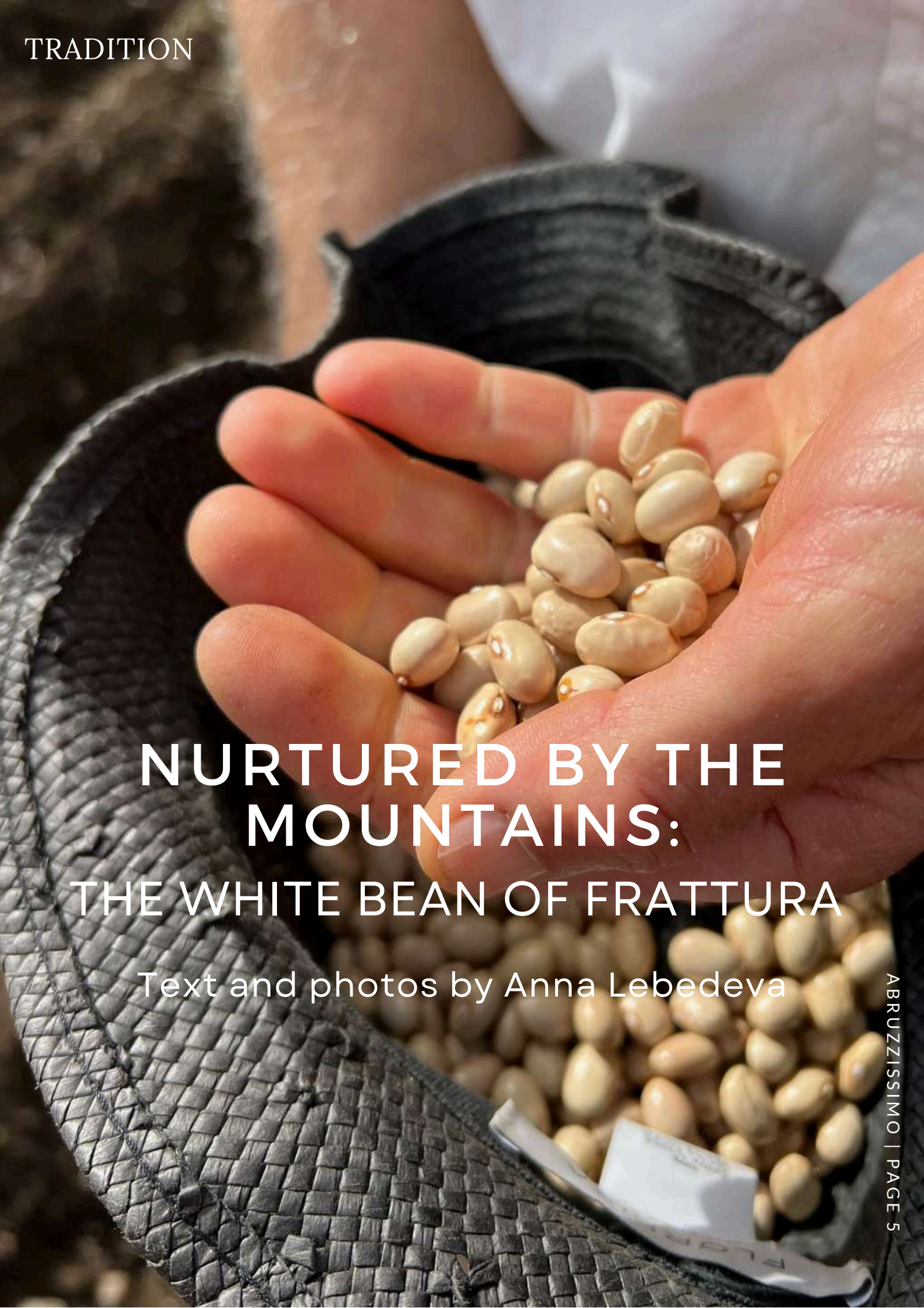
SOPHIA LOREN AND ABRUZZO

Sophia Loren, who recently celebrated her 90th birthday, has a special connection to Abruzzo, as several cinematographic figures from the region played a significant role in shaping her early career.

In the 1950s, the Italian cinematic icon found herself working closely with some of Abruzzo's finest talents. Her first major dramatic role came in *La donna del fiume* (The River Girl), a film written by renowned Abruzzese screenwriter Ennio Flaiano, born in Pescara. Flaiano's contribution was pivotal, as he helped shape Loren's character with her inimitable allure in mind. This marked the beginning of her ascent to stardom, and Loren soon became a frequent collaborator with Flaiano, whose sharp screenwriting paired her with Marcello Mastroianni, creating an iconic duo in Italian cinema.

But the Abruzzo connection extended beyond the scripts. Composer Alessandro Cicognini, another Pescara native, also from Abruzzo, scored two of Loren's films, including the memorable *Peccato sia una canaglia* (Too Bad She's Bad). Ettore Maria Margadonna from Palena wrote the screenplay for the *Bread, Love and Dreams* film starring Loren. Also noteworthy is Anton Giulio Majano, a Chieti native, who directed the actress in *Good Folk's Sunday* in 1953.

Very few people know that in the 1980s, the actress visited Abruzzo, staying at Gagliano Aterno's 12th-century castle as a guest of Baroness Lazzaroni, who owned it at the time.



NURTURED BY THE MOUNTAINS:

THE WHITE BEAN OF FRATTURA

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva

In the remote mountain hamlet of Frattura (AQ), the *Fagiolo Bianco* — a local heritage bean — has been cultivated for centuries. Delicate and tasty, it thrives nurtured by pure mountain springs and the devoted care of a small group of elderly farmers.

On a sunny autumn morning in Frattura, I walked through the most beautiful vegetable patch I had ever seen. Surrounded by dramatic mountain peaks, with a blue lake glistening below, long, neat rows of bean plants — over two meters tall — climbed toward the sky, supported by poles. Yellow, plump pods with pink speckles dangled among the leaves, ready to be picked.

In the bean jungle, I spotted a man in a bright pink fedora approaching me. He was carrying a white plastic bucket, and a cheerful Italian pop song played as he came closer. He extended his hand to greet me: "*Armando, piacere.*" Then, taking his phone out of his pocket, he added, "Wait, I'll turn the music off. I always work to a soundtrack of old songs."

This is Armando Iafolla, one of the *fagiolari*, farmers who cultivate a local heritage white bean variety, *Fagiolo Bianco di Frattura*. There are ten of them, all in their 70s, who lovingly tend small allotments of *fagioli*. "It could be a good, profitable business, but not many younger people are very interested. Too much hard work," says Armando.

LITTLE HAS CHANGED

Frattura is a mountain hamlet near Scanno, in the heart of the Sagittario Valley, and is home to around 14 residents. The village is divided into two parts: Frattura Vecchia, now a ghost town, destroyed by the 1915 Marsica earthquake, and Frattura Nuova, which has a small bar and just a few streets, with laundry flapping on lines between trees on sunny days, and chickens peacefully clucking in their enclosures. Despite its tumultuous past, the *Fagiolo Bianco* has been cultivated here for centuries, with little changing

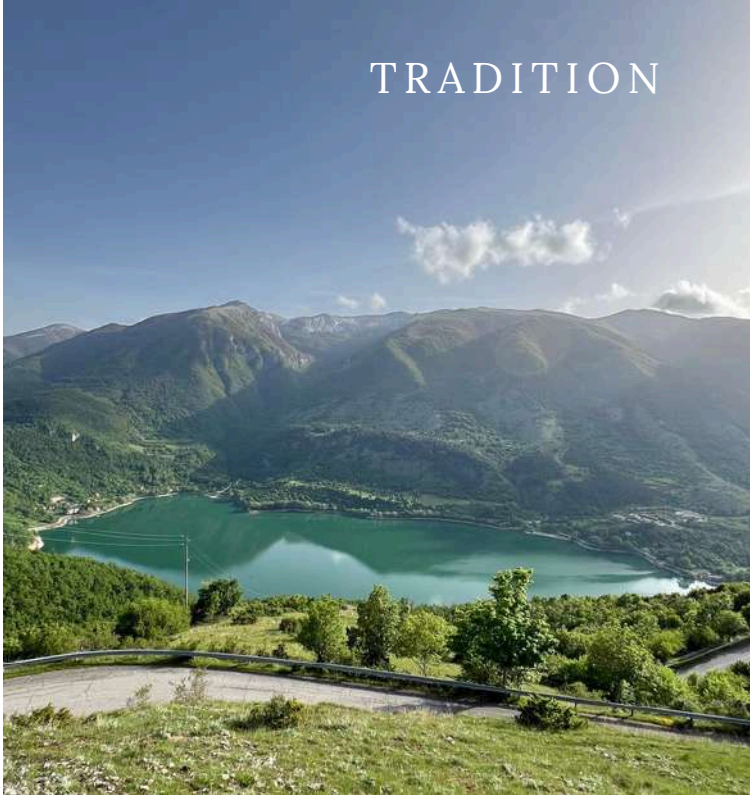
Photos: (from top) Armando among the bean plants; *Fagiolo Bianco* pods waiting to be picked

over time. Beans are still planted, harvested, carefully selected, and shelled by hand. As in the old days, no fertilisers are used, and irrigation comes directly from a nearby mountain spring. These bean patches have been passed down through generations, from father to son. Following the devastating earthquake in 1915, the people of Frattura transformed an area where makeshift shelters had stood for over fifteen years into fertile gardens that continue to produce a bounty of vegetables and beans today.

THE MOUNTAIN BEAN

The Frattura bean is an indigenous variety that grows at an altitude of 1,300 meters. It is distinguished by a thin ivory-coloured skin and a soft, delicate flesh. In Frattura, the *Fagiolo Bianco* grows taller than two metres with up to eight beans per pod. Farmers from

Photos: (from top) *fagiolari* planting beans in May; (below): Armando "dancing" on his drying beans



Photos: Paolo Casalvieri in Frattura Vecchia; view of Lake Scanno from Frattura

other areas have tried growing it but the result is never the same — the bean's unique traits change: the skin becomes thicker, it grows less and has a lower yield. The mountains towering above the bean patches have created a favourable microclimate in Frattura. "The plants bask in the sun most of the day and at night the heat is slowly released by the mountains," explains Armando. "The mountain water that we use for irrigation gives the *fagioli* a special flavour." The hardy legumes have helped *fratturesi* (as the locals are called) through difficult times in the past, with one kilogram providing nutritious meals for 10 to 12 people. Humble traditional dishes with the *Fagiolo Bianco* such as bean salad and sagne, a pasta made with water and flour, with beans, beaten lard, and onion are still made in local homes.

YOUNG ENERGY

While Armando notes that the younger generation is not eager to take over the bean patches, a group of energetic youths has been helping the farmers in drumming up interest in the *Fagiolo Bianco* by organising events and tastings in Frattura. Thirty-one-year-old Paolo Casalvieri worked as a teacher in Verona, but the call of his homeland proved too strong, prompting his return. He founded De Rerum Natura, an association dedicated to promoting local producers and bringing visitors to Frattura. "Although I am from Sulmona, my mother and grandparents are from Frattura, so I feel a deep connection to this land," says Paolo. He has begun assisting the *fagiolari* and has brought groups of children to participate in planting the *Fagiolo Bianco* and local grains. "We want everyone to understand from a young age how much work goes into growing quality food and why artisanal produce costs more and tastes better."

AGE-OLD RITUALS

The hamlet's beloved bean not only nourishes the body but also sustains the cultural identity of the *fratturesi*. Here, the pace of life is measured by seasonal rituals that have remained unchanged over the centuries, many of which are connected to the *Fagiolo Bianco*: preparing the soil in spring, planting the seeds in May, harvesting and drying in September. Armando adds his personal touch to the drying stage. "I will show you my bean dance," he said, leaping onto the beans spread out on the roof of his garage. With rhythmic steps and small twists of his hips and feet, he crushed the shells beneath him. He then ran his hand through the broken pods and loosened beans, allowing the light mountain breeze to carry the chaff away.

The next stage of the production cycle was sorting the *fagioli* and it is always done by the expert — Armando's mother-in-law, Graziosa, who is 100 years old. She sat in her comfortable armchair beside a television that is blaring at high volume. As Armando gave her an apron and transferred the legumes into a bowl in front of her, she began picking out the beans, separating them from the shells. Frattura has had seven centenarians in the last few decades, and now only two remaining, with Graziosa being one of them. Is it the fresh mountain air, the healthy diet rich in beans, or the simple, unrushed lifestyle that contributes to their longevity? We reflected on it while sipping the homemade *genziana* liqueur that Armando poured in small shot glasses.

WHERE TO TASTE AND BUY THE FAGIOLO BIANCO

Since the beans are cultivated in small quantities mostly for domestic consumption, you need to place your order with a local grower before May. Contact De Rerum Natura via their page or the page dedicated to the *Fagiolo Bianco*. The farm *Antico Monastero San Pietro* grows the white beans and you can order yours for next year by contacting them via their website.

Photos: (above) Graziosa is sorting the beans; (below) a photo of Frattura Vecchia before the earthquake of 1915

FRATTURA VECCHIA

The foundation of Frattura Vecchia dates as far back as the late 9th century, when it was founded by the Di Sangro counts.

Clinging to the slopes of Monte Genzana, it offers a vantage point with breathtaking views stretching from north to south with the mountain ranges flanking the Sagittario Valley. At the heart of this panorama lies Lake Scanno, formed by a massive landslide on Monte Genzana during the late Pleistocene era.

Frattura Vecchia, the original settlement, was established in the niche created by this ancient landslide. Unlike their neighbours in Scanno, who were traditionally linked to sheep farming, the people of Frattura earned their livelihoods as labourers, farmers, and expert shearers, known for their skill in quickly shearing sheep wool in one piece.

Photos: (from top right) Frattura Vecchia; an old fountain in the hamlet

The history of Frattura has been marked by hardship, as it was repeatedly devastated by earthquakes and fires between the 17th and 18th centuries, culminating in the catastrophic Marsica earthquake of 1915. The earthquake nearly wiped out the entire village; of the 500 residents, 162 died — mostly women and children — while the men were away with their flocks or working in other regions. After the tragedy of 1915, the community faced relocation, devastating epidemics of the Spanish flu and measles, and the waves of emigration that have significantly reduced the population.

The village was rebuilt as Frattura Nuova in the 1930s, but the original centre, Frattura Vecchia, still stands, with some houses restored and its streets, fountains, and ancient squares lovingly maintained by the elderly residents of Frattura Nuova.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