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ISSUE NO. 47 • NOVEMBER 2024

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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Scanno. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 8.

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Gagliano Aterno. Read the story on page 13. Photos by Anna Lebedeva.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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Periodico diffuso in via telematica non soggetto a registrazione ai sensi degli artt. 3 e 3 bis della legge n. 103 del 16 luglio 2012.

In the old days, November was an important, joyous month: farmers completed their harvests, prepared for winter and celebrated *Capetièmpe*, the arrival of New Year, with ancient rituals that blended Christianity and pagan traditions. Antonio Secondo talks about the forgotten rites in his article on page 5.

One of my favourite places in Abruzzo is **Scanno**, with its beautiful lake, surrounding mountains, centuries of history, and a few intriguing mysteries. The origins of the people who settled here and the story behind their traditional dress are still up for debate. In this issue, I invite you to explore Scanno's sumptuous *abito tradizionale* on page 8.

In this month's issue we visit **Gagliano Aterno**, which has been making headlines for all the right reasons in recent years. Its energetic young mayor, Luca Santilli, has brought energy and fresh ideas in an effort to revive its half-empty streets. Read my story about Gagliano and be sure to try the town's ancient dish, *antremè* (see the recipe on page 28).

Sulmona's cultural scene has an exciting new addition: the theatre school Marfateatro is now offering recitals and classes in English, led by Joe Meehan, a British actor and teacher who moved to the city recently. Read our story on page 22.

I'm already working on editorial plans for next year, so if you have a story idea, know of an exceptional artisan in Abruzzo, or a tradition you think we should feature, please drop me a line at editor@abruzzissimo.com. And don't forget that ABRUZZISSIMO is a reader-supported publication, so we need your help to keep our work going. Please consider purchasing a premium subscription for yourself, your Abruzzo-loving friends and family, or making a donation.

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor

DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS

REVIVING THE GIOVENCO RIVER IN BISEGNA

The Giovenco River, flowing through the Abruzzo, Lazio, and Molise National Park, will soon be restored to its natural course through a unique ecological project funded by the Open Rivers Programme and led by Rewilding Apennines. Five concrete weirs will be removed, reconnecting over 11 kilometres of river near **Bisegna** (AQ), which will boost biodiversity, reduce erosion, improve habitats for local species like the River shrimp and Mediterranean trout, and encourage the return of the European otter. This project is part of broader efforts to revive river ecosystems across Europe.

HAUTE COUTURE SCHOOL IN PENNE

The prestigious Nazareno Fonticoli School of Haute Couture has been reopened in **Penne** by the famous Brioni luxury fashion house. The school will be training new generations of artisans in fine craftsmanship and "slow luxury" philosophy. The first 16 students have already begun a two-year programme. The school strengthens ties with Penne, where one of Brioni's founders, Nazareno Fonticoli, was born.

A favourite among celebrities, politicians, and business leaders, Brioni is renowned for its high-quality tailoring (with price tags between €3000 and €10,000 for a man's suit).

40% OF HOMES IN INTERIOR ABRUZZO ARE UNINHABITED

In Abruzzo, nearly 40% of homes are permanently unoccupied, surpassing the national average by over 11 percentage points, according to data from Openpolis. This issue is particularly acute in the region's interior, where depopulation and lack of services persist. Some of these unoccupied homes are inherited family homes that are only used for a few weeks in summer. The highest number of unoccupied homes by habitual residents is in the mountainous areas of the region. In **Cappadocia** (AQ), for instance, a staggering 90.2% of homes stand empty, while **Villa Santa Lucia degli Abruzzi** (AQ) follows closely at 89.8%. The demographic crisis, driven by declining birth rates and migration from mountainous areas, could see Abruzzo's population drop to under one million by 2070.

ALARMING INCREASE IN ROAD FATALITIES

Recent data from the Automobile Club d'Italia and the Italian National Institute of Statistics, reveals a troubling trend in Abruzzo, where road fatalities have surged by 22% compared to the previous year. While Italy as a whole shows a slight improvement in victim numbers, Abruzzo records an absolute increase of 13 fatalities. In the **Province of Pescara** alone, there were 884 accidents, resulting in 16 deaths and 1,127 injuries. This alarming rise highlights the urgent need for improved road safety measures and public awareness in the region, prompting authorities to advocate for stricter enforcement of traffic regulations.

OPEN WINERIES FOR SAN MARTINO

The much-anticipated *Cantine Aperte a San Martino* returns for its 2024 edition from November 3 to 11. Over nine days, nine participating wineries across Abruzzo will offer wine enthusiasts guided tastings, experiential tours, and meetings with producers. The participating wineries will be open in **Controguerra**, **Giulianova**, **Catignano**, **Ortona**, **Tollo** and **Villamagna**. In Abruzzo, the feast of San Martino is traditionally associated with the release of new wine, or *vino novello*. See the list of participating wineries on the organisers' website.

CLASSICAL MUSIC FESTIVAL IN CITTÀ SANT'ANGELO

The **Città Sant'Angelo Music Festival** has announced its 2024/2025 season's programme. Now in its ninth year, the festival, curated by the Nicola Polidoro Foundation, will bring to the Teatro Comunale in Città Sant'Angelo opera, ballet, and symphonic concerts, all connected by the timeless tale of Romeo and Juliet. Highlights include Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo e Giulietta*, the opera *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* by Bellini, as well as music by Tchaikovsky, Haydn, and Mozart. The season will run from November 30, 2024, to May 25, 2025, featuring an impressive line-up of artists and performances. Visit the festival's website for the complete programme and ticket purchasing information.

DID YOU KNOW?

IS THE WARRIOR OF CAPESTRANO A FAKE?

The enigmatic statue of *Guerriero di Capestrano* is at the centre of a heated controversy. For years, questions about its origins have sparked debate, but recent developments may bring long-awaited answers. A court-appointed commissioner will now investigate whether the Warrior is a genuine relic from the 6th century BCE or a fake made in 1934. This decision fuels a longstanding legal battle, reignited by filmmaker Alessio Consorte, who advocates for transparency regarding the statue's origins.

Consorte, known for his investigative documentary, *Il Guerriero Mi Pare Strano* (The Warrior Seems Strange) — which can be watched in Italian on YouTube — has raised questions about the Ministry of Culture's handling of evidence on the Warrior. He points to some missing data and the presence of unexpected substances like gypsum and rubidium as signs of a modern creation, not of an ancient artifact. According to Consorte, documents provided by the Ministry were limited to the analyses from 2005 which, he claims, were intended merely to test new equipment, not to verify authenticity.

Consorte argues that the Ministry's evidence lacks archival rigor, adding weight to claims of a possible 1934 fabrication. If the statue is proven to be a fake, it would deliver a significant blow to the region, as it stands as one of Abruzzo's most important artifacts and is featured in the region's coat of arms and flag.

For more information about the iconic *Il Guerriero di Capestrano*, read our article here.

CAPETIÈMPE: WHEN THE NEW YEAR BEGAN IN NOVEMBER

By Antonio Secondo

Translated by Anna Lebedeva

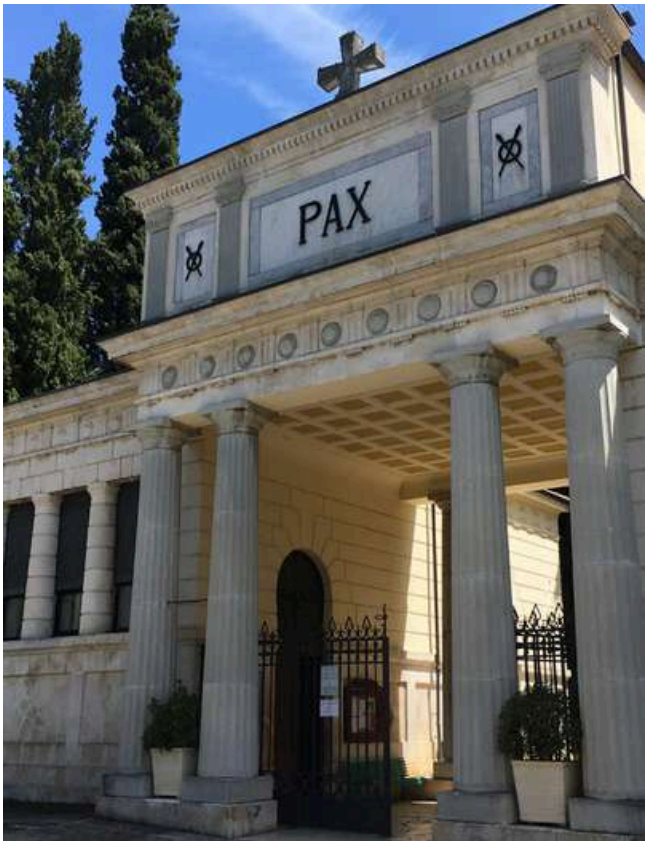
Pagan rituals connecting the world of the living with the dead were a big part of rural life in Abruzzo for a long time. The bond was especially felt in November, when agricultural works finished and the New Year was celebrated.

All Saints' Day, November 1, is a Catholic celebration dedicated to the memory of the dead. The rite's origins go back to the pagan *Samhain*, the Celtic New Year, which marked the end of the solar year and a closure of agricultural activities. It was a special period, during which provisions were made for the difficult winter months ahead. The nature's colours were fading under the cold touch of autumn and days drew shorter. With the advancing darkness, the line separating the earthly world from the one belonging to the deceased blurred and, according to pagan beliefs, the spirits returned to visit their loved ones to soothe the suffering brought by death.

In this period, ancient Celts organised noisy bacchanals on the graves of their dead, dancing, drinking and feasting to delight the tormented dead souls, so they could return to their underworld without worry or delay. In pagan and popular culture, the dead were, among other things, associated with the fertility of the land and were propitiated in rites for good future crops. To bring prosperity to the table you were supposed to keep your dead happy.

ANCIENT RITES

The Celtic New Year, or Samhain, was also celebrated in Abruzzo, especially, in the Valley Peligna and neighbouring municipalities but under the name of *Capetièmpe* (*Capotempo*). Just like *Samhain*, *Capetièmpe* went on for ten days, from November 1st to the 11th, during which it was necessary to follow certain rites to guarantee the spirits' clemency and bountiful harvests. These rites



Sulmona's cemetery

were divided into four main phases, translated roughly into solar, or fire rites, funeral or purification rites to appease the dead, rites called "the passage", which were meant to restart time and the cyclical nature of agricultural work, and fertility rites.

With the advent of Christianity, the Church began to reinterpret pagan rituals, so the dragon-slaying heroes turned into Saint George, gods of tempest into Saint Elijah, the concepts of fertility became merged into the figure of the Virgin Mary and female saints, and Samhain became the All Saints' Day. However, despite the Church's efforts to eradicate certain pagan rites, the cult of Capetièmpe survived in the Valley Peligna for a long time, in parallel with Christianity.

A detail of a fence at Sulmona's cemetery

According to historic documents, the tradition of noisy banquet celebrations at the cemeteries to appease the dead, in Sulmona and across the valley, was officially prohibited only in 1861.

RETURN OF THE DEAD

The first night of Capetièmpe, November 1, was the night of return. It was the custom not to clear the table, leaving some food and a few drops of wine in a glass, so that the dead, on their return, could see that they had not been forgotten. The doors of the houses were left ajar and the floor was not swept.

Every house lit candles ("*lumini*") in the windows to illuminate the path for the spirits and to make sure they recognised the houses in which they once resided.

Wealthy families used to prepare numerous dishes which, the following morning, were given to the poor. There are certain similarities between *Capetièmpe* in the Valley Peligna and Halloween. The children of Sulmona, Pratola Peligna, and Pettorano Sul Gizio used to wander the streets of the towns with their faces painted white like those of ghosts. They went from house to house to collect offerings of food or small coins. In Raiano and Prezza, boys carved large pumpkins, *chècocce*, hollowed with demonic eyes and mouths; with a candle inside they were supposed to scare passers-by in the dark.

In Introdacqua, locals believed in *Scurnacchièra*, a procession of the dead that, on the night of All Saints, went silently through the streets of the town, first heading to the main church, where a deceased parish priest would officiate a mass for

***Lumini* candles lit in the windows to illuminate the path for the spirits**

the souls, and then the ghosts headed to the homes of relatives to eat, returning to the cemetery at the first light of the dawn. The procession was led by stillborn children followed by adolescents and adults with the oldest, who died of natural causes or disease, closing the group. All the ghosts carried a candle in their hands and walked in silence, without taking their eyes off the ground. The unfortunates who happened to stumble across this silent parade would have a short life, as seeing the *Scurnacchièra* was a sign of approaching death.

Despite the long list of traditions and ceremonies connected to it, the *Capetièmpe* has now completely disappeared from our lives. The fields in the Valley Peligna were abandoned, new factories built, and the peasant became the proletarian and later, the bourgeois, forgetting the ancient traditions of the land. The memory of those precious customs, intertwining the pagan and Christian today lives only in the stories of the elderly who will soon leave this world. There will be sad silence above their graves instead of joyous banquets that once were so popular in the Valley Peligna.

Antonio Secondo is a local history enthusiast. He lives in Sulmona and used to write the popular Gotico Abruzzese page.

This article was first published in the November 2020 issue of ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine.

MASS OF THE DEAD

"This is a story that the elderly in the towns of Pescina and Cerchio tell about the Mass of the Dead which, according to local beliefs, is celebrated on the night of November 1.

"Everyone who has ancestors buried in the church where the Mass on the All Souls' Day is celebrated light up candles and lights on the tombs. There is no other celebration during the year when the church is so fantastically lit. But before the living the divine Mass is celebrated by the dead. A lady from the bakery, who didn't know about it, woke up before dawn to get the wood oven going. Walking past a church she saw it illuminated and, thinking it was a Mass, entered inside. The church was brightly lit and full of people. She kneeled and a woman from the village, who had been dead, approached saying: "Neighbour, you are not good here, leave. We are all dead and this is our service. With the lights off you would die of a fright surrounded by many deceased." The woman thanked her and left immediately but lost her voice from the fright."

Translated from Credenze Usi e Costumi Abruzzesi *by G. Finamore (Adelmo Polla Editore, 2002).*

THE WOMEN OF SCANNO AND THEIR TRADITIONAL DRESS

By Anna Lebedeva

If you find yourself wandering the narrow streets of Scanno (AQ), shadowed by weathered, centuries-old *palazzi*, you may well catch sight of a *nonna* clad in a voluminous wool skirt with a dark apron, black or navy cardigan, and headscarf. This traditional attire is unique to Scanno, the only place in Abruzzo where a few women still wear it daily.

The oldest records describing the Scannese women's attire come from dowry inventories dating back to the 16th – 18th centuries, where every detail of what a bride brought to her husband was meticulously documented. In these extensive lists of household items and garments, we find the various components of the costume, recorded in the dialect of the era.

Photo: Scanno. Photo by Lise Presseault

MYSTERIOUS ORIGINS

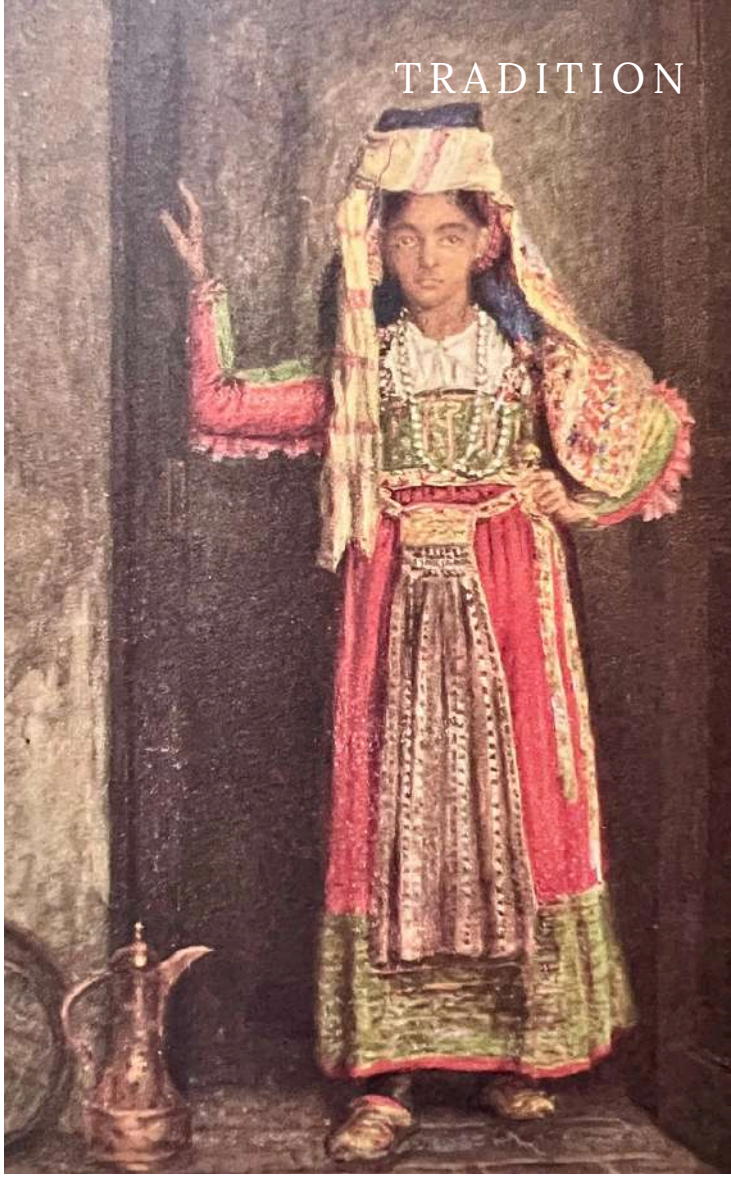
Some scholars of local history have suggested that Scanno's traditional costume has Oriental origins. They point to the fact that, in the past, the women of Scanno covered their faces with black fabric *(ju abbruvudature*) leaving only the eyes and forehead exposed, as a sign of mourning. They also note other habits associated with the East, such as the old women's custom of following their men in the street from two or three steps behind, reminiscent of certain Muslim practices. Additionally, in church, women used to sit on the floor with crossed legs, a posture seen in Eastern cultures.

Adriana Gandolfi, an anthropologist from the *Museo delle Genti d'Abruzzo*, remains sceptical of these theories. "The Oriental origins of Scanno's costume are often mentioned, but the theory lacks evidence and has never been proven," she says. Gandolfi notes that the attire of women in Scanno in its essential components resembles that of many other areas in Abruzzo.

Abruzzo's territory has seen many invasions and influences over centuries: the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Normans, Lombards, and French, each leaving traces of their customs. With such a complex history, the origin of Scanno's costume remains elusive, but one thing is clear: it used to be quite different from the one worn today.

FROM COLOUR TO BLACK

Before the mid-1800s, the women of Scanno were a sight to behold, carrying out their daily chores in colourful dresses made from wool dyed with natural pigments in shades of turquoise, green, and brown. In his book, *Saggio Itinerario Nazionale pel Paese de' Peligni*, written in 1792, author and diplomat Michele Torcia described woollen skirts and jackets



Photos: (top) a Scannese woman in an antique wedding dress, an illustration from "Through the Apennines and the lands of the Abruzzi" by Estella Canziani, 1928; Scanno's festive traditional attire worn by women today, photo courtesy of the Foundation FASTI

adorned with scarlet silk or velvet bands, blue or green wool socks embroidered in gold, and the headcovers of “a blue fabric wrap, woven with various threads and intricately embroidered with silk designs.” He compared the graceful and elegant women of Scanno to the sublime sculptures of antiquity. “The most spectacular of all was the red traditional wedding dress," explains Gandolfi. "Visitors to the *Museo delle Genti d'Abruzzo* can see one dating from the 1700s on display in the permanent collection acquired by the museum about 20 years ago from a Scannese family."

During the 19th century, women swapped bright attire for black and dark hues. Gandolfi says it was a general trend across southern Italy. “Women were attracting too much attention, and their origins could be easily identified by the colour of their clothes. Perhaps, the switch to darker colours was an early sign of the desire for emancipation.”

Whatever the reason behind such a dramatic change, written and photographic accounts from that period recorded only the sombre, more practical outfits worn by local women. In 1907, the English writer and anthropologist Anne MacDonell described in detail the clothes made from thick, dark fabrics with just a few bright elements. “In this dark guise, which is *de riguer* from the age of ten or so, winter and summer, Sunday and weekdays — save only at weddings and on high festivals of the Church — do the Scannese go about their daily business.” She adds, “The ancient costume, worn till less than a hundred years ago, was a much grander affair.”

PRESERVING THE PAST

Scanno was spared destruction during World War II, so some families have managed to save the traditional costumes worn by their grandmothers or even great-grandmothers, which helps to understand how the garments continued to evolve and change until recent times. The close-fitting, elegant jacket *(ju cummudene)* with intricate silver or gold buttons was replaced by a more comfortable knitted cardigan, becoming the modern version of everyday wear, while the skirts grew lighter. “Each woman crafted her traditional costume from whatever fabric she could acquire, adap-

Photos: young women wearing Scanno’s traditional bridal dress. Photos by Anna Lebedeva

ting it to suit both her resources and practical needs," explains Maria Pia Silla, president of the Foundation FASTI that aims to safeguard the town's traditional costume. "The skirt, with its distinctive pleats, was key to the outfit's elegance. Reducing the pleats lightened the garment, which was often necessary, as wool fabric weight varied with one's financial means. Wealthier women used thicker fabric, while those with fewer resources opted for lighter materials."

"In the 1950s, a national law was passed aimed to preserve traditional attire by offering a sum of money to newlywed young women who committed to wearing their regional costumes daily," says Maria Pia. "This law, enacted after the hardships of Fascism and World War II, provided financial help and encouraged a generation of women to continue wearing the iconic local dress. Many of them honourably upheld the agreement throughout their life to present day. In Scanno, we have three women in their nineties who still wear traditional clothes."

Women in Scanno wearing traditional daily attire (right) and festive dress (left), photo courtesy of the Foundation FASTI

Recently, the town's administration has put forward a proposal to add Scanno's traditional women's dress to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list.

Nowadays, it is not unusual to see a local woman in Scanno wearing iconic attire for her wedding: a voluminous skirt covered with a white or ivory apron (*mantera*), an elegant dark jacket with hand-crafted silver buttons adorned with delicate bobbin-lace trim, and cascades of gold jewellery made by local artisans, along with the small hat (*cappellitte*) with thick braided cords gathering the hair. Throughout the year, many events are organised during which younger women dress in traditional costumes to walk around the town and patiently pose for curious tourists' snapshots. Whether it is the graceful, thick folds of the wool fabric, or the rustle of the apron, the jingle of the gold charms and earrings or the crown-like hat, there is still that regal air about them that Anne MacDonnell mentioned more than a century ago (see the excerpt from her book below). These girls stride along the cobbled streets of Scanno with pride, knowing that they are custodians of age-old traditions.

WHERE AND WHEN TO SEE SCANNO'S TRADITIONAL DRESS

Each year on August 14, the town hosts *Ju Catenacce*, a re-enactment of the traditional procession in wedding costumes. Accompanied by traditional music, it winds through the historic centre of the town, concluding with a quadrille dance in Piazza Vecchia. This event recreates the Scanno wedding procession, a ritual meticulously documented in 1760 by Romualdo Parente, a local poet who wrote in the Abruzzese dialect (watch a video of *Ju Catenacce* here). The full programme is published on the town's tourism page. Other events during which you can see Scanno's women in traditional attire are *Festa di Sant'Antonio da Padova* on June 17-18, *Notte Romantica* in mid-June, *Festa di Sant'Eustachio* on September 20.

Those who want to experience the feel of authentic Scannese attire can rent *abito tradizionale* from Signora Loreta who runs La Violetta shop. "All the costumes in my shop are 90 to 100 years old," Loreta explains. "My mother bought them from local families in the 1950s and '60s. I have different sizes here, so we can find a costume for everyone." Address: Via Roma, 32. Tel. 0039 3405065229.

To view an antique 18th-century red wedding dress from Scanno, visit the *Museo delle Genti d'Abruzzo* in Pescara (Via delle Caserme, 24). Admission €8.

Several jewellers in Scanno, such as *Oreficeria Di Rienzo* and *Bottega Orafa Luigi Fronterotta*, make filigree silver buttons once used for traditional garments, though they are now mostly purchased as souvenirs.

EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK "IN THE ABRUZZI" BY ANNE MACDONELL, 1908

Scanno is a city of women. Their reputation for beauty is amply deserved. Nearly all are comely. For nearly every third one it is worth while turning round; but she will return your gaze with a haughty serenity as she trips to the fountain with her copper *conca* on her head... She is a mountaineer, proud, independent, largely self-sufficient, a great maintainer of tradition. You may not like all the ways of her town; but with a quiet precision which ends the matter, she answers, *Cosi si fa a Scanno* (This is how things are done in Scanno).

...She bakes, she weaves, she knits, she dyes, all as a matter of course. In summer she gathers the fuel needed for the long winter — a terrible task! She works in the fields; she keeps sheep or cattle. She is mason or bricklayer. I used to watch a handsome group of women masons day after day. Among them were girls who seemed to find the work as amusing as making mud pies, bigger ones who scaled ladders as if mounting thrones, and elderly women, who carried their loads of bricks and stones with not too great an air of resignation. Work of slaves, you may say; and there is something to be said for the judgment. The wood-carrying from the mountains is a terrible task, and it begins in childhood. But the Scanno women look anything but slaves. Their air is regal, rather. I have never seen so many queens. They are fully aware of their worth and their power in the family. They are the pillars of the place, and they have the air of knowing it."

T*he book is available for free download here.*

Photo above: a widow and a bride from Scanno; an illustration from "Through the Apennines and the lands of the Abruzzi" by Estella Canziani, 1928

GAGLIANO ATERNO: TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva

Gagliano Aterno

YOUNG ENERGY

Having once faced a steep population decline, Gagliano Aterno is slowly transforming itself into a fast-growing town that is embracing exciting projects, welcoming new residents, and proving that even the smallest mountain community can find ways to bounce back.

A few years ago, the small town of Gagliano Aterno (AQ) made headlines in the regional press for having the highest birth rate in Abruzzo (measured as the number of newborns per one thousand residents). It also recorded the largest increase among Abruzzese municipalities between 2014 and 2020, rising from zero new births per thousand residents to 12.2.

With the town's population of only about 250 people, the statistics may not seem impressive at first glance. However, for those familiar with the grim situation in the mountainous hinterlands of Abruzzo — where empty villages and an aging population are stark realities — these few newborns bring a spark of joy and hope. Before the baby boom, Gagliano Aterno was one of Abruzzo's towns with the steepest decline in population, nearly 80% since 1951.

In recent years, since the arrival of a young, forward-thinking mayor, Luca Santilli, the town has grown accustomed to making headlines for all the right reasons. Having studied economics at the University of L'Aquila, Santilli returned to his hometown, bringing fresh ideas and a commitment to positive change. One of the first things he did as mayor was to invite a group of young researchers and social science students from the University of Valle d'Aosta who were interested in studying rural communities of the Apennine Mountains. The initiative grew into a bigger project, NEO (Nuove Esperienze Ospitali in Valle Subequana) that has been praised nationally for its innovative approach to repopulating small mountain villages and giving hope for a brighter future. The temporary residency programme invites people of any age from all over Italy to participate in hands-on training and research while living for six months in Gagliano Aterno and five other small towns of the Subequana Valley.

"In the last three years, 20 new residents arrived in Gagliano Aterno," says Raffaele Spadano, anthro-

pologist and project manager. “Through the NEO project, five young people have decided to live permanently in the small towns of the Subequana Valley.”

Two enormous cranes tower above the town's historic centre, and many buildings are wrapped in scaffolding, as a significant reconstruction effort is underway to restore the centuries-old houses to their former glory. Alongside this renovation, Gagliano Aterno has been buzzing with new and exciting developments. “A renowned bookstore that sells rare books has moved from Rome to Gagliano Aterno,” says Raffaele. “A young couple is working to open a bakery. Another young resident who runs a summer street food kiosk is starting a restaurant soon. We now have a climbing sports station, electric bike rentals, and a trekking association that organises hikes in the area.” To top it off, the town boasts a fast charging dock for electric cars and its own web radio station, *Antiche Rue*, which was launched two years ago by two local enthusiasts.

COMMUNITY FIRST

Unlike some small mountain towns in Abruzzo that mainly focus on attracting tourists in hopes of reviving their economies, Gagliano Aterno prioritises the needs of its residential community. It has become the first town in Abruzzo to install solar panels to produce communal energy instead of relying solely on centralised supplies. “This is a significant change, a great revolution,” says Spadano with excitement. “The municipality has purchased the solar panels, but the benefits are for everyone living in Gagliano, since the energy produced is collectively owned. There is still some work to be done, as the town needs 400-450 kilowatts to become nearly self-sufficient, but currently, it produces 30-50 kilowatts.”

Photos: On the streets of Gagliano Aterno

Photos: on the streets of Gagliano Aterno

Recently, the town's mayor announced in the regional media that, with the money saved on energy, the administration has been able to provide transportation for organised outings to the cinema and theatre, as well as to start community nursing services for the elderly, provided by a young new resident.

COMING TOGETHER

Gagliano Aterno has attracted a small international community, with a few Romanian and Scandinavian families living here either year-round or part-time. Danish couple Inge Thormann and her husband Michael bought a large barn on the outskirts of the town in 2006 and converted it into a beautiful holiday home where they spend up to six months a year. "We live in the centre of Copenhagen, so we wanted something very different," says Inge. "Our house is south facing, overlooking the valley below, with a small garden where we spend a lot of time." But it is not only the Italian sunshine that attracted Inge. She says that the community warmly welcomed her and whenever she needs something, she just goes to the town's bar and asks for help.

"When I had no car and needed a lift, I asked in the bar if someone could drive me to the supermarket in the next town, and all the elderly local men sitting there offered to help." When some locals started showing her old photos, Inge had an idea: organise a summer

exhibition of old images telling the story of the town and its families, which two years ago became a permanent museum. “In summer, we host evenings where all generations come together to talk about the photos and how life in the town was in the past,” explains Inge. Many locals helped Inge set up the exhibition. “An elderly man volunteered to make some frames, others – both young and old – joined in to hang the photos on the walls. I was so happy! That is community!”

Inge has noticed more young people in Gagliano Aterno and hopes that they will also be curious to learn more about the town’s past. She believes Gagliano has a bright future, envisioning it “growing slowly over the coming years, but still remaining a small town, like it was some time ago.” So far, that seems to be the path Gagliano Aterno is taking: embracing modern innovations while holding on to its special close-knit community spirit which makes it a place where people want to put down roots.

Photos: (from top clockwise) stone carving on a wall; a building with an old inscription; the *rosone* window on the church of San Martino; chiesa di San Martino

WHAT TO SEE AND DO IN GAGLIANO ATERNO

WALK IN THE HISTORIC CENTRE

While the town's old centre has beautiful historic *palazzi*, medieval churches, and timeworn archways, its charm is revealed to those with a patient eye. Some buildings have ancient stone figurines that seem randomly placed on their walls during restorations centuries ago, making the search for them feel almost like a treasure hunt (you can spot one on the wall opposite the entrance to the *municipio* (town hall) and another one on the right-side wall of the Chiesa di San Martino). The church of Saint Martin is still awaiting restoration but its eclectic façade is worth a good look: the 14th-century Gothic portal topped with a triangular Baroque tympanum depicting the saint and a Renaissance rose window above it. A short stroll along Via Fontana (to the right of the church) will take you to the elegant medieval fountain on Piazza del Popolo commissioned by Countess Isabella D'Acquaviva in1344.

STOP BY THE BAR

A visit to Gagliano Aterno would not be complete without a stop at the town's only bar, Circolo Arcigallo (Via Citarella, 11). Grab a coffee or a beer with a fresh cornetto or slice of pizza or and cosy up beside the resident cat, Peppita, who naps on her favourite chair all day long.

BROWSE BOOKS

A few months ago, the famous second-hand bookshop, Simon Tanner, found its new home in Gagliano Aterno, bringing over 24,000 volumes to the town. Owners Rocco Lorusso and Vincenzo Goffredo, who live upstairs above the shop with their two cats — one, named Topo (meaning "mouse") who sometimes wanders down to coolly observe visitors — say they chose Gagliano for its cultural buzz and great young energy. In their shop you will find a selection of rare, out-of-print, and antique books across genres from art to philosophy, science to

Photos: (from top) Chiesa di San Martino; the medieval fountain; Peppita the cat in the Bar Arcigallo

foreign literature, with some volumes also in English, French, German, and Spanish. In front of the shop is a lovely garden with an old cherry tree where book readings and community events are organised. Rocco and Vincenzo speak some English. Address: Via Librice, 4

ADMIRE THE CASTLE

Overlooking the town stands the glorious Castello di Gagliano Aterno, one of the best preserved castles in Italy. Built between the 12th and 13th centuries by the Counts of Marsi, it had been sacked, looted, destroyed, and rebuilt several times over the centuries, passing through the hands of various noble families, including the Piccolomini, Colonna, and Barberini, before reaching the Lazzaroni family. A local legend says that Saint Francis of Assisi stayed here overnight. In more recent times, the castle has hosted many rich and famous, including Sophia Loren, who visited in the 1980s as a guest of the then-owner, Baroness Lazzaroni.

The castle is surrounded by two formidable, fortified walls and is accessible via a drawbridge, one of only a few remaining in Abruzzo. The main courtyard, with an ancient well, is adorned with 17th-century frescoes, including a portrait of Marcantonio Colonna set against the dramatic backdrop of the Battle of Lepanto. The castle has been converted into luxurious private apartments (one of which is currently for sale), but the gardens, courtyard, and loggia are occasionally open for guided visits.

Photos: (from top clockwise) Castello di Gagliano Aterno; a wall in the castle's courtyard; a fragment of the Battle of Lepanto fresco; the loggia

ENJOY THE FESTIVALS

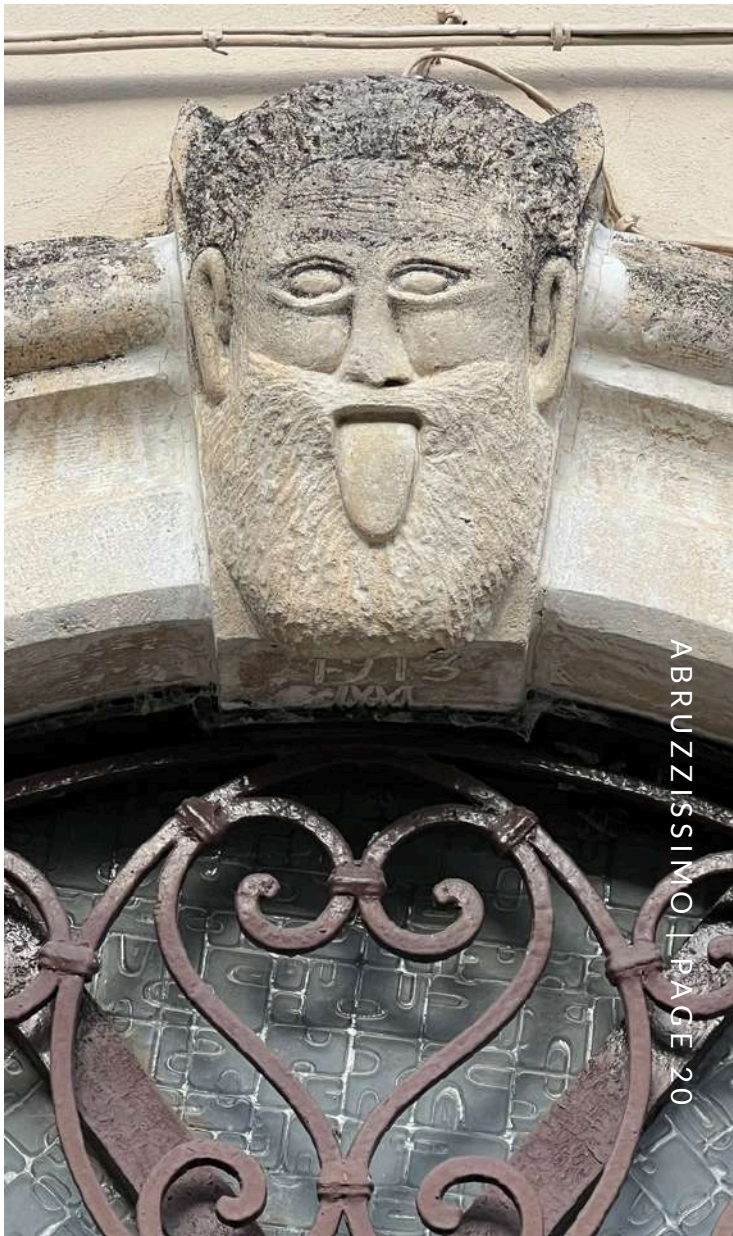
In mid-August, Gagliano hosts the *Sagra dej'Ntremè*, its biggest and most popular festival, attracting thousands of visitors eager to enjoy live music and sample traditional foods, including *antremè* – a hearty dish that is a local specialty (see the recipe on page 28). The dates and programme are published on the festival's page. On November 11, the town honours San Martino, its patron saint, with a religious procession and live music concerts. In December, Gagliano transforms into a festive wonderland with Christmas decorations and small artisan market in one of the central squares, along with concerts and a variety of activities for both visitors and locals. Keep an eye on the mayor's Facebook page or Radio *Antiche Rue* for announcements.

HIKE AND BIKE

Gagliano is surrounded by magnificent mountains that offer numerous hiking trails. Experienced hikers can traverse the Sirente mountain chain, where seven peaks rise over 2,000 metres, towering above the town. *Orsa Maggiore Trekking* organises guided walks in small groups across many spectacular locations in the area. Additionally, you can rent an e-bike to explore the beautiful towns of the Subequana Valley.

VISIT THE PHOTOGRAPHIC MUSEUM

The museum houses a collection of approximately 200 photographs, some dating back to the late 1800s, that illustrate the town's history. Visitors can view images depicting daily life, festivities, and photos from family archives. You can see some of the photos in a room above the bar on Via Citarella. The museum is open most days during the summer when curator Inge Thormann returns to town. During other seasons, you need to call the town hall at 0039 086 4797401 to arrange a visit. For more details see the museum's Facebook and Instagram pages.



Photos: in the streets of Gagliano Aterno

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MAGAZINE

ENJOYING THE JOURNEY IN SULMONA

By Teresa Mastrobuono

Joe Meehan moved from the UK to Sulmona in search of community and connection. In Abruzzo, he is learnig how to seamlessly blend his two passions, theatre and teaching, while fully embracing the Italian way of life. It's a metamorphosis of sorts . . .

Born and raised in Birmingham, England, Joe Meehan lived in London pursuing post-graduate university studies in theater, learning dramatic interpretation — including Shakespeare's texts — as a conventional route to professional acting. "All in all, it was a very positive experience", he says. "I continued acting, creating original works of my own, and even had some minor film roles. But I'm not a big-time name actor by any means!"

While living in London, Joe met and fell in love with Lilia, a nurse from Sulmona who would eventually become his wife. The couple married in her hometown in 2018, but continued their busy life in England. Eventually, Joe left acting and settled in Birmingham with Lilia, where he began working as a teacher. "Teaching is very similar to acting," he notes. "You have to be attuned to your fellow participants and react spontaneously in the moment. Both professions remain an ever-present passion for me."

MOVING TO ABRUZZO

After the confinement of pandemic lockdowns, Joe says he was ready for a change. "Isolation really sharpened my focus on family and community," he recalls. So, in 2023, he and his wife made the move to Sulmona with their two young children. Here Joe set up *Englishiamo*, to teach English online, in person, as well as in local schools. The city offered ample opportunity to connect with those who wished to learn the language, but beyond that, Joe

Joe Meehan in Sulmona

was excited to discover that Sulmona was the hometown of the famous ancient Roman poet Ovid. "I knew that Sulmona was known as a 'City of Art' but didn't realize the connection between Ovid and Shakespeare," he recalls. "It seems that Shakespeare was greatly influenced by Ovid's works. There's an almost spiritual connection between the two. Who knows, maybe he had even visited Sulmona during his 'lost years'?!"

COMMUNITY THEATRE

This intriguing overlap of his past and present led him to connect with Daniella De Panfilis, founder of Sulmona's Marfateatro. Joe laughs at the chance connection: "I was at the gym I regularly go to, talking to the manager. I mentioned my background in theater. Turns out the man was friends with Daniella! He told her about me and she got in touch."

Daniella had studied theater in Rome and worked there for 20 years as an actress, teacher, and director. Ten years ago, she moved back to her native Sulmona and opened a theater for the local community. When Daniella heard of Joe, she had just formulated an idea: teaching English to Italians via theater.

Joe was intrigued by this possibility, particularly since it dovetailed with his new business. “There are many touring shows that come through Sulmona, but nothing permanent. When Daniella proposed that I help her with teaching, I immediately said “Yes!” The classes include reciting and acting for young children, youth, adults, and seniors over 60. Joe is involved in the new production of Macbeth, which will be performed at the inauguration of Marfateatro’s new space (Via Montenero, 38A) on November 17.

LEARNING ITALIAN

Joe feels grateful to the Sulmona community for welcoming him and making it easy to integrate into local life, although it hasn’t been without its challenges. Despite his wife being Italian, he admits he still needs to improve his language skills: “I knew some Italian before I moved, but my wife speaks perfect English, so there was no need for me to become fluent.” He recognises that learning is easier when you are immersed in the language daily and, as a teacher, he understands the journey that comes with it. “In the initial stage, you’re afraid to open your mouth,” he says. “Then you’re happy to speak what you can; you gain more confidence, even if you know you’re wrong!”

Having one foot in the Sulmonese community via his wife and in-laws certainly helped adapt to the new culture and life, Joe admits. He likes that this affords him the ability to be both English and Italian. While he is aware that there is a large English-speaking expat community, he has not been able to take advantage of their presence. With a young family to manage and a business to run, he has not fully explored that facet of life in Sulmona.

A street in Sulmona

Like many people moving to Abruzzo, Joe finds the bureaucracy daunting but adds, “You could make an argument for any place in the world having disadvantages; no place is perfect. Here, you just have to come to terms with how long things take. I’m learning patience.”

For Joe, one of the best parts of moving to Sulmona is the constant presence of every generation — children, parents, and the elderly — mingling in a way he rarely saw in England. Here he has found the sense of community and togetherness that he had longed for. He cherishes the way the children can play safely in the streets and piazzas and the relaxed pace of life. “I like the Italian concept of *la passeggiata* — walking not just to reach a destination, but just for the journey, to see what happens,” he says.

Teresa Mastrobuono is a professional actress, voice over artist and ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine’s regular contributor. Originally from the US, she now lives in Abruzzo.

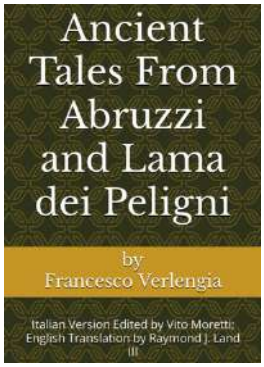
BOOKS

PASSEGGIATE DANNUNZIANE A PESCARA E DINTORNI

by Emanuela Borgatta

This pocket-sized guide invites curious tourists to explore the tangible traces of Gabriele D'Annunzio in his native Pescara. The text is presented in both English and Italian and features several detailed itineraries throughout the city, encouraging readers to discover the poet's influence on the region's landscape, architecture, and culture. Ideal for both walking and cycling, the routes highlight significant sites associated with D'Annunzio's life and works. Emanuela Borgatta, a devoted researcher of D'Annunzio, brings her expertise in foreign languages and the visual arts to this insightful exploration of Abruzzo's beloved poet.

Available on Amazon.



ANCIENT TALES FROM ABRUZZI AND LAMA DEI PELIGNI

by Francesco Verlengia

This book is a translation of the Italian edition published in 1999 in Lama dei Peligni. Raymond J. Land, who visited the town that year, purchased a copy in honour of his grandfather born there and later decided to translate it, with some light revisions, to English. The collection of ten local fables introduces readers to Lamese legends, blending folklore and history. Many of the places and landmarks mentioned in the fables still exist today.

Available on Amazon.

ATTRAVERSO GLI ABRUZZI CON MATTIE E HARRIET

by Edmund Wilson

This small book is an extract from *Europe Without Baedeker: Sketches Among the Ruins of Italy, Greece and England*, published in 1947 and based on the post-war stories from the continent written for *The New Yorker*. The tale of two young United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration workers — Mattie from America and Harriet from England — who navigate the challenges of war-torn Abruzzo is partly based on the author's imagination, but largely drawn on the events of the time and on testimonies he gathered during a short visit to Abruzzo in the spring of 1945.

The narrative unfolds along paths far from the glamorous Grand Tour of Italy, leading through ravaged landscapes and ruined villages. Wilson describes Abruzzo's scenic and cultural richness and the warmth of its people, and suggests that the region's future will be a sought-after destination for tourists looking for authentic Italy. The text is in both Italian and English.

Available on Amazon.

33 dessert recipes

DOLCI

Dessert recipes from ABRUZZO

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PASTA GALORE

By Anna Swann

Italy boasts over 300 unique pasta shapes, each with its own history and region of origin. Abruzzo has contributed its share to this impressive variety, with more than a dozen distinctive shapes and styles deeply rooted in the history of its mountain and coastal towns and peasant traditions.

Pasta is the queen of every Abruzzese (and Italian) table: whether served *in bianco* (without tomatoes) or *al sugo* (with a rich tomato sauce), made with eggs or simply with flour and water, it is served almost religiously in many households for lunch every day. Traditional restaurants often offer not just one but two pasta dishes (*primi*) on their set Sunday or festive menus, serving generous portions of both before moving on to hearty *secondi* meat courses.

Over the years, I have sampled many of Abruzzo's traditional pasta dishes, but I still occasionally come across intriguing *primi* on the menu of a small rural restaurant. Sometimes, I find a familiar pasta shape that goes by a different dialect name depending on the geographical area; other times, I stumble upon a delightful new discovery. Regardless, Abruzzese pasta is always hearty and irresistibly more-ish. Here are just a few of my favourites and the best places to taste them.

MUGNAIA

This pasta is made by dividing the dough into small balls with a hole in the centre, and then rolling and stretching it into thick, uneven cords. While it requires time and practice, the result is a satisfyingly chewy pasta. **Ristorante La Bilancia** (C.da Palazzo, 11, Loreto Aprutino) serves it in two versions: *mugnaia bianca*, the oldest recipe with garlic, olive oil, and sweet dried pepper, or with a classic tomato sauce. **Ristorante La Mugnaia** in Città Sant'Angelo (Contrada Piano Di Sacco, 95) is also renowned for its generous portions of the pasta in a rich meat-based tomato sauce.

SAGNE A PEZZI

Sagne a pèzze (or *sagne a pezzi*) also known as *tacconelle*, are a traditional pasta from the province of Chieti. Made from a simple dough of water and soft wheat flour, their rustic texture and shape bear a resemblance to *maltagliati*. Typically dressed in a simple tomato sauce with basil, garlic, and extra virgin olive oil, they also come in seasonal variations with asparagus or fresh broad beans and guanciale. In the upper Sangro area, *sagne a pezzi* are often cooked with beans and potatoes, while in the inland areas of Vasto, the preferred sauce is the more rustic, with local *ventricina* sausage. My favourite place to gorge on *sagne a pezzi* (in the photo above) is **Ristorante La Griglia** (Via Italia, 158) where they are more delicate and are served with a simple tomato sauce.

CAZZARIELLI

Shaped like tiny, neat *gnocchi*, *cazzarielli* (also called *cazzarille* or *cavatille*) are served with a sheep meat sauce or wild greens in some restaurants in Scanno. **Ristorante Il Torchio** in Pettorano sul Gizio (Piazza Rosario Zannelli, 14) always offers a local dish called *mugnoli e cazzarielli* (or *mognele e chezzerieje* in dialect) made with leafy greens that grow in the area on mountain pastures.

IL RINTROCILO

Cut with a special special ribbed rolling pin called *lu rintrocilo* (hence the pasta's name), it comes with different condiments: seafood, tomato, and meat sauces. At the **Agriturismo Fattoria Carbonetta** (Contrada Sant'Onofrio, 126, Lanciano) and **Agriturismo Caniloro** *rintrocilo* pasta is served with zucchini in summer and a pumpkin cream in autumn.

FUNGHI RIPIENI (STUFFED MUSHROOMS)

By Teresa Mastrobuono

This recipe comes from Rita Marcoberardino, co-owner and founder of **Bar La Lanterna** in Castiglione Messer Raimondo. Rita and her husband, Emidio, opened the bar in 1975. Born in the hamlet of Villa Degna, just outside of Penne, she learned to cook out of necessity. When she was 4, both her mother and grandmother passed away within months of each other. She and her three sisters then became cooks and housekeepers.

Fifteen years ago, when the bar moved from a tiny space just outside the historic center to a larger former *frantoio* (oil press) off Castiglione's main square, Rita began cooking. She felt there were too many tables for just a bar, so she started preparing meals, first for the workers involved in town projects, and later for townspeople and visitors.

When I follow my nose to her small kitchen behind the bar, she often shares her cooking methods with me. I hesitate to call them "recipes," as she tends to eyeball ingredients and combine them by feel. This recipe represents the closest I could get to actual measurements, but feel free to experiment!

INGREDIENTS

- 10 – 12 medium mushrooms (any type with a large, deep cap — but portobello will be too large)
- 3 slices of stale bread soaked in milk
- ½ cup Parmigiano Reggiano cheese (more to taste, if you like, just not too much to make mixture dry)
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 water glass of white wine
- 2 tsps fresh parsley, chopped
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Fresh lemon juice

PREPARATION

Preheat your oven to 180 degrees Celsius (350 degrees Fahrenheit). While the oven is heating, line a deep baking pan with oven paper to prevent sticking and make for easy cleanup.

Clean the mushrooms. Carefully detach the stems from the caps, ensuring the caps remain intact. Finely chop the stems and set them aside.

To prevent the mushrooms from turning black, drizzle a little lemon juice lightly over the tops of each cap.

In a small bowl, combine the chopped mushroom stems with the bread, Parmigiano cheese, egg, minced garlic, and chopped parsley. Mix well to ensure all the ingredients are evenly incorporated. Season the mixture with salt and pepper to taste, enhancing the flavours. Fill each mushroom cap generously with the prepared mixture.

Place the filled mushroom caps on the lined baking pan. Once arranged, pour white wine into the pan underneath the mushrooms. This will not only add flavour but will also keep the mushrooms moist as they bake.

Finally, bake in the preheated oven for 30 minutes, or until the mushrooms are softened and the filling is cooked through. Serve as a side dish or appetiser.

ANTREMÈ

By Maria DiCenzo

There are more Gaglianese in Hamilton, Ontario (Canada) than there are in Gagliano Aterno. Many return in the summer months, notably those who came to Canada and the United States as children with their parents in the 1950s. The '*paesani*' formed a tightly-knit community in the Hamilton area and for decades they have gathered to celebrate feast days and holidays including Sant'Antonio, All Souls and San Martino.

This recipe for a dish called in local dialect *dej'Ntremè* (also known as *antremè* and *j'antremè*) comes from The Gagliano Cookbook and was contributed by Concetta Valeri. Compiled by Franca Marini and first published in 2012 (reprinted 3 times), the book has become an important source of history and food heritage for the children and grandchildren of immigrants. Franca, currently the President of the Community of Gagliano Aterno Social Club, took two years to gather the recipes from members. In our conversation, she recalled the challenges of recording recipes, known by memory and feel, into standard measures and directions for readers. Some recipes appear in different versions to reflect the variety of preparations and contributors.

Antremè is basically a *coratella* and was traditionally prepared as an antipasto for special holidays.

For copies of the cookbook or information about the Gagliano Club, contact Franca Marini *fmarini2@cogeco.ca*

INGREDIENTS

Makes about 6 portions

- 2 pounds/ 900 grams lamb's pluck (liver, lung, heart)
- 60 ml olive oil for frying or as needed
- 1 bunch celery, tender stalks only, diced
- 60 ml wine vinegar or to taste
- Pickled peppers, to taste, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- Salt, to taste
- Sprig of fresh rosemary

PREPARATION

While still semi frozen, cut each organ into strips and then into pieces no larger than 1cm (¼ inch) in size. Wash the pluck by rinsing several times and allow it to drain thoroughly or dry it with paper towels.

In a Dutch oven, add olive oil, garlic, cubed organs, salt and rosemary. Sauté over medium heat.

When the organs change colour, add the tender part of the celery and the pickled peppers. Add the wine. Add the vinegar and cook slowly, making sure that the mixture is always moist by adding the occasional tablespoon of oil and a little more vinegar if you so desire.

Stir frequently. When it starts to spatter the *antremè* is ready. It should be cooked the same day you are serving it.

Note: *Antremè* is an appetizer and servings should reflect small portions. This is only a guideline so use your own discretion as to the quantity of lamb's pluck that you will want to purchase. Although antremè is not difficult to make, its preparation is time consuming. However, the effort will be most worthwhile.

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