

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



**How draining Lake Fucino
changed the local climate**

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**A colourful Carnival rite
from Castiglione Messer
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ON THE COVER:

Fog covering the Fucino plain seen from Serra di Celano. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 5.

LEFT:

(top) Chiesa di San Nicola in Valle Piola. Read the story on page 16.
(bottom). Agricultural fields in the Fucino Plain. Read the story on page 5.

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Editor's Note

With the first issue of 2025, we are bringing some exciting changes. Starting this month, you'll find new sections in the magazine. In *Quick Stop*, we highlight small museums, fascinating landmarks, and little-known places that can easily be added to your day trip itinerary and explored on the go. Our *Easy Trails* section suggests picturesque walks for all fitness levels, blending nature, culture, and history. We've lined up an impressive roster of historians, authors, and local storytellers for the year ahead. In the coming months, we'll introduce even more new sections and article series to satisfy your – our readers' – voracious appetite for all things Abruzzo.

Did you know that Abruzzo once had a magnificent lake, the third largest in Italy? Draining Lake Fucino at the end of the 19th century not only changed the landscape but also altered the climate of the Marsica area irreversibly. Read Sergio Natalia's fascinating—yet rather disturbing—story about it on page 5.

This month, I take you to **Valle Piola**, an abandoned *borgo* tucked away in the folds of the Laga Mountains of Teramo province. For 14 years, the hamlet has been for sale, and in my article on page 16, I wonder whether this is the right way to bring it back to life.

February means Carnival, and to celebrate, we explore the colourful tradition in **Castiglione Messer Marino** and share an almost-forgotten Teramo specialty – *ravioli dolci*, a traditional Carnival treat. You'll also find a guide to Abruzzo's most exciting Carnival events on the [ABRUZZISSIMO website](#) – be sure to add some to your "must-visit" list!

Enjoy the February issue!

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor

DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS



CARNIVAL FESTIVITIES

Abruzzo is celebrating Carnival throughout February until March 5, when Lent begins. Parades of allegorical floats, music, and colourful masks will be accompanied by traditional fried Carnival desserts. From the historic celebrations in **Francavilla al Mare**, the oldest Carnival in Abruzzo, to the small but lively festivities in **Civitaquana**, **Luco dei Marsi**, **Giulianova**, and **Penne**, each town offers its own unique spin on this ancient festival rooted in pagan rituals. In **Castiglione Messer Marino**, locals will wear colourful hats unique to the town (read about it on page 13), while **Città Sant'Angelo** will host a two-day Carnival bonanza (photo above) with spectacular costumed parades (more about the tradition in our post [here](#)).

For more details on the Carnival events in Abruzzo, check out our full post linked [here](#).

REGIONS JOB MARKET SURGES

Abruzzo saw a sharp rise in employment during the third quarter of 2024, with employment rising by 22,000 – an increase of 4.5%. This places the region second among Italian regions, exceeding the national average of 0.6% by more than seven times.

According to ISTAT data published on 12 December, unemployment also fell sharply, dropping by 18,000 (-34.3%), ranking Abruzzo fourth in Italy. The strongest sectors were services (+15,000 jobs) and construction (+17.8%), bucking the national trend.



WINTER TOURISM BOOM

Tourism in Abruzzo saw a 40% increase this winter, mainly driven by several abandoned snowfalls in the mountain resorts of **Roccaraso**, **Ovindoli**, and **Campo Felice**, and a few others. However, coastal regions, especially in the province of Teramo, faced a 30% decline in visitors compared to last year. Many experts noted in the regional press that, while the snow tourism boom brought positive results, there is a clear need for year-round attractions to reduce dependency on seasonal tourism as climate change continues to impact snow levels in the region. The boom also led to undesirable overtourism, with 10,000 visitors and 250 tour buses descending on **Roccaraso** in a single weekend at the end of last month (more about it in [this article](#) in The Guardian).

PESCARA MUNICIPALITY MERGER

Ten years after the referendum, the merger of **Pescara**, **Montesilvano**, and **Spoltore** into the new Municipality of Pescara is set to move forward. This historic decision, made by the citizens, will create the largest municipality on the Adriatic coast between Venice and Bari, with 200,000 inhabitants. The merger is promised to boost economic and social development, optimise public services, and rationalise infrastructures. The boycott by some members of the administration in Spoltore and Montesilvano has delayed the decision, but the new law passed by the Regional Council confirmed that the new municipality is set to be established in 2027.



GROWING INTEREST IN ABRUZZO'S MOUNTAIN VILLAGES

A recent study conducted by Telepass (an Italian company that provides solutions such as electronic toll payments on highways, parking services, and ski passes) reveals that **Scanno** (photo above) is the most searched village in Abruzzo, ranking fourth overall among Italy's top mountain and hill villages in online searches by Italian travellers. Other popular destinations in the region include **Pescocostanzo**, **Pietracamela**, **Pretoro**, and **Opi**. The study highlights the increasing interest in small historic towns, with a 45% growth in searches since 2020.

STRICTER ROAD CODE IMPACTS WINE SALES

The new Road Code, which came into effect in Italy in December, has had a significant impact on Abruzzo's winemakers and restaurateurs, reflecting a national trend. Stricter drink-driving regulations have led to a sharp decline in wine consumption, with some restaurateurs reporting a 40-50% drop. Angelo Radica, mayor of **Tollo** – one of Abruzzo's winemaking hubs – and president of the Wine Cities Association, noted that the new rules have created "a climate of alarmism," making people overly cautious about even moderate drinking. Meanwhile, the government has approved the production of dealcoholised wine, a move met with resistance, as producers argue these bottles should now be labelled as "grape-based beverages," not wine and the production should be carried out separately from traditional winemaking to preserve the integrity of genuine wine production.

DID YOU KNOW?

THE REPUBLIC OF SENARICA: MYTH OR HISTORY?

Why do locals refer to their miniscule village of Senarica, immersed in the lush green woods of the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park, as the Ancient Republic?

According to local oral tradition, straddling the line between legend and reality, the village of shepherds, farmers, and lumberjacks was granted the freedom of self-governance by Queen of Naples Joanna I of Anjou and became a republic from the mid-14th century until 1797.

Nineteenth-century historian Niccola Castagna claimed that Queen Joanna I of Anjou granted Senarica, along with Poggio Umbricchio, the right to govern themselves with their own laws in recognition of the courage and loyalty demonstrated in repelling the Visconti troops in 1343. This meant they were no longer under the control of dukes or marquises and answered only to the crown. The heads of the families in Senarica were given titles of barons, chose their own magistrates, and even elected a Doge to lead the republic.

According to Castagna, the Republic of Venice granted Senarica its protection, even referring to it as a "serene sister." Under this alliance, the people of Senarica would send 12 gold ducats annually to Venice and, in times of military need, also send 2 soldiers.

While the Republic of Senarica is mentioned by several historians in some 19th-century geographical books, and in inscriptions carved into the stone lintels of a few village homes, there is no definitive support for this claim from official historical documentation, partly due to the destruction of the Chancery in the Royal Palace of Naples during the war in 1943. However, the villagers continue to celebrate the Republic Day in August every year to commemorate Senarica's legendary past and, in 2013, a representative from Venice joined the festivities to recall the historic connection between the two places.



HOW DRAINING LAKE FUCINO CHANGED THE LOCAL CLIMATE

By Sergio Natalia

Once Italy's third-largest lake, Lago Fucino was immortalised by renowned European artists of the Grand Tour era. Its draining at the end of the 19th century triggered profound climate shifts, forever transforming the area, serving as a cautionary tale that reminds us of the importance of balancing economic development with the preservation of natural ecosystems.

In 1876, after about 22 years of hard work and an expenditure of roughly 30 million lire, Prince Alessandro Torlonia completed the drainage of Lake Fucino – a tectonic lake that dominated the Marsica area in the modern day province of L'Aquila – like a colossal mirror, at about 700 metres above sea level. At the time, it was Italy's third-largest lake, after Lake Garda and Lake Maggiore. The vast body of water was bordered by some of the most imposing mountain ranges in Abruzzo. It had a basin of 500 square kilometres and a surface area that

Photo: The Fucino Plain where the lake once was/Getty Images

ranged from 160 square kilometres under normal conditions to as much as 170 during periods of flooding. Although not very deep – at most 22 metres – it stretched 19 kilometres in length and 10 in width.

AN AMBITIOUS FEAT OF ENGINEERING

Alessandro Torlonia, one of the wealthiest men in 19th-century Italy, revived the project originally undertaken by the Roman Emperor Claudius who, in 52 CE, had partially drained the lake. The Roman endeavour, part of an extensive and ambitious public works programme aimed at boosting agricultural production – the Fucino plain was meant to become Rome's breadbasket – took 11 years and involved 30,000 slaves. However, the Roman drainage project ultimately failed due to a lack of maintenance and defects in the construction of the canal.

In the centuries that followed, various emperors and rulers attempted to preserve or improve the structure, but it was only under Torlonia that the aspiration to completely eliminate the lake was realised. Three hundred kilometres of canals and 272 kilometres of roads were constructed, transforming the lakebed into an expansive agri-

Lake Fucino and the mountains in Abruzzo, Jean-Joseph-Xavier Bidault, 1789 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, online collection)

cultural area. A government decree authorised Torlonia to become the owner of all reclaimed land, amounting to about 14,000 hectares.

CLIMATIC CHANGES

The disappearance of the lake brought significant changes to the local climate. Before the drainage, the lake acted as a large thermal reservoir, moderating weather extremes. In summer, the water absorbed heat and released it gradually during the colder months. After the drainage, summer temperatures increased, while winters became harsher. The reduction in relative humidity altered the area's thermal balance, causing an average temperature variation of about 1–1.5 °C in both winter and summer.

The removal of the lake not only altered the climate but also disrupted an environmental balance that had endured for centuries. The condensation of water vapour, which released heat into the atmosphere, ceased, leading to a drastic reduction in relative humidity. This climatic transformation left the Fucino Basin vulnerable to the effects of wind and spring frosts, previously mitigated by the presence of the body of water.

Along with the climate deterioration, the formation of thick fog became new phenomena in the Fucino. Contemporaries wrote that the fog was "spreading like a mournful sheet across the entire plain," adding to the transformation of the landscape.





A fisherman's family by Lake Fucino by Pietro Barucci, 1800s (Vienna, Palais Dorotheum)

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

THE IMPACT ON AGRICULTURE

Before the drainage, the area boasted a rich variety of tree species and crops. The towns of Pescina, Collarmele, Cerchio, Celano, Avezzano, Luco, and Ortucchio, surrounded by highly fertile plains, had established themselves in the 19th century as suppliers of Fucino's valuable olive oil, wine, and fruit. Alongside olives and vineyards, almond, apple, pear, cherry, fig, mulberry, walnut, and even chestnut trees thrived on the lake shores.

The presence of the lake had previously created a Mediterranean microclimate, but after its drainage many of these species began to gradually disappear, as the new climate was no longer favourable for their growth and fruiting. In 1860, the area counted around 11,000 – 12,000 olive trees, which contributed significantly to olive oil production. By 1893, the number of olive trees had halved, and by 1955, only 3,500 remained. By the 1970s, olive cultivation in the Fucino area had practically vanished.

Vineyards faced a similar fate. Before the drainage, the vineyards surrounding the lake were renowned for their quality, producing wines appreciated in Rome. However, the new climatic conditions made the vines more vulnerable to spring frosts, disrupting grape ripening and severely affecting wine production.

The drainage of Lake Fucino brought about a radical economic transformation. The newly created agricultural plain provided a vast, highly productive land, significantly boosting the region's agricultural income. According to estimates from the time, the average income per hectare increased from 5 lire to 270 lire after the drainage. However, not everyone benefited from this change. Small landowners and agricultural labourers often found themselves worse off than before, while large landowners consolidated their wealth. Land prices plummeted, and the availability of local labour decreased as many residents migrated elsewhere. While overall agricultural income rose, smallholders and farmers struggled to adapt to this new economic landscape.

The shift from a system based on fishing and traditional agriculture to a modern agrarian economy also created social tensions.

CRITICISM AND NOSTALGIA

Despite the economic benefits, the drainage of Lake Fucino drew significant criticism. Many intellectuals and politicians of the time decried the climatic and ecological damage it caused. The renowned Baron Raffaele Nardelli, a physician and botanist, melancholically recounted how the sun-warmed shores were now shrouded in cold fogs. Similarly,

the local anthropologist Antonio De Nino lamented the disappearance of the “azure lake,” which he considered a “gem of Abruzzo.” Numerous writers and intellectuals of the era expressed a deep sense of loss for the vanished lake.

In the years following the drainage, a controversy arose between the area’s large landowners and Prince Torlonia. Complaints focused on the damage to hillside crops, with grape harvests delayed by three weeks and yields harmed by the formation of morning frosts. The disputes culminated in 1882, when the Provincial Council of L’Aquila approved a motion requesting the government to partially restore the lake to mitigate climatic damage and preserve some of the original ecological balance. However, this proposal was never implemented.

A LESSON FOR THE FUTURE

Over time, some scholars and environmentalists have proposed a partial restoration of Lake Fucino to recover biodiversity and mitigate negative climatic effects. Although these proposals have never been implemented, they highlight how the issue of Lake Fucino continues to spark interest and debate. Some suggest that if the project were undertaken today, a less drastic approach might

Agricultural fields in the Fucino Plain. Photo by Anna Lebedeva

have been chosen – preserving part of the original water basin by maintaining a central reservoir to sustain wetland areas, protect environmental diversity, and provide a water reserve.

At the time, such a solution, which would have required a cost-benefit analysis of the project, was inconceivable. On the one hand, local populations were overwhelmingly in favour of the drainage, while the state – typically more inclined to balance various interests – played a completely passive role. Today, however, the growth of tourism, skyrocketing prices for Abruzzese olive oil and wine, and the increasing value of traditional local products revive interest in the story of Lake Fucino, now enriched with new perspectives that combine ecology and economy.

The issues surrounding the Fucino Plain have become more pressing today, but they are still largely ignored, just as they were nearly two centuries ago, mainly because economic and production-focused interests still take precedence in our society.

Sergio Natalia is an expert in territorial cohesion and author of several books on local history. He has served as mayor of Canistro (AQ) and manager in public institutions.

Read our article about draining of Lake Fucino in the August 2020 issue available in [this bundle](#).





ON HIS ANCESTORS' ANVILS

By Anna Lebedeva

Third-generation *ramaio* Antonio D'Annibale carries on the craft he learned from his father, recreating historically accurate armour and weaponry from the Italic peoples who inhabited the Abruzzo region over 2,000 years ago.

In a small workshop in Cepagatti, a quiet town in Abruzzo, Antonio D'Annibale hammers away at sheets of copper and bronze, continuing a family tradition that spans more than a century. The rhythmic clang of metal on metal, the warm glow of copper and bronze, and the simple, old tools lined up on a workbench are testaments to a lineage rooted in the artistry of the *ramai* – coppersmiths who were indispensable in the olden days of Abruzzo.

For Antonio, this work is not a career but a calling, a labour of love inspired by the generations before him. His grandfather, Antonio D'Annibale, together with his grandmother Anna Falone,

Photo: A historical re-enactment. The helmet in the foreground on the right was made by Antonio D'Annibale. Photo by Javier Tamargo.

established the *Rameria Cepagatti* in the early 1900s. Starting with utilitarian items like cauldrons, ladles, and cooking pans, the workshop evolved through the decades, adapting to changing times without ever losing its artisanal essence. Antonio's father, Camillo, carried on the craft, instilling in his son a profound respect for this ancestral art.

"I started working in the workshop when I was little," Antonio recalls. "I remember holding tools on the anvil to help my father before heading to school in the morning. By the time I was a teenager, I was already crafting pieces myself."

FORGING THE HISTORY OF ITALIC TRIBES

In the 1990s, as his father's career neared its end, Antonio began to explore a new direction for the family workshop. Inspired by the passion for history he shared with his father, Antonio started working with historical reconstructions, focusing on Italic armaments and ornaments. It was a natural extension of their traditional craft, combining ancient techniques with historical research to bring the past to life.

Using tools that have been in his family for over a century, Antonio crafts detailed replicas of armour and weaponry from the Italic era, a period spanning from the first millennium BCE to the early centuries CE, when the *Peligni*, *Vestini*, *Marsi*, and *Sabini* tribes inhabited the territory now known as Abruzzo. His creations include helmets, shields, spears, and the distinctive cardiophylax breastplates adorned with fantastical animal motifs. He also creates finely decorated greaves (armour that protects the legs) and ornamental figurines. "The tools I use today belonged to my father and grandfather," he says. "Some hammers and anvils date back more than a hundred years. While I occasionally use modern equipment to clean metals, the crafting itself is done entirely by hand, using age-old techniques."

The process is painstaking. Shaping a single helmet, for instance, can take three to four months. "You start with a flat piece of metal and heat it repeatedly



Antonio D'Annibale in his workshop, holding a cardiophylax he made

to 600–700 degrees Celsius to make it malleable," Antonio explains. "Each stage of hammering hardens the metal, so it needs to be annealed again and again. There's no shortcut; every curve and detail is shaped by hand."

CRAFT AND SCIENCE

Antonio's dedication to historical accuracy has led him to collaborate closely with archaeologists from the University of Chieti. Together, they study ancient artefacts unearthed from Italic necropolises in Abruzzo, piecing together the designs and functions of long-lost objects. One of Antonio's most notable projects has been the reconstruction of the *Guerriero di Capestrano* (the famous Warrior of Capestrano, an ancient funerary statue that dates back to the 6th century BCE. For more read our article [here](#)), a challenging undertaking that required earnest study of scientific literature and archaeological findings.

Among his most difficult creations was a helmet depicted on the famous Etruscan bronze chariot of Monteleone. “Recreating the helmet with the same metal thicknesses as the original was incredibly challenging,” he says. “The nasal guard had to be one centimetre thick, while the back of the neck was just one millimetre. Achieving that precision took an extraordinary amount of work.” The result was so remarkable that the helmet was displayed at a prestigious event in Spain as one-of-a-kind in Europe and ended up in a private collection in Rome.

PASSION, NOT PROFESSION

Despite his remarkable skill and reputation, Antonio views his work as a passion rather than a profession. By day, he is a research and development manager in the scientific field, a role he finds equally fulfilling. “I don’t create these pieces for profit,” he says. “I do it purely for the love of the craft and to keep the workshop alive.”

Antonio’s current project is perhaps his most ambitious yet: the reconstruction of an 8th-century BC bronze chariot. Having acquired the partially deteriorated original, he is working with archaeologists to hypothesise and recreate its missing elements. “It’s a massive undertaking that will take time,” he admits, “But it’s a dream project.”

For now, Antonio’s creations can be seen at historical reconstruction events across Europe, organised by the cultural association VES Gentes. Museums, exhibitions, and private collectors also showcase his work. While he plans to establish a gallery within his workshop, visitors are welcome to contact him directly for a private viewing. Photos of his creations are available on his public Facebook profile.



Photos: (from top) Antonio D'Annibale with a mannequin wearing the armour of an ancient Vestini warrior, which he crafted; Antonio's replica of the helmet from the Monteleone chariot

ITALIC ARTEFACTS IN ABRUZZO'S MUSEUMS

Frentani, Vestini, Marrucini, Marsi, Peligni, Carricini, and Equi tribes were part of the larger group of Italic peoples and inhabited the Italian peninsula and the territory now known as Abruzzo before the rise of Roman Empire. All Italic tribes had their own distinct art, craftsmanship, and traditions, including the creation of armour, weaponry, and decorative items. Italic artefacts often feature intricate designs and symbolic motifs, reflecting the cultural diversity and sophistication of these early societies. Over time, as the Roman state expanded, these tribes were absorbed by the empire, losing their distinct identities, with their languages and cultures being supplanted by Latin and Roman customs.

Today, Italic artefacts can be found displayed in several museums across Abruzzo, offering a fascinating glimpse into the region's ancient past:

Photos: (below) Italic Pizzoli fibula (mid-8th century BCE); an Italic room in the Museo archeologico nazionale d'Abruzzo - Villa Frigerj; (right) Il Guerriero di Capestrano



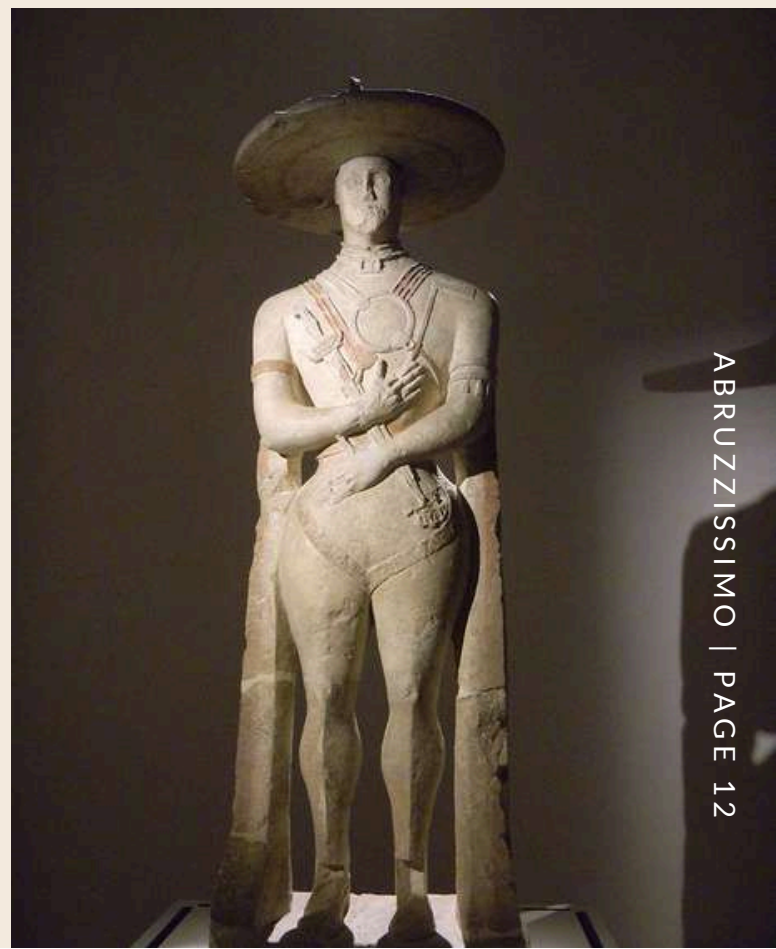
Museo archeologico nazionale d'Abruzzo - Villa Frigerj, Chieti: This museum houses a vast collection of Italic artefacts, including the iconic Warrior of Capestrano, along with weapons, jewellery, and pottery from the Vestini, Marrucini, and other tribes.

Museo archeologico nazionale "La Civitella," Chieti: Located near a preserved ancient amphitheatre, this museum displays Italic artefacts alongside Roman-era finds, illustrating the transition between the two cultures.

Museo Archeologico Nazionale d'Abruzzo, Celano (Piccolomini Castle): Situated in a medieval castle, the museum showcases Italic funerary items, decorative objects, and weapons.

Museo Archeologico di Campi: This museum exhibits items from the Necropolis of Campovalano, one of the largest Italic burial sites in the region, highlighting the funerary traditions of the Italic peoples.

Museo Civico di Sulmona (Santissima Annunziata): The largest archaeological museum in the Peligna Valley, part of the Santissima Annunziata church-complex. Features Italic coins, votive statues, funerary items and more.





A COLOURFUL RITE FROM CASTIGLIONE MESSER MARINO

By Anna Lebedeva

It is not just in Venice that locals dress up this time of year. Carnival in Abruzzo is celebrated with parades, colourful floats, and traditional costumes.

In Abruzzo, with its agricultural and pastoral traditions, carnival celebrations were always part of the transition from the old year to the new one. In the old days, Carnival in Abruzzo meant the awakening after the cold rigid winter and, according to popular beliefs, the dead ancestors and underground spirits were the guardians of the land's fertility who helped seeds' germination. The weeks from the winter solstice to the feast of Sant Antonio in January to Fat Tuesday was filled with rituals, many of which have been forgotten these days, but some are still celebrated.

Photo: The Pulgenèlle in Castiglione Messer Marino. Via [Pulgenella/Instagram](#)

HISTORIC VALUE

“The Carnival in Abruzzo was a celebration of great complexity and historic value,” says Professor Francesco Stoppa of *Centro Antropologico Territoriale Abruzzese per il Turismo, Università G. D’Annunzio di Chieti-Pescara*. “This patrimony has unjustifiably been diluted by modern consumerism. Once very com-mon, nowadays, the ancient carnivalesque rituals can only be found in a few small areas of the Chieti Province. Our carnival celebrations were as spectacular as many other, better-known celebrations, but it has always been more engaging because of its songs and choral tradition, which meant everyone was a participant.”

For many centuries, the town of Castiglione Messer Marino in the Chieti province has been keeping the little-known custom of the *Maschera castiglionesi* alive. It is a performance that takes place along the streets of this small town. Men dressed up as *Pulcinella Abruzzese* (*Iu Pulgenèlla*, in local dialect) announce the start of the *Maschera* marching around the town, singing and playing traditional instruments. Locals treat the procession participants and spectators to wine, panini sandwiches, and biscuits as they walk around the town.

THE COSTUME

The most striking feature of the *Pulcinella Abruzzese* is its elaborate high headgear decorated with bright colourful pompoms and ribbons. It symbolises the connection between earth and heaven, religious power and the warding off of evil. The *Pulcinella* costume has other symbolic accessories: a magic wand that brings natural order and makes whatever it touches burst into flowers, the boots (a symbol of power, as peasants could barely afford even simple shoes), bells to keep evil spirits at bay and to symbolise fertility.

Anthropologists say that the character of *Pulcinella* goes many centuries back and had always represented the deceased ancestors. In the town nearby, Schiavi D’Abruzzo, a similar tradition exists:



The Pulgenèlle. Photo by pulgenella_castiglionesi/Instagram

local men dress as *Marraroun* (or *Marraroni*) with high conic hats. However, anthropologists say it is difficult to say which of the two started first or whether they were influenced by another long-lost ritual.

Although there are some similarities with the Neapolitan *commedia dell’arte* character *Pulcinella*, the Abruzzese one is connected to the archaic Carnival figures typical for the Central Apennines and has more ancient origins and symbolism.

Recently, the town of Castiglione Messer Marino asked UNESCO to recognise the *Pulcinella Abruzzese* as an intangible cultural heritage.

In [this video](#) you can see a procession of *Pulgenèlle* in Castiglione Messer Marino. Turn the sound up to listen to the tinkling of the beautiful bells attached to the costumes.

This year, you can see the procession of the *Pulgenèlle* in Castiglione Messer Marino on March 2. For more details see the organiser’s [page](#).



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Anna Lebedeva

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PLACES

VALLE PIOLA: SUSPENDED IN TIME

By Anna Lebedeva

Tucked away in the Laga Mountains, Valle Piola is as remote as it is idyllic. While efforts have been made to breathe new life into the hamlet, its isolation – alongside the challenges of restoration – raises doubts about its future.

Valle Piola, an isolated hamlet in the province of Teramo, little known even within Abruzzo, made national and international headlines in 2011 when a group of entrepreneurs listed it for sale on eBay for €550,000. Major newspapers, including the *Mail* and *Telegraph*, marvelled how low the price was – the same sum would only buy a three-bedroom town house in Hackney or a tiny one-bedroom apartment in Covent Garden in London. Although the price tag seemed modest at first glance, those familiar with the reality of Italian abandoned villages knew the challenges that lay behind the numbers.

CENTURIES OF HISTORY

Valle Piola, once part of Torricella Sicura municipality, sits at an altitude of 1,000 metres on the northeastern slopes of Monte della Farina. Abandoned in the 1970s, it consists of a dozen dilapidated stone buildings and two shepherd's houses from the 1960s. The abandoned Church of

Photos: (below) Valle Piola, via Idealista.it; (right) Il Rifugio del Pastore

San Nicola is held together by an unsightly reinforcement frame. Completely rebuilt in 1691, today its roof is caved in and the walls stripped bare by time and vandals. This is where the hamlet's weddings and christenings were celebrated for centuries.

However, the hamlet is more than just a cluster of ruins—it holds centuries of history. Its first recorded mention dates back to 1059, and its isolation made it a place of rebellion in the past. From the 13th century until the unification of Italy, this area was known for resisting authority. Brigands and outlaws found shelter in the dense forests and ravines of the rugged mountains, and the families of Valle Piola were inextricably linked to their defiance. But rebellion could not stop the slow march of modernity. By the 20th century, the pressures of economic hardship and lack of infrastructure led to a gradual exodus.

A HAMLET LEFT BEHIND

Alfonso Ferrante, one of the last people born in Valle Piola, remembers a time when the hamlet was alive with families. His ancestors, along with four other families, bought a few houses here in the 1800s. "The hamlet lived prosperously between World War I and World War II," Ferrante says. The people relied on pastoralism and small-scale farming. The hamlet was well set up for



self-sufficiency: each house had an attached barn for keeping sheep and pigs, small plots for cultivating potatoes and legumes, and even a water mill. The few roads that existed were nothing more than mule tracks, isolating the hamlet from the larger towns below.

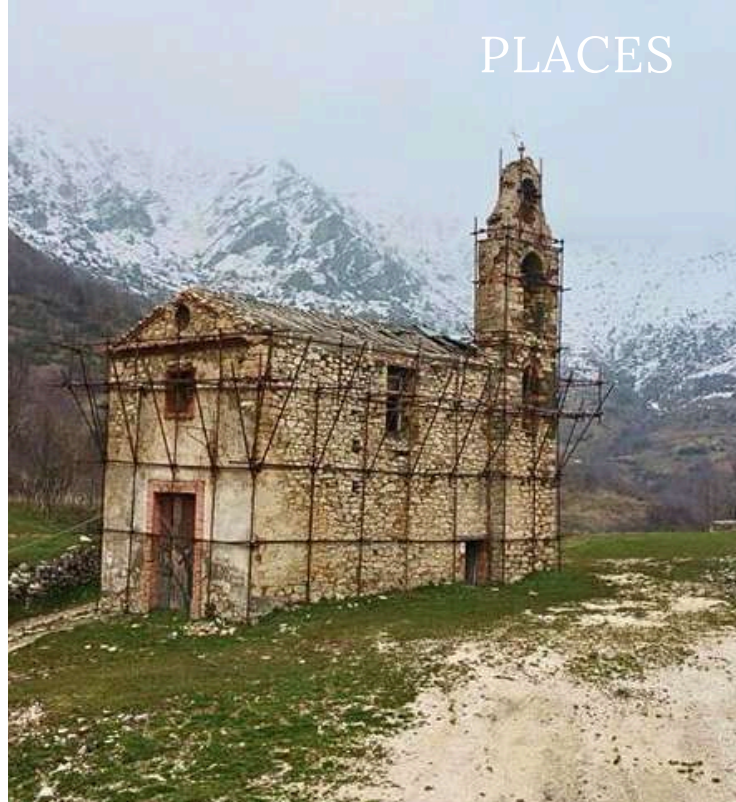
At its peak, Valle Piola had about 20 families, numbering around 170 people. However, the aftermath of the last war brought a significant shift. "Life changed in the 1950s with a decline in sheep farming, and the families who were once prosperous couldn't put lunch on the table anymore," says Ferrante. The last child was born in Valle Piola in 1967. "By then, people were already leaving, searching for work, for a better life," he recalls. "My parents and I left in 1965 and the last family moved away in 1971 or 1972. After that, the hamlet stood empty." Despite the passage of time, Ferrante still returns to his birthplace from Teramo where he lives now to walk and see what once was his family's land and forest.

Ferrante has vivid memories of his childhood in Valle Piola. Winters were harsh, with snow reaching up to 1.5 metres. "So much snow, that for me, a little boy, it was impossible to walk to the barn," he remembers. "I had to ask an adult to go ahead of me and follow behind; otherwise, I would have been submerged in the snow." Even at a young age, children in the hamlet contributed to the family's livelihood. "I took the family's flock of sheep to graze from the age of four, together with somebody only a little older."

Over time, many of the village's properties were sold, including Ferrante's family land. "My father, together with several others, sold their properties to a local land surveyor who is now trying to sell the *borgo* as a whole," Ferrante explains.

RESTORATION AND ROADBLOCKS

Over a decade ago, the municipality of Torricella Sicura attempted to revive Valle Piola by restoring one of its larger buildings and opening [*Il Rifugio del Pastore*](#), a restaurant-refuge managed by the Pro Loco of Torricella Sicura. The beautifully renovated



The church of San Nicola in Valle Piola. Photo via Il Rifugio del Pastore/Facebook

structure features a *gafio* – a wooden balcony typical of the area, introduced by the Lombards in the 6th and 7th centuries, when they ruled these mountains – and offers six rooms with a total of 15 beds. In the kitchen, the energetic Romina D'Andrea prepares hearty meals for small groups of bikers, hikers, and anyone seeking to immerse themselves in the tranquillity of the hamlet, surrounded by the green mountains.

It was a promising step that brought many visitors to the hamlet, but not enough to turn the tide. The lack of a proper road is one of the main problems. The mayor of Torricella Sicura has mentioned in the press that it would cost about €500,000 to asphalt the track leading to Valle Piola, a sum the municipality simply does not have. The authorities have done everything they could with the limited funds available to improve the road. Drainage systems were installed to channel rainwater, and the surface was covered with gravel to make it more accessible. However, despite these efforts, the road remains difficult to navigate when it rains, making the journey challenging for most vehicles.



Valle Piola. Photos via [Idealista.it](#)

HOW MUCH IS HISTORY WORTH?

The Valle Piola Rebirth Team (as the four people selling the hamlet call themselves) state on the [website](#) that their “mission is to perform every possible action to give Valle Piola a second life.” The the buyer will get 15 dilapidated buildings, a ruined watermill, a crumbling chapel, and six hectares of land. At a “reasonable price” of half a million euro. I noticed that the distances between the hamlet and Fiumicino Airport in Rome indicated on the website is significantly lower than it is in reality (two hours vs. three plus hours, if it is not raining and the road conditions are good). It is clear that their goal is to attract investors for a project similar to the one successfully completed by Italian-Swedish real estate developer Daniele Kihlgren in Santo Stefano di Sessanio (see my article in the April 2024 issue of *ABRUZZISSIMO* available [here](#)). However, few can match Daniele’s unwavering passion and his respect for the historical, aesthetic, and emotional value of small mountain villages.

Rumours of interested investors have surfaced over the years – a Dutch entrepreneur, a film director from Rome – but nothing has come of them.

I asked Alfonso Ferrante if half a million is too much for a few ruined houses and a dilapidated church. “I don’t think it is a high price for a historic *borgo*, but to return it to its former splendour, whoever buys it will need many millions to rebuild the houses, the old watermill, the road.” Despite the effort to restore the area, Ferrante remains sceptical. “I don’t believe Valle Piola will ever be repopulated or revived.”

I have spent a lot of time hiking in the Monti della Laga, drawn by their silence, rugged beauty, the lingering echoes of ancient history in the hamlets there. Even before visiting Valle Piola, the idea of selling an entire hamlet on an auction site struck me as rather undignified. After visiting it several times, that feeling only deepened. This place, once alive with voices, where families worked their land, tended their flocks, and raised children, deserves more than to be seen merely as a business opportunity.

For now, Valle Piola is still listed for sale on [Idealista.it](#) (the *rifugio* is not included) and remains untouched – a tiny hamlet at the edge of the world, waiting for someone to decide its fate.

IF YOU GO

Il Rifugio del Pastore is open from April to November. The road is not accessible after heavy rains. Rooms are priced at €30 per night and can be booked by calling or messaging Romina D’Andrea at 0039 3332179561. Lunch and dinner available on request.

You can also pitch a tent overnight for free on the lawn in front of the church but be sure to inform Romina in advance.

The ProLoco often organises lively events at the *rifugio* that are announced on their Facebook [page](#).



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ABRUZZISSIMO
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QUICK STOP

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM OF TRADITIONAL ABRUZZESE CLOTHING AND FABRICS



The small *Museo degli abiti e tessuti tradizionali abruzzesi* – located at the beautiful Palazzo Ducale Valignani in Torrecchia Teatina – offers a glimpse into over a century of Abruzzo's history, culture, and craftsmanship. This permanent exhibition showcases remarkable collections that span the period from the 1800s to 1920. It features traditional family handwoven fabrics, original Abruzzese clothing and replicas, cold-painted terracotta figurines, and watercolours from family archives.

The museum's carefully curated pieces reflect the influences of both Bourbon and Victorian eras, highlighting the region's diverse artistic heritage. Many of the exhibits are rare, with some items sourced by Francesco Stoppa, the esteemed anthropologist behind the project, while others have been generously donated from across Abruzzo.

Francesco Stoppa, who spearheaded the museum after more than two decades of research, is committed to making the museum a dynamic cultural hub. Alongside the static exhibits, the museum will host workshops and courses, including polyphonic singing and traditional dance, ensuring the region's living traditions are celebrated and passed on.

Address: Palazzo Valignani, via Castelferrato 2, Torrecchia Teatina (CH). The museum is open by appointment. Contact Francesco Stoppa at 348 7629637, via email fstoppa@unich.it or the museum's [page](#).

EASY TRAILS

CANYON DELLO SCOPPATURO WALK



- **Length:** 2km (one way)
- **Time:** 40 minutes (one way)
- **Starting Point:** Parking along SS17bis road (enter "Canyon dello Scoppaturo" in Google Maps)

The walk begins at a clearly visible parking area just off the SS17bis road, which crosses the plain and continues towards **Fonte Vetica**. The canyon is accessible year-round, though in winter, snowshoes are required.

The trail offers stunning views of the **Campo Imperatore plateau**, a vast expanse of rugged terrain. Along the way, you are also treated to a piece of Italian film history, as the area served as the backdrop for scenes from the famous spaghetti-western, "*Continuavano a chiamarlo Trinità*" (*Trinity Is Still My Name*), with Bud Spencer and Terence Hill (available on [YouTube](#)). A sign near the trail provides information about the film and its connection to the location, adding an interesting cultural layer to your natural adventure.

As you continue, the route leads you through a striking landscape of dramatic cliffs and remnants of an ancient riverbed. The area is home to various wildlife, and if you're lucky, you may spot kestrels, ravens, or even the elusive Apennine chamois on a quieter winter day.

At the end of the canyon, simply turn around to retrace your steps. After the walk, be sure to stop at the famous **Ristoro Mucciante** for a well-deserved meal of *arrosticini* and local cheese.

INGLES' ARK: ADVENTURES IN ARSITA AND BISENTI

By Linda Dini Jenkins

In May 2023, Lisa and Paul Ingles left Ireland with their virtual petting zoo and took a chance on a new life in Abruzzo. They started a holiday rental business, welcomed son number three in an unplanned bathroom birth, and still have dodgy internet service. But they've never been happier.

Living in Arsita, an hour from Pescara, on the eastern side of the Gran Sasso, Lisa and Paul say they have it pretty good. The sunrises are absolutely amazing, the people they've met are kind and curious about them, and the food and wine are both affordable and incredible.

Lisa and Paul moved to Abruzzo after only one visit to look at property. They both hail from London, where Paul was in international banking for more than 40 years. Lisa had spent five years in Vancouver and they met and married when she came back. Soon Paul's health had taken a turn, and she convinced him to move to West Cork in Ireland (where she had family) to be mortgage free, experience a better cost of living, and get away from the grey skies of London, the latter of which didn't really work out. "We were two weeks in and halfway through the alphabet of named storms," laughs Paul. Nevertheless, they stayed for more than three years and rescued a passel of animals including three horses, three cats, and two dogs.

ON A PHOTO AND A PRAYER

They were fans of the TV program, *A Place in the Sun*, where British folks go to the Mediterranean to look at overseas property as a holiday home or a permanent move for retirement. Lisa later went to the show's website on a lark to see what was there. She found a photo of a vista from a balcony looking over the snow-capped Gran Sasso — and fell in love. Too dear at first, she kept looking and the price was reduced after a few months. When a neighbour offered to pet sit (no simple task with



Paul and Lisa Ingles with their sons Luciano, Raylan, and Alexander

their menagerie which now included chickens, turtles, and tropical fish) they decided to visit the property in 2022 and see about schools for their son. They offered to buy the house in Arsita and went back to Ireland to make arrangements before moving to Abruzzo.

Their somewhat comical passage from Ireland to Italy included barely making the reservation for the tunnel from Ireland with a broken car, and a land voyage with trailers, a blown tire, and animals too numerous to mention. Lisa remembers, "We had the little vintage car on the back, and then the trailer full of stuff, and I had gestational diabetes, and was seven months pregnant," she says. "Driving to the

ferry port with two kids and all those animals was like something from the Keystone cops, because we absolutely had to get there. If we missed that ferry there wasn't another one for four days – and on day four we were supposed to be in Pescara to sign the papers.” The ferry was held for them and all the passengers cheered when they finally boarded. They were bound for France – where the 2000km journey to Abruzzo lay ahead of them but, at the end, they all arrived and happily settled in their new home in Arsita, over 17 hectares of land—plenty of space to unpack and let the kids and animals run wild.

As all their adventures were not enough, they decided to buy another property somewhere nearby to set up a rental business. But before they got much further on those plans, there was . . .

THE BABY BIRTHED IN THE BATHROOM

One night in July 2023, they went to bed, knowing that they had an appointment at 8:00 the next morning at Teramo Hospital for Lisa’s induced labour. “At 4:30 Lisa woke me up, not feeling quite right,” remembers Paul. “So I did what all British men do – I put the kettle on.” They thought about going to the hospital then, but said, no, we have an appointment in a few hours, it’ll be fine. “By the time I came back with a cup

Bisenti where Lisa and Paul purchased their second property

of tea, I heard sounds through the bathroom door,” remembers Paul. “And there’s Lisa sitting on the floor with our third son, Luciano, swaddled in her arms.”

With no internet service, and an Irish phone that didn’t take WhatsApp and an Italian vocabulary that extended only to *cappuccino*, they were frantic. “I was hanging off the balcony talking to a fellow after I tampered with the phone enough and we finally put the whole thing together and it turned out that he spoke a little English and the town had an ambulance and we got Lisa to the hospital,” he says. “But there were complications and Lisa was haemorrhaging, so basically, the doctor in Teramo saved her life.”

Soon after they got a call from the headmistress of their son’s new school asking if they’d like to be on national television, because theirs was the first home birth in Arsita in more than 50 years. How did they find out? It happened that the fellow Paul was talking to was the homeowner’s son, who was himself that last home-born baby – born in the very same house that Lisa and Paul were buying! So everyone learned their story and, to this day, the pharmacist asks after Luciano.

“All these experiences made us fall in love with the area even more, the people are so kind, it’s warm, and we feel we are finally home,” explains Lisa.



In the meantime, their menagerie has grown. The Ingles have adopted several Abruzzo Shepherd dogs and kittens since they moved to Arsita. “In total we have nine dogs, seven cats, three horses, two budgies, two turtles and a gerbil,” says Lisa. “We want the children to grow up in nature and with lots of animals to have around them.”

STARTING A BUSINESS

In October 2023, just 20 minutes from their home, in the town of Bisenti, they finally found their second property and opened [Bisenti Apartments](#). They didn't have to do major renovations, just cleaning out and adding a few personal touches but they wanted to convert the cellar into an apartment. In the course of creating this dream rental, they pitched their story to *A New Life in the Sun*, the UK Channel 4 tv program, and were accepted. “It turns out that the show's producer was very keen to showcase Abruzzo, because his family is from Atri,” says Lisa. Their story will air in the episodes starting on February 17 (you can watch the programme [here](#)). In addition, Lisa has written a book about the family's experiences called *Cameras, Countries, Curiosities and a Bathroom Birth*, which is available as a Kindle edition on [Amazon](#).

Running a business in Abruzzo is not without challenges. “The additional taxes on owning a second home and on urban waste disposal are very high,” says Lisa. “We have, however, enjoyed running our holiday rentals because we get a chance to meet wonderful people who come to stay with us.”

The Ingles are thrilled with the lower cost, higher quality of life they find in Abruzzo and are grateful for the many friends they have in town who are supportive of what they're doing. They are looking to the future, which might even include creating a rustic retreat studio somewhere on their property. So despite dodgy internet service, boilers packing it in, and only the 11-year-old being fluent in Italian, they continue rescuing animals and loving Abruzzo. You can follow their adventures on [Instagram](#).

Linda Dini Jenkins is a freelance writer and travel planner. She is the author of [Up at the Villa: Travels with my Husband](#), and the new memoir, [Becoming Italian: Chapter and Verse from an Italian American Girl](#).

The view from the Ingle's house in Arsita



LE BRASCIOLE - A HISTORICAL DISH FROM GUARDIAGRELE

By Gino Primavera

Few foods spark such divided reactions as horse meat. Yet in Guardiagrele (CH) horse meat has a long, if controversial, culinary history. One of its historical dishes, *brasciole* meatballs, showcases how locals turned a once-stigmatised ingredient into a proud culinary tradition.

Le brasciole guardiesi are made with minced horse or donkey meat seasoned with salt, garlic, parsley, and a healthy dose of chili, and browned slowly in a pan. Their origins are tied to the town's old *chiochiari* craftsmen, who fashioned rustic shoes from horse hides and used the leftover meat for food.

This practice, however, was not without its challenges. The consumption of horse meat has long been fraught with cultural and religious prohibitions. In 732, Pope Gregory III issued a papal bull warning Christians against eating horse meat, associating it with pagan rituals. During the Middle Ages, additional bans were enacted, with practical concerns about preserving horses for war often hidden behind moral arguments. A strong cavalry was essential for military success, and eating horses could undermine that advantage.

Even in the 1950-60s, horse meat remained socially frowned upon in parts of Italy. Stories persist of families burying slaughtered horses by day, only to unearth them at night for consumption. My grandmother used to cook large amounts of horse meat, obtained from animals slaughtered for their hides, which my grandfather processed for making shoes. The *brasciole* she made were exclusively for the men of the household, always prepared in the same pan which she considered "impure" and reserved solely for this purpose. After serving the dish, she would quickly leave the room, unable to bear the sight of anyone eating it. Her deeply ingrained ancestral taboo wouldn't let her stay. Interestingly, until recently, horse meat could only be sold in specialised butcher shops, exclusively handling equine meat – an arrangement rooted not in hygiene or practicality, but in a historical and social prejudice.



In Guardiagrele, to overcome the taboo, the meat was finely minced, mixed with plenty of chili, and transformed into meatballs. After a long and slow cooking process, it no longer resembled horse meat. In this cleverly disguised form, it could be enjoyed as *brasciole*, becoming a source of pride in the town's authentic identity. A true local wouldn't hesitate to devour at least ten of them, always paired with a glass of good Montepulciano.

Gino Primavera is a renowned author of books on Abruzzo's culinary traditions (see some of them [here](#))

WHERE TO EAT LE BRASCIOLE

MACELLERIA ANGELO FERRARI

This historical equine butcher – located outside the town centre, as the tradition required many years ago – sells ready-made horse, donkey, or mule *brasciole*, but many locals prefer buying meat here to make them from scratch. **Address:** Via occidentale, 9, Guardiagrele

CAFFETTERIA RISTORANTE FUORI COMUNE

Le brasciole guardiesi always feature on the menu. The portion is small, but the meatballs are excellent – firm and with a spicy kick. **Address:** Largo S. Francesco, 2/4, Guardiagrele

RESTAURANT THE SAME PLACE

Despite its English name and a menu focused on hamburgers and BBQ ribs, this casual kiosk-restaurant offers one truly local option – *le brasciole*. Made exclusively with local meat, they are served topped with a few strips of roasted peppers. **Address:** Largo G. Garibaldi, 19, Guardiagrele

RAVIOLI DOLCI

By Elsa Di Marco

When we were little, my mother, Maria, made sweet ravioli with ricotta. She said it was a traditional recipe from Teramo, passed down to her by her own mother.

A typical stuffed pasta dish, it was once prepared mainly during Carnevale week, particularly on *Giovedì Grasso* (Fat Thursday).

Sweet ravioli (*ravioli dolci*) are traditionally served with a simple tomato or even with *ragù* sauce, surprising pairing for the modern palate. I make them for my grandchildren every February to honour our family tradition, dressed with butter, sugar, and a sprinkle of cinnamon.

I've been told that a similar recipe exists in Basilicata, but in other Italian regions, *ravioli dolci* are usually filled with ricotta, jam, or chestnut purée and are baked or fried.

Elsa Di Marco lives in Pennsylvania and has been a subscriber to ABRUZZISSIMO magazine since its first issue.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 30-35 ravioli

For the dough:

- 500g white flour
- 3 whole eggs
- 3 egg yolks
- A pinch of salt

For the filling:

- 500g sheep ricotta
- 1 egg
- 3 tbsps sugar
- Zest of 1 untreated lemon
- Dry marjoram leaves

For serving:

- A knob of unsalted butter, sugar and cinnamon (as desired)



PREPARATION

To make the dough, create a well in the flour. Crack the whole eggs and egg yolks into the centre, adding a pinch of salt. Mix and knead the ingredients until the dough becomes smooth and soft. Wrap the dough in plastic wrap and let it rest for about 1 hour.

Drain the ricotta well to remove any excess whey. In a bowl, combine the ricotta with the egg, sugar, grated lemon zest, and marjoram leaves. Mix until smooth and well blended.

Cut your ball of dough into 4-5 smaller balls and roll out one piece at a time into a thin sheet using a rolling pin or pasta machine.

To assemble the ravioli lay the dough flat and spoon small portions of the ricotta filling in the centre of each dough sheet in a row, spaced 2 finger-widths apart. Fold the dough over the filling, then press the edges to seal the ravioli. Cut the ravioli into individual pieces using a pasta cutter. Press the top of each *raviolo* with a fork to ensure they stay sealed during cooking.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Carefully drop the ravioli into the water and cook for 3 minutes from the boil. If the dough is still too tough, cook for another 2-3 minutes.

Once cooked, drain the ravioli. Serve them with butter and a sprinkle of cinnamon and sugar.

LA PASTUCCIA TERAMANA

By Anna Swann

I first discovered *la pastuccia teramana* in Azzinano di Tossicia, a tiny village in the Teramo province, at an event organised by the local cultural association. Served in bite-sized cubes, it piqued my curiosity immediately. When I asked the friendly ladies at the stand for their recipe, they explained that their local version included pumpkin, cheese, and eggs, but that this humble dish has many variations across the Teramo area. Some recipes call for dried figs, while others exclude eggs, and feature *pancetta* or dry *soppresata* sausage.

At its core, *la pastuccia teramana* is a firm polenta, delicately balanced between sweet and savoury. Traditionally, it was cooked over an open hearth, with the pan placed on a tripod and covered with a heavy lid heaped with glowing embers. This method ensured even cooking, infusing the dish with a subtle smokiness that must have made it irresistible.

Of all the variations I've tried making at home, this simplest – likely the oldest – has become my favourite. I prepare it using fresh Italian-style sausages from a local butcher and dried figs from my garden. My go-to polenta is made from organic, coarse, whole-grain cornmeal that I buy from the [Ru Spenite farm](#) in Alfedena (AQ). It is much paler than the polenta you'd normally find in a supermarket but has a rich, nutty flavour and good texture.

La pastuccia can be served as an appetizer, and sometimes as a hot or cold accompaniment to meat dishes and vegetables or even as a main dish.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 6-8 portions

- 500g cornmeal (polenta flour)
- 3 pork sausages (can be substituted with 300-400g *pancetta*, diced); sausages should be skinned and cut into pieces
- 100g raisins (sultanas)
- 50g pecorino cheese, grated
- 5 Tbsps extra virgin olive oil (optional: replace with a knob of butter for a creamier flavour)
- A few dried figs, chopped
- Salt to taste



PREPARATION

Soak the raisins and figs in a little water.

In a pan, brown the sausage meat (or diced *pancetta*) in extra virgin olive oil.

Gradually whisk the cornmeal into one litre of water, stirring constantly to avoid lumps. Cook for 20 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the grated pecorino and mix well.

Stir in the soaked raisins, chopped figs, sausage pieces (reserve a small amount for later), and butter (if using) into the polenta, and a pinch of salt.

Pour the mixture into a well-greased baking dish (use olive oil or butter). Smooth the surface with a spoon and add additional oil or butter and top with the reserved sausage pieces.

Bake in the oven for about 30-40 minutes (adjust cooking time based on your oven) until golden.

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