

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO

MAGAZINE



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ON THE COVER:

Pratola Peligna. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 8.

LEFT:

Pratola Peligna. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 8.

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Editor's Note

In this issue of ABRUZZISSIMO, we are launching two new series of articles. The first is dedicated to the Jubilee, viewed through a historical lens. In partnership with [Taste Abruzzo](#), together with historians, journalists and writers, we will explore the illustrious personalities and fascinating places in Abruzzo connected to the celebration. We begin by asking whether the first Jubilee truly took place in Rome—or if it actually happened in... **L'Aquila**.

The second series will focus on some of the most beautiful historic *palazzi* in Abruzzo. This month, we take you to Palazzo D'Alessandro in **Caporciano**, with its owner's, Andrea Portante, story about its past.

On page 8 you'll find my article about **Pratola Peligna** and its successful €1 house scheme, aimed at revitalising the town's historic centre. I spoke to the municipality and several locals about the scheme to get a sense of life in Pratola, and one person shared her experience of buying a run-down property for just €1. Is it really worth it? The answer was "Yes!"

On page 21, in our *Easy Trails* column, you will learn where in Abruzzo to find one of Italy's oldest forests, and in *Quick Stop* we suggest visiting a beautiful small museum in **Tossicia**.

For our premium subscribers this month we bring exclusive discounts (see page 27) on stays at Palazzo D'Alessandro, beautiful holiday apartments in the historic town of Bisenti, and food tours in Pescara.

Publishing ABRUZZISSIMO is made possible because of your, our readers, support, and we rely on that support to keep bringing you the stories you love. If you enjoy what we do, 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

THE REGION BRACES FOR POTENTIAL IMPACT OF US TARIFFS

Abruzzo's economy may face challenges due to potential new tariffs on European exports, announced by the US government. The region ranks fourth in Italy for exports to the United States, which reached €1.732 billion in 2024 and has seen significant growth recently, particularly in the provinces of **L'Aquila** and **Chieti**. However, industries like manufacturing and agri-food may struggle with higher costs and reduced competitiveness if higher tariffs are approved. Small and medium-sized enterprises, the backbone of the regional economy, could be especially affected, with broader implications for employment and economic growth.



TOURISM: RECORD-BREAKING NUMBERS

Abruzzo saw a record-breaking 7 million tourists in 2024. According to the region's Department of Tourism, while mass tourism remains strong along the coast, particularly in the province of Teramo, experiential tourism is also on the rise. More visitors are visiting the region's cultural and historic landmarks as well as outdoor activities in the national parks, with the **Parco Nazionale D'Abruzzo** becoming the most popular.



ABRUZZO FILM GOES INTERNATIONAL

Un mondo a parte is coming to a cinema near you, Abruzzo lovers! Directed by Riccardo Milani, this heartfelt film is gaining international recognition, having already sold to the US and 25 other countries. Released in Germany and Austria, it will soon be distributed in Poland, Australia, and Brazil. Premiering in Italy last year to over a million viewers, the film tells the story of a teacher who relocates to a small village in Abruzzo to save a school threatened by depopulation. Filmed in **Opi**, **Pescasseroli**, **Villetta Barrea**, and **Civitella Alfedena**, the movie quickly became a hit, attracting many visitors to these mountain towns. Watch the trailer on [YouTube](#) and see if you can recognise the stunning locations.

DRAMATIC DECLINE OF BIRTHS

Abruzzo is facing a concerning demographic decline, with the **L'Aquila** area experiencing the sharpest drop. From 1943 to 2023, the number of births in the region has fallen dramatically from 25,091 to 7,578. Over the past decade, Italy's youth population has dropped by 5.8% with Abruzzo ranking on the seventh place (-13.8%) among the regions. This demographic shift is already impacting the job market, with fewer young people entering the workforce and putting additional pressure on the region's health system.



EXPLORE ART RESTORATION IN L'AQUILA

The **National Museum of Abruzzo in L'Aquila (MUNDA)** will host "Restoration Thursdays" from 6th March to 8th May 2025, with a series of events showcasing the museum's scientific work in art restoration. The initiative will offer insights into techniques and the meticulous preservation of artworks, accompanied by guided tours of restored pieces (in Italian). Experts, including restorers and diagnosticians, will show visitors the restoration process of such masterpieces as the 15th-century *Madonna in Throne* by Andrea Delitio, the 16th-century *Sacred Kinship* by Cola dell'Amatrice and others. See the programme details [here](#).

NEW ORGANIC GIN MADE FROM GRAPES IN ABRUZZO

A new gin made from Montepulciano d'Abruzzo grape pomace (the leftover skins, seeds, and stems after pressing) has been launched in **L'Aquila**. Organic Bacco Gin, with floral and fruity notes that enhance the juniper aroma, is one of the very few gins made in Abruzzo. The use of pomace is an innovation, combining traditional distilling methods with local agricultural byproducts. The two young entrepreneurs behind the project, Federico Congiu and Antonella Marrocchi from the Realize cooperative, will donate part of the proceeds from its sales to the National Association of the Deaf in L'Aquila. For details on upcoming tasting events, check the cooperative's Facebook [page](#).

DID YOU KNOW?

THE DAWN OF MOUNTAINEERING IN THE GRAN SASSO FOUR CENTURIES AGO



On 19 August 1573, at the remarkable age of 69, Francesco De Marchi, a military engineer from Bologna, undertook what is now recognised as the first documented ascent of Corno Grande (2912 m.a.s.l.), which he believed to be the tallest peak in Italy.

De Marchi's account (read an extract [here](#)) of his ascent of Corno Grande is considered the first detailed written record of a mountain climb purely for exploration. While people had certainly climbed mountains before—for hunting, herding, or religious reasons—De Marchi's meticulously documented ascent set a precedent for scientific mountaineering long before the concept even existed. It predates the famous 1786 ascent of Mont Blanc—often regarded as the birth of modern mountaineering—by more than 200 years.

Accompanied by two friends and three chamois hunters, he spent over five arduous hours scaling the rocky slopes, braving extreme cold despite the blazing August sun. "...we had a flask of wine, which was frozen on the surface, and the rest was as cold as ice. Because of the cold, we took shelter behind some rocks in the sun to have a small meal," De Marchi wrote later.

To commemorate the 450th anniversary, the new Italian film *Monte Corno* (watch the [trailer](#)) brings his adventure to life, narrating his own words against breathtaking images of the Gran Sasso (photo above). By recreating his journey, the film highlights De Marchi's role as a true pioneer, whose daring ascent remains one of the most remarkable yet little-known milestones in exploration history.



THE FIRST JUBILEE IN HISTORY: L'AQUILA OR ROME?

By Marianna Colantoni

When we think of the Jubilee, our minds immediately fly to Rome, to St Peter's Basilica, to the crowds of pilgrims passing through the Holy Door in search of indulgence. But what if I told you that the first Jubilee in history might not have been the one proclaimed by Pope Boniface VIII in 1300, but rather an event that took place in L'Aquila a few years earlier?

This theory is not new to the people of Abruzzo, but to many, it might come as a surprise. In his book *Il Primo Giubileo della storia* (The First Jubilee in History), journalist Angelo De Nicola argues that the first Jubilee actually took place in L'Aquila in 1294 with Pope Celestine V. "My provocative theory is based on a documented historical fact: on 29 August 1294, immediately after his coronation

Photo: Basilica di Santa Maria di Collemaggio in L'Aquila where Pope Celestino V was crowned

at Santa Maria di Collemaggio, Celestine V issued *La Bolla del Perdono*, a Papal Bull (an official document) granting plenary indulgence to anyone who, truly repentant and confessed, entered the basilica between the vespers of 28 and 29 August each year,” De Nicola explains. “This act was revolutionary for its time, as it was the first time indulgence was granted freely to everyone, *erga omnes*, without distinction of social class – thus anticipating by six years the mechanism that became the foundation of the Jubilee.” This event, known as the *Perdonanza Celestiniana*, established a rite that is today recognised by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

KEEPING IT SAFE

Celestine V did not entrust the Bull to the Church, as would have been expected, but to the Municipality of L’Aquila. We do not know for certain why he made this choice, though one might speculate that he feared his gesture would cause discomfort. “Boniface VIII, his successor, sent a letter – still in existence today – ordering the Bishop of L’Aquila to hand over the document so it could be annulled, which at the time meant physically destroying it. However, Bishop Nicola Castroceli was unable to comply, as the Bull was safely kept by the people of L’Aquila,” says De Nicola. “The historical analysis suggests that Boniface VIII saw in the success of the Celestinian Forgiveness an opportunity (granting the plenary indulgence for free, as the Christian people were demanding) and a threat at the same time (the

Photos: (below) the original La Bolla del Perdono kept in L’Aquila; (right) a historic procession during the celebrations of the Perdonanza Celestiniana, photos by Andrea Mancini

decentralisation of papal power from Rome and its rituals).” Boniface VIII, a man of sharp political acumen, recognised the potential of such an initiative and, only a few years later, in 1300, proclaimed what is now considered the first official Jubilee of the Church, a global event with Rome at its centre.

But did Boniface VIII truly draw inspiration from the *Perdonanza Celestiniana*? And, more intriguingly, if Celestine V had remained on the papal throne longer, would we all now be heading to L’Aquila for the Jubilee instead of Rome?

TWO OPPOSING VISIONS

To fully grasp this historical debate, we must consider the figure of Pope Celestine V. Known for his humility and ascetic spirit, he was almost a revolutionary figure within the Church of his time. Elected during a period of great crisis and division, his decision to grant plenary indulgence to all who visited the Basilica of Collemaggio reflected a vision of spirituality accessible to everyone, free from the bureaucracy of the Church.

Pope Boniface VIII, on the other hand, represented the opposite: ambitious, shrewd, and determined to strengthen the power of the Church, he could not tolerate a religious event that might shift attention away from Rome. His decision to proclaim the Jubilee of 1300 was motivated not only by spiritual concerns but also by political and economic interests – attracting pilgrims meant increasing the prestige of the Roman Church and boosting its revenues.

It is no coincidence that the *Perdonanza Celestiniana* (ABRUZZISSIMO will cover the event in detail in the July-August issue) remained a local event in L’Aquila, while the Roman Jubilee took on an international dimension.



The powerful organisational machinery of Boniface VIII ensured that his initiative became the universal reference, overshadowing the experience in L'Aquila.

And yet, despite everything, the *Perdonanza Celestiniana* has not been forgotten – far from it! This religious event has been celebrated for over 730 years on 28 and 29 August (watch a video about it [here](#)), with a historic procession accompanying the opening of the Holy Door of the Basilica of Collemaggio. However, the city comes alive and dresses up for a whole week, from 24 to 30 August, with music, performances, and historical re-enactment events. These celebrations serve to highlight Celestine V's message, in which the secular and religious aspects of the *Perdonanza* weave together, creating a harmonious balance between spirituality and culture.

A QUESTION OF PERSPECTIVE

So, can we say that the Jubilee actually originated in L'Aquila? The answer is not straightforward and depends on how one interprets history. If we define the Jubilee as an event officially institutionalised by the Church with global impact, then Rome remains its epicentre. But if we focus on the essence of the spiritual message and the granting of plenary indul-

Opening of the Porta Santa in L'Aquila. Photo by Andrea Mancini

gence, then the *Perdonanza Celestiniana* could indeed be seen as a forerunner of the Jubilee.

"It is unfair to overlook the merits of Celestine V, who turned the utopia of forgiveness into a means of lifting up the world, without concern for power dynamics," says De Nicola. "Boniface VIII, unable to annul the Bull of Forgiveness, chose instead to 'institutionalise' it to his advantage by creating the Jubilee of 1300, thereby reinforcing the centrality of Rome and the Papacy in official historical narratives. His decision brought indulgence back under papal control, establishing Rome as the focal point of Christianity."

The debate remains open, and we may never have a definitive answer. But one thing is certain: the *Perdonanza Celestiniana* is a unique event that predates the official Jubilee and stands as a testament to the deep connection between faith and tradition in the land of Abruzzo. Perhaps there is no need to choose between Rome and L'Aquila – after all, history is also made of inspirations and cross-pollinations.

Marianna Colantoni is the founder of [Taste Abruzzo](#), Destination Maker and Communications Specialist.

In the next issue, we will explore the life of Celestine V and his role in the history of the Church and Abruzzo.





PRATOLA PELIGNA: MORE THAN JUST €1 HOMES

By Anna Lebedeva

A few years ago, Pratola Peligna joined the list of Italian towns selling €1 houses. However, unlike many other remote and sparsely populated locations, it offers much more than just cheap properties.

Pratola Peligna is a small town in Valle Peligna in the province of L'Aquila, with spectacular views of Monte Morrone and Monti Marsicani. Due to its strategic location in the valley, it was a trade hub and thriving town for centuries (see the History of Pratola Peligna below). The 20th century brought its challenges and the population decline in the 1950s stemmed from a significant wave of emigration.

Like many other inland areas in Abruzzo, the historic centre of Pratola Peligna was gradually abandoned with many buildings left to crumble for decades. To add to the problem, the 2009 earthquakes caused further damage, making some areas unsafe and accelerating the depopulation.

Photo: Pratola Peligna with the snow-capped Majella mountains in the background

SAVING THE HISTORIC CENTRE

While Pratola Peligna has benefited from post-earthquake reconstruction funds, it didn't resolve the issue of privately owned abandoned buildings, many of which remained in disrepair as many owners had moved away – some emigrating overseas, others relocating to larger cities – leaving behind properties that gradually fell into neglect.

A few years ago, local officials, led by Mayor Antonella Di Nino, undertook a detailed survey, mapping over 600 uninhabited properties in the town. Their findings were stark: nearly 40% of these buildings lay outside the scope of public funding, their restoration entirely dependent on private investment.

With this in mind, in 2021, the municipality launched the €1 house programme, offering new buyers not only ownership but access to Italy's seismic tax incentives. "The goal of the initiative is to restore the abandoned buildings in the town's old part and bring new residents," explained Claudia di Girolamo from the abandoned building recovery office. "So far, about 20 buildings have been sold, with five already restored and many others in various stages of renovation." Italians, Canadians, Portuguese, Danish, and Swedish nationals have bought the old buildings, planning to spend summers and extended periods in Pratola Peligna.

Photos: shops in Pratola Peligna

BUYING PROCESS

The municipality's [website](#) currently lists 35 buildings for sale in a dedicated section "[Case ad 1 euro](#)" with all the necessary documents available for download.

"Anyone, from anywhere in the world, can express interest simply by completing a form from the municipality's website and sending it to us," says Di Girolamo. "They have two months to sign the contract and an additional six months to submit the restoration project, which must be completed within three years." Di Girolamo adds that these terms are quite reasonable. "To date, no one has encountered any issues in meeting the deadlines, with some even finishing their restorations sooner. However, there is always a possibility for an extension on the final deadline."

Obviously, the buyer will need to spend more than one euro. In addition to the €200 deposit to the municipality, which will be withheld if the buyer withdraws from the final acquisition, there are other costs. These include a fee for the notarial deed, which varies depending on the property's cadastral value, payment for developing the renovation plans, and the costs of the restoration itself. Some properties need very little work, others need new roofs and a complete structural and interior overhaul.

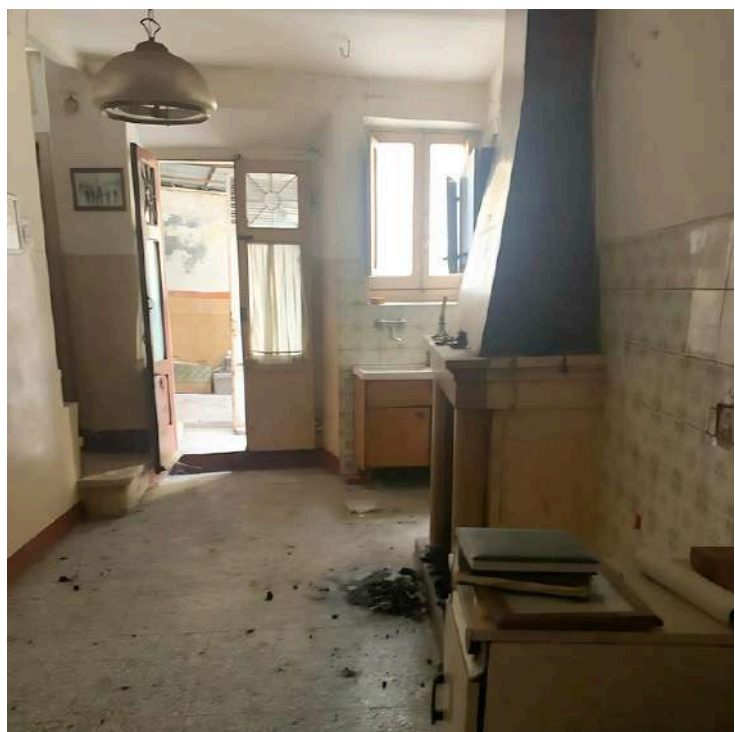


€1 HOMES FOR DIFFERENT BUDGETS

Camilla Drescher Noro, from Copenhagen, Denmark, was the first foreigner to buy a €1 house in Pratola Peligna, signing the deed on her three-storey house in 2021. "It is about 120 square metres. The bottom part is really old, maybe even from the 1500s or 1600s, but the top part was probably rebuilt in the 1950s," she says. Unlike many others, her house required minimal renovation. "When I first looked around it, I thought, oh, this is messy and dirty. But I was lucky, I only had to repair the ceiling in two places where water infiltrated, connect water and electricity, then clean and paint everything." While she still has some improvements to make, she has spent only €8,000 so far. "I didn't have much money to spend on renovations, so I did it step by step, paying €1,000-2,000 at a time." A stark contrast to a friend's €200,000 renovation of a €1 house nearby. "Let's say, she chose a house she could afford to renovate, and I did the same," explains Camilla.

Since buying her home, Camilla has encouraged others to take the plunge, helping a few friends secure their own €1 houses. "It is important to check the structure of the house," she shares her advice. "Some of the houses are really bad structure-wise, and if you have to re-build everything, then it might be cheaper to go to a real estate agent in the town and buy a house that is already liveable." She also notes that buyers need to consider how long they're willing to wait, as some homes are eligible for Italy's seismic renovation bonus, meaning work is done for free but at a much slower pace. Camilla says she had no major bureaucratic hurdles and the municipality was very helpful throughout the process. She loves Pratola Peligna and spends a few days there each month. "It is like a holiday retreat for my family and friends," she says.

Photos: (from top) one of the €1 houses for sale in Pratola Peligna; Camilla's kitchen before and after the renovation



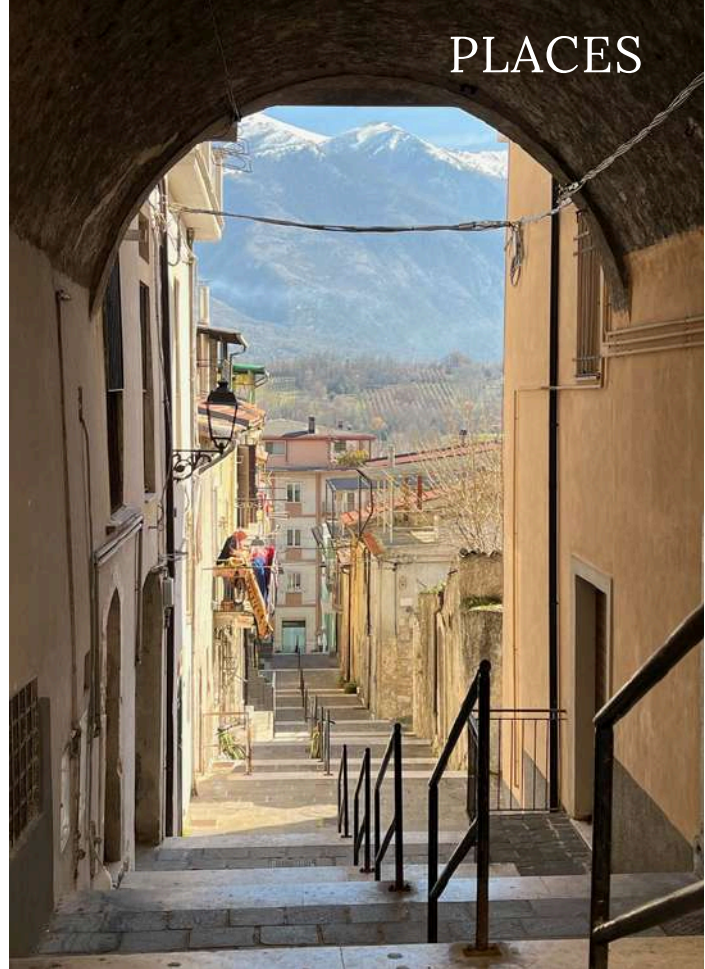


Photos: on the streets of Pratola Peligna

LIVING IN PRATOLA PELIGNA

The €1 house scheme is often criticised for being in towns that are half-empty and far from airports and train stations. However, Pratola Peligna stands as an exception. Apart from shops, bakeries, restaurants, bars, pharmacies, and a theatre, it has a railway station with frequent trains to Rome, taking just three to four hours. Located halfway between the ski slopes of Roccaraso and the Adriatic coast, the town is also well-connected by regional and intercity buses. Plus, Sulmona, a lively tourist destination with more shops, another beautiful theatre, excellent restaurants, and a large hospital, is just a short drive away.

“There is a everything you need for a good life here,” says Maria Luciana DiNino (known to friends as “Mary di Canada”). She moved to Pratola Peligna from Canada about six years ago because her parents emigrated from the town in the 1960-1970s. She loves the friendly community and finds ways to participate in local events. “I volunteer a lot, so I’m always busy,” she says, describing her weekends filled with everything from Carnevale celebrations to organising festivities for the town’s patron saint. “This Sunday, we are celebrating the Carnival and I am participating in one of the floats dressed as a pirate of the Caribbean, and then going to a communal dinner,” says Maria Luciana.

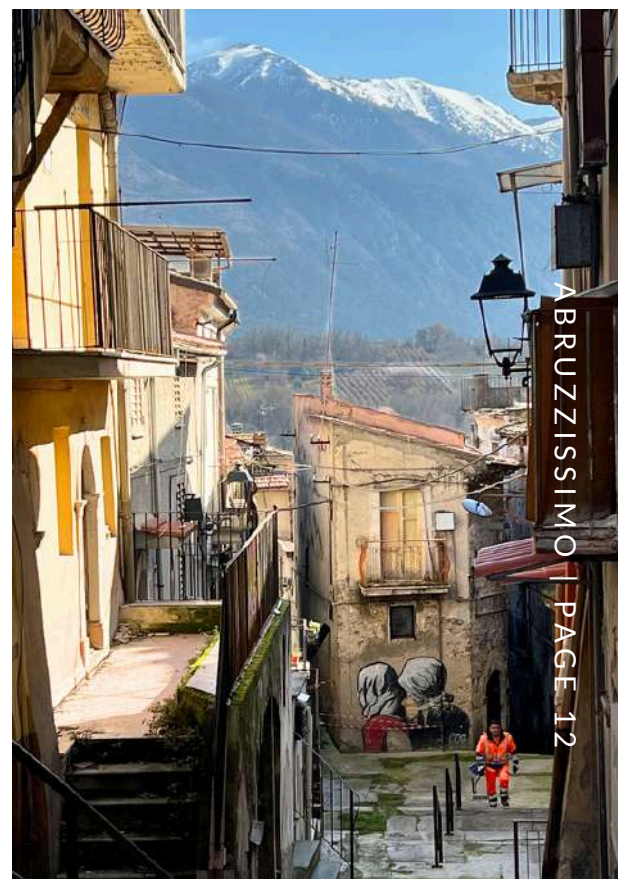


She describes living in Pratola Peligna as convenient and affordable. Maria Luciana teaches conversational English online and pays just €250 a month for rent and doesn't even need a car, thanks to excellent transport links. "I'm near the bus and train stations," she points out, adding that the town has everything from shops to fibre internet. For her, it's the perfect location, providing both small-town charm and easy access to bigger cities like Pescara, where she goes to the beach in the summer. "I get the train and in just over an hour I am at the beach," she says.

Her mother, now retired, has decided to move back to Pratola Peligna, and Maria Luciana is looking for

a bigger place for the two of them. While the idea of a €1 house intrigued her, she ultimately decided against it. "For me, it would be too much investment," she explains, preferring a move-in-ready home. However, she acknowledges the scheme's appeal for those with time and resources, especially in a town like Pratola, which offers much more than just cheap property. "When people think of €1 houses, they think the place is abandoned, but Pratola Peligna is not like that. It is a lively town with all modern comforts." She describes the town as feeling like a big construction site at the moment, with cranes towering overhead as numerous publicly funded restoration projects take place. "I can't wait to see Pratola in two or three years when all the scaffolding comes down. It's going to be even more beautiful!"

Photos: on the streets of Pratola Peligna



WHAT TO SEE AND DO IN PRATOLA PELIGNA

ENJOY TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS

Pratola Peligna's most important festival, **Festa Madonna della Libera**, takes place on the first Sunday of May. According to legend, Madonna saved the town from the plague in the 16th century. The town is decorated with beautiful lights and the celebrations span an entire week, featuring religious ceremonies, processions, food, and music. The focal point is the grand **Sanctuary of the Madonna della Libera** (see below). The lay committee that organises the festival is actively involved in the town's cultural life, hosting numerous community events throughout the year. Follow their [Facebook page](#) for festival details and other announcements.

In January, Pratola Peligna honours Sant'Antonio Abate with street performances and communal meals, while February-March bring the lively celebrations of Carnival. Check the [Pro Loco Pratola Peligna page](#) for event updates.

WALK IN THE OLD CENTRE

While many buildings are being renovated in the town's historic centre, it hasn't lost its charm. Take a walk along the narrow streets to see the old, pastel-coloured *palazzi* decorated with floral garlands and cherubs, two elegant 19th-century cast-iron fountains on **Piazza Madonna della Libera** and **Piazza Garibaldi**. To synch with the town's slow-paced life, sip a coffee at **Caffe del Corso** (they have excellent mignon pastries such as custard-filled *coda d'aragosta*) in front of the **Santuario della Madonna della Libera**.

The oldest part of the town is located around the **Chiesa di San Pietro Celestino** (if you look at the town's map, you see that this area is oval-shaped like all medieval fortified towns of the past). Walk along the narrow streets, heading north, away from the church, and you'll come to a beautiful medieval square surrounded by old houses with a small fountain in the centre (on Google Maps it is marked as "**Piazza Centro Storico Dentro La Terra**").

Piazza Centro Storico Dentro La Terra



CATCH A SHOW AT THE THEATRE

Built in 1929, the Teatro Comunale D'Andrea is the town's pride and joy. It has an excellent programme packed with classical music and pop concerts, plays, and spectacles for children. See the full programme on the theatre's [page](#).

VISIT THE MAIN CHURCH

The 19th-century **Santuario della Madonna della Libera** was built on the site of a smaller 15th-century church to accommodate the growing number of pilgrims. Its three-nave interior is decorated with works by renowned Abruzzese masters Teofilo Patini and Amedeo Tedeschi and an impressive 3,200-pipe organ. The sanctuary houses the revered medieval icon and 18th-century processional statue of the Madonna della Libera, a symbol of devotion for the community and pilgrims.

STOCK UP ON LOCAL PASTA

Pastificio Masciarelli is a fifth-generation, family-run pasta shop has been serving customers since 1867. Stop by to stock up on premium pasta, made right on-site with 100% Italian flour – a quality that sets it apart from many other, better-known brands.

Address: Via Enopolio, 32.

Photos: (from top clockwise) Sanctuary of the Madonna della Libera; a décor fragment of a palazzo; a shop; an Italian-liberty style palazzo in Pratola Peligna





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with
ABRUZZISSIMO'S EDITOR

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Anna Lebedeva

After the call, you'll receive a personalised itinerary with a curated list of great restaurants (vegan and vegetarian options on request) and special places to stay.

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PALAZZO D'ALESSANDRO IN CAPORCIANO

By Andrea Portante

The 15th-century Palazzo D'Alessandro in Caporciano has witnessed military attacks, the tremors of earthquakes, and the gradual wear of time. Now, after a long restoration, it is ready to tell its story to curious visitors.

I inherited Palazzo D'Alessandro from my mother, Ornella D'Alessandro. Although it had been in her family for at least 500 years, she never lived there and only visited during her holidays, when growing up in Forlì.

During my childhood I spent every August there with my family. When I was young, I preferred other holiday destinations and spent many years living in the USA and Brazil, but always made sure I visited the *palazzo* once or twice a year keeping the connection to my roots in Caporciano (AQ).

In 1999 I settled in Rome, pursuing a fulfilling career. It was only about two hours by car from the *palazzo*, so I started spending more time there.

Photo: Palazzo D'Alessandro in Caporciano (AQ)



A room in the palazzo where old murals were discovered during a recent restoration

HISTORY

Palazzo D'Alessandro is no ordinary house. It carries centuries of history within its walls. In an official document issued in Naples in 1525 (the Kingdom of Naples included Abruzzo at the time), in the name of Berardino D'Alessandro, son of Alessandro and a native of Caporciano in the province of Abruzzo Ulteriore, he was formally recognised as quartermaster of the newly established mounted battalion of the Royal cavalry. The document grants him various exemptions, immunities, and powers, along with a series of royal privileges, affirming his status and authority within the militia. The central nucleus of the *palazzo* with its fireplace room, a kitchen and other rooms dating back to the 16th century was, most likely, built by Berardino D'Alessandro, while the "new quarter" was the work of the notary Giuseppe D'Alessandro, my great-great grandfather, who lived in the early 19th century.

For generations, the D'Alessandro family built its prosperity on landownership and a long lineage of notaries, reaching its height with Giuseppe in the

1800s. However, his eldest son, Francesco, chose not to follow the profession, instead relying on income from the family's properties. When this was no longer sufficient, he resorted to selling land and buildings. The years after the First World War brought deep economic hardship, and following the death of Francesco D'Alessandro (known as Don Ciccuccio) in 1940, a protracted and contentious inheritance dispute began. Lasting over two decades, it ultimately led to the fragmentation of both the family's estates and the palace itself.

In the 1970s, my father, Giuseppe Portante, who had married Ornella D'Alessandro, my mother, began the painstaking task of reclaiming parts of the family's historic estate, determined to restore what had been lost through decades of division and decline. Recently, I bought the upper floor of the palazzo from relatives and now, finally, it feels whole again.

RESTORATION

I am not a nobleman. I have no family crest or inherited fortune. But I do have an unshakable love for history, for the craftsmanship of the past, and for the challenge of bringing something old back to

life without stripping it of its soul. The decision to restore the *palazzo* is a commitment to a way of life, one rooted in patience and reverence.

The 2009 earthquake damaged the palace in which the family had already invested heavily. The structure needed extensive work — not just cosmetic restoration, but fundamental repairs to ensure its survival. The post-earthquake reconstruction and consolidation began in 2019 and was completed at the end of 2024.

Restoring a listed building of cultural interest like the *palazzo* is not simply a matter of fixing walls and repairing roofs. Every stone, every beam tells a story. There are moments of discovery — like uncovering the original frescoes plastered over in the 1960s — and moments of frustration, when bureaucracy and costs threaten to derail the dream. But the greatest challenge, I believe, is balancing preservation with the realities of modern living.

Over the years, and especially during the post-earthquake restoration work, the original wallpaper was either damaged or completely lost. Luckily, I was able to salvage some physical samples and take high-definition photographs, which I sent to a small company in England. They managed to faithfully reproduce the designs and digitally print new wallpaper. Now, the three main rooms of the

Photos: (below) a room in the palazzo before the restoration; the fireplace room on *piano nobile*



piano nobile, once designed for hosting guests and displaying the family's wealth and status, look just as they did in the past. And I managed to find antique Dutch cast iron radiators from the early 1900s that have been fully restored and installed in the dining room.

LEGENDS, GHOSTS, AND ARTEFACTS

Palazzo D'Alessandro is filled with objects that tell family stories stretching decades and centuries back. The main door opens onto a vaulted entrance, adorned with ancient artefacts that have been part of the house for centuries, including a fragment of an ancient Roman funerary monument featuring gladiator symbols. From here, a stone staircase leads up to the *piano nobile* and the fireplace room, transformed into a large living room decorated with objects of historical and artistic significance. A door from this room opens into the small chapel with family religious relics and sacred furnishings.



In the *palazzo*, we have preserved a wooden board taken from the back garden door with holes from rifle shots fired by revolutionary French soldiers in 1799, who attempted to break into the house on their way to Naples to support the new Jacobin Republic. The D'Alessandro family, like many noble and wealthy families in Abruzzo of the past, supported the king against the revolutionaries. In one of the rooms there is a stuffed eagle killed in 1927 by a shepherd, while it was trying to steal a lamb. There is also an Esso gas pump from the 60s, in homage to my father's career with that company. The palazzo is furnished with a mixture of antique, vintage, and modern furniture, and has become a custodian of our family's history, a museum of curiosities we have collected over the years.

But there are also many stories from the past. My mother told me that when she was little, the *palazzo* was dark, with only a few dim lights, with eerie portraits at the walls, squeaky noises from the furniture, and drafts from the windows. My maternal grandfather was an army officer, and used to give my mother the challenge to enter alone at night in the empty house, reach the top floor in the dark, turn on the light to prove that the goal had been reached, and then come down again.

We also might have had a ghost here. A family story goes that in the early 20th century, when there was no corridor upstairs and all the rooms were connected, a guest stayed in one of the rooms, at breakfast, apologised for possibly being inconvenient and "in the way". He said that during the night a woman went back and forth through his room, but everyone in the family and all the servants said they were asleep. When the guest described the woman, it sounded like aunt Mariannina, who had died a few years earlier.

OPEN TO GUESTS

As the main restoration works are finished now, I've opened the doors of Palazzo D'Alessandro to visitors and guests, hoping to share not just its history but the experience of being within its walls. I want people to feel the same sense of wonder I felt as a child, to sit by the fireplace and imagine the



The palazzo's original kitchen; the entrance with a fragment of an ancient Roman funerary monument

conversations that once took place there, to walk the corridors and sense the air of centuries. I also envision it becoming a space for cultural events – intimate concerts, literary gatherings, perhaps even workshops that celebrate the craftsmanship of the region.

There are still some small jobs to be done inside and in the garden. But every step brings me closer to my goal: to ensure that Palazzo D'Alessandro is preserved, a bridge between my family's past and present, history and modernity.

In conversation with Anna Lebedeva. Photos courtesy of Andrea Portante.

Private visits to the [Palazzo D'Alessandro Wunderkammer & Suits](#) can be arranged by emailing a.portante@gmail.com or calling at 0039 3355994204.

Our premium subscribers can take advantage of a special discount on stays at the palazzo (see more details on page 27).



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ABRUZZISSIMO
MAGAZINE

QUICK STOP

MUSEO DELLE GENTE DEL GRAN SASSO IN TOSSICIA (TE)



The Ethnographic Museum of the People of the Gran Sasso, located in the small mountain town of **Tossicia** (TE), is best known for showcasing the works of its native artist, Annunziata Scipione, a self-taught naïf painter and sculptor. Scipione inspired the murals in the nearby town of Azzinano di Tossicia (see our article about her in the October 2023 issue available [here](#)).

Housed in a 15th-century Palazzo Marchesale built by the noble Orsini family, the museum brings to life the traditions, craftsmanship, and rural culture of the small villages in the Gran Sasso mountains. Visitors can explore traditional crafts up close through interactive exhibits in four themed sections: copper, weaving, wood, and wheat. Here you will find a fascinating reproduction of a grain mill once used by the local De Stefano family, illustrating the evolution from water mill to animal-driven mill to engine-driven mill.

In addition to its focus on folk traditions, the museum also houses many historical artefacts. One notable piece is a *cippus*, or boundary marker, believed to have delineated the burial area of freedmen who had belonged to a Roman noble.

Alongside its permanent exhibits, the museum hosts periodic temporary exhibitions. The most recent, Icons Beyond Pop, featured works by renowned Italian artists Franco Angeli, Tano Festa, and Mario Schifano.

For more details, visit the museum's [page](#). **Address:** Via S. Spirito 6, Tossicia (TE). **Opening hours:** open year-round from Tuesday to Sunday 9.30am to 13.30pm

EASY TRAILS

WALKING AMONG THE GIANT SILVER FIRS OF ROSELLO



- **Length:** about 2km
- **Time:** about one hour
- **Starting Point:** a picnic area in Località Fonte Volpona (follow signs for Riserva Naturale Abetina di Rosello)

The **Abetina di Rosello Nature Reserve** is home to one of Italy's oldest forests. Park along the road near the first picnic area, just outside **Rosello**. From there follow a short stretch of paved road on foot until you reach a barrier and a sign welcoming you to the reserve.

The path is well marked as *Sentiero Natura* and runs through towering silver firs, some exceeding a metre in diameter and reaching heights of 50 metres. One of Italy's tallest naturally growing tree, a majestic 54-metre fir grows here in a narrow, nearly inaccessible gorge carved by the Turcano stream. Scientists believe that during the Ice Age, this area provided a refuge for many species, allowing them to survive and later spread northwards.

The reserve's 200 hectares are home to 500 species, which include an astonishing variety of trees, alongside rare plants such as *Epipactis purpurata*, an elusive orchid. Wildlife flourishes here too, from 600 species of beetles to moths and amphibians like the spectacled salamander. Birdwatchers may spot rare black woodpeckers, indicators of an ancient and well-preserved ecosystem.

The trail is accessible year-round, though snowshoes may be needed in winter. More details about the trail and the natural reserve see the *Abetina di Rosello's* [website](#).

DONKEYS AND DUMBBELLS: STAYING FIT IN RURAL ABRUZZO

By Linda Dini Jenkins

Running an online fitness business from a small farm in rural Abruzzo? Why not! Personal trainer Pippa Grover and her husband, Ryan Woodhouse, moved from the UK and are doing just that. Of course, it involves plenty of hard work and flexibility. "Our 42 animals have their own ideas about what we should be doing – and when," laughs Pippa.

Two years ago, Pippa and Ryan moved from their home in Dorset, a seaside county in Southwest England, to their exceedingly rural new homestead in a small village in Teramo province to find mountains, great food, good people, and self-sufficiency. Pippa brought her online personal training business with her to Abruzzo, helping women all over the world get stronger with her online programs.

Her husband Ryan is into fitness, as well, but has been working as a seafarer onboard ships, and spends much of his time – usually, a few months each year – back in the UK. That leaves Pippa on her own quite a lot to keep their enterprise running, no mean feat when you consider all that needs doing: tending to the farm, processing ducks and chickens, raising and rearing goats, building fences and designing stables, and running her business (you can follow Pippa on Instagram). It's not for the faint of heart.

IT WAS ALL UPHILL

Pippa and Ryan were world travellers; in fact, Pippa spent several months in Northern Italy before she even met Ryan. They thought a lot about where they would want to settle and clearly had hearts for a rural mountainous lifestyle. Abruzzo rose to the top of their list and Pippa came down for a month to look at properties. "I loved the first house I looked at, but there just wasn't enough land," she recalls. "In all, I saw more than 40 houses and only put one offer in, but the owners pulled out. It was



Pippa Grover and Ryan Woodhouse at their farm in Abruzzo

our estate agent who eventually found our place. It's very, very rural, with lots of land. It was meant to be."

The first order of business was to get excellent internet service, because Pippa's business depends on it. They decided on a satellite service and say the expense is well worth it for their needs. Their property is at the end of a private road and, getting their belongings up there was not, as they say, half the fun. Everything was in storage, in two containers, which came to Abruzzo by truck. Of course, the truck got a flat tire and all their gear – including some very heavy gym equipment – ended up on the ground on delivery day at 21:00, and had to be brought up the hill bit by bit.



Photos: (above) Pippa with one of her donkeys; exercising in her home gym



Irish driver's licenses for Italian ones without having to complete the dreaded licensing exam. "I was a total perfectionist when I first got here, and the waiting and red tape drove me nearly mad," she recalls. "But after a while I learned to slow down and relax. Now, I just let it go."

THE DONKEYS STILL WANT BREKKIE

In 2024, Pippa suffered a serious elbow injury which put her out of action for a long time, and from which she is only now fully recovered. "I was in agonising pain and unable to train for three months, and one of the lessons that it taught me is that I am not bulletproof," she says. "But the injury also taught me how resilient I am, while highlighting that I really do need to slow down sometimes." The lesson is that fitness is absolutely critical – especially for the lifestyle she has chosen. "The donkeys don't care if my arm is throbbing, they still want brekkie," she says, laughing.

THE REAL MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

Asked about an ex-pat community, Pippa smiles. "There is nothing in the immediate area, so no, there are no other expats." She says the nearest village has a post office and bar (which has decent pizza), and it's only five minutes to an *arrosticini* place, but that they have to travel twenty-five minutes or more for a market or a proper restaurant. But that's the way they like it.

With her *carta di soggiorno* and Ryan's Irish passport, they are good to stay here. They're all set with medical cards and were even able to trade in their

THE TEN-YEAR PLAN

Ryan is planning to launch his own fitness business, focusing on men, but he probably won't be full-time in Abruzzo for another few years. In the meantime, Pippa is forming plans for their future which will be, as she says, more of the same. First there was her podcast launch (find it by searching for "The TEAMPGPT Podcast" on Spotify or Apple Music).

Then there's farming. "We'll have piggies by 2026," according to Pippa. They already produce goat, chicken, and duck meat for themselves. Their aim is to be as self-sufficient as possible, installing solar and hydro systems for their electricity and water needs. And to grow their fitness businesses. And to have more goats. From hay bales to dumbbells, Pippa and Ryan's rural fitness routine is far from ordinary.

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](#).

FORMAGGI GREGORIANI FROM SCANNO

By Anna Swann

This month marks three years since the passing of Gregorio Rotolo, Abruzzo's most famous cheesemaker and shepherd. For anyone who loves the region's rich pastoral traditions, he was a legendary figure – an emblem of mountain life, transhumance, and the time-honoured craft of cheesemaking. Towering in stature like a bear yet warm-hearted and welcoming, Gregorio dedicated his life to preserving and elevating the art of traditional cheese production.

From his family-run farm, *Agriturismo Valle Scannese*, in the spectacular Valle del Sagittario, outside the picturesque town of Scanno, Gregorio created strong, rustic cheeses that captured the soul of Abruzzo's mountains. Here, in a landscape shaped by centuries of transhumance, he followed ancient methods, natural fermentation and used raw milk from his sheep that grazed on the mountain slopes above the farm.

Rotolo took over the organic farm his father had started in the 1970s and gained fame far beyond Abruzzo. Restaurants across Italy sought his cheeses out, and high-end delicatessens stocked them as prized specialities.

I met him about ten years ago at an agricultural fair. He wore his signature red beanie hat and a T-shirt that read *Sono troppo bello per lavorare (I am too beautiful to work)*. He gave me a generous chunk of pecorino Gregoriano and explained how it was made. Since then, it has become my favourite cheese. Unlike most pecorinos, this cheese is made using lactic coagulation rather than rennet, a slower, more delicate process that results in a soft, aromatic cheese. It has a rounded, flattened shape with a rind that ranges from white to greenish, and its texture evolves over time, becoming increasingly creamy—almost *stracchino*-like—with ageing. With a smudge of wild blackberry and sage jam and a slice of dense *solina* flour bread, I love to wash it down with a sip of sweet *Moscatello* from Castiglione a Casauria or a glass of robust Montepulciano d'Abruzzo.



Rotolo's other finest creations, all organic, include *Scorza Nera*, a ricotta made with three different whey types and aged to perfection, coated in a delicate layer of mould and massaged with olive oil. Then there is *Il Trittico*, a grand *caciocavallo* crafted from three different types of milk (sheep, goat and cow), and *Brigantaccio*, a pecorino inspired by the 19th-century bandits who once roamed these hills, hiding their stolen cheeses in terracotta jars sealed with goatskin inside caves.

Gregorio's family has 1500 sheep, 100 goats and 40 cows guarded by 40 protected Abruzzese shepherd dogs that keep wolf packs at a safe distance, and continues making cheeses, which are still often referred to as *formaggi gregoriani* in honour of their famous creator.

WHERE TO BUY FORMAGGI GREGORIANI

AGRITURISMO VALLE SCANNESE

The farm has an excellent restaurant serving traditional dishes and a small shop selling their full range of cheeses. You can also buy some of them online. See the farm's [website](#) for details.

PUNTO VENDITA IN SCANNO

You can also buy *formaggi gregoriani* in the farm's shop in the centre of Scanno. **Address:** Via Abrami, 21.

SATOLLO2

At the covered market in Piazza Muzzi, in the centre of Pescara, Rosella and her family sell a variety of excellent local cheeses, including the *pecorino Gregoriano* (or *il Cremoso* as Rosella calls it).

Marcelli Formaggi.com sells a range of Abruzzese cheeses, and even has a [pecorino Gregoriano](#) (photo above).

STUFFED AUBERGINES WITH RICE

By Teresa Mastrobuono

I found this recipe on Irene Levine's blog [Flavor of Italy](#) where she says this dish is a favourite of her Abruzzese husband, Fernando. To make stuffed aubergines lighter, she omits the meat from the traditional recipe, using only rice for the filling. In winter, it pairs well with second courses, offering a hearty and comforting accompaniment.

Historically, this meatless version was also common in the months between butchering, when fresh meat was scarce, making it a practical and economical choice. The versatility of the recipe means it can be easily adapted with different grains, cheeses, or herbs depending on what's available. Some variations include the addition of pecorino or breadcrumbs for extra flavour and texture.

I tried the recipe with *farro* instead of rice, and it turned out delicious, adding a satisfying texture and depth to the filling. The nutty flavour of the *farro* complemented the tender eggplant beautifully, making it a dish I'll definitely be making again.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 2 portions

- 2 aubergines
- 250g rice or farro
- 1 tin of diced tomatoes
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- 5–6 tbsp Parmigiano Reggiano, grated
- 1 medium mozzarella, cut into small cubes
- 1 garlic clove
- A few basil leaves (or a pinch of dried basil)
- Olive oil for frying
- Salt to taste



PREPARATION

Cut the aubergines in half lengthwise and scoop out the flesh with a spoon. Chop the scooped-out flesh into small cubes.

Heat some olive oil in a pan and sauté the chopped aubergine flesh with a whole garlic clove until softened. Remove the garlic and set the aubergine aside.

Place the hollowed-out aubergine halves ("boats") on a baking tray lined with baking paper. Drizzle with olive oil, sprinkle with salt, and bake at 170°C for about 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, heat some olive oil in a pan and sauté the chopped onion until soft. Add the tomato pulp, season with salt, and let it simmer for a few minutes.

Stir in the rice and add water or vegetable broth. Cook until the rice is al dente, then mix in the sautéed aubergine, grated Parmigiano Reggiano, and basil.

If using *farro* instead of rice, cook it separately in a ratio of one cup of grains to two cups of water or vegetable broth until almost done (about 15 minutes), then stir it into the tomato mixture.

Fill the baked aubergine boats with the rice (or *farro*) mixture, top with mozzarella cubes and a little more Parmigiano.

Return to the oven and bake at 180°C for about 15 minutes, until the cheese is melted and the aubergines are tender. Serve warm.

LEMON-SCENTED BAKED RICOTTA

By Anna Swann

A few years ago, while stocking up on delicious local cheeses at *Caseificio del Transumante* in Lettomanoppello (PE), I spotted a sign that read *ricotta al forno* next to what looked like a slice of cake with a golden crust. Curious, I asked about it, and Sara, who runs the family shop, explained that whenever they have an oversupply of fresh sheep's ricotta at their farm, she bakes it. Naturally, I had to try it – and I loved its creamy texture.

In Abruzzo, you can also find freshly made *ricotta al forno* in smaller supermarkets, sometimes flavoured with chocolate, citrus zest, or left plain. My favourite is lemon-scented baked ricotta. I prefer stronger flavours, so I always go for sheep's milk ricotta, but if you prefer a milder taste, cow's milk ricotta works well too. The dessert turns out especially fragrant when I use the zest of lemons and a touch of bergamot from the *Trabocchi* Coast, bought directly from local farmers.

If you like a bit of texture (as I do), there's no need to blend the ingredients into a completely smooth mixture – just whisk them by hand and add coarsely grated zest for little bursts of zing. *Ricotta al forno* is also delicious with orange zest. Note, that the texture of baked ricotta is soft, but compact, not like soufflé, and it is served sliced like a cake.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 4-5 portions

- 500g cow's or sheep's ricotta
- 3 medium eggs
- 130g icing sugar
- 50g potato starch (optional)
- 5 tbsps plain yoghurt
- Zest of two lemons
- 4 tbsps lemon juice
- Butter, as needed



PREPARATION

Grate the lemon zest carefully, avoiding the bitter white pith. Squeeze the lemons and set aside 4-5 tablespoons of juice.

In a separate bowl, whisk the eggs. If your ricotta is too wet, place it in a cheesecloth, gather the edges, and twist tightly to squeeze out excess liquid, or set it in a fine mesh sieve over a bowl and press down with the back of a spoon to force out excessive moisture.

In a large mixing bowl, combine the ricotta, icing sugar, and beaten eggs. Mix with an electric whisk on low speed until smooth (or with a hand whisker if you want or slightly coarser texture). Add the yoghurt, lemon juice, and zest, then whisk again until well incorporated.

Sift in the potato starch and continue mixing until you have a uniform batter.

Grease a small baking dish with butter and lightly dust it with potato starch. Pour in the batter and smooth the surface with a spatula.

Bake in a preheated oven at 170°C for 40 minutes until it has a golden crust. Once baked, allow it to cool completely before removing it from the dish and transferring it to a serving plate. The ricotta will flatten slightly as it cools and become more compact.

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