

5th anniversary issue

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



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Devotion in Bucchianico**

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**A Home Above
Lake Barrea**

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*Special
Supplement
Inside:*

**5 Festivals Not
To Miss in May**

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Barrea. Photo by Anna Lebedeva.
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LEFT:

Raiano. Photos by Anna Lebedeva.
Read the story on page 11.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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Editor's Note

ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine is five years old!

When I started the publication in 2020, I had no idea how long it would keep going – or how far it might travel. In these five years, it has grown into a small, but spirited, Abruzzo-based digital publishing venture. So far, we've published over 200 features exploring the region's history, traditions, people, and its most intriguing places. We've written about almost 90 towns and villages and interviewed nearly 150 people who call Abruzzo home and care deeply about its future, published four ebooks.

Over the years, ABRUZZISSIMO's mission has become more defined. We don't present Abruzzo simply as a place to visit – we explore it as a place people call home. We tell the story of a living land, not a pretty postcard – with its cracks in old stone walls, depopulated hamlets, and daily struggles – but also as a place of innovation and a fierce pride in tradition. We believe every corner of Abruzzo has something worth exploring with a curious and open mind: a small religious festival held by a village of 30 souls; a simple, honest dish made from a handful of ingredients; a faded fresco in a crumbling church; a conversation with a *nonna* sitting quietly outside her front door.

Although ABRUZZISSIMO doesn't exist in print format, running a digital magazine isn't cheap. We still have significant annual costs – including mailing platforms, hosting, software, and contributor fees. Thanks to our premium subscribers, many of these are now covered. But with a larger budget, we could do even more for you. If you've been enjoying the magazine, please consider marking our fifth anniversary with a donation – or upgrading to a paid subscription if you haven't yet. We're very close to 5,000 subscribers – will you help us reach that milestone by inviting your friends and family to subscribe via our website? And if you'd like to send birthday wishes our way, we'd love to hear from you!

As always, I thank you for your continued support. Wherever you are in the world, raise a glass of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo to ABRUZZISSIMO – and let's make five more years of storytelling and celebrating Abruzzo a reality together! *Grazie!*

As the magazine turns five, we are offering a small gift to mark the occasion: a free supplement: **"5 Festivals Not to Miss in May"** for all our subscribers. You'll find it at the end of this issue. For our premium subscribers there is a special discount for a visit to Palazzo Tilli in Casoli (CH).

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor

DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS



PESCARA BRACES FOR DISRUPTION AS AQUEDUCT WORKS BEGIN

Pescara faces months of disruption as a €15 million overhaul of the city's main aqueduct gets underway. The project, involving the installation of a new five-kilometre pipeline from Colle Pineta to Aca's headquarters, is set to begin on 12 May. Major roads including Via Chieti, Corso Vittorio Emanuele, and Via Gabriele D'Annunzio will see closures, lane reductions, and suspended parking. Critics warn of severe impact on traffic, tourism, and local businesses, especially during the peak summer season. While the infrastructure upgrade is essential, the timing and planning have raised concerns about the administration's ability to balance progress with public welfare.

RIDLEY SCOTT TO FILM HIS NEW POST-APOCALYPTIC MOVIE IN ABRUZZO

The famous film director has chosen Abruzzo for his latest production, *The Dog Stars*, an adaptation of Peter Heller's post-apocalyptic novel. The production team has already begun setting up the area for filming, which is set to start in mid-May in **Ovindoli** (AQ) in the Sirente Velino Regional Park.

The story follows Hig, a widowed pilot living in isolation after a global catastrophe, played by Jacob Elordi. The cast also includes Margaret Qualley, Guy Pearce, and Josh Brolin. The production, involving around 300 people, is expected to bring a significant boost to the local economy. The film is due for release by the end of 2025.



STANLEY TUCCI IN ABRUZZO

In the upcoming National Geographic series *Tucci in Italy*, premiering on May 18, Stanley Tucci returns to Italy to visit five regions: Tuscany, Lombardy, Trentino-Alto Adige, Lazio, and Abruzzo. The details of the show haven't been revealed, but the programme's trailer and some announcement show Tucci enjoying a fire-cooked meal with the famous chef Davide Nanni in Castrovalva, participating in grilling traditional *arrosticini*, and enjoying a family Sunday lunch. The Abruzzo episode is set to air on June 1 on Disney+ and Hulu.

POPULATION DECLINES AGAIN BUT IMMIGRANTS SLOW THE TREND

Abruzzo lost 3,056 residents in 2023, according to the latest ISTAT census – roughly the population of a small town like Altino or Balsorano. The decline, driven by low birth rates and an ageing population, marks a continuation of the region's demographic slide. Births fell to a historic low of 7,578, while deaths totalled 15,829. Without the positive contribution of foreign residents, the loss would have been almost triple. Migrants from abroad increased by 2,924 people, helping to counterbalance the decline and lower the region's average age. **Teramo** saw the highest foreign growth rate at 4.6%, offering a rare demographic lifeline.

As of the end of 2023, Abruzzo was home to approximately 85,828 foreign residents, accounting for about 6.5% of the region's total population. This diverse group includes immigrants from Romania, Albania, Morocco, North Macedonia, China, and smaller numbers from the UK and the US.



TWO EVENTS FOR WINE LOVERS

This month, Abruzzo will host two hugely popular events for wine lovers.

From May 16 to 18, **L'Aquila** will host *Vinorum – Festival del Vino d'Abruzzo* in the historic Piazza Duomo, the largest wine festival in the region. Visitors can enjoy tastings, direct sales from local wineries, gastronomic specialties, and guided wine tastings, all while discovering new labels and meeting the region's renowned wine producers. See the full programme on the event's [page](#).

On May 24-25, *Cantine Aperte* will return with dozens of wineries across the region opening their doors for visitors. The event offers an incredible opportunity to taste local products, enjoy educational workshops, and experience scenic picnics and sunset aperitifs. See the full list of the open wineries on the *Movimento Turismo Vino Abruzzo* [page](#).

BOBBIN LACE SCHOOL REOPENS IN L'AQUILA

The bobbin lace school in **L'Aquila** reopens for the new season, offering afternoon courses for anyone eager to learn this ancient craft. Known locally as *tombolo aquilano*, the technique has been practised in the city for centuries. It involves weaving threads into intricate geometric and floral patterns using bobbins. Local artisans will guide beginners and advanced learners every Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday in central L'Aquila. For more details, contact the organisers via their [page](#).

DID YOU KNOW?

THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR IN ABRUZZO



After the First Crusade, the Templars established a network of commanderies in strategic locations – along ancient *tratturi*, Roman roads, and mountain passes – to protect pilgrims and travellers. Their distinctive symbols – roses, tau crosses, lambs, and the fleur-de-lys cross – can still be found carved into churches across Abruzzo. Examples include the church of San Leucio in **Atessa (CH)**, the sanctuary of Maria Incoronata in **Pescasseroli (AQ)** (photo above), and the Abbey of Santa Maria della Vittoria in **Scurcola Marsicana (AQ)**. Remains of the Templars' presence have also been found in locations such as **Vasto (CH)**, **Penne (PE)**, and **Monteodorisio (CH)**.

Some historians believe that **L'Aquila** was designed to mirror Jerusalem and may have been chosen by the Order as a hiding place for its immense treasure. It is said that the **Basilica di Collemaggio** once held sacred relics, including thorns from Christ's crown and the index finger of John the Baptist.

Pope Celestine V, whose tomb lies within the basilica, is believed to have become the custodian of the treasure after meeting the Templars at the Council of Lyon in 1274. Inside the basilica, a fresco depicts Celestine V alongside an angel holding a coat of arms marked by the red cross of the Knights Templar.

In the church of Santa Maria ad Cryptas in **Fossa (AQ)**, a depiction of Christ bears a striking resemblance to the Shroud of Turin – long believed to have been in Templar possession. The figures of Saint George and Saint Martin also appear there, wearing white garments linked to the Order.



WOMEN'S WORK: PETALS OF DEVOTION IN BUCCHIANICO

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva

In anticipation of La Festa dei Banderesi, I visit Bucchianico – not for the parades or pageantry, but to see the quiet labour of the town's women who, night after night, keep an old tradition alive, one paper flower at a time. Without them, the festival could not exist.

The bright, spacious room hums with the soft chatter of women gathered around long tables. A television murmurs from one wall, while the gentle rustle of crepe paper fills the air. Lilac wisteria, whimsical orchids, delicate apple blossoms, deep burgundy roses, cheerful crocuses, and vivid gerberas – paper flowers in every hue – spill across the room in a joyous riot of colour. I am in Bucchianico, in the thick of preparations for the *Festa dei Banderesi*, one of Abruzzo's most beautiful festivals. A few members of the Pro Loco – a grassroots organisation that promotes the town and coordinates local events – are taking me to several homes to show the behind-the-scenes work that sustains the celebration.

Photo: Women carrying baskets with paper flowers during the festival. Photo courtesy of the ProLoco di Bucchianico

OLD TRADITION

With the festival, the town honours a centuries-old tradition that dates back to the 1600s, commemorating its legendary defence against a barbarian siege, attributed to the wisdom of its patron saint, Sant'Urbano. In May, over four days, the streets fill with the sound of traditional songs, historical parades, and the solemnity of religious services.

To an outsider, it may appear to be a male-dominated event: the main figures are men – the official representatives who preside over ceremonies, lead the processions, carry the flags, and recount the soldiers' tale of victory. Women, dressed in traditional red and white costumes, appear prominently during the *Ciammaichella*, a zigzagging march in the main square, and the *Trasporto delle Some di Sant'Urbano*, balancing baskets filled with thousands of colourful paper flowers on their heads, re-enacting an ancient ritual in which food and wine were gathered for the feast honouring the patron saint. But there is more to the women's role than what unfolds in the square. Behind every costume stitched, every loaf baked, every paper flower pinned to a float, there are countless hours of work carried out in kitchens and basements.

(below) Rita D'Amico is making a paper flower; a basket with paper flowers ready for the festival



Gianluca Di Pasquale, president of Bucchianico's Pro Loco, notes that what spectators see in May is only the surface of a much deeper tradition. "*La Festa dei Banderesi* goes on all year. And women are its main force."

From December onwards, women gather almost nightly to make *i fiori di carta* – delicate paper blossoms that will later fill baskets and decorate the big wooden floats. The division of labour remains much as it was in decades past: while men work outdoors, building the massive *carri* that will be hauled through the streets by tractors, women carry the greater weight of the preparations: sewing costumes, preparing communal meals, baking hundreds of *cancellate* waffles and *pesche dolci* biscuits, and assembling, patiently, thousands of flowers by hand.

WHERE THE FLOWERS ARE BORN

In Contrada Piane, we visit the home of Sheila Palmitesta and her family. "It's our second year opening the house," she says. "Last year, my husband was *il Banderese*. This year we volunteered to host again. I teach during the day, so the real boss here is my mother-in-law, Rita D'Amico."



MORE THAN PAPER

Around the kitchen table, about a dozen women are deep in their work. Someone is making leaves, others are coaxing strips of crepe paper — purple, blue, pink — into sculptural blooms. Each flower is crisp, deliberate, some uncannily true to life. Later, these will be arranged into compositions and placed in baskets, each labelled with the name of the woman who will carry it during the procession.

Rita takes a piece of yellow paper and, almost without looking, folds and curls it into a sunflower no larger than her palm. “Where did you learn?” I ask. “By watching the others,” she replies with a smile. “I’ve been doing this thirty years. I came to Bucchianico after I married — and learned it all from the women here.”

I try to gauge the total. “How many flowers do you make each year?” I ask a few of the women. They all shrug and say the same: “Many. Maybe thousands.” They don’t count. That isn’t the point. What matters are the hours spent together — coffee shared between hands sticky with glue, plates of cancellate passed round the table, the conversations, and the laughter.

Photos: (below) paper crocuses arranged in a basket; (right) folding paper leaves

I ask if the same flowers might be reused the following year. Mirella Tucci, a member of the Pro Loco, responds with patient clarity: “The colours fade, and they wouldn’t look as nice the following year. But the real reason is that for many women, it’s a kind of devotion to Sant’Urbano — a way of honouring him by dedicating time to this ritual and offering freshly made flowers each year.” Once the festival ends, the flowers are given to friends and family, making way for the next year’s creations.

Mirella tells me that everyone has their own technique. “Some roll a strip of fringed paper into shape, others build their flowers petal by petal. Some even add hand-painted details.” New shapes and designs appear each year. “They are also those who prefer the old-style flowers,” she adds, “larger, with curled edges — they take more skill to make.”

I watch the women work, hands moving with the assurance of long practice. Every cut is clean, every fold exact; there’s no room for waste, no





Photos: (from top clockwise) women working in Contrada Pozzo Nuovo; Elvira Palombaro; paper flower waiting to be arranged in baskets; smaller blossoms require more patience

need to start over. Each woman brings her own strength to the task — like Elvira Palombaro, with her flair for elegant lilies, and Gabriella D’Onofrio, who makes the smaller blossoms that frame the image of Sant’Urbano, just as her mother once did. Their skills are known and respected.

“I’ve been making flowers since I was born!” laughs Stefania Di Pasquale, whose house in Contrada Pozzo Nuovo we visit next. In Stefania’s kitchen, another group of women is making paper flowers. She recalls how, in years past, women would take apart fresh blossoms — petal by petal — to understand their structure, so they could recreate them in paper. “Now it’s easier,” she adds. “There are photos and videos online.”

“*La Festa dei Banderesi* is in my blood,” Stefania says. “My father was *Il Banderese* once, and twenty-one years ago, my husband was too, for the first time. Our daughter was still a baby, and I was pregnant with our son. This year, my husband is *Il Banderese* again.”

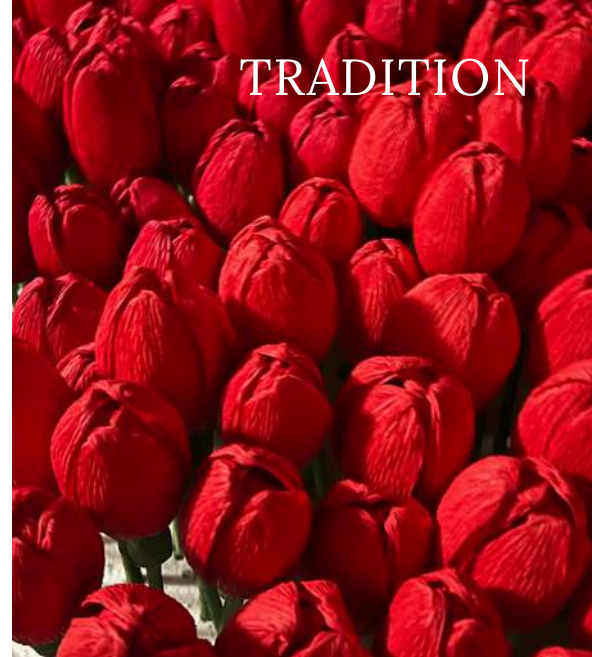
CHANGING TIMES

In Bucchianico, *Il Banderese* is a symbolic figure rooted in a 14th-century tradition — once a peasant leader entrusted with defending the town and its flag, now a married local man with a house in the countryside and at least one son chosen by draw to take on the honour and burden of organising key parts of the *Festa dei Banderesi*. The role demands months of preparation, from building four main floats to hosting communal meals, and opening his home to the entire community,



TRADITION





Photos: Stefania Di Pasquale; paper tulips waiting to be arranged in a basket

with the women in his family taking on the bulk of the behind-the-scenes work.

In the basement of Stefania's house, apart from numerous trays and baskets filled with paper flowers, I see trays of cancellate waffles, packs of soft drinks, cardboard boxes with pasta – a few hundred kilos' worth. "And this is just part of the provisions," explains Stefania. As *Il Banderese*, her husband and family are responsible for hosting five or six communal meals, each feeding up to 600 people. "For one lunch alone, we'll need more than 40 kilos of pasta." To be *Il Banderese* is to take on an honour charged with both prestige and expectation – one that carries weight only locals can truly grasp. During the months of preparation, the true strength of the community emerges – friends, neighbours, and relatives of the *Banderese* family unite to bake, gather materials for the floats, organise fundraisers, and share meals. Still, each year it grows more difficult to sustain the scale of the event. The draw to select the next *Banderese*, once held reliably in June, has in recent years been often postponed due to a lack of candidates. "There's always so much anxiety in the lead-up," says Stefania. "We're constantly wondering if someone will come forward."

Gianluca Di Pasquale notes how times have changed: "Women are working now, lives are busier, and fewer families can commit the time and money needed. But we're trying to adapt – simplifying some of the rituals where we can. What matters most is that the festival doesn't disappear."

THE FESTIVAL THAT UNITES

I see a flicker of tiredness in Sheila's and Stefania's eyes – they both admit that hosting the *festa* preparations these months has been exhausting. "When the festival ends, everyone breathes a sigh of relief," Stefania confides. "But a month later, there's this odd emptiness. You wonder, now what? What do I do with my evenings?" Before long, the conversations turn to the next year's celebrations and by winter, the flower-making begins again. There's a special energy during the preparations," she says. "People stop each other to ask how things are going, to say, 'See you tonight for the flower-making.' She smiles. "*La festa ci unisce*. The festival brings us together."

Like many traditional festivals in Abruzzo, *La Festa dei Banderesi* has two sides: the one shared on social media – colourful parades, fluttering flags, beautiful costumes – and the hard, often unseen work that sustains it. It is in the kitchens, workshops, and communal halls that the true festival takes shape. Here, women play a central role – not just as caretakers of tradition, but as the engine that keeps it going. Theirs is the less glamorous labour, carried out with precision and pride, the invisible scaffolding that gives the festival its depth and its soul, and its myriads of paper flowers.

Read about the history of the Festa dei Banderesi and this year's details in our special supplement "5 festivals not to miss in May" at the end of the issue.



RAIANO: CHERRIES, SAINTS, AND ANARCHISTS

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva

Raiano (AQ) sits on the northern edge of the Valle Peligna, where the River Aterno runs through ancient gorges. Once part of an important route linking Rome to the Adriatic coast, the town remains better connected than many others in the region. Still, it faces the familiar challenges shared by small towns across Abruzzo. Here, we explore its way of life and what a visitor can see and do in Raiano.

“The town is located at the 170th kilometre of an important ancient Roman road, the Via Tiburtina-Valeria, which connected the capital to the mouth of the River Aterno in Pescara, with its important sea port,” explains Massimo Di Bartolo, a local history enthusiast. “For many centuries it was a thriving farming town known for its cherries and beans,” Di Bartolo says. “The town’s cherries were prized for their quality, and in the 1960s, Ferrero bought them from our

Photo: Raiano (AQ)

farmers for their famous *Mon Chéri* chocolates." Nowadays, only a few producers continue cultivating cherries, but the town's *Sagra delle Ciliegie* (see below) still attracts big crowds, although most of the fruit sold there comes from other parts of Italy.

Raiano was also crossed by the *Tratturo Celano-Foggia*, one of the ancient routes used until the 1950s for the transhumance — the seasonal movement of sheep flocks from the mountains of Abruzzo to the plains of Puglia and back. Many grand palazzi still stand as reminders of the centuries of the town's thriving economy that brought wealth to many local families.

The old heart of Raiano unfolds just beyond Piazza Umberto Postiglione, where the *Torre dell'Orologio* stands as the lone surviving fragment of a 9th-century castle. This tower marks the entrance to the historic Sant'Antonio quarter (in front of the main piazza), the oldest part of town, where tightly clustered houses form a dense patchwork of alleyways and courtyards. Viewed from above, the layout reveals its medieval origins — narrow, irregular lanes shaped by the stone staircases, known as *bajitte*, that once led to upper-floor entrances.

Photos: (below) on the main piazza in Raiano; (right) Torre dell'Orologio

A SAINT AND AN ANARCHIST

Two historic figures loom large in Raiano's collective memory: a saint and an anarchist. San Venanzio, the town's patron, is celebrated each year with reverence. According to legend, Venanzio, a young martyr from Camerino, sought refuge here in the third century living in a hermitage carved into the wild cliffs of the Gole di San Venanzio (more in the "What to see and do in Raiano" section below).

The town's other beloved figure is Umberto Postiglione, born in Raiano in 1893. A tireless pacifist and anarchist, Postiglione moved to the United States in 1910 and later to South America to avoid conscription during the First World War. Returning to Abruzzo in 1921, he devoted his life to education and to his ideals of social justice. Upon his death, a stone plaque was placed high above the gorges he loved, among the cypress trees, with an inscription reading, "The people of Raiano call forth... the spirit of Umberto Postiglione to inspire us to love the ideals he pursued for a better humanity."





Photos: (from above) a park in Raiano; a mural with Umberto Postiglione's poetry on the "Path of Peace"; on the streets of Raiano

In 2024, Raiano unveiled a new "Path of Peace" featuring eight murals that bring to life verses from Postiglione's poetry with QR codes connecting audio guides (in Italian and English). The town's main piazza and a newly built kindergarten have both been named in his honour.

Many *raianesi* are also proud of the fact that the famous Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce often visited the town in the early 20th century as a guest of the Palazzo Sagaria Rossi.

COMPLEX REALITY

For visitors, Raiano offers both beauty and convenience. The town's train station lies just a short walk from its central piazza, and the nearby motorway takes you to Rome in under two hours. Recently, 10 houses have been sold to American families, drawn by the promise of affordable *la dolce vita* and tranquillity.

Yet, what may appear idyllic to those who visit on weekends and spend summer holidays here is more nuanced for those who live in the town year-round. While working on this article, I noticed a different side of Raiano that emerged through conversations with the locals and observations of daily life, revealing complexities that go beyond its charm. The population has shrunk over the past decade, from 3,000 to around 2,600. There is a shortage of staff in the municipal office and some locals are not happy about neglected green spaces and the rubbish often dumped along the roads, and say that the current mayor prefers chasing likes on social media to doing real work for the town. Yet, despite these criticisms, Mayor Marco Moca insists he is focused on revitalising the town. In a quick phone call, I asked him about the challenges. "The population has decreased because, like



in many other of Abruzzo's towns, birth rates have been dropping," he explained. "Another reason is that young people who go to study in other cities do not return because there are not many jobs here." The mayor said that the town's administration is doing what it can to reverse the trend, but there is no quick fix. "In January, the town's kindergarten reopened after two years of reconstruction, meaning parents no longer have to drive their children elsewhere. Next year, we are planning to open a new nursery in the town," said the mayor. There is also an innovative school cafeteria project in the works. Part of the building will be transformed into a bioclimatic greenhouse, where students will grow their own food while learning the basics of sustainable agriculture.

DREAMS OF RENEWAL

Since the times of the Roman Empire, Raiano was renowned for its thermal sulfuric springs. In the 1990s, the Terme di Raiano were opened with a lot of fanfare but closed soon after due to financial mismanagement, and since then the thermal complex has sat abandoned. Legal entanglements

and unrealised promises cast long shadows, particularly after the structure was seized by authorities in a corruption scandal. Now, a glimmer of hope: last year, the complex was bought at auction by a big company from Rome. "It is still not official, but we are hoping that the spa, with a hotel and conference centre will open by this summer," said Mayor Marco Moca. "The thermal part might take a little longer, as they need a major restoration." When the Terme di Raiano finally reopens, it could create dozens of desperately needed jobs for locals.

Raiano, like so many places in Abruzzo, stands at a crossroads, where a lot depends on the shifting tides of local politics — a force that can often prove more damaging than helpful, which frequently disrupts the region's progress. Yet, despite its challenges, the town holds on to its character and offers so much to enjoy. I often find myself returning — to walk in the cool shade of the Gole di San Venanzio, to savour an olive oil gelato at Bar Aterno, to grab fresh biscuits and a slice of *pizza con sfrigoli* (pizza with pork cracklings) from a local bakery and then relax beneath the tall chestnut trees in the main piazza, watching life unfold at a slow pace.

Photos: on the streets of Raiano



WHAT TO SEE AND DO IN RAIANO

VISIT THE SUNDAY MARKET

The town's weekly market is one of the longest running in Abruzzo. For more than a century, every Sunday morning, on the central piazza Umberto Postiglione, vendors set up to sell fresh produce, local cheeses, cured meats, and porchetta.

SAMPLE LOCAL PRODUCTS

On the main piazza, you will find **La Bottega del Pane** bakery stocked with delicious biscuits, *pizza con sfrigoli*, pasta made to order, and seasonal baked goodies such as *fiadoni dolci* for Easter. The **Bar Aterno** (Via della Repubblica) is renowned for its gelato flavours which include some unusual ones: olive oil and red garlic (only sold around June when fresh garlic is harvested in Sulmona).

Parco del Gusto (Contrada Cannuccia, near Supermercato Tigre) brings together Abruzzo's small-scale producers selling products that rarely make it onto supermarket shelves: ancient grain flours, rare wild *mugnoli* greens from Pettorano, Sulmona's famed red garlic, local olive oil and cheeses, liqueurs from Pescasseroli, fruit preserves from local orchards, and truffles from Molina Aterno.

Photos: (below) Convento dei Padri Zoccolanti;
Eremo di San Venanzio

EXPLORE HISTORIC CHURCHES

A short walk from the square lies the **Convento dei Padri Zoccolanti**, founded in 1642, that once had 21 monastic cells, a library, and a small hospital (currently closed for renovations). Facing the main square is the parish church of Santa Maria Maggiore, first built in the 15th century and reshaped in baroque form following the devastating earthquake in 1706. Along Via Vestini, the **Chiesa della Madonna delle Grazie** dates to the 12th century, its façade a fine example of 15th-century Renaissance design. One inscription still records the solar eclipse of 9 April 1567. If you wish to visit Raiano's churches, it is best to contact the parish office a few days in advance at +39 086 4726542.

RELAX AT THE EREMO DI SAN VENANZIO

The Hermitage of San Venanzio, located along the Aterno River in the **San Venanzio Gorges Regional Nature Reserve** is dedicated to Saint Venantius of Camerino, who retreated to this hermitage in the 3rd century. The *Scala Santa* — a holy staircase carved directly into the rock, leads to a small grotto, the oldest part of the hermitage. In this sacred space, visitors can touch the supposed imprint of Saint Venantius's body in the stone. Near the entrance, there is a stone seat, traditionally known as the "seat of Pope Celestine" or "seat



of Saint Rina,” where, for centuries, pilgrims have come in the hope of receiving relief from rheumatic pain. In summer months, there is a small kiosk selling snacks and drinks with picnic tables where you can relax in the shade of the trees, listening to the sound of the rushing river. The grounds are open all year, but the hermitage building is accessible only between May and October. For opening hours check the natural reserve’s Facebook [page](#).

ENJOY THE FESTIVALS

Since 1946, *Sagra delle Ciliegie* has been hosted in the town in May with traditional music, food, and parades (for more, see our special supplement “**5 festival not to miss in May**” at the end of the issue).

One of the biggest festivals is *La Festa Padronale di San Venanzio*, The Patron Saint’s Festival, celebrated annually on May 16-18. Pilgrims from the surrounding towns, including Penne, Montebello di Bertona, and Villa Celiera, make their way to the hermitage of San Venanzio, continuing a centuries-old tradition of devotion. The festival, which once drew hundreds of visitors, still attracts a significant crowd, celebrating the town’s religious heritage with processions, prayers, and joyous community gatherings.

Photos: (below) a fragment of the façade of the Chiesa della Madonna delle Grazie with the inscription about the solar eclipse; a trail in the San Venanzio Gorges Regional Nature Reserve

VISIT THE COPPER MUSEUM

The recently opened **Museo del Rame** is housed in the ancestral home of its founder, Antonio Tronca, a retired teacher. Dedicated to local coppersmith Fioravante Baglione, the museum displays around 200 copper objects once used in everyday rural life. Open Thursdays and Saturdays, and by appointment on other days. Admission is donation-based, with visitors free to offer what they feel appropriate. Book your visit by calling at 0039 329 8847702.

WALK THE TRAILS

A short, easy trail leads from the **Eremo di San Venanzio** to the old mill and the sulphur spring known as La Solfa (there is also a [trail](#) starting from the centre of Raiano). More experienced hikers can take on the steeper path that winds through the gorges above the hermitage to reach fascinating late Neolithic rock paintings, dating to 3000–4000 BCE. As some sections are quite challenging, it’s best to go with a certified guide. To book a guided trek, email assterrecolte@gmail.com or call Paolo at +39 347 639 3353.





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with ABRUZZISSIMO'S EDITOR

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Anna Lebedeva

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PALAZZO TILLI IN CASOLI

By Lea Bianchini

In the historic heart of Casoli, a hill town in the province of Chieti, Palazzo Tilli rises like a memory brought back to life. Behind its white façade and beneath its frescoed ceilings, this 18th-century residence — built by the Tilli family and inhabited by their heirs until the late 20th century — has become more than a monument.

Palazzo Tilli was bought by Antonella Allegrino, a businesswoman from Pescara and, thanks to her vision, it is now a place where memory is not merely preserved but lived. “I fell in love with the palace the first time I saw it, even though it was abandoned and crumbling,” says Allegrino, whose husband worked as a doctor at Casoli’s hospital and introduced her to the town. “We decided to return the building to the people of Casoli and Abruzzo. The work was demanding and challenging. We sought to preserve every stone, every brick, and bring to light what time had hidden.”

RESTORING TIME

The conservative restoration, carried out between 2013 and 2017, was not just a matter of bricks and mortar. Guided by the principles of preservation, the project followed strict

Photo: Palazzo Tilli in Casoli (CH)

constraints set by Italy's Fine Arts protection authorities. The result is a rare example of an 18th-century noble residence restored with authenticity and grace. Original features — from the Majella stone staircase to the frescoed salons — have been faithfully reimagined, with objects, documents, and oral histories adding emotional depth to architectural grandeur.

Built in 1787, the palace spans one thousand square metres over four floors, including expansive cellars with cobbled floors and ancient barrels, a noble chapel still consecrated and used for special masses, and grand salons named not only for their functions but for the life that once animated them. The Salone delle Armi, for instance, once displayed 17th-century suits of armour discovered in the family's olive groves. The Sala dei Merletti was where women gathered to sew and embroider under the invitation of Donna Rosina, a strong and energetic woman remembered fondly by many Casolani.

Only a few pieces of furniture are original, as they were replaced over the decades, but while restoring the palazzo, Antonella Allegrino found boxes of documents, which helped her to replicate the rooms with historical accuracy. "They were all dusty, disorganised, and had never been catalogued at the

time," she explained. "They helped me to understand what furnishings were used, what choices were made in different periods to set up and decorate the rooms — including everything related to upholstery, drapery, and more."

These same documents also became a key to unlocking the broader story of the building itself. "I studied the documents we found in the palazzo to understand its and the Tilli family's history," Antonella explained. "The palazzo suffered during the French Revolution and many records were lost." The upheaval of that time, she added, left gaps in the palazzo's story that may never be filled, though what survived offers valuable glimpses into its past.

THE TILLI FAMILY

The Tilli family were not nobles by royal decree, but they wielded comparable influence as large landowners. Their holdings stretched across the rolling hills and fertile valleys around Casoli, cultivated by tenant farmers and sharecroppers who depended on the estate's yields. With this ownership came an unspoken social contract — part patronage, part governance. The family mediated disputes, collected taxes, and even offered assistance in lean years, long before municipal institutions took root.

Some of the rooms in Palazzo Tilli



One of the most memorable figures of the family was Donna Rosina, a woman of formidable character and fine sensibility. She was known for her beautiful winter balls and theatrical soirées in the grand reception rooms. When the restoration was completed, Antonella Allegrino invited the entire town of Casoli to attend a mass in the palazzo's chapel. Many locals came to share their memories of Donna Rosina – some recalling her exceptional desserts, especially the aniseed biscuits she used to give to children in the town.

SHADOWS IN THE CELLARS

But Palazzo Tilli holds more than family lore and local affections. During the Second World War, its cellars and an annex were used as internment camps under fascist rule. Between 1940 and 1944, over 280 people – many from Slovenia and northern Italy – were imprisoned there. The annex has since become the Palazzina della Memoria, a place of remembrance for those persecuted during the war.

Allegrino considers this chapter of the building's past essential to its present mission. "We wanted to preserve not only the structure, but the civil and political history," she explained. "That's why we've created spaces for reflection, and why we participate in national initiatives like the Giornata delle Dimore Storiche."

A LIVING SPACE OF MEMORY

Today, Palazzo Tilli is a cultural venue alive with events, guided tours, and new forms of storytelling. In

Photos: (below) a wine cellar in the palazzo; (right) a fragment of a ceiling fresco. All photos courtesy of Palazzo Tilli

addition to traditional visits, the palace offers a VR Experience – a virtual reality tour allowing visitors to immerse themselves in ten historical scenes, from ballroom dances to everyday life in the salons. "We've had 2D visors for a couple of years," says Allegrino, "But starting in May we're launching 3D VR headsets – something unique in Abruzzo. Visitors will be able to truly step into the past." The rooms are also available for private events and small stays. Guests can dine where Rosina once served biscuits, or rest in chambers still resonant with memory.

When the chapel reopened after restoration, Casolani returned, not as curious visitors, but as descendants. They sat in the same pews where their grandparents once knelt, under the same vaulted ceiling and, afterwards, they told stories. In doing so, they helped restore not just a building, but the community's bond with its own history.

IF YOU GO

Palazzo Tilli is open for guided visits, virtual reality experiences, and special events. You can book a visit through their Facebook [page](#) or by sending a message to 0039 342 550 1354 or 0039 347 8400130.

SPECIAL DISCOUNT

Palazzo Tilli is offering ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine readers a 15% discount on guided visits. Simply print out or take a screenshot of this page and present it when purchasing your ticket.



OUR HOME ABOVE LAKE BARREA

By Elly Baus and Michael Windross

The authors, who bought a house in Barrea (AQ) over 20 years ago and have come to appreciate its history, people, and the quieter rhythms of life, share their story and invite us to explore the town.

One afternoon in August 2007, the phone rang. It was the *muratore*, Giuliano: "Your apartment is ready – it is sunny, airy, and *pieno di luce*, full of light." It has been so ever since, even on a grey, rainy day – at least to us! Jokingly, we always say that we didn't choose the place; it found us.

During one of our visits from our home in Antwerp, Belgium, to Rome, we decided to take the pullman from Tiburtina station and explore Abruzzo. We were immediately enchanted with the Alto Sangro area – so much so that we decided to dip into our savings and look for a place to buy. Our humble plans ranged from a cabin in the wild for stargazing to a more civilised *villetta* in one of the towns there. On our return home, we did some internet research to familiarise ourselves with the housing market.

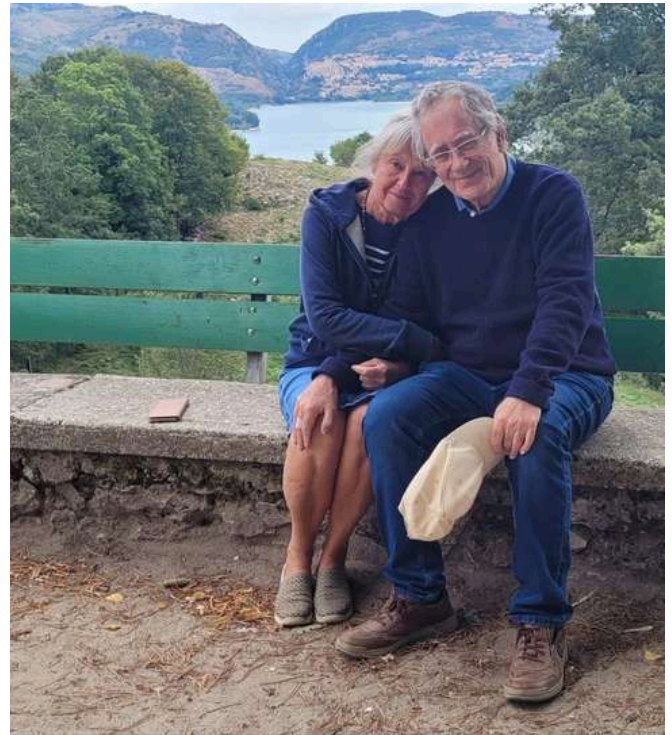
LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

In spring 2007, we consciously set out on a house hunt in situ. It was a very short hunting season, for when we saw the flat in Barrea during one of our first viewings, in Palazzo Victor, we immediately fell for it and ended our search there and then. It was a three-room, two-bathroom flat, with a kitchen and a large terrace in Condominium Victor, which looked out onto the majestic Monte Greco, with a side view of the lake across the old tiled rooftops.

At the end of June we went to the *notaio* and the deal was concluded, followed by a festive meal, in the *Tana dell' Orso*, by then our local restaurant, with Giuliano and others who helped us in our house hunting.

ALL THE COMFORTS — PLUS WILDLIFE!

We are still in the same enthusiastic frame of mind every time we arrive, with the one regret that we cannot stay for longer periods in our apartment in



Elly Baus and Michael Windross near Lake Barrea

Barrea. In the town, we have almost everything we need: two butchers (one with its own livestock), two small supermarkets (one with its own *forno* for bread), a vegetable shop, a newspaper shop, a pharmacy, a doctor, and even a blacksmith. No fish shops, much to our regret, for mountainous, rural Abruzzo is meat-eating, as we soon discovered from the menus of our local restaurants. We use our own car, but there is a good bus service to the nearby town of Castel di Sangro, with connections to Rome, Napoli, and Pescara.

Every year, we spend a few months in Barrea. We keep ourselves busy reading, having coffee or a meal with friends. Mike is writing his second book and he paints; I do genealogical research. Walking is one of our favourite activities and many well-marked trails start at our doorstep. There is a lot of wildlife around, since Barrea is part of the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise and protects its species. Deer and wild boar are a usual sight, with bears occasionally coming to the town to steal fruit from the trees in private gardens and raid hen houses.



Lake Barrea. Watercolour by Michael Windross; (right) the authors' apartment in Barrea

PALAZZO WITH A PAST

Our Palazzo Victor was the last of the big mansions to be built in the town. It dates from around 1890 and stands in a prominent position on Via Roma, just outside the old walls. It was built by Alfredo di Loreto as a grand style residence, ground floor for keeping the animals and first floor as living quarters. In the late 1950s it was bought by a building contractor and converted into a large hotel, with an extra second floor and attic added, but a decade later it was converted into 25 residential apartments. The entrance hall with its large classical pilaster, imposing stone staircase, and old-fashioned lift recalls the hotel's past. And in the big communal room with its grand fireplace, once the foyer for hotel guests, now where the annual *assemblea condominiale* takes place and one might feel a brush with the past.

When we first saw our apartment, it was still divided into two separate spaces. We decided to open it all up, replacing some doors by arches and unifying the entire area with a tiled terracotta floor; we also added a bit of distressing to our imported furniture — a touch of gilt here and there — under the impression that we were making it more 'Italian'. When the *amministratore*



popped in to see how we were getting on, the first thing he said was, "Well I can see that you are not Italians!" What we didn't know was that Italians make a clear distinction between *al mare* and in *montagna*; Barrea is obviously in the latter, and all the other apartments are rustic, with dark, wooden furniture, double-glazed windows with small panes and thick, dark frames, and a wood-burner taking up half the room.

HISTORY IS EVERYWHERE

We love learning about Barrea's history and, through conversations with local people, have uncovered many fascinating stories and corners. Many families in Barrea made their fortune from their sheep flocks and built grand houses, *case signorili*, in the town centre. The Di Loretto family is still prominent; they own one of the most spectacular palazzi on the main square, Piazza Umberto I, which opens each year for the annual Nativity scenes tour.

Another notable landmark on the square is the *fontana* where, in earlier times, local women gathered to collect water and chat. Here, we also find the old town hall, now used for exhibitions — Mike, who is an artist, had a two-week show there in August 2014.

In the historical centre the medieval street pattern has been preserved despite many devastating earthquakes. The last one happened in 1984, with no human casualties, though much of the medieval centre was damaged and had to be cordoned off for a few years. But the pieces were picked up again and life went on, with more up-to-date building regulations and preventative measures. Our own Palazzo Victor's attic was then fitted with giant screws, running from one outer wall to the other.

A trail near Barrea. Watercolour by Michael Windross

One of Barrea's most famous features is its beautiful lake shimmering below the town. A dam was built in 1951 on the Sangro river to create an artificial basin, partly to regulate the water supply to the lower regions, partly for hydro-electrical purposes. The waters of the new lake eroded patches of the soil and old burial grounds from 700 BCE resurfaced. The artefacts were sent to the National Archaeology Museum in Chieti, others to the archaeological museum in Alfedena. One of them, the Warrior of Barrea, is displayed in Barrea's *Museo della Civiltà Safina*.

A NEWCOMER'S WELCOME

For Easter in the spring and Ferragosto in August, crowds of ex-barreani return to their hometown. We were unprepared for this seasonal Italian phenomenon when we arrived for the first time to our new apartment in August of 2007 and began to unload our household items in at the height of the festivities. The locals, no doubt, were wondering *Di chi si lu fije?* (Whose child are you?), the question that is always posed to newcomers here and in all small villages in Abruzzo. We have no ancestral connections to Barrea but the town has welcomed us and has become our second home.

You can see Michael Windross' paintings on his [website](#).



QUICK STOP

SCORRANO, A VILLAGE OF FAIRY TALES



Tucked away in the hills of Teramo province, the hamlet of **Scorrano** — part of the comune of **Cellino Attanasio** — has reinvented itself as a village of stories. In 2019 the village transformed itself into an open-air museum of fairy tales.

The project, born from a municipal initiative in 2019, invites artists every year from Abruzzo and beyond to paint murals inspired by classic children's stories. These artworks are part of the *Borgo da Favola* initiative, transforming the village into an open-air museum where visitors can explore and listen to classic stories (in Italian) like *The Little Prince*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Pinocchio*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Mulan* through QR codes placed beside each mural.

Every year, on April 25, during the *Borgo da Favola* Festival, new murals are unveiled, adding to a growing collection. The murals are more than decoration — they're part of a wider effort to revive the hamlet and attract visitors. You can find a map of the murals on Scorrano's [website](#).

Bring a smartphone, follow the map, and lose yourself in the stories. Scorrano is tiny — just a scattering of houses and alleyways — but it offers a brief, enchanting detour for anyone travelling through Abruzzo. A reminder that even the smallest places can hold whole worlds.

Perfect for: families, photographers, and dreamers passing through.

EASY TRAILS

EXPLORING THE SALINELLO GORGES



- **Length:** about 3km
- **Time:** about 2 hours
- **Starting Point:** the top of the hamlet of Ripe. Set your GPS to Gole del Salinello. You'll be guided onto a gravel road. Small lay-bys are available along the road for parking. 500 metres from the road, there is a picnic area where the trail begins.

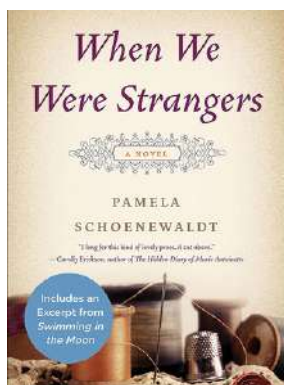
An easy, rewarding walk winds through the **Riserva Naturale delle Gole del Salinello** in the province of Teramo. Archaeological excavations carried out here in the 1960s uncovered traces of human life dating back to the Neolithic and Iron Ages.

The trail begins with a brief, steep climb before levelling out into a gentle path that follows the Salinello River. All along the way, the river creates pools and waterfalls among the rocks, its cool breath keeping the gorge lush even in the heat of summer.

Two stops along the route are not to be missed. The waterfall **Cascata del Salinello** — also known as the **Cascata del Caccamo** — plunges 35 metres into a deep natural basin, affectionately called *lu caccheme* in local dialect. Though the final stretch can be slippery, ropes have been fixed to aid your steps.

Nearby, the **Grotta Sant'Angelo** opens in a great cleft, offering sweeping views across the valley. The earliest worship in the cave was likely dedicated to Mother Earth during the Neolithic period. A limestone altar, built in 1236, marks the later Christian devotion to Saint Michael the Archangel.

Late spring is the best time to visit, when the river is full and the waterfall is at its most impressive.



WHEN WE WERE STRANGERS

by Pamela Schoenewaldt

The book chronicles the tumultuous life journey of a young immigrant seamstress, Irma Vitale, as she travels from her isolated mountain village of Opi (AQ) to America in the 1800s.

Her moving tale opens in Abruzzo: “I come from the village of Opi in Abruzzo, perched on the spine of Italy. As long as anyone remembers, our family kept sheep. We lived and died in Opi and those who left the mountain always came to ruin.” Irma’s voice is quietly lyrical as she recalls her life in the mountain village: “Barely sixteen, I felt as old and shabby as my mother’s brown shawl, melting into Opi and the place carved out for me... I knew the narrow streets draped across the mountain crest like threads for lacework never finished, unravelling into shepherds’ trails. These threads caught and held me like a web. I knew which families had carved wooden doors and which had rough nailed planks. I knew the voices and shapes of our people. By the sound of their footsteps I knew which of them walked behind me.”

With her family dwindling and her future narrowing, she is pushed—by grief, by fear, and by the soft, persistent urging of her aunt—into leaving everything she knows for the uncertainty of America.

From the poverty of immigrant quarters to the ruins left by the Great Chicago Fire, Irma’s journey is filled with hard-won friendships and sharp betrayals.

Pamela Schoenewaldt lived for ten years in a small town near Naples, and her novel reflects a deep understanding of both Italian village life and the hardships faced by immigrants in 1880s America. A worthwhile read for those who enjoy historical fiction and stories of immigrant journeys.

Available on [Amazon](#).



ABRUZZO FORTE E GENTILE

by Primo Levi

Abruzzo forte e gentile. Impressioni d'occhio e di cuore is a rare literary gem that offers a vivid portrait of late 19th-century Abruzzo through the eyes of Primo Levi (1853–1917), a journalist and writer from Ferrara. First published in 1883, the book gave birth to the now-iconic expression *forte e gentile*, today widely used to describe the region and its people. Levi’s travelogue—at once lyrical and clear-eyed—guides the reader from Rome to the heart of Abruzzo, over mountain passes and into towns where religious devotion, civic pride, and daily hardship coexist in quiet harmony.

This new edition (in Italian), curated by David Ferrante and published by *Solfanelli*, restores the full original text, including sections omitted from previous versions. It also features Ferrante’s thoughtful introduction, which situates Levi’s work in its historical and cultural context. The book captures a transitional moment: Abruzzo’s rural identity intact, yet shadowed by the stirrings of change. From the arcades of L’Aquila to the springs of Tempera, and from the castle of Ocre to the Adriatic shore, Levi evokes a landscape both majestic and austere, where men and women are deeply connected to their land, their labour, and their traditions.

The book is available from [Amazon](#) or directly from the [publisher](#).

TRUFFLES FOR EVERY SEASON

By Anna Swann

May marks the awakening of the *scorzzone*, the summer truffle (*Tuber aestivum*). Grated over fresh pasta or grilled meats, it makes even the humblest dish heavenly with its subtle hazelnut and earthy notes.

During the Renaissance period until the 1800s, the region provided some of the best truffles for aristocratic tables. Nowadays, approximately 40% of Italian truffles originate from Abruzzo, making it one of the country's leading truffle producers. Though the region yields around 800 quintals of truffles each year, official figures record just 380 quintals (for 2022), a reflection of the vast quantities that are traded beyond its borders, often without acknowledgment. At celebrated fairs like Alba in Piedmont, it is not uncommon for Abruzzo's bounty to be offered under other names, its origins blurred in the market's clamour. Yet the numbers tell their own story: with 3,800 registered truffle hunters and an annual turnover of €5.1 million within the region alone.

The region is home to eight truffle species: the prized white truffle (*Tuber magnatum Pico*), available from mid-September to mid-January, the black winter truffle (*Tuber melanosporum Vitt.*), harvested from November to March, with a deeper, woodier aroma, ideal for robust sauces and roasts.

Spring brings the *bianchetto* (*Tuber borchii Vitt.*), known for its lighter flavour and subtle garlic notes, making it perfect for creamy risottos. The *uncinato* variety, a cousin of the summer truffle *scorzzone* (*Tuber aestivum*; in the photo), has a more pronounced, nutty taste and matures from autumn to early winter sharing the season with the *Tartufo Nero Ordinario* (*Tuber mesentericum*), which has a lovely musky aroma. There also rarer varieties such as the *tartufo moscato* and the newly identified *ruber soave*.

In the early 19th century, hunters even employed female pigs, prized for their focus – as they were less likely to be distracted by the scents of wild game than dogs. Today, specially trained dogs of different breeds lead *tartufai* (truffle hunters in Italian). All types of truffles can be found in the Maiella and Gran Sasso mountains, where they thrive in well-drained, calcareous soils rich in lime, under oak, hazel, and



chestnut trees. In recent years, however, many new plantations have been established, as the European Union provided generous subsidies. However, the white truffle can only be picked in the wild, commanding prices of around €4000 per kilo. Black truffles cost less, between €250 and €1800 per kilo.

WHERE TO BUY ABRUZZO'S TRUFFLES

Berlingueri Tartufi

The Berlingueri family has a few small truffle plantations in Villa Santa Lucia (AQ), which were planted around 30 years ago. Today, Lucio harvests black truffles with his dogs throughout the year selling them fresh, thinly sliced in oil, or transformed into delicate condiments.

Rio Verde Tartufi

A small shop in the town of Borello (CH) sells a range of excellent condiments made from the local black truffles. You can also buy them fresh placing your order via their website or WhatsApp.

Truffle hunting

If you're eager to see *tartufai* and their dogs in action, *Abruzzo With Gusto* offers private truffle hunting experiences for small groups. For more details and bookings, reach out through the website.

Sagre

You could buy the prized delicacy and taste local dishes at two festivals: Sagra del tartufo di Campovalano (TE) in July and *Tuber Magnatum - Manifestazione del Tartufo Bianco* in Poggio Umbricchio (TE) in October, which celebrates the white truffle.

"MARRIED" POTATOES FROM PESCASSEROLI

By Anna Swann

Patate maritate is a traditional dish from Pescasseroli, which I discovered while researching local peasant recipes and I had to try it immediately.

It is a simple dish where sliced potatoes are paired with Pecorino cheese, breadcrumbs, and parsley. For many years, Pescasseroli hosted a festival dedicated to this dish.

The term *patate maritate* translates literally as "married potatoes." The word *maritate* comes from the verb *maritare*, meaning "to marry" or "to pair," which reflects the harmonious combination of potatoes with ingredients such as herbs, vegetables, and cheeses.

To make it even heartier, add crumbled cooked sausage between the layers or *scamorza* cheese.

In Abruzzo, potatoes from the Fucino Plain are regarded as some of the finest, but you can use any local variety suitable for oven roasting.

INGREDIENTS

Makes about 2-3 portions

- 200 g potatoes, peeled and thinly sliced
- 100 g Pecorino Abruzzese, grated
- Slices of stale bread, crumbled
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- Fresh parsley, chopped
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Salt to taste
- Optional: 200 g *scamorza* cheese, sliced thinly



PREPARATION

Start by crumbling the stale bread by hand and placing it in a baking dish. Toast it in the oven at 160°C for about 10 minutes until golden and crisp. Once the bread is toasted, combine it with minced garlic and chopped parsley in a bowl.

Peel the potatoes and slice them as thinly as possible using a mandoline.

Grease a baking dish and start layering the thinly sliced potatoes. Sprinkle each layer with the breadcrumb mixture, a pinch of salt, and some grated Pecorino cheese. If you're using *scamorza* or sausage, add those between the layers as well. Finish with a final layer of potatoes, saving some breadcrumbs, Pecorino, and *scamorza* (if using) for the top.

Drizzle the top with a little extra virgin olive oil, then bake in a preheated fan oven at 160°C for about 30 minutes.

After 30 minutes, remove the dish from the oven and sprinkle the reserved breadcrumbs, Pecorino, and *scamorza* on top. Drizzle with more olive oil and bake for another 20 minutes at 180°C until the top is golden and crispy. If the potatoes are still a little firm after the first baking, just cover the dish with parchment paper and bake for another 10-15 minutes until tender.

Serve the *patate maritate* hot.

SOFT AMARETTI BISCUITS

By Rose Myers

When my children were young, we spent every summer with our relatives in Abruzzo, in Giulianova. Long days by the sea, lazy lunches, arrosticini parties – we still remember those holidays fondly and return whenever we can.

One of our neighbours was Pina, a lady in her 70s who always made *amaretti* biscuits for the children. They were unlike the crumbly ones I knew. Pina's *amaretti* were soft, not very sweet, and larger. She told me they were the traditional Abruzzese *amaretti*, not the kind "they sell in shops."

She shared her recipe with me and, 30 years on, I still make her *amaretti* biscuits for special occasions for the whole family.

Rose Myers lives in Germany and has been subscribing to ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine for several years.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 40-45 biscuits

- 350g sweet almonds
- 300g caster sugar
- 4 egg whites
- A few bitter almonds

PREPARATION

Begin by finely grinding the sweet and bitter almonds into a coarse flour. In a large bowl, mix the almond flour with the caster sugar. Add the egg whites and stir gently until the mixture comes together into a soft, slightly sticky dough.



Cover the bowl and leave the mixture to rest at room temperature for 1–2 hours. This quiet pause allows the flavours to deepen and the texture to settle.

When you are ready to bake, preheat the oven to 200°C.

Prepare a clean work surface by dusting it with a mixture of equal parts flour and sugar. Tip the dough onto this surface and knead it lightly.

With hands dusted in the same sugar-flour mix, shape the dough into small balls, roughly the size of a walnut. Roll each one generously in caster sugar, coating them well, and place them on a baking tray lined with parchment paper, leaving a little space between each biscuit.

For a soft *amaretti* with a tender heart, bake at 200°C for about 16–18 minutes. If you prefer a slower bake that yields a slightly drier, more golden biscuit, lower the temperature to 150°C and bake for around 30 minutes, or until the *amaretti* are just tinged with gold.

Remove from the oven and allow to cool completely. These traditional Abruzzese *amaretti* are wonderful with morning coffee, as a sweet ending to a meal, or simply as a small, beautiful pause in the day.



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ABRUZZISSIMO
MAGAZINE



5 FESTIVALS

NOT TO MISS
IN MAY

RAIANO
ROCCA DI MEZZO
PRATOLA PELIGNA
PREZZA
BUCCHIANICO





FESTA DELLA MADONNA DELLA LIBERA IN PRATOLA PELIGNA (AQ)

When: all month of May

Known as *il paese della Madonna* — the town of the Madonna — Pratola Peligna celebrates its most important festival in May, honouring its patron saint, Maria Santissima della Libera.

The festival begins on the Friday before the first Sunday of May, when pilgrims from Gioia dei Marsi arrive on foot, walking for about 11 hours to the Sanctuary of the Madonna della Libera in the centre of Pratola Peligna. Upon arrival, they enter the sanctuary on their knees, making their way down the central nave.

During these three weeks, streets fill with pilgrims, market stalls, marching bands, and processions. On May 3 and 31, the town gathers for beautiful torch-lit processions, when the statue of the Madonna is carried through the streets. On May 4 and 24, fireworks light the night sky. Every evening, festive lights illuminate the town, and live concerts take place in Piazza Garibaldi, with performances ranging from the nationally famous star Fiorella Mannoia to a local Eric Clapton tribute band and DJ sets.



The origins of the festival go back to the early 16th century. A man named Fortunato, stricken by the plague, fled to the ruins of a chapel in the hamlet of Torre, on the slopes of Mount Cerrano. There, weakened and alone, he lay down to die. But in his sleep, a vision came — a woman in red and pale blue, the Liberatrice, she who delivers and liberates — and said she would save him and the people of Pratola from the plague.

When he awoke, Fortunato found a fresco of the Virgin Mary. Overcome with joy, he cried out, “Madonna, liberaci!” — “Madonna, deliver us!”

The fresco was brought to the town, but a fight ensued with neighbouring Sulmona, whose people also wanted to claim the miraculous image. They brought seven pairs of oxen, yet the cart carrying it would not move. When two oxen were hitched by the people of Pratola Peligna, the cart moved forward effortlessly — and stopped on the spot where the Sanctuary of the Madonna della Libera now stands. The image is still preserved inside showing the Virgin upright, serene, with angels lifting her mantle above two groups of kneeling worshippers — women on one side, men on the other.

Yet it is the processional statue, consecrated in 1741, that commands the most fervent devotion in the town and is carried during the celebratory processions.

The current sanctuary was built between 1851 and 1912. It also houses a monumental organ with 3,200 pipes.

See the full programme of the festival on the sanctuary’s [website](#) or their public Facebook [group](#).

Photos via Parrocchia Maria Ss. Della Libera Pratola Peligna/Facebook



FESTA DEL NARCISO IN ROCCA DI MEZZO (AQ)

When: May 23-25

Rocca di Mezzo, located in the Altopiano delle Rocche in Abruzzo, celebrates the *Festa del Narciso* (Daffodil Festival) each May. Now in its 79th edition, the festival is known for its unique parade of daffodil-covered floats and its strong community participation. In 2025, the main event will take place on Sunday, 25 May, with related activities beginning two days earlier.

The festival was first held in 1947, as a way for the town to come together after the Second World War. According to local accounts, some of the organisers had been inspired by the Rose Parade in Pasadena, California, an idea brought back by emigrants. The daffodil was chosen as the symbol of the event because it grows spontaneously across the plateau during the month of May.

The central event of the festival is the parade of allegorical floats, each one elaborately decorated with fresh wild daffodils. The themes of the floats vary each year and often include references to folklore, current events, or pop culture. The floats are judged at the end of the procession, and a prize is awarded to the best creation.



The floats are constructed throughout the month of May by local teams known as *costruttori*, who dedicate many hours to designing and building them. Originally, the floats were wooden platforms pulled by oxen and decorated with whatever materials could be found. Today, they are large, complex structures with moving parts and coordinated performances involving both adults and children.

Visitors can take part in the preparations in the days before the parade. On Friday 23 and Saturday 24 May, from 9:30am, tourists are welcome to join the locals in *la raccolta* – the gathering of wild daffodils from nearby fields – and watch how the flowers are attached to the floats.

In the final 24 hours before the parade, work continues through the night. Volunteers complete the decoration of the floats with daffodils, pinning each flower into place and making final adjustments.

The *Festa del Narciso* attracts over 10,000 visitors each year. The main event – the float parade – begins from Piazza Principe Piemonte on Sunday 25 May at 3pm. Spectators line the streets to see the floats pass through the town centre. At the end of the route, judges announce the winning float. You can reserve a place in the front row by calling at 0862 916125. For more information see the festival's [page](#).

Photos via Festa del Narciso/Facebook



SAGRA DEL CARCIOFO IN PREZZA (AQ)

When: May 24-25

The town of Prezza will host the 14th edition of the *Sagra del Carciofo*, celebrating the local variety of artichoke that has been cultivated in the area for a long time.

First held in 2010, the festival has grown into one of the most anticipated annual events in the Peligna Valley. It offers an opportunity to taste traditional dishes centred around the artichoke. Over the two days, visitors will be able to explore food stands and taste grilled artichokes, fried artichoke hearts, artichoke pasta dishes, *lasagna alla crema di carciofi* and more.

In addition to food, the programme includes live music and entertainment.

Entry is free, and the event takes place in the town centre. For more details see the festival's [page](#)



LA FESTA DEI BANDERESI OF BUCCHIANICO

When: May 24-25

Since medieval times, Buccianico has celebrated the *Festa dei Banderesi* to honour the town's patron Sant'Urbano with parades, ancient rituals, and big feasts.

Local legend has it that during the Middle Ages, a territorial dispute broke out between the municipalities of Chieti and Buccianico. As the story goes, Chieti's army laid siege to Buccianico, but the town's commander devised a clever ruse. Allegedly, Saint Urban appeared to him in a dream, instructing the men of Buccianico to wear red and blue armbands and helmets adorned with coloured feathers, and to run in zigzag patterns along the defensive walls to create the illusion of a large force ready to defend the town. The plan worked: Chieti's troops, convinced they were outnumbered, quickly retreated, lifting the siege. The town commemorates this victory with *La Festa dei Banderesi*, held each May to coincide with the feast of Saint Urban, Buccianico's patron saint.

Photo above: la Ciammaichella march during the *Festa dei Banderesi*

The festival has developed over time, incorporating different customs and festive rituals of Bucchianico. "Over the centuries, the festival has transformed, but many elements have remained unchanged," says Giuliano Di Menna, the vice-president of Bucchianico's ProLoco (a local grassroots organisation that runs events and promotes the town), who has thoroughly researched the festival's history. "Historical documents mention that carts became part of the celebration from 1550, and later, paper flowers were added as decorations." Today's version of the *Festa dei Banderesi* is a week-long celebration – a joyful mix of history, legends, pagan and Christian rituals.

MAIN FIGURES

The *festa* revolves around a peasant becoming a knight. In the 14th century, *Il Banderese* was an elected peasant who had the right to guard and carry the municipal flag and recruit a small army of relatives and friends (*banderesi*) to protect the town and its inhabitants. They were distinguished by a strip of cloth (*banda*) attached to their coats. "The *Banderese* had to have a large kinship and have sons who could be initiated into knighthood, a custom that has remained unchanged to this day," explains Di Menna.

Photos: (below) *Il Banderese* and his wife with an image of Saint Urbano, 2019; (right) *Il Banderese* and *Il Sergentiere*, 2018

In Bucchianico, any married local man with a house in the countryside and sons (these are the main requirements) can self-nominate for a draw where the *Banderese's* name is picked every June. The title comes with a lot of responsibilities: raising a bull for the procession, collecting money for the festival, building four carts, and serving refreshments and festive meals. Additionally, his house will be open to everyone for the entire year, and his whole family will be involved with social events and preparations for the festival, according to Di Menna.

Another central figure is *Il Sergentiere*, the festival's highest authority. The title is hereditary and has been passed from father to son within the local family of Tatasciore-Papè for at least 200 years. According to tradition, they are the descendant of the commander who defended Bucchianico with the help of Saint Urban. He is a knight whose task is to instruct *Il Banderese* and his children in the practices of knighthood. The *Sergentiere* brandishes an ancient battleaxe and is followed by an escort of 10 drummers, 30 armourers and damsels, all dressed in 14th-century historical costumes.

PROCESSION

Di Menna says that what spectators see in May and know as *La Festa dei Banderesi*, is only a small part of this historical event. "When people ask me how long the festival lasts, I always tell them that it goes on all year." The festival's main events start the Sunday before May 23rd, with the *Trasporto delle*





Photos: (clockwise from above) festival participants in historical costumes; festive lights decoration that reads "Viva Sant'Urbano"; hand-made paper flowers; *la Ciammaichella*



Some di Sant'Urbano: when the roads leading to the town's old centre fill up with almost 1500 people dressed in traditional costumes. Men drive carts featuring peasant scenes, and women carry baskets with 100,000 paper flowers on their heads, re-enacting an ancient ritual when food and wine were collected and brought to the feast in honour of the patron saint. The family of *Banderese* brings four carts filled with bread, wood, wine, and a bed — re-enacting the old legend about the imminent siege of Bucchianico, when peasants fled carrying their life possessions.



After a celebratory mass at the church of Saint Urban, the procession moves to the main piazza where the most spectacular event begins: *la Ciammaichella*. Women march, zigzagging left and right, creating a mesmerising sea of bright colours and flowers. The same zigzagging spectacle will be performed by men dressed in red and blue medieval costumes on May 25th, accompanied by flag throwing.

RITUALS

La Festa dei Banderesi is filled with many rituals — some of which have been carried on from the Middle Ages. There is the initiation of *Il Banderese* to the rank of the knight, gifting him a golden ring (made every year for the occasion from real gold, as Giuliano Di Menna tells me)





A procession during La Festa dei Banderesi

and a horse. There is also a ceremony of handing of municipality's flag and other beautifully staged events that might seem confusing to an outsider who is not familiar with the historical background of the festival. All these are accompanied by music, church bells ringing, and cheerful exclamations: *"Eh eh evviva Sant'Urban, eh eh evviva Lu Bannaraise, eh eh evviva Lu Sergentier."* And food. A lot of food. Banquets are part of the programme and locals also organise their own private feasts. It has been proudly reported in the press that around 20,000 *cancellate* (traditional waffles) are baked in Bucchianico each year for the feast of Saint Urban.

Nowadays, the festival might not carry as much religious meaning as it did in the past, but one theme remains strong – merry gatherings of friends, families, and neighbours.

The full programme of the festival is published on the main Facebook [page](#). For those who cannot make it to this year's Festa dei Banderesi in Bucchianico, a live broadcast will be organised on a dedicated YouTube [channel](#).

IF YOU GO

This year, the festival will be on May 18, 24-26. To see a particular event during the festival, you will need to arrive at least an hour before the start. The town's centre will be closed for traffic for most of the week, so you will need to park on the outskirts and walk. The Sunday with its *Trasporto delle* Some procession (this year, it will take place on May 18) and *la Ciammaichella* is the most popular and busiest, so arrive early and plan to spend the whole day to enjoy the festive atmosphere. There will be stands selling food and refreshments in the town. If you prefer a sit-down meal in a restaurant, make sure to book a table at least 7-10 days in advance.

All photos courtesy of ProLoco Bucchianico.



SAGE DELLE CILIEGIE IN RAIANO (AQ)

When: May 30-June 1

First launched in 1946 by poet Ottaviano Giannangeli, *La Maggiolata*, or *La Sagra delle Ciliegie* celebrates the town's cherry harvest. Once a symbol of Raiano, the fruit grew in the orchards surrounding the town. In the 1960s, Ferrero, the renowned confectionery company known for products like Nutella, Kinder, and Ferrero Rocher, selected Raiano's cherries for its popular *Mon Chéri* chocolates. Today, very few farmers still cultivate cherries, but producers from across Italy participate in the festival.

The three-day programme features concerts, folk dances, a food market, and the eagerly awaited "Cherry Red Night," an evening event that attracts young crowds to celebrate under the stars. A highlight of the weekend is the colourful parade of allegorical floats, all adorned with cherries.

The town will be adorned with festive lights and flowers as part of the "*Balconi Fioriti*" competition, where locals decorate their balconies with floral displays, competing for the title of the best. There will be also a homemade ratafia liqueur competition, so make sure to have a sip and cast your vote.

Guided tours of the nearby San Venanzio Gorge Nature Reserve will be organised as well as walks in English to explore the town's murals dedicated to Umberto Postiglione, a local poet and scholar that the town is proud of.

The full programme is published on the festival's Facebook [page](#).

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