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TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore. Photos by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 12.

LEFT:

San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore. Photos by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 12.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

www.abruzzissimo.com
editor@abruzzissimo.com

EDITOR & PUBLISHER
Anna Lebedeva
editor@abruzzissimo.com

COPY EDITOR
Linda Dini Jenkins

CONTRIBUTORS

Teresa Mastrobuono
Maria DiCenzo
Silvio Pascetta
Linda Dini Jenkins
Luciano Coccia
Anna Swann

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# Editor's Note

Abruzzo often appears on lists of ideal places to retire — whether for foreigners or for Abruzzese who return after a lifetime abroad — thanks to its tranquillity, affordability, and slower pace of life. But what is it like for children to grow up here? In this issue, Maria DiCenzo speaks to children and teenagers in the small communities of **San Pio** and **Fontecchio (AQ)** to discover their perspective (see page 8).

This month we also stop in **San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore (PE)**, officially recognised as the Italian town with the longest name. We explore its history, walk among stately *palazzi* and elegant churches, take in the sweeping views, and find a town that offers both beauty and ease of living.

Have you ever heard *ddu' botte*? This traditional accordion, a fixture at festivals, has a long history. One of the finest makers, the Della Noce family in **Teramo**, continues to handcraft organetti sought after by folk musicians around the world. Read their story on page 5.

And then there's Dolly Daggerz. You might expect a pole dancer with bright pink hair to raise eyebrows in rural Abruzzo, yet in **Gessopalena (CH)** she has been warmly received. Discover her tale of splits in the *piazza* and daring fireman spins against the backdrop of the Majella mountains on page 23.

Finally, as the saffron harvest approaches on the **Navelli plain**, we explore the story of this precious spice (page 26), alongside three traditional recipes you may not know: *pasta alla pecorara, pancotto,* and *le morette* biscuits.

Enjoy the October issue!

**Anna Lebedeva**
**Founder & Editor**

# DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS

## ABRUZZO SHINES AS A FAVOURITE MOUNTAIN ESCAPE

Abruzzo climbed to fourth place among Italy's most popular mountain destinations in September, drawing both Italian and foreign visitors. The region saw 46.12% of available rooms booked through online platforms, well above the national average of 38.3%. Only Valle d'Aosta, Trentino, and Basilicata ranked higher. Regional media were delighted to report Abruzzo's growing appeal as a mountain destination, with demand staying strong well past the holiday peak.

## MOST ABRUZZESI EARN BELOW AVERAGE

More than seven in ten Abruzzo residents earn below the national average, according to a recent study by *Confederazione Generale dell'Artigianato e della Piccola e Media Impresa*. Average incomes lag across the region: **L'Aquila** tops the list at €22,531, followed closely by **Pescara** (€22,483), while **Chieti** (€21,004) and Teramo (€20,904) fall further behind, between €2,500 and €4,000 below the national average. Rising living costs and higher local taxes are eroding purchasing power, with many facing higher personal income tax without improved public services.

## LOOMING WORKFORCE SHORTAGE

The region is facing a looming workforce crunch, with nearly 65,000 workers set to retire by 2029, according to research from Cgia di Mestre, a centre studying Italian labour and small businesses. The region's private-sector employees have an age ratio of 77 over-55s for every 100 under-35s, well above the national average of 65. Most retirements will hit services, industry, and healthcare. With few young people entering the workforce, local businesses risk struggling to replace retiring staff.

## PESCARA AIRPORT EYES US AND CANADA FLIGHTS

Saga, the company managing **Pescara Airport**, has announced ambitious plans for intercontinental flights, targeting New York within two years and a Canadian destination soon after. Airlines are conducting technical assessments and simulations, while Saga invests in infrastructure, adds check-in counters, and increases staff to support the international leap. With passenger targets approaching one million and the winter 2025-2026 schedule already busy, the airport is steadily moving closer to becoming a key gateway to North America.

## INTRODACQUA DRAWS FOREIGN RESIDENTS

Local media have reported an interesting phenomenon: the small town of **Introdacqua (AQ)**, near Sulmona, is thriving thanks to an influx of English-speaking expats from the US, UK, Canada, and Australia. Over 300 newcomers have settled here, sparking a revival of old streets, organising music festivals, and cultural events (read our story about the Introdacqua Music Project in the July-August 2023 issue).

The mayor, Cristian Colasante, called the phenomenon "anomalous," noting that many families have settled here permanently over the last five years, with some purchasing two homes each, one for themselves and one for their children. He also emphasised how in-demand the town's properties have become, saying that homes for sale now sell out quickly and are increasingly hard to find.

## CHESTNUT FESTIVALS IN ABRUZZO

Autumn in Abruzzo means chestnuts — and the season's *sagre* bring whole towns to life. From **Canistro (AQ)** to **Leofara (TE)** and **San Felice d'Ocre (AQ)**, piazzas glow with open fires, the scent of roasting chestnuts drifts through old streets, and music fills the air. These much-loved festivals celebrate tradition, food, and community, drawing visitors from near and far.

We've rounded up some of the best chestnut festivals to visit this year — read the full list on ABRUZZISSIMO site here.

# DID YOU KNOW?

## HONDA'S EUROPEAN HUB IN ATESSA

One in five Honda scooters sold in Europe is produced in Atessa (CH). Abruzzo's plant is one of Honda's 35 factories spread across 21 countries. It produces eight different models with more than 100 colour and variant combinations, including scooters from the SH series and Forza line, as well as motorcycles such as the CB125R and CB125F. In the past, it has also produced larger, iconic bikes including the Hornet, CB1000R, and Transalp.

Honda's story in Italy began in 1971 when the Atessa facility, then called I.A.P. Industriale, assembled imported motorcycles. By 1976, local production began, and exports soon followed, first to European markets and later to Japan.

The factory today covers some 140,000 square metres and operates as a fully integrated manufacturing centre, performing aluminium casting, mechanical machining, frame welding, painting, final assembly, and testing. It also produces prototypes, special editions, and scooters for racing paddocks, alongside accessories and components for emerging markets.

The numbers are impressive: around 600 scooters leave the plant each day, roughly one every 90 seconds, with an annual capacity of 130,000 vehicles. In 2024, production reached 141,448 motorcycles, surpassing expectations, and plans for 2025 target 145,100 units. Atessa's production alone accounts for more than half of Honda's European output and, while much of the automotive industry struggles under crisis, the factory in Abruzzo is bucking the trend.

# FROM BELLS TO BELLOWS

By Teresa Mastrobuono

**For over a century, the Della Noce family of Penne Sant'Andrea (TE) has refined the traditional accordion, creating a sound that is uniquely Abruzzese.**

If you attend almost any festival or gathering in Abruzzo, you are likely to hear traditional Abruzzese songs accompanied by the *organetto*. Nicknamed "the singing wood", this regional type of accordion produces a bright, energetic sound that complements the spirited folk songs and often sets the pace for the lively dances that follow. Much of the credit for the instrument's distinctive tone and enduring popularity goes to the Della Noce family from the province of Teramo.

## HOW IT STARTED

The Della Noce story began in 1760, when the family cast bells in makeshift spaces near their home. Their craftsmanship soon gained renown, leading to the opening of a proper foundry in Penne Sant'Andrea in 1925.

**Photo: an orgnetto made in the Della Noce workshop in Teramo**

"In the early twentieth century, Loreto Della Noce moved to the United States, like many Italians looking for a better future," says Marco Falconi, owner of *Organetti Della Noce*. "At the family foundry, Loreto learned the skills that helped him to repair the reeds of his accordion, using cast light alloy plates. Thanks to this skill, he managed to find a job as a repairman and builder at *Petromilli & Piatanesi,* an Italian-American accordion factory in Wisconsin."

Loreto later opened a workshop in Wilmington, Delaware, with fellow Italian immigrant Vincenzo Ianni. He remained in the United States until the 1950s, when he returned to Abruzzo. "Back home, he worked together with his son Giuseppe and son-in-law Gianni Falconi — my father," says Marco.

A musician and teacher, Giuseppe Della Noce took over the business in 1959. He expanded it into an established music bookshop in Teramo, and later opened a store in Piazza Dante dedicated to selling the family's signature *organetti*. The shop is still there today. In the 1970s, Giuseppe and his wife Teresa founded several music schools in Teramo and its province, where students learned the difficult push-and-pull technique of the *organetto Pennese* — as the instrument came to be known thanks to its link with Penne Sant'Andrea.

## A PILGRIM'S GIFT

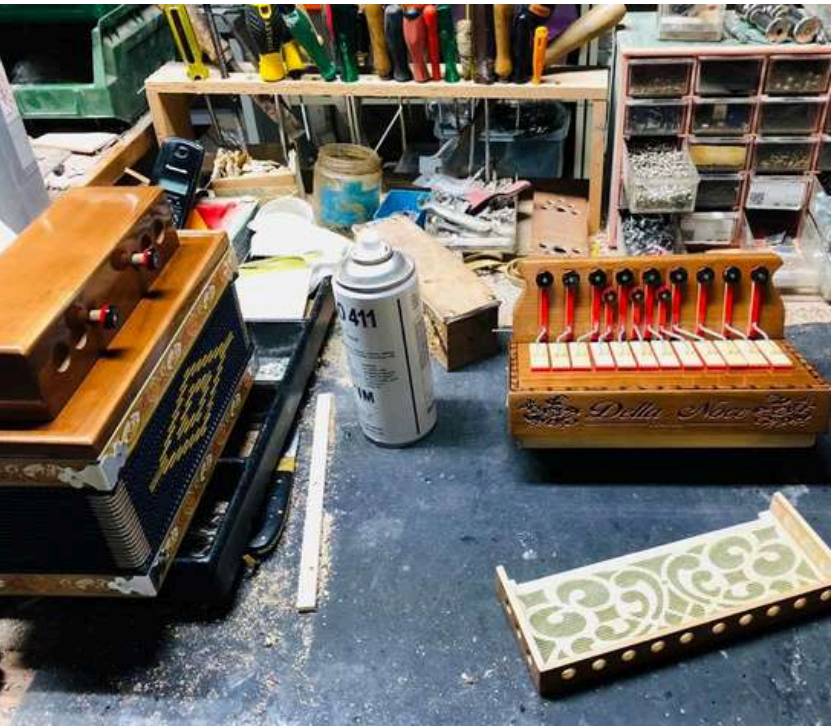
The accordion itself is not Italian in origin but Austrian. Its arrival in Abruzzo is wrapped in local lore: sometime in the mid-19th century, an Austrian pilgrim returning from the Sanctuary of the Madonna of Loreto stopped at the farm of Paoli Soprani in the Marche. The pilgrim carried an accordion, an instrument Soprani had never seen. Fascinated, he studied it overnight, later building his own version. Travellers heading through the Marche towards Abruzzo heard its sound and brought it further south, where it became part of Abruzzese tradition.

Loreto Della Noce was among those captivated by the accordion's possibilities. His background in metallurgy and acoustics, gained through years of bell-making, gave him the tools to experiment with sound in new ways. The leap from casting heavy bronze bells to shaping a nimble *organetto* may seem wide, yet both required the same sensitivity to airflow and vibration. Loreto applied this knowledge to the reeds, introducing light metal alloys for the plates. What once rang from church towers was reimagined into finely tuned components, producing a brighter, more distinctive tone — the unmistakable voice of the Della Noce organetto.

## THE TECHNIQUE

The organetto produces sound through the interaction of bellows and reeds. The bellows, made of layered fabric and leather, act like the instrument's lungs,

**At the Della Noce workshop, organetti are still made by hand**



pushing and pulling air through the reeds. Each reed is a thin strip of metal that vibrates when air passes over it, creating a musical note. What makes it especially challenging is that each key produces two different notes: one when the bellows are pushed in, another when they are pulled out. The player must therefore think in two directions at once, coordinating hand movements with split-second timing. Mastery comes not only from speed and precision, but also from an intuitive feel for when to change direction without breaking the flow of melody. In Abruzzese folk music, where songs often accelerate into spirited dances, this push-and-pull technique gives the *organetto* its unmistakable pulse and driving energy.

## A CRAFT IN DETAIL

Loreto built his first *ddu' botte* (dialect for two-bass *organetto*) entirely by hand, even creating his own tools when necessary. Today, the method remains artisanal, though aided by modern instruments for the most delicate steps. The Della Noce workshop now produces different types of *organetti*, from the traditional two-bass model to more modern versions with four or eight basses for a wider range of notes and richer harmonies.

"We choose woods such as cherry, walnut, maple and mahogany not only for their aesthetic beauty, but above all for their acoustic qualities and durability," explains Marco Falconi. The bellows are reinforced with leather for elasticity and airtightness, while the internal mechanisms — levers, springs and buttons — are shaped from brass, steel, and aluminum (see the process in this video). Every detail matters: glue, precision-drilled holes, even the inlays and engravings, often customised on request. Compact and lightweight, the *organetto* is easy to carry — one reason it remains ever-present at Abruzzese celebrations.

## TODAY'S ORGANETTI

The Della Noce workshop produces around 200–250 *organetti* per year, a "deliberately limited number," says Falconi, to safeguard quality. Their customers span Italy and beyond, especially in France, Germany, the United States, and Argentina, where Abruzzese communities keep folk traditions alive. The Della Noce accordions also travelled with emigrants. Abroad, it became a thread connecting Abruzzese diasporas to home. At gatherings overseas, the familiar push-and-pull rhythm recalled village festivals and family dances, ensuring that even far from

**Organetti made in the Della Noce workshop in Teramo**

Penne Sant'Andrea, the "singing wood" remained part of Abruzzo's cultural heartbeat. Many of Italy's leading folk musicians play a Della Noce *organetto* (listen to the instrument in this video).

Prices for an *organetto* Della Noce vary according to tuning, decorations, type of wood, and number of basses, starting at around €400 and rising above €2000 for elaborate or customised models.

The Della Noce family shop, where their accordions are made and sold, is located in Teramo.

Photos courtesy of Organetti Della Noce.

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

# "WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE?"

Text and photos by Maria DiCenzo

**What is it like to grow up in a mountain village where the school is shrinking, the population is dwindling, yet the air is clear and the bonds are strong? The voices of children and teenagers from Fontecchio and San Pio reveal both the beauty and the limits of life in Abruzzo's interior.**

In the summer of 2019, I was translating exchanges between my nephew who was visiting San Pio for the first time and some of the local kids. As we discussed differences between Canada and Italy, one of the girls, Claudia, eight at the time, exclaimed '*ma che stiamo a fa qua*?' ('What are we doing here') implying there was obviously a better world out there they were missing out on. I never forgot her words or streetwise tone and gestures. As we face the increasing challenges of depopulation in Abruzzo's interior, I recalled this incident and asked the question *What does it mean to grow up in small mountain villages today?* To answer that I interviewed a number of local children and teenagers. Their responses were illuminating and poignant.

## BETWEEN TWO VILLAGES

San Pio where I live for some months each year is a 'frazione' or small satellite of Fontecchio, roughly one kilometer up the road. They technically constitute one municipality, but in other senses they are separate and distinct villages. The San Piani do not consider themselves

**Photo: San Pio di Fontecchio**

themselves Fontecchiani and vice versa. In the article, I treat the two villages as one since the children live and go to school in Fontecchio but some of them spend time with single parents and grandparents in San Pio. Some live in the temporary earthquake homes (MAPs) situated between the two villages.

In terms of infrastructure, San Pio, with roughly 20 residents, has no shops or businesses (just a church which remains inaccessible since the earthquake of 2009), while Fontecchio has a post office, bar, hairdresser, butcher shop, pharmacy, minimarket and funeral services. There are probably more B&Bs in the area than community services. The installation of a bancomat machine in 2023 was a major event.

According to recent statistics, the municipality of Fontecchio has 286 inhabitants, 38 of which are under 18 years of age. The number of *stranieri* (anyone of foreign citizenship who is resident) has fluctuated and is currently 17 (5.9%). Total population has been in steady decline over the last century, peaking at 1,646 in 1911 and under 500 since the 1970s. There were no births and eight deaths in 2024. The trend is clear, and it will have a detrimental impact on the lives of families, especially children, because the state allocates resources to social services and education on the basis of numerical criteria.

## EMPTY STREETS, OPEN SKIES

I interviewed some young people to find out what they like about their lives in San Pio and Fontecchio and what they would change if they could. I didn't expect the enthusiasm and deep sense of attachment expressed by the younger kids. They demonstrated keen awareness of their physical environment and articulated the benefits of living outside of city centres. The children (5-10 years of age) all mentioned being close to nature and the open, safe spaces where they can play unsupervised. That freedom is very important to them. They were critical of urban life, rejecting the noise, chaos, and crime in cities. I included two cousins who both live in Rome now but spend time with their grandparents in San Pio whenever they can because they much prefer it. Nico (7) told me '*si respira meglio*' -- you can breathe better!

## GRANDPARENTS AND GATHERINGS

In addition to the beauty of the landscape and mountains, the historical character, and the tranquility, they also noted the sense of community. They know everyone and enjoy taking part in events, notably the festivals and sagres all summer in the surrounding area. The kids also

**Photos: (below) two children on their way to school; a sign on the road where school buses stop**

explained that their grandparents are essential—not just for their care and support, but also for the delicious food. Living alongside grandparents and extended family creates a warm, loving environment, where bonds formed in childhood last a lifetime. The village, a hub for holidays and special events, lets children connect with cousins and friends they might otherwise only see on these occasions.

For the younger children, the drawbacks to village life were few. Because Fontecchio houses the only elementary school for the area, the locals have a clear advantage. Francesco (10) told me he felt 'fortunate' to be able to walk to school and thinks school is '*bellissima*'. Children from the nearby villages must take a bus which means leaving earlier. The San Pio-based kids lamented the lack of a functional playground; the new playground in Fontecchio is too far for them.

## TEENAGE PERSPECTIVES

The teenagers cited many of the same positive aspects and it surprised me how much they value nature, tranquillity, and clean air – as one of them noted, 'zero crime and zero chaos'. But they pointed out a different set of challenges, seeing the effects of isolation—both geographic and social—in ways that younger children don't. These range from the inconvenience of having to be bused to San Demetrio for middle school and to L'Aquila for high school. Busing requires early starts and long days which one teen described as 'inhumane'. It also means their friends are further afield, which makes it difficult to socialize after school. The lack of good transport services makes it hard to access shops, entertainment, and organized sports without a sibling or parent willing to drive them. As they get older and leave school, they are forced to find work in L'Aquila or Sulmona and beyond. One 18-year-old told me he spends 20% of his monthly stipend on gas for his car to get to work.

The teens had a broader range of thoughts on what 'community' means. While they appreciate having grown up in a place where everyone knows you by name and where they feel protected, by a certain age they begin to recognize forms of prejudice, marginalization, rigid attitudes (sometimes towards gender and race). Some felt that the municipality could serve their age group better, especially by providing an appropriate space for them. They are happy to see recently improved facilities for children, but they feel left out of these efforts and believe the municipality has missed an opportunity to find ways of bringing them together on their terms and potentially in collaboration with teens in neighbouring communities.

**A school bus; parents and kids in front of the school in Fontecchio**

**Fontecchio**

## STAYING OR LEAVING

Looking ahead, some teens would be happy to stay in the village and hope that these villages will attract more families to settle and inhabit the empty houses. Anyone who wants to pursue higher education has no choice but to leave. Some teens can't wait to move on, while others leave reluctantly, missing their family—especially their grandparents.

Depopulation means that these villages are struggling to keep their schools and services. Fontecchio offers a wide range of cultural activities in the summer months, as well as throughout the year. In terms of child-centred initiatives, the creation of a 'ludoteca' (indoor play centre) last year was a welcome addition for children and their parents. It was part of a larger educational initiative in the region called '*Standing Room Only: Communities Beyond the Desks*'. But even these efforts do not serve all the age groups or physical areas of the municipality. Attracting families from outside is difficult because of the many remote locations. The increased sale of houses to foreigners is not a long-term solution because they tend to spend short periods of time and do not always integrate into the local community.

## SMALL THINGS COUNT

The children and teens I spoke to recognize both the advantages and disadvantages of village life. I asked Claudia who made that remark in 2019 what she would say now. She has changed her mind and knows what she is doing here. It is where she was born and where her roots are, she said. At almost 15 and having to leave Fontecchio to pursue her athletic talents, she thinks, "all of these small things count in the end" — nature, tranquility, safety, sense of community — "they are important things".

Just this past week the regional chapter of the labour confederation called for special legislation to buffer the effects of the 'demographic winter' affecting the interior areas. Schools were singled out as a critical resource to protect in order to keep the villages alive. The young people I met show just how much small communities matter, and they deserve support as they are the future of these mountain villages.

*Maria di Cenzo is a retired academic who lives in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada and spends part of the year in her house in San Pio, originally her grandparents' home.*

The author extends her warmest thanks to Sofia, Nico, Francesco, Lorenzo, Sofia, Christian, Claudia, Carmen, and Marilù for their time and enlightening observations.

# THE TOWN WITH THE LONGEST NAME

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva

**With a name so long it once tripped up the postal service, and home to the bizarre Parade of the Cuckolds festival, San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore is a town of historic charm and forward-thinking renewable energy initiatives.**

On the road leading up to San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore, your gaze is inevitably drawn upward. The town clings to the slopes of the Majella, the Montagna Madre, its cathedral crowned against the mountain's changing moods — snow-blanketed in winter, green and vibrant in spring. From the town, the panorama unfurls all the way to the Adriatic, with the valley of the Pescara River stretching out below. Today, 1,788 inhabitants call this hill town home.

## HISTORY

Archaeological finds show that the area has been inhabited since prehistoric times. The Grotta dei Callarelli, now a recognised UNESCO geosite, preserves rock paintings — still under study — that suggest the site may have been frequented even earlier, by hunters of the Paleolithic and

**Photo: the view of San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore from Belvedere San Nicola**

Neolithic periods, linking San Valentino's story to the earliest human settlements in Abruzzo.

The first written record of the town appears in 1182 in the Chronicon Casauriense, where it is listed as Castrum de Petra. In later centuries, its destiny became tied to the martyrs Valentino and Damiano, whose relics were transferred here during the Norman era. The town, rebuilt in 1006 as Castel di Pietra, took their name in the late 11th century, when the bodies of the saints were placed within the castle — today known as Palazzo Farnese.

In the 14th century, San Valentino passed under the rule of the Orsini and then the Acquaviva of Atri, until it was destroyed in 1423 by Braccio da Montone. In the following centuries, control of the town changed hands several times.

"In the past, the territory of San Valentino was much larger, including what are now the towns of Scafa, Abbateggio, and Roccamorice," says Beniamino Gigante, local history enthusiast and president of the association Amici del Museo. The area was primarily agricultural, with a few wealthy families owning extensive estates and cultivating mulberry trees for silkworm production.

Gigante's grandfather was among the first to introduce industrialisation to the town. In the early 1900s, he opened a *lanificio-tintoria*, a workshop where woollen clothes and blankets were produced and yarn was dyed, which remained in operation until 1948.

## LONGEST NAME

In 1863, after Italian unification, the town acquired its current, elongated name: San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore. The designation Abruzzo Citeriore placed the town in the "nearer" part of the region, on this side of the Pescara River, while the territories beyond were called Abruzzo Ulteriore. This division, formalised under the Kingdom of Naples, reflected the way rulers and travellers viewed the land: closer or further away, depending on the direction of approach.

San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore boasts Italy's longest place name — thirty-four characters, spaces included. A proud record, yes, but in 2020 it became a headache: the newly updated postal service systems

**Photos: on the streets of San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore**

simply couldn't cope with so many letters. Forms cut the name short, preventing some residents from opening savings accounts or subscribing to government bonds. The problem was resolved within two weeks, but not before giving the town its moment of comic notoriety. For the *sanvalentinesi*, it was just another reason to smile at their record-breaking name. For convenience, it is often shortened to "San Valentino in A.C."

## LIVING IN THE TOWN

Despite a small population, San Valentino today is a lively community. Its streets host festivals and events throughout the year, and the town offers the essentials of daily life — restaurants, bars, shops, a supermarket, pharmacy, schools, and even a library. The sense of being rooted in the landscape is paired with a forward-looking energy: San Valentino is among the first towns in Abruzzo to create a renewable energy community. A photovoltaic plant, installed on former quarry land, will soon produce enough power to lower household energy bills and reduce reliance on external, polluting sources.

Arlene Gregorius and Sean Sherman bought a house on the outskirts of San Valentino two years ago. They say the process went smoothly thanks to the MajellaCase estate agency. "They're like a one-stop shop," explains Arlene. "They helped us find a notary, translate the documents, switch over the utility bills, and they still assist us with our property taxes."

The couple chose San Valentino not only for its panoramic mountain views but also for its convenient location. "We are only a few minutes from the motorway and can explore the surrounding villages and towns easily. And we're close to many hiking trails," says Sean.

Although they currently visit for just a few weeks at a time, the couple has made many friends among the locals. "We introduced ourselves in the shops here and very quickly became on first-name terms with many of the shop owners," Arlene recalls. "There are lots of events at the town hall and local festivals. We go whenever we can, and when we're not there, our friends send us videos."

"The people here are incredibly warm and friendly," adds Sean. "They've helped us whenever we needed anything and continue to do so. It's been a real pleasure to feel so welcome in the community — probably more welcome than we've ever felt anywhere else."

*Majellacase offers experience tours for non-residents considering buying a home in the town or elsewhere in Abruzzo. This mention is part of our collaboration with Majellacase.*

**Photos: (below) a street in San Valentino A.C.; a votive niche in the town**

## WHAT TO DO AND SEE IN SAN VALENTINO IN ABRUZZO CITERIORE

### EXPLORE THE OLD TOWN

Park near the town hall (*municipio*) and wander up the endless steps in the town's older, upper quarter. Here you will find grand *palazzi* and ancient churches — many with weathered façades and closed shutters. Though their former splendour has faded, they still speak of past glory.

At the top of the town stands the **Duomo dei Santi Valentino e Damiano**. Its history dates back to the 12th century, with major reconstructions in the 18th century. Its iconic twin domes — rare in Abruzzo — rise above the town, visible from a long distance. Damaged by the 1915 Avezzano earthquake, the cathedral was restored in 1926. In the 1930s, the façade was completed and a second bell tower added to mirror the original.

Beside it stands **Castello Farnese**, the remnant of what was once a formidable castle, located in the upper part of the town. Over the centuries, the castle was transformed from a fortification into a noble residence, yet traces of its medieval structure and defensive walls remain. On the left, beneath the arched entrance, a stone inscription from 1507 commemorates the restoration and fortification works. By 1583, it had passed to the Farnese family and still bears their name.

Today, the ownership is divided among the municipality, private individuals, and the church, which complicates restoration efforts. A few years ago, funds were allocated for repairs, but no concrete project has been drawn up, so it may be some time before any work begins.

To the right from the *Duomo*, you can see a section of the medieval wall and tower used to guard one of the castle's gates.

On a small *piazza* behind the cathedral is a long stone building that once served both as a prison, in use until the 1980s, and as a grain reserve. Its role as a granary is marked by the inscription above the entrance — *Pauperu et ecclesiae pio monti frumentario/constructum A.D. MDCCXVI* — which dates the building to 1716. The grain reserve, established to aid the poorest peasants, lent seeds of wheat and barley to ensure a harvest for the coming season, reflecting a practical combination of authority and community support.

**Photos: (from top) Duomo dei Santi Valentino e Damiano, the belvedere on Piazza Di Vittorio; Castello Farnese**

One hundred metres to the left, on a green lawn, stands a little **Chiesetta di San Rocco**. This small church, dating back to the 16th century, is a classic example of a rural chapel originally built outside the town walls. Over time, as the town expanded, it came to occupy a more central location. Inside, in the single nave, there is a beautiful 17th-century painting of the Madonna of Constantinople (or Madonna del Carmine), crowned by angels and accompanied by Saints Elijah and Elisha, along with the souls in purgatory. The custodian Nicolino lives nearby and opens the church every day.

**TAKE IN THE VISTAS**

San Valentino has several belvederes from where you can admire the surrounding countryside. From **Piazza Di Vittorio**, near the cathedral, the view stretches toward the Gran Sasso mountain range, framed by contemplative lines of poetry etched on the railing: *…ma dov'è la strada, ma qual è la via….* Another viewpoint, **Belvedere Stella**, rises just above the Monument to the Fallen on Largo San Nicola. Yet the most striking panorama is from Belvedere San Nicola, above the *Museo dei Fossili e delle Ambre*. From here, you see the *palazzi* of the historic centre, the soaring bell towers of the *Duomo*, and the valley below unfold into the horizon.

**VISIT THE FOSSILS AND AMBER MUSEUM**

The **Museo dei Fossili e delle Ambre** has just re-opened after a renovation and houses a vast collection of fossils that tell the story of the last 500 million years of our planet, alongside a precious collection of amber. The museum is organised into several sections: one devoted to fossils from around the world; another focused on amber, featuring exquisite jewellery and fossil resin pieces; a third where visitors can admire dinosaur casts, including a replica of the famous Ciro, an entirely Italian dinosaur; and a final section dedicated to the fossils of the Majella. It is open from 9am to 1pm on weekdays, and from 4pm to 7pm on weekends. See the museum's page for updates.

**Photos: (top) ex-Bourbon prison and grain reserve; chiesetta di San Rocco**

**JOIN THE FESTIVALS**

The town has a busy calendar of events and festivals. The **Majella Etnofestival** has been held each year for over two decades, usually on the first weekend of August. It celebrates traditional music and dance from Abruzzo and other regions of central and southern Italy. Visitors can watch — and join in — performances of *saltarelle*, *ballarelle*, *tamurriata*, *pizzica*, and polyphonic singing from across the country. The programme is published on the festival's page.

On September 9-11, with the streets decked in beautiful lights, the town celebrates its beloved saints Emidio, Nicola, Valentino, and Damiano with religious masses, processions, concerts, and food markets.

Every November, San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore hosts the ***Festa del Vino a Castrum Petrae***, a 25-year-old festival during which the old wine cellar of historic homes open their doors for visitors to taste local Montepulciano wine and traditional Abruzzese dishes. Keep an eye out for announcements on the municipality's page.

On the evening of November 10, local men parade through the town's streets, taking part in the ***Sfilata dei Cornuti***, a peculiar centuries-old festival that blends pagan fertility rites with playful satire. The procession turns the theme of "infidelity" into a collective, liberating celebration, accompanied by jeers and teasing. Read our story on page 19 about the festival.

On January 17, the feast of Sant'Antonio Abate unfolds with noise and laughter as youngsters move from house to house "*a candà lu Sand'Andoneje*," re-enacting the saint's temptations in spirited performances. In the afternoon, the *sbannimènde* takes place, with local delicacies auctioned off amid lively bids.

The Good Friday procession is equally evocative, as hooded men walk barefoot through the streets, re-enacting Christ's Passion. You will find the event's details on the municipality's official channel.

**SAVOUR LOCAL DELIGHTS**

For local treats, start at **La Gelateria di San Valentino** (try the *crema di San Valentino* flavour). Their artisanal rum-and-cherry and orange-filled chocolates will have you plotting a second visit. **Garden Bar Pizzeria** (Largo San Nicola, 16) serves up tasty pizzas, including a memorable Nutella option, while **Panificio Pasticceria D'Ottavio** is the place for traditional *le morette* biscuits (see the recipe on page 29) and fresh bread. And if you're in town on Wednesday, don't miss the weekly market: the *porchetta* vendor makes *panini* so generous, you might need a second stomach.

**Photos: (from top clockwise) the Duomo's twin domes; at the Majella Etnofestival; a dinosaur cast in the Museo dei Fossili e delle Ambre; Castello Farnese**

## TONINO DI VENANZIO: CHRONICLER OF SAN VALENTINO IN ABRUZZO CITERIORE

San Valentino is a town with its own witness to history: Tonino Di Venanzio, its native photographer, who for decades captured everyday moments of the community. Born here in 1909, Tonino immortalised the town through his lens, creating a remarkable archive of images that today preserve an exceptional record of San Valentino's people, festivals, and customs from the 1930s to the 1950s.

Born in San Valentino in 1909, Tonino Di Venanzio discovered photography in his youth and started capturing images with a rudimentary box camera, setting the stage for a lifelong passion.

Tonino honed his craft in a darkened carpentry workshop, developing negatives in a kitchen dish and building his first wooden camera with his brother's help. By his early twenties, he was riding across Abruzzo on a motorcycle, photographing summer festivals, fairs, and family gatherings, leaving a vivid record of life in Abruzzo under the fascist era. During the war, he survived evacuation and hiding, returning after 1945 to rebuild both his studio and the town's photographic memory. With his wife Elda hand-colouring the black-and-white prints with watercolours, he became the familiar presence at the wedding and town gathering. Ever inventive, the photographer crafted his own cameras and equipment with help from local artisans. He captured the rhythms of daily life with a warmth and intimacy that made him a beloved figure in the town.

When he passed away in 1982, San Valentino lost more than a photographer: it lost a chronicler of its spirit, a man whose lens captured the town's heart, an enduring link between past and present for generations of *sanvalentinesi*.

His photographs are now safeguarded in a national archive under the care of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and are regularly exhibited in the town. This year, the municipality purchased around 500 glass plate negatives, produced between 1930 and 1950, which capture weddings, christenings, and town gatherings, offering a unique glimpse of the town's history through the eyes of its most devoted chronicler.

Since 2019, a National Photography Competition, "Tonino Di Venanzio," is held in San Valentino, in which participants from across Italy explore themes of daily life, community, and tradition, continuing the spirit of observation and storytelling that defined Tonino's extraordinary career.

For more information about Tonino Di Venanzio's archive, see the dedicated pages on Facebook and Instagram.

The municipality and *Archivio Di Venanzio* are hosting an exhibition of Tonino's photographs in San Valentino until October 12, open Fridays through Sundays. For more information, visit their page or contact them via WhatsApp at +39 333 5295656.

**Photos: (below) one of Tonino Di Venanzio's photographs; the current exhibition. Photos courtesy of the Archivio Di Venanzio**

# THE CUCKOLDS OF SAN VALENTINO IN ABRUZZO CITERIORE

By Silvio Pascetta

**For as long as locals can remember, on November 10, a boisterous parade which mixes pagan fertility cults with more profane traditions takes place in the picturesque town of San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore. Beyond the jovial atmosphere, it carries rich symbolism, celebrating fertility and the cyclical nature of life and death. Let's explore the origins and meaning of this unique celebration.**

At nightfall, on November 10, in San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore, a group of men known as the *Congrega di San Martino* parades through the town with the last married man of the previous year leading, followed by the men of the town, old and young. There is nothing solemn about this procession, but a lot of profane, starting from its name: *la Processione dei Cornuti*, the Procession of the Cuckolds. Instead of crosses and religious symbols, the men carry unusual objects: horns, a phallus-shaped wooden sculpture called *la relléqueje* (the relic) modestly covered with a white veil, bells, and candles.

**Photo above: *Processione dei Cornuti* in San Valentino A.C.**

Some men wear hats with horns, others raise them on sticks adorned with evergreens, such as laurel, ivy, and various berries. All this is accompanied by accordion players, drums, tambourines and cowbells, jeers, laughter, and the singing of the congregation.

## SYMBOLISM

The procession is opened by the banner on which the horns and the phallus are depicted. The horns symbolise the crescent of the moon. When the moon begins its crescent phase, it takes on the characteristic shape resembling oxen's horns. Since ancient times it has been associated with the generative cycle of women and therefore represents their fertility. In contrast, the phallus represents male fertility. The union of these two symbols sums up the essential meaning of the event: a celebration of the fertility of human beings and nature in all its forms.

Bells are present in many rituals of this kind in Italy and beyond, including the famous Mamuthones of Mamoiada in Sardinia, and their ringing is believed to drive evil spirits away. Finally, candles symbolise the sunlight that illuminates the night and makes plants grow.

The procession starts from Largo San Nicola and makes its way up the ancient narrow streets, up to the town's cathedral. Here, the last married man of the previous year hands over the relic to the newlywed husband of the current year. The wooden sculpture is briefly uncovered and with laughs and goliardic naughty jokes, the relic's new owner is crowned with a horned hat.

## WEARING HORNS

In addition, there is a very conspicuous meaning related to marital infidelity. Like in many other countries, horns in Italy also mean cuckoldry, and the procession makes fun of the men whose wives might have been unfaithful. In the old days, the parade participants stopped at the doors of the cuckolded husbands, real or presumed, and sang mocking songs. Back then, women and unmarried men were not allowed to take part in the procession, but nowadays, everyone can join in; mocking of alleged cuckolds has been removed from the programme. The emphasis is

**Procession of the Cuckolds in San Valentino**

placed on the fact that marital infidelity can happen to anyone and one must have the courage to admit it and endure it, as a song in the local language, dedicated to the procession, puts it:

*Chi le té i sâ purtà, Sande Martine l'aiuttarrà*
*Ma chi le té i nen sâ le purtà, Sande Martìne che pòzza penzà.*

*Whoever has horns and knows how to wear them, St. Martin will help him,*
*but whoever has them and does not know how to wear them, St. Martin can think about it.*

The event always has a carnivalesque character, immersed in the celebratory spirit of the moment and some new elements are added every year. At the end of the parade, everyone heads to their wine cellars or restaurants to celebrate the old tradition with a feast and new wine.

The celebration echoes the ancient agricultural New Year which began on October 31 with All Saints' Eve. Twelve days were dedicated not only to remembering the dead, but also to a well-deserved rest after hard work in the fields. The new agricultural year began on November 11, the time for sowing seeds, which preludes the rebirth of the coming spring — a concept of cyclicity between life and death rooted in the peasant mentality and inherited from the ancient world.

You might ask what St Martin, Bishop of Tours in France, has to do with all of this? Absolutely nothing! This saint had the misfortune that his feast day falls on the days of an ancient pagan festival, dedicated to a fertility god, probably Dionysus or Priapus. Carrying a phallic symbol was a customary practice within the Greco-Roman religion known as Phallephoria, which featured dedicated festivals in honour of these two deities. Archaeological artifacts discovered in Italy offer compelling evidence for historians studying this ritual.

Currently, to my knowledge, there are only two documented rituals remaining from the ancient Phallephorias in Europe. One is in the village of Tyrvànos, near Larissa, in Greece, and the other one – in San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore. Amazing. Try to visit our event if you can!

*Silvio Pascetta is a San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore native and a local historian. Photos courtesy of the author.*

**IF YOU GO**

*La Processione dei Cornuti* is part of a two-day event. Apart from the parade, the programme includes concerts, a local artisan market, stands with roasted chestnuts and wine. If you want to go to a restaurant in the town on one of the evenings, make sure you book a table well in advance. For more information about the festival, see the town's Facebook page.

**The handing over of *la relléqueje* (the relic)**

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# HELLO, DOLLY . . . HELLO, GESSOPALENA

By Linda Dini Jenkins

**Singer, teacher, and pole artist Dolly Daggerz (her stage name) has done more than move from her native UK to Gessopalena — a picturesque village of about 1,100 inhabitants in the Chieti province. She has moved herself far away from grey, noisy London and toward a life of beauty, strength, and empowerment for herself and the women she teaches and performs with.**

There is nothing retiring about Dolly, with her fuchsia pink hair and six-inch-high performance heels. She teaches singing and piano, sings and writes songs for *Tokyo Taboo* (a band she fronts with her husband, Mike, also a music teacher), and she teaches pole dancing and flexibility through her Patreon page and during the retreats that she organises in Abruzzo.

"During Covid, our lessons were mostly online, so we realised we could make a decent amount of money that way," she recalls. "We had become really tired of being stuck indoors and I started to fantasise about being somewhere warmer — permanently." She did a few searches, entered her budget, and a few properties in Abruzzo popped up. Of course, the couple couldn't travel, but they viewed houses on a video call with an estate agent and quickly put in an offer. Never having been to Abruzzo before, Dolly and Mike Googled the region and were impressed. They had a gut feeling it was the right thing to do. In Dolly's words: "I know it sounds a bit mental . . . but I really believe in just trusting your intuition and making decisions based on that."

## THE MAJELLA AS HER BACKDROP

Dolly has fallen in love with the area around Gessopalena, in the province of Chieti, with the incredible Majella mountains as her backdrop. The house is on the outskirts of town at the end of a rustic road, accessible only by traveling up the drive or the steep olive grove. And Dolly loves the peace and quiet at night — a big change from the noise and bus fumes of London. She got just what she wanted:

**Dolly Daggerz with the Majella mountains on the background**

a grand view and lots of seclusion. They have hired someone to tend to the olive grove and they help the neighbours who come for the annual harvest.

Work on the property — a former schoolhouse and the home of one of her favourite neighbours' grandparents — began promptly. They double-glazed windows, added solar panels to defray the cost of utilities, installed underfloor heating connected to those solar panels, and knocked down a few walls to enlarge the kitchen and generally brighten up the space. And then they added a prefab building to house Dolly's pole studio.

**Gessopalena; photo via the Comune di Gessopalena Facebook page**

## ABOUT THE POLE

Dolly is on a mission to help women gain strength and empowerment through physical activity. And for this she trains them on the pole. People know about maypoles and peace poles and totem poles, but Dolly's pole comes right out of the club culture.

"The 'pole' has deep roots in strip clubs, where black women played an essential role in developing the art form," explains Dolly. "They were pioneers in pushing boundaries, combining tremendous strength with sensuality and creativity. Their innovative moves laid the foundation for what we practice in studios around the world today." Dolly's goal is to remember the origins of pole dancing and honour the influence of these women — mostly disrespected and stigmatised — and focus on the liberating effects of being in a positive, supportive community of women who want to feel strong in their bodies.

Dolly started pole seven years ago, in her 30s, having no real dance or gymnastics training. "It was really painful," she says. "It hurt my skin and I got bruised a lot. But I fell in love with it and became obsessed. To be physically and mentally strong is amazing, and pole has taught me so much about myself and has helped me to learn what I call an 'athlete mindset.'" This from a woman who has run four marathons . . .

## WARM WELCOME

You might think that Dolly, always decked out in pink, would cause quite a sensation in rural Abruzzo. But she has had exactly the opposite experience. "If I see people staring, I'll drop down into a split," she laughs.

"It always brings a smile." When she was traveling with her students in Palombaro, a *nonna* — with a purple wash in her hair — was fascinated and asked for a photo with the women. While her clients are mostly ex-pats, she always gets compliments from the locals; one woman even wanted to try a few moves!

"The people here are very special, and our neighbours are so kind, always offering us anything that they think we might need," observes Dolly. "One day, I was walking my dogs in the rain, and our neighbour ran out and gave me an umbrella. She always offers me vegetables — and speaks slowly, so I can understand her."

The town itself, inhabited since pre-Roman times, takes its name from the chalk (gesso) quarries (gypsum deposits) in the area. It is known for its narrow streets, historical churches, and a charming *piazza* in the *centro storico*. The Antico Borgo di Gesso (medieval citadel) is a haunting ruin — the remains of the original village abandoned after the earthquake in 1933 and destruction by the Germans in WWII. Gessopalena hosts three communal celebrations throughout the year: the Feast of San Antonio in January, a costumed passion play every other year on Holy Wednesday, and a wheat harvest *sagra* in August.

## KEEPING BUSY

Dolly is a survivor. Now sober, she says dancing has helped to heal and wants to bring this good news to other women. Her schedule is packed, reflecting the energy she pours into her mission: she'll be running a retreat in Gran Canaria later this year, recording an album in February, leading another retreat in March in Ecuador, and touring the UK in April.

Her retreats have garnered great reviews. "Women really need a safe space to dance and be themselves," Dolly says. "Sometimes I think they just need other women cheering them on and telling them that they can do the hard thing. They leave as great friends and tell me it's inspiring and life changing, so I must be doing something right!" And those majestic mountains form an empowering setting for her work.

*Linda Dini Jenkins is a travel planner and author of several books. Her new book,* How Way Leads on to Way, *is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.*

# QUICK STOP

## TORRE DI BEFFI

High above the valley carved by the Aterno River rises the **Torre di Beffi**, the surviving sentinel of a once-formidable fortress. Built in the 12th century, the stone tower still commands sweeping views of the Sirente massif and the Subequana valley, the same vantage point that once allowed guards to watch over trade routes and signal danger across the landscape.

The tower formed part of a wider defensive network. Each fortification in the area was positioned in sight of the next, creating a chain of rapid communication. From Beffi's crest you can still glimpse the cylindrical tower of **Goriano Valli** across the valley — proof of the strategic design.

Originally encircled by walls and residential dwellings, the fortified hamlet sheltered its feudal lord within the enclosure. It oversaw the central stretch of the Aterno valley and the entrance to the Subequana valley. Castello di Beffi was first mentioned in the 11th century in the *Chronicon Farfense*. Today, only the tower, some wall fragments, and a cluster of buildings remain from the castle.

The Torre, restored in the 1990s, rises over 20 metres. You can climb the steep steps to take in views of the surrounding mountains and the valley below. In summer, the lawn beneath the tower hosts *Il Cibario*, a small restaurant serving simple local dishes.

The cultural association *Aternostrum* opens the tower for free visits every weekend; check their Facebook page or call 347 904 8731 to confirm opening hours.

# EASY TRAILS

## MYTHICAL CREATURES IN SANT'EUFEMIA A MAIELLA

- **Length:** about 2km
- **Time:** 1 hour
- **Starting Point:** Enter "Fiabosco Sant'Eufemia a Maiella" in your GPS to reach the site. Parking is available along the road.

At the foot of the Maiella, in the woods above **Sant'Eufemia a Maiella (PE)**, lies a place where imagination takes shape in stone. **Fiabosco** is not a theme park but a forest ecomuseum, where more than forty statues — a dragon, the Mandrake, the Nymph Maia, the Witch, the Werewolf, a Serpent, and the Prince transformed into a tree — stand quietly among the oaks and beeches. Each sculpture draws on Abruzzo's folklore, a reminder of stories that once passed from one generation to the next.

The trail is gentle and shaded, winding through about two hectares of woodland. It takes roughly an hour to complete, making it ideal for families with children who will delight in spotting the next mysterious figure among the trees.

October is a particularly beautiful time to visit as the statues appear and disappear among the golds and russets of autumn foliage.

Created in 2021, **Fiabosco** is Italy's first ecomuseum as a protected space for the fantastic creatures that once populated the imagination of the region but which today are metaphorically becoming extinct, forgotten and replaced by other forms of imagination. The sculptures are carved from the white stone of the Majella by both national and international artists.

For more details see the Fiabosco website and Facebook page.

# THE RED GOLD OF NAVELLI

By Anna Swann

In late October–early November, delicate saffron (*zafferano*) flowers bloom across the plains of Navelli. *Crocus sativus*, commonly known as saffron crocus, has been cultivated in Abruzzo since the Middle Ages and little has changed in its production: planting and harvesting are still done by hand.

Each morning during the short flowering season, saffron farmers head to the fields at dawn. The flowers must be picked before the sun rises and forces them open, otherwise the vivid red stigmas lose their quality. The work is painstaking. Each bloom is gathered individually and placed into wicker baskets before being carried to the houses, where the next step begins: the *sfioritura*, or stripping of the flowers.

Around tables piled with the purple blossoms, families sit for hours, carefully separating the three red stigmas from the stamens and petals. The day's work must be completed before nightfall or the saffron risks spoiling. On abundant days, it is not unusual for the *sfioritura* to stretch late into the evening.

Drying is the most delicate stage. The fresh saffron threads are placed on sieves suspended over glowing embers, traditionally from almond wood. The process is slow and requires constant attention to prevent scorching or crumbling. If dried for too long, the stigmas burn and all the labour is wasted; if not enough, they spoil within days. Once perfectly dried, the saffron is wrapped in cloth to protect it from air and light, preserving its powerful flavour and deep colour.

According to legend, in the 12th century the Dominican friar Santucci, originally from Navelli and then serving in Spain, smuggled three bulbs back to his homeland. There he adapted cultivation methods to local soil and climate, introducing annual planting. The crop flourished, and by the 13th century saffron from Navelli was traded widely through L'Aquila, reaching major European cities including Frankfurt, Vienna, and Marseille. It became highly sought after by merchants, particularly those from Venice, Milan, and Florence. Around 1513, the Nuremberg merchants, eager to avoid Venetian middlemen, established their own trading delegation directly in L'Aquila.

In the 15th century, saffron taxes financed the construction of the magnificent Basilica di San Bernardino in L'Aquila. Production peaked in the late 1500s, but wars, plague, and Spanish taxation brought decline.

Today, annual production across the Navelli plain amounts to just 40 kilos, making it one of the most valuable (and priciest) crops in Italy. *Zafferano dell'Aquila* is highly prized for its zesty aroma and intense crimson colour and has been assigned the D.O.P (*Denominazione di Origine Protetta*) classification, which means a protected designation of origin and guarantee of the highest quality. Saffron from Abruzzo is often called "red gold," as it commands high prices: 200 crocus flowers yield one gram of dry spice threads, which costs at least €26.

## WHERE TO BUY ABRUZZO'S SAFFRON

Many supermarkets delicatessens sell small sachets of local saffron in powdered form, made from broken threads, which are less expensive, as well as small jars containing whole red stigmas. To ensure you are buying authentic saffron, look for the purple square symbol reading *Zafferano dell'Aquila* and the paper seal marked *Sigillo di garanzia*.

The *Coop Altopiano di Navelli* unites small saffron growers from 13 small towns. You can buy their products online or by contacting them via the coop's Facebook page .

# DORA'S PASTA ALLA PECORARA

By Luciano Coccia

I saw her standing in front of a large wood-burning stove, skilfully stirring the sauce in the pot. The room was filled with a sublime aroma that stirred the appetite. Dora, well into her eighties and the grandmother of my dear friend and colleague, had promised that she would let me taste, for the first time, *pasta alla pecorara*: the original recipe, the true one, now almost forgotten, whose origins I did not know.

On the table, two trays of handmade *anellini* ring-shaped pasta were set out in plain view, so beautiful they promised extraordinary flavour, alongside a dish of the freshest sheep's ricotta. I was immediately swept up by the senses, transported into a dream that would soon become reality.

Many people know *pasta alla pecorara* only as a simple vegetable sauce with ricotta — often not even from sheep's milk. But the original dish is something entirely different: rich, ancient in origin, and unforgettable once tasted. The original *pasta alla pecorara* calls for fresh, egg-free pasta such as *anellini*, which is hard to find outside Abruzzo. It also works beautifully with *strozzapreti*, potato gnocchi, or other fresh pasta made only with water and flour.

*Luciano Coccia, a chef from Manoppello (PE), is the author of the cookbook* Maramè *(available in Italian here).*

## INGREDIENTS

**Makes 3-4 portions**

**For the sauce**

- 50g *guanciale*
- 50g porcini mushrooms
- 100g minced veal
- 350ml tomato sauce
- 25g grated p*ecorino* cheese
- 80g fresh sheep's *ricotta*
- 1 white onion
- 10 black oven-dried olives
- 4 basil leaves
- 1 round aubergine
- 1 red bell pepper
- 2 zucchinis
- Olive oil, as needed (for frying)

- Fresh or dry pasta, enough for 3–4 people

## PREPARATION

Finely chop the onion and place it in a pan with four tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil. Cut the *guanciale* into small pieces and add it to the onion. Sauté gently for a few minutes.

Meanwhile, dice the aubergine, red pepper, and zucchinis into small cubes and fry them together in a pan. Drain the vegetables in a colander — this dries them better than paper towels. Set aside.

Add the minced veal to the sauté along with the porcini mushrooms, a pinch of salt and pepper, and brown well. Then add the tomato sauce and basil and cook for 15–20 minutes. Taste and adjust the seasoning if needed, but don't overdo it. Finally, stir in the olives.

Cook the pasta while the sauce finishes, drain, and transfer it to a large serving bowl. Pour in the hot sauce, sprinkle with grated *pecorino*, and stir gently. Serve portions topped with some of the fried vegetables and a spoonful of fresh ricotta.

# PANCOTTO SOUP

By Teresa Mastrobuono

I first came across this *pancotto* soup in a small folio that Caterina Ciavatella gave to guests during a cooking class at my guesthouse in Castiglione Messer Raimondo (TE) a while ago. It was a recipe passed down from her mother, Frida. Caterina is a certified nutritionist living in Penne, but her roots are in Farindola, the gateway to the Gran Sasso National Park. Winters there can be long and harsh, and dishes like *pancotto* were born of necessity — hearty enough to sustain, simple enough to be made with whatever was at hand. Caterina remembers how, when provisions ran low, nothing went to waste; even stale bread could be turned into something satisfying.

This made me think of my own Italian grandmother. As a child, I remember her way of coaxing tomatoes through the winter. At the end of summer, she would wrap the green ones left on the vine in newspaper, tuck them into a brown paper bag, and store them in a cool, dark corner. Weeks later, they would ripen, their flavour a reminder of warmer days. I still find myself using her trick.

For this recipe, you can use any bread you have. Wholegrain sourdough loaves hold their shape and lend a deeper flavour, while white bread softens more quickly, giving the soup a porridge-like, almost creamy texture.

## INGREDIENTS

**Makes 4 portions**

- 230g stale bread
- 4–6 cups of water
- 450g peeled tomatoes, fresh or preserved, chopped
- 1 clove garlic
- 5 tbsps extra virgin olive oil
- 6 fresh bay (laurel) leaves
- 4 tbsps freshly grated *Parmigiano Reggiano* or aged pecorino cheese, more if desired
- some parsley, chopped
- Salt to taste

## PREPARATION

In a large saucepan, combine the water, tomatoes, garlic, bay leaves, and a pinch of salt. Set over medium–low heat and bring gently to the boil.

Once the liquid is simmering, lower the heat and add the stale bread. Stir occasionally, pressing the bread down with the back of a spoon so it softens evenly and absorbs the tomato broth. Continue cooking until the bread is soft and the soup has a thick, porridge-like consistency. This may take 10-15 minutes depending on the bread used.

Drizzle in the olive oil, stirring well to blend it through. Taste and adjust the seasoning.

Ladle into bowls and finish with a generous sprinkle of *Parmigiano Reggiano* or aged *pecorino* and chopped parsley. Serve hot.

# LE MORETTE BISCUITS FROM SAN VALENTINO IN ABRUZZO CITERIORE

By Anna Swann

The first mention of *le morette* biscuits dates to back to the 1870s, when Camilla Pace, a noblewoman from San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore, made them upon her return from travels in the north of Italy. She offered *le morette* to the guests at parties and special occasions celebrated in her mansion.

Though once a delicacy of the aristocracy, *le morette* gradually became part of the wider community's celebrations and are often made made for baptism and communion celebrations. The S-shape comes from the first letter of the town's name.

The ingredients are deceptively simple but the secret lies in the careful balance that gives them their crumbly texture and subtle sweetness. In the old days, they were baked after the bread, when the wood oven was still hot. The biscuits were put in until they started turning toasty dark (*moro* means "dark").

*Le morette* sold in local bakeries are much lighter in colour nowadays, but they are always darker on the bottom side, as a nod to the old days.

## INGREDIENTS

- 6 eggs
- 500g sugar
- 600g flour
- Zest of a lemon

## PREPARATION

Preheat the oven to 180° C-

Beat eggs, sugar, and zest using an electric or stand mixer until the mixture is pale, shiny, and has slightly increased in volume.

Stir in the flour little by little while mixing with a spatula to create a smooth sticky dough. Work quickly without overworking the dough.

Scoop the dough, a spoonful at a time, onto a baking tray lined with parchment paper sprinkled with flour. Shape it into a short cylinder bent into a fat "S". You might want to lightly grease your fingers with olive oil, as the dough will be sticky and tricky to work with. Do not place biscuits too close to each other as they will spread slightly on the tray.

Bake for 15 minutes or until the bottom of the biscuits start to turn dark.

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