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TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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Marano dei Marsi. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 19.

LEFT:

Marano dei Marsi. Photos by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 19.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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Editor's Note

This issue of ABRUZZISSIMO lands on Easter Sunday — by far the most important and most deeply felt celebration in the Abruzzo calendar. The region still preserves the true, solemn spirit of *Pasqua* through ancient rituals, and in this issue, we look at one of the oldest: the *Processione del Venerdì Santo* in **Chieti**. I spoke with Giulio Obletter, governor of the *Arciconfraternita del Sacro Monte dei Morti* — the brotherhood that has organised the procession since its very beginning — and he shared its fascinating history with me.

Every April, hundreds of people from across Italy and beyond gather in **Sulmona (AQ)** to walk the Freedom Trail, retracing the route taken by escaped Allied soldiers during the Second World War as they crossed the Gustav Line to rejoin their regiments. Read our story about *il Sentiero della Libertà* — and if you can, walk it.

Also in this issue, Alessandro Chiappanuvoli takes a clear-eyed look at **L'Aquila** 17 years on from the earthquake. The city has been almost rebuilt in brick and mortar — but has it truly recovered? And as it takes on the title of Italian Capital of Culture 2026, not everyone is convinced that 300 events and 16 million euros are quite the right prescription for what still ails it.

A few weeks ago, I visited **Marano dei Marsi (AQ)**, a small cluster of houses huddled on a mountaintop, one of the very few places to escape the 1915 Marsica earthquake unscathed. Silent, almost deserted, and heartachingly beautiful, it opens its fragile soul to patient explorers. Read my piece, go there, see it — and if it moves you, pass the word on.

Have you tried the *pigna* from **Castel di Sangro (AQ)**? If not, arm yourself with time and patience and give it a go with the recipe at the end of this issue. And if you think sweet ricotta-filled *ravioli* and a robust tomato ragù have no business on the same plate — think again. The *ravioli dolci teramani* recipe in this issue might just change your mind.

Buona Pasqua! Enjoy the April issue!

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor

DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS

NICKNAMES IN ABRUZZO'S VILLAGES – OUR NEXT WEBINAR

The third free event in our ABRUZZISSIMO webinar series takes place on **April 18**, dedicated to one of Abruzzo's most revealing cultural traditions: the *soprannomi*, the art of naming people the way a community actually sees them. Every village had them — nicknames rooted in a trade, a physical quirk, a long-forgotten blunder, or a feud nobody can quite explain anymore. *Ju Sciancate. Lu callarare. Ciaccaficur'*. If you have Abruzzese roots, this might unlock memories — a grandfather's nickname you never quite understood, a family joke that finally makes sense. Following the success of our first two webinars, join us to explore what these names tell us about Abruzzese humour, identity, and village life. We will send you the link to join the webinar next week.

THE REGION IS RUNNING OUT OF DOCTORS

Abruzzo has lost one-fifth of its GPs in just five years, placing it third in Italy for the steepest decline in family doctors, according to the *Fondazione Gimbe*. With 237 more set to retire by 2028, the pressure is only going to grow. For now, the shortfall remains small — just 12 vacant posts, partly because Abruzzo has fewer patients per doctor than the national average. Across Italy, the shortage traces back to years of poor planning that simply didn't train enough new doctors to replace those reaching retirement age — and Abruzzo is feeling the consequences.

SANTA MARIA IN PIANO REOPENS AFTER A DECADE

The church of Santa Maria in Piano in **Loreto Aprutino (PE)** will reopen on 24 April, after almost three years of restoration work funded by the Ministry of Culture at a cost of €1 million. The church had been closed since the 2016–2017 central Italy earthquakes that caused some structural damage of the building. The church has been reinforced against future seismic risk and some frescoes has been restored. First documented in 864, Santa Maria in Piano is among the oldest and most significant religious monuments in the region. Read more about its magnificent Last Judgement fresco on page 24.

WOMEN MEAN BUSINESS IN ABRUZZO

Abruzzo ranks third in Italy for female entrepreneurship. In 2025, the region had nearly 36,000 women-led businesses, according to the latest Infocamere report processed by the *Centro Studi of the Agenzia per lo Sviluppo L'Aquila* — making it Italy's third region by incidence of female enterprise. **Chieti** leads within the region, with a strong focus on agriculture, while **Teramo** stands out for manufacturing and **Pescara** for commerce. Women in Abruzzo are significantly more likely to be running a farm than their counterparts elsewhere in Italy.

L'AQUILA'S TEATRO SAN FILIPPO RETURNS AFTER 17 YEARS

One of **L'Aquila**'s finest baroque interiors is set to welcome audiences again on 17 April, when the Teatro San Filippo throws open its doors after a long post-earthquake restoration. The deconsecrated church of San Filippo Neri — rough-faced outside, breathtakingly ornate within — has been restored with part-funding from over €1.1 million raised through Domani 21/04.09, a charity single recorded by 56 leading Italian artists, alongside national reconstruction funds and €500,000 from the municipality. The 206-seat theatre, managed by the Comune di L'Aquila, will host drama, concerts, and cultural events.

PESCARA'S POPULATION IS SHRINKING

According to the recently published statistics (2024) just 640 babies were born in the Adriatic city, against 1,430 deaths — a natural balance of -790. That means roughly 45 births for every 100 deaths. With a current population of 118,313, **Pescara** has recorded more deaths than births for several consecutive years, reflecting a trend seen across Italy but particularly pronounced here. The figures are all the more striking given that Pescara is one of Abruzzo's busiest and most dynamic cities with a university, busy beaches, and a thriving food and nightlife scene.

DID YOU KNOW?

LET'S GET BACK TO BOMBA

Have you ever lost track of a conversation, only to drag it back to the original subject? In Italian, there's a wonderfully specific expression for exactly that moment: *Torniamo a Bomba* — literally, "let's return to Bomba." According to the Zingarelli dictionary, it means to resume an interrupted discussion or return to the main point. And yes, Bomba is that pretty town perched above the Bomba lake in the province of Chieti.

The most popular explanation credits a 19th-century parliamentarian from the town, Silvio Spaventa, who later became a government minister. The story goes that during a Chamber of Deputies debate about road construction, Spaventa kept steering the conversation back to works needed in Bomba's territory — only to be repeatedly interrupted by colleagues and forced off-topic. Undeterred, he would patiently repeat: *Torniamo a Bomba*. Abruzzesi are proud of the story to this day and hold onto it firmly — much as Spaventa himself refused to be derailed. Historians, though, note there's no written record linking him to the phrase. The episode survives only through oral tradition passed between parliamentarians.

French has its equivalent — *Revenons à nos moutons* — and English speakers simply say "let's get back on track." But only Italian has Abruzzo and the picturesque town of Bomba to thank for it.

WALKING THE FREEDOM TRAIL FROM SULMONA TO CASOLI

By Anna Lebedeva

Every spring, hundreds of people lace up their boots in Sulmona and set off into the mountains of the Maiella. They are retracing one of the most dramatic — and least told — stories of the Second World War.

In the autumn of 1943, Italy was cut in two. The Germans had constructed a formidable defensive barrier — the Gustav Line — running from the Tyrrhenian coast to the Adriatic, with the massif of the Maiella forming a brutal natural wall along its length. To the south were the Allied forces advancing northward; to the north, German-occupied territory and the remnants of the Fascist regime. For thousands of men, the mountains between represented the difference between captivity and freedom.

Just outside Sulmona, in a locality called Fonte d'Amore, stood Campo 78 — a prisoner-of-war camp that had its origins in the First World War and had been repurposed to hold Allied soldiers captured in the North African campaigns. At its peak it held around 3,000 men: British, American, South African, New Zealander, Australian.

Photo: Walkers on the Sentiero della Libertà

THE DAY THE GATES OPENED

The announcement of the Italian armistice on 8 September 1943 threw Campo 78 into instant chaos. The Italian guards, suddenly without orders or purpose, abandoned their posts. Before the Germans could move in and re-establish control, the prisoners found themselves, improbably, free.

What followed was disorganised, desperate, and dangerous. The men scattered into the fields of the Valle Peligna, up the slopes of Monte Morrone, through the surrounding villages. When the German forces arrived and retook the camp, many prisoners had already escaped. Ahead of them lay the Maiella, and beyond it, the Allied lines. In distance, barely a few kilometres as the crow flies. In reality, weeks of mountain crossing without maps, in enemy-held territory. “To the south were the British, the Americans, the Australians, the New Zealanders and to the north, the Germans, and the Italians under the Fascist regime,” explains Adelaide Strizzi, former teacher at the Liceo Scientifico who for many years coordinated the organisational work as vice president of the Associazione Culturale Il Sentiero della Libertà. “They wanted to get over the mountains to reach freedom, reunite with their regiments coming up from the south to liberate Italy.”

THE PEOPLE WHO HELPED

What made the difference was the population of the Valle Peligna. Peasants, shepherds, ordinary families — people with almost nothing — opened their doors to strangers who didn't speak their language and whose presence put every household at risk of German reprisals. “The people of Sulmona put themselves at the prisoners' disposal, hiding them in cellars, in stables, in attics — everywhere they could — and then at night they would organise groups with a local guide who led them through the mountains. Led through extremely rough terrain in the winter of 1943-44 — the dead of winter — the escapees crossed the Maiella with a guide, because otherwise they had no idea where to go,” says Strizzi. This spontaneous, uncoordinated wave of solidarity acquired its name only many years later: *Resistenza Umanitaria* — Humanitarian Resistance.

Campo 78 near Sulmona; archive photo

Among those who crossed the Maiella in those months, guided by the people of Abruzzo, was a young Italian officer named Carlo Azeglio Ciampi — who would later serve as Prime Minister from 1993 to 1994 and President of the Italian Republic from 1999 to 2006.

A SCHOOL PROJECT

Many years later, those same escape routes through the Maiella would become the foundation of a remarkable cultural and historical project. The story of the Sentiero della Libertà begins, perhaps surprisingly, in a classroom. In the 1990s, the Liceo Scientifico Fermi in Sulmona was approached by a British association with two memoirs — *Spaghetti and Barbed Wire* by John E. Fox and *Escape from Sulmona* by Donald I. Jones — written by former POWs recounting their escapes through the Maiella. The contact had been initiated by J. Keith Killby, a former prisoner who had established the Monte San Martino Trust in England to repay, in some small measure, the debt owed to the Italian families who had sheltered Allied soldiers during the war. The Trust offered placements and cultural exchanges to young Italians, particularly the descendants of those who had given help.

The school began translating the memoirs and conducting its own historical research led by Professor Mario Setta and the school's headmaster, Ezio Perino. In the course of that work, they discovered Ciampi

When the then-President learned of the project, he made contact with the school and donated his personal diary from that wartime crossing. It was, says Strizzi, a turning point.

On 17 May 2001, the project took on physical form. From Piazza Garibaldi in Sulmona, a group set off on foot — former prisoners and their families, students from the Fermi, and President Ciampi himself, who came to inaugurate the route. It was the first official walk of what would become an annual event. “This group walk that we created has grown stronger over the years,” says Strizzi. “On average, between 350 and 400 people take part every year: schools, families with children from across Italy, and some people come from England, New Zealand, Australia, and United States, often the descendants of the men who once fled through mountains, returning now to walk them in daylight, in peace, in gratitude.”

Photos: (below) Walkers on the Sentiero della Libertà; (right) the Sacrario della Brigata Maiella in Taranta Peligna, one of the stops along the trail

THE TRAIL TODAY

The route covers roughly 60 kilometres, from Campo 78 at Fonte d'Amore in Sulmona to Casoli — the town where, on 5 December 1943, the partisan Brigata Maiella was formed, and where today a long memorial wall in the Piazza della Memoria bears witness to what happened here.

Along the way the path runs through Campo di Giove, climbs to the Guado di Coccia at 1,674 metres, and descends into the Valle del Sangro, following the line the escaped prisoners walked in darkness and silence 80 years ago.

The trail is waymarked and included among the *Cammini d'Abruzzo* recognised by the Abruzzo Regional Tourism Department.

The annual group walk takes place each spring. This year's edition falls on 25 April — Liberation Day— marking the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Italian Republic, but it will only include one leg of the trail, from Sulmona to Campo di Giove.

IF YOU GO

To take part in the group walk on 25 April, register online attaching a medical fitness certificate.

You will also have to pay a €10 registration fee. For more details see the *Associazione Culturale IL Sentiero della Libertà* Facebook page.

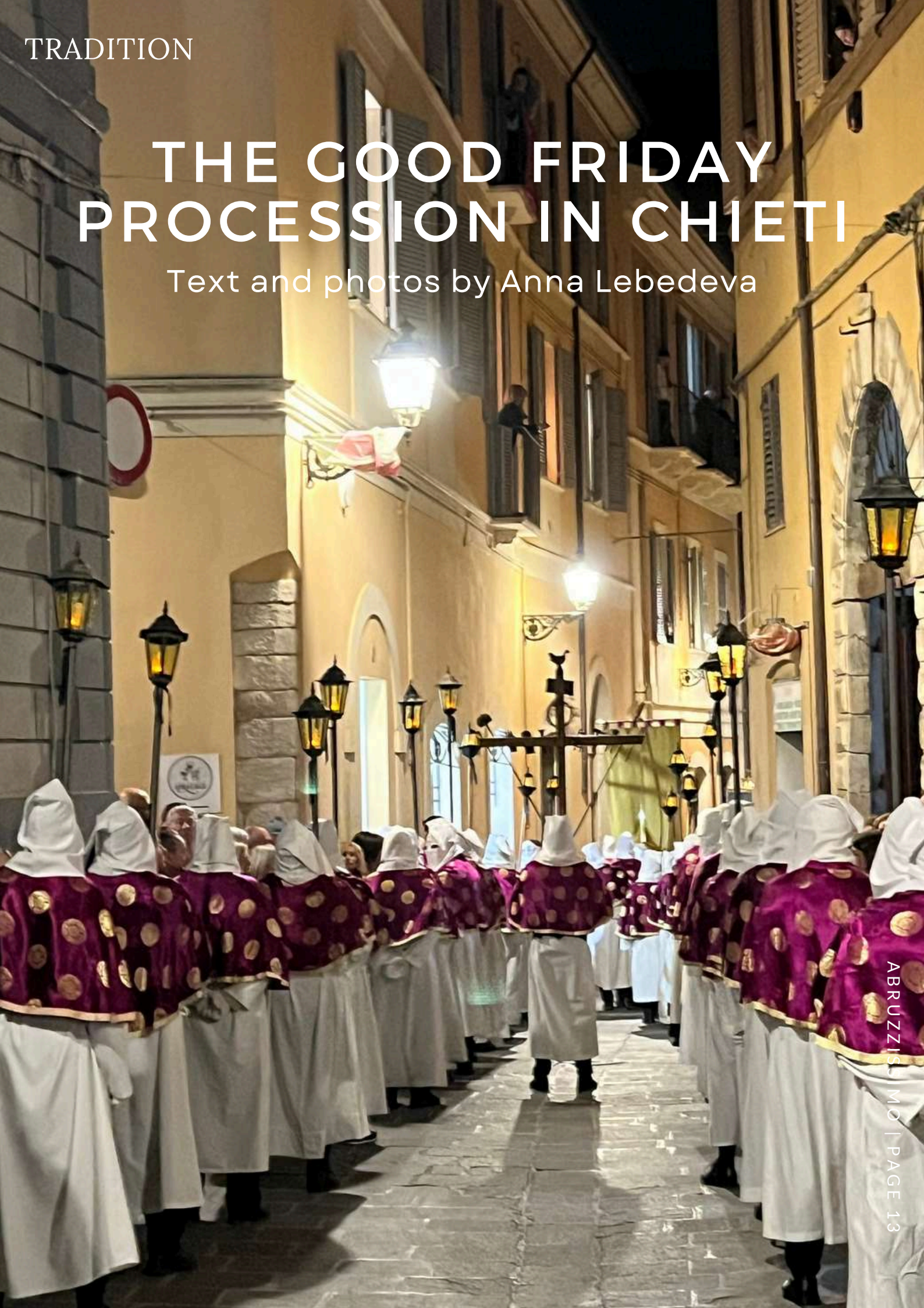
The trail can also be walked independently at any time of year — roughly 56 kilometres over three days, with each leg gaining between 730 and 800 metres in elevation. Full information on stages, elevation profiles, GPX tracks and places to stay overnight is available on the official website.

Photos courtesy of Associazione Culturale "il Sentiero della Libertà - Freedom Trail"

A group of walkers on the trail near Campo di Giove

THE GOOD FRIDAY PROCESSION IN CHIETI

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva



Every year on Good Friday, Chieti becomes the stage for one of the oldest and most extraordinary Easter processions in Italy. With 1,300 participants, an orchestra of 100 musicians, and a choir of 200 voices, this is no modest local tradition — it is a living monument to centuries of unbroken faith.

According to the Treccani — Italy's most authoritative encyclopaedia — the origins of Chieti's Good Friday procession can be traced to 842 AD, the year the city's main cathedral was completed. But Giulio Obletter, governor of the Arciconfraternita del Sacro Monte dei Morti, the brotherhood that has been organising the procession since its conception, is careful to qualify the claim. "This is a reasonably certain date in terms of documentation, but the procession, in the form we know today, was born later," he says. "Its current form, magnificent and highly elaborate, goes back to the early 1600s with the main sacred symbols introduced in the 19th century."

Photos: (below) Cathedral of San Giustino; (right) a member of a confraternity in the procession

CONFRATERNITIES, HOODS, AND SYMBOLS

Over the centuries, the procession grew into something of extraordinary complexity: 1,300 participants ranging in age from five to ninety, drawn from the city's twelve confraternities, carrying seven sacred symbols, set out at dusk, emerging slowly from the Cathedral of San Giustino into streets lit by torches burning on iron tripods. At its head is the black standard of the Arciconfraternita del Sacro Monte dei Morti, flanked by hooded brothers of San Francesco Caracciolo. Behind them come the seven *trofei* — symbols of the Passion — carried one after another by members of the brotherhood, each escorted by young *valletti*, attendants dressed in 18th-century costume.

The symbols tell the story of the Passion in sequence, a visual Gospel from an age when most worshippers could neither read nor understand the Mass read in Latin. There is the angel who came to Christ

in the Garden of Olives, the Roman lances, the column of the flagellation, the Volto Santo — the cloth with which Veronica wiped Christ's face — the cross, the ladder, and finally the burial shroud. "The symbols were a simple explanation for ordinary people who at the time had no way of reading or going deeper," Obletter explains. "They brought a page of the Gospel to the street."

Behind the symbols come representatives of Chieti's twelve confraternities — each hooded, each carrying a lantern on a long pole, each distinguished by the colour of their *mozzetta*, the short ceremonial cape worn over a *saio* robe. In earlier centuries, confraternity membership followed trade lines; a man's brotherhood told you his profession. That custom has long disappeared, but the chromatic variety remains one of the procession's most striking visual qualities. The Confraternita della Madonna del Freddo, for instance, wears a sky-blue mozzetta with a gold border over white; the Confraternita di Santa Maria della Vittoria is distinguished by purple, edged with circular gold motifs. Multiplied across twelve brotherhoods, the effect, by torchlight, is dazzling.

The clergy follow — seminarians, canons, the archbishop. But at the heart of the procession, the *confratelli* of the Sacro Monte, who carry two statues: the *Cristo Morto* (the Dead Christ) and the *Madonna Addolorata* (Our Lady of Sorrows). Small children, aged five or six, walk alongside, their task to hold the corner tassels of the statues' mantles so that the fabric never touches the ground.

Every participant — with the exception of the musicians, the clergy, and the young *valletti* — walks hooded. Many foreign visitors are unsettled by the sight, inevitably drawing parallels with the Ku Klux Klan, an association that could hardly be more misleading. The hooded penitent is a figure that predates the American South by centuries; it is the Klan that appropriated an ancient symbol of Christian humility, not the other way around. For the brotherhoods of Italy, the hood is not a mark of menace but its opposite. “The hood is a sign of penance and humility, a private space for grief. Originally, many members of the Arciconfraternita del Sacro Monte dei Morti were nobles," Obletter explains. "They wanted to erase social class, emphasising that before God all men are equal.”

THE MISERERE

Closing the procession is the orchestra of 100 musicians and a choir of 200 voices, filling the entire route with the *Miserere*. The composition dates to the first half of the 18th century, written by Saverio Selecchy, then Maestro di Cappella of Chieti's metropolitan church. He set to music the verses of

Photos: (below) the statue of the Madonna carried by the Arciconfraternita del Sacro Monte dei Morti; members of a confraternity in the procession

Psalm 51 — traditionally attributed to King David of Israel as a confession of his sins and a plea for divine mercy — and, according to tradition, donated the score to the Arciconfraternita del Sacro Monte dei Morti on one condition: that it to be performed every year during the procession, in perpetuity.

The low, aching strains of the *Miserere* carried into the evening streets of Chieti is one of the most striking and memorable elements of the procession. The orchestra and choir, all dressed in black, move slowly through the darkened streets, led by a conductor whose baton glows in the dark.

The scale of that performance is, Obletter notes, without parallel in the world of religious confraternities. Having travelled widely and encountered brotherhoods from Spain, France, Portugal, Switzerland, and Chile, he is confident in his assessment: "We are, certainly in the world, the only arciconfraternita with an orchestra of 100 musicians and a choir of 200 voices."

NEVER INTERRUPTED — ALMOST

There is a saying in Chieti: it brings great misfortune not to hold *La Processione del Venerdì Santo*. Whether superstition or collective memory, whether rain or snow or war, the procession walks the same. It has only been abandoned once, during the COVID-19 pandemic. But even then, the city did not simply go dark. In place of the procession only the Bishop of Chieti with a few officials walked, followed by a representative of the Arciconfraternita carrying the notes of the *Miserere*. But the musicians found another way. The conductor and dozens of violinists leaned out of their windows and balconies across the city, playing along as the *Miserere* drifted through the empty streets.

Even during the Second World War the procession continued — and saved lives. German forces were moving through Chieti, rounding up men for forced labour camps, but they managed to escape and hid inside the procession, unrecognisable in the brotherhood's robes and hoods.

The orchestra playing the Miserere

THE SENIOR BROTHERHOOD

The procession exists because of one institution: the Arciconfraternita del Sacro Monte dei Morti, founded between the 9th and 10th centuries in the crypt of the Cathedral of San Giustino. It is the oldest and most important of Chieti's confraternities, and it is the guardian of everything: the symbols, the vestments, the statues, the tradition itself.

Its original purpose was practical as much as spiritual — to help the needy, educate the young, pray for the dead, to carry out works of charity, and to bury the bodies of those who died in the fields during wars and epidemics at a time when there were no public cemeteries. Over the centuries, the brotherhood's charitable mission shifted. "The needs always exist," Obletter observes. "They change, but there are always needs that we can help to resolve, as well as, in our case, maintaining a cultural heritage that is passed down to new generations."

Obletter's own family arrived in Chieti from Val Gardena in the north of Italy at the end of the 18th century. "From the early 19th century, my family has been part of the Arciconfraternita and walking in the procession," he says. The procession today includes participants from five to ninety years old; families in which grandchildren carry the same mantle tassels their grandparents once carried, in which children learn the violin specifically so they can one day play the *Miserere*.

The financial burden of keeping the procession alive across the centuries has always fallen on the brotherhood itself. The vestments and mantles must be remade roughly every hundred years — a cycle that sounds manageable until you consider the cost. The great mantle of the *Cristo Morto*, embroidered with gold and silver thread, runs to the equivalent of around €100,000 in today's money. "All the expenses of the procession, all the expenses for the symbols and restoration — they have always been met exclusively by the brothers," Obletter says. "And we will continue to do so." A new restoration of the Christ mantle is now approaching, and the Arciconfraternita is hoping to delay it a few more years — but when the time comes, they will fund it themselves, as they always have.

Members if the Arciconfraternita del Sacro Monte dei Morti carrying one of the symbols

WHAT IT MEANS

The *Processione del Venerdì Santo* is, perhaps, the only non-divisive point the city of Chieti has. "You can ask anyone of any political persuasion, any faith, any background and in the procession they find a moment of recognition of their own roots, of their own city," Obletter says.

The ritual generates what Italians call *il ritorno* — the return. Chieti's diaspora, scattered across Italy and beyond, comes home not for Christmas but for Good Friday.

For an outsider it might be hard to understand why someone would walk for hours through darkened streets in a hooded robe. Is it an act of faith? A sense of duty to community? Or simply the draw of a magnificent spectacle? Obletter is honest about the complexity. "Certainly for our brotherhood it is faith — on that there is no doubt. Among almost 1,300 people participating there will surely be some for whom the tie is a little less strong. But in recent years all the confraternities have been deeply renewed in their leadership — they are close to the Church and carry out charitable work."

Whatever draws each person into the procession, something else takes over once they are in it and once you are watching. The crowds that line Chieti's streets during the Good Friday Procession are vast, but they are quiet; unusually, strikingly quiet. "Silence is an important element," Obletter says, "one that perhaps doesn't exist in other cities, especially in the south of Italy where public life tends toward the exuberant — very much comedy, a lot of shouting, a lot of commotion." But in Chieti, in that stillness, the sobbing strings of the *Miserere* fill the dark streets, year after year. "The point of the silence is reflecting on the meaning of death. The question of what comes after death cannot fail to challenge both believers and non-believers. I think that on that day, everyone examines their conscience a little."

IF YOU GO

The orchestra and choir can be heard rehearsing the *Miserere* in the Cathedral of San Giustino at midday. The procession begins at around 7pm from the cathedral. Free parking is available at Chieti Tricalle, with regular shuttle buses to the town centre.

For those unable to attend in person, the regional television channel Rete8 normally broadcasts the procession live on their YouTube channel.

Photos: La Processione del Venerdi Santo in Chieti

CAPITAL OF CULTURE OR JUST CAPITALISING ON CULTURE?

By Alessandro Chiappanuvoli

L'Aquila has been rebuilt in brick and mortar after the 2009 earthquake — but at what cost to its social fabric, its economy, and its future? As the city takes on the title of Italian Capital of Culture 2026, a sociologist and local asks whether culture alone can do what reconstruction has not.

Seventeen years separate us from the night of the L'Aquila earthquake of 6 April 2009, which caused 309 deaths, more than 1,600 injuries, and around 100,000 displaced people, with material damage estimated at around 10 billion euros. To date, the cost of reconstruction has exceeded 20 billion. Long years marked by the emergency phase through to the early months of 2010, by damage assessment and the organisation of the vast reconstruction effort through at least 2012, and by full-scale rebuilding that began to do the bulk of its work from around 2015. Seventeen years in which the face of the city has changed considerably, yet not as radically as the "opportunity" offered by the reconstruction of almost the entire urban building stock — and virtually unlimited funds — could have generated.

Photo: the city of L’Aquila. Getty Images

THE NUMBERS BEHIND THE NARRATIVE

L'Aquila, despite the slogans repeated year after year ("we will fly again", "the city has been reborn"), still has the look and feel of a city in transition. The undeniable effects of reconstruction — more visible in private buildings than public ones — coexist with an urban reorganisation that remains little more than half-formed: streets have been repaved, much of the historic centre has reopened, yet the city has achieved neither a genuine return to everyday normality nor any real improvement in the quality of life of those who live there. L'Aquila is more or less the same city it was before the earthquake, its flaws and strengths almost unchanged — and in this state of affairs, 17 years on from that devastating night, one cannot help but see, in my view, if not outright failure, then at least the marks of a dispiriting "missed opportunity".

The evidence lies not only in a general discontent — which could, admittedly, reflect political opposition to the current municipal administration — but in the data, which has recently been the subject of debate on social media and in local newspapers. It appears that residents of the historic centre, a figure some analysts have also called into question, number 6,784, compared with roughly 12,000 before April 2009, while commercial activity, as research by the Gran Sasso Science Institute shows, remains around 43% below pre-earthquake levels.

But it is the way the city is actually lived — historic centre and periphery alike — that raises considerable concern among various observers, including sociologists such as myself: a lack of attention to the outlying neighbourhoods, where shopping centres multiply while services for residents and social spaces remain absent; and a historic centre that is sparse in life and inhabitants on weekdays, yet crowded with people on evenings out and during the many cultural and artistic events that have for some years now filled the city's calendar. In short, a "city of consumption", animated only at certain moments and desolate the rest of the time — a place where it is easy, and

The historic centre of L'Aquila under reconstruction. Getty Images

appropriate, to ask what has become of the much-hoped-for "social and economic reconstruction" of the territory. It was precisely to that end that funds were allocated under the Restart programme (Regeneration, Economy, Social, Territory), financed as a complement to the material post-earthquake rebuilding.

CULTURE YES, JOBS NO

What are the Restart funds? They are public resources, divided into two streams (Restart 1 and Restart 2), directed at the revival of the territory — both L'Aquila and the municipalities of the crater zone. Unlike the funding for physical reconstruction, they intervene at the economic, social, and cultural level, supporting projects aimed at reactivating the community, attracting tourist flows and generating new employment and development opportunities. Their goal is to accompany a long-term vision of renewal.

And how have these resources — amounting to approximately 350 million euros — been spent since 2012? If we look at the picture outlined by the USRC — the Special Office for the Reconstruction of the Crater Municipalities — the Restart 2 stream has so far invested resources in only three areas: "tourism and the environment, culture, research and technological innovation" (funds almost always managed directly by the University and other research centres), while neglecting "the entrepreneurial and productive system, higher education, the digital agenda and governance, monitoring and evaluation". In short, money is being spent — and in considerable amounts — on culture and tourism, while investment in jobs and the genuine tools for generating territorial wealth is absent.

WHAT IS THE LONG-TERM VISION?

Which brings us to this year's novelty: L'Aquila's designation as Italian Capital of Culture 2026. The

L'Aquila after the earthquake. Getty Images

programme announced by the municipal administration envisages a total investment of over 16 million euros, with more than 300 events spread over 300 days. The programme — described as "dynamic" and not yet complete or fully available for consultation — includes performances, festivals, exhibitions, artistic productions and research initiatives, involving not only the city but the entire crater territory in a distributed model oriented towards cultural regeneration of the inner areas as well. The slogan is "one territory, a thousand capitals".

In light of what has been said so far about the Restart funds, however, it is legitimate to ask what the social and economic revival strategy actually is that underpins the idea of putting L'Aquila forward as Capital of Culture. Or rather: given that considerable sums are already being spent on culture and tourism, how is this further investment of national public resources supposed to improve the city's situation? What, in short, is the long-term vision for the development of L'Aquila and its surrounding territory?

The candidacy dossier points to a strategy that treats culture as an indirect economic lever — not a direct source of income, but a means of creating the conditions under which other sectors might flourish. The goal, in other words, is not simply to stage events, but to build a territorial ecosystem capable of attracting people, skills, and investment, and of cementing L'Aquila's role on the national stage and as a hub for the inner areas. Yet the economic returns on this investment remain vague:

the dossier is far more comfortable talking about favourable conditions than about jobs, supply chains, or anything that might actually be measured.

THE GRAND SPECTACLE

The risk, in short, is real: that 300 events at a cost of 16 million euros amount to nothing more than a succession of cultural moments that are ends in themselves, without generating any genuine economic development. Of course, artists of considerable stature — Maurizio Cattelan, Ai Weiwei, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Liu Bolin — or leading figures in music and performance such as Nicola Piovani, Salvatore Accardo, Simone Cristicchi and Giorgio Pasotti, alongside the writers, actors and cultural practitioners involved in the various productions and initiatives, will certainly draw audiences from across Italy. But of this grand spectacle, what will concretely remain for the people of L'Aquila? The answer to that question can only be found in the realm of hope. The hope that an artistic movement takes root; the hope that a museum of art is born, beyond the Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo and the MAXXI; the hope that L'Aquila establishes itself in the years ahead as a tourist destination; the hope that the University and the city's cultural associations grow exponentially as a result of this year-long event — but certainly not the hope that industrial output increases, that trade increases, that real employment improves, that services for citizens grow.

To know what L'Aquila as Italian Capital of Culture will actually yield, we have no choice but to wait for the end of this year and those that follow — left, for now, with one cold certainty: that beyond a major investment in culture and tourism, there is precious little else on which to re-build a solid future for the Abruzzo capital.

Alessandro Chiappanuvoli is a writer, sociologist and community manager from L'Aquila. Find out more about his work on his website.

A government building after the 2009 earthquake. Getty Images

MARANO DEI MARSI: THE ROCK THAT HELD

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva

Marano dei Marsi has watched over its corner of Abruzzo for nearly a thousand years. The earthquake that flattened the valley below left it untouched. Depopulation has been harder to withstand.

For years, driving on the A25 motorway just before crossing into Lazio, I often glimpsed a pretty cluster of houses huddled on a mountaintop — Marano dei Marsi — and never found the time to stop. A few weeks ago, I finally made the trip.

The visit brought back a conversation I had recently overheard in a bar, where a group of foreign visitors were planning a day drive around Abruzzo. When one of them suggested visiting a small mountain town nearby, another waved the idea away: "There is nothing to see there — let's not waste time." And just like that, that little town's centuries of history were dismissed. Dismissed were generations of people who built their homes on those slopes, raised their children there, buried their dead there, and called that place the centre of their world.

Photo: Marano dei Marsi

Abruzzo is full of towns like this. You won't find major works of art there or celebrated architectural gems that feature in every guidebook. They are overlooked not only by eager tourists but often by Abruzzesi themselves — forgotten, too, by the politicians, municipalities and dioceses that have no funds to spend on restoration, signage, or promotion. The silence around these towns and villages can make them seem, from the outside, like places where nothing happened and nothing remains.

And yet it is often precisely these small, half-forgotten *borghi* that have the most to tell — if you are curious enough to stop.

Marano dei Marsi is one such place.

HIGH GROUND

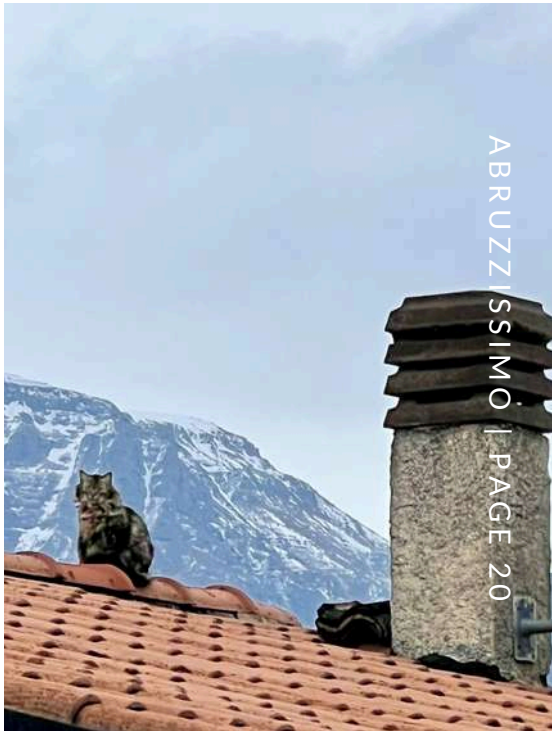
At over 900 metres, Marano – today a *frazione* of Magliano dei Marsi – sits atop Monte La Costantina, with Monte Faito rising behind it and the majestic Monte Velino facing it across the valley. It is a commanding position, and not an accidental one: from here, for the best part of a thousand years, the settlement watched over both the gateway to the Cicolano — the historical region straddling the Abruzzo-Lazio border along the central Apennines — and the ancient via Quinctia, which linked the Tiburtina Valeria to the Salaria.

Fernando Di Orio, whose family has been rooted in Marano since the 18th century and who has co-authored a book about history of the town, puts its origins in a precise medieval context. “Marano dei Marsi is among the settlements that, during the early and late Middle Ages, underwent *incastellamento*, a widespread process in which communities abandoned the exposed plains and moved to fortified positions in the mountains as invasions made valley life increasingly unsafe,” he explains. Documents from the 11th century already refer to the *castello-recinto* — an enclosure castle — of *Castrum Marani*.

In later centuries, the settlement became a possession of the Orsini family, before passing to the Duchy of Tagliacozzo, held by the Roman noble house of the Colonna family. Three towers of the late-medieval castle still stand today.

Marano was never large — at its height, perhaps 400 people. Agriculture was a struggle in these mountains, where fertile land was scarce, but livestock farming offered better returns. “There were well-off landowning families and, as also recorded in my own family, they raised livestock in the mountains and regularly drove them down to sell at the markets in the plains below, in the Marsica area,” says Di Orio.

Photos: In Marano dei Marsi



Photos: (above) a street in Marano; (right) a typical old stone doorway

SURVIVING THE EARTHQUAKE

On the 13th of January 1915, the Marsica earthquake — one of the most catastrophic in Italian history — killed tens of thousands across in the area and levelled Avezzano, Magliano dei Marsi directly below, and dozens of other towns. Marano was one of very few settlements to emerge unscathed. "Soldiers sent to check on Marano arrived expecting to find rubble and bodies. They found neither. Not a single death. Not a single collapsed building," says Di Orio. "Our family palazzo, built in 1888, came through without so much as a crack."

The engineering faculty at the University of L'Aquila later conducted a study on Marano. "It turned out that the solid rock spur the town sits on remained entirely intact while the fault lines tore through the valley floor below," explains Di Orio. The geology that had made the site so difficult to farm was the same geology that saved every life in the *borgo*.

EMPTY STREETS

Walking the streets of Marano today, you can still read its long history in the stones. The highest part of the *borgo* is where the castle once stood. Three of its towers survive, reduced in height and incorporated into later buildings; one of them stands above an archway that leads into a small courtyard, enclosed by tightly packed medieval houses, that still preserves something of the original castle's layout. The *case-mure* — the tall, solid structures that once formed the defensive wall — rise above the lanes below. Between some houses, narrow gaps — barely 30 centimetres wide — slope downward, channelling rainwater off the mountain. Raise your eyes and you will spot the occasional graceful Renaissance window.

The stone doorways of Marano carry a distinctive carved keystone — each shaped something like a bishop's mitre, with a small round detail at the tip. There were said to be 180 carved stone doors

across the town until relatively recently, but many have since been dismantled and sold.

In a regional television programme about Marano dei Marsi from the 1980s (you can watch it here), a 92-year-old local man, Nonno Biagio, dressed in his Sunday best for the camera, sums up the old life with simple finality: "Oh, how terrible, terrible it was. So exhausting. I wouldn't want to live back then again." The camera catches a few figures moving through the streets, chickens picking between the cobbles, and crumbling houses. And while many buildings have been restored since then, and others have been swallowed by brambles and wild ivy, the streets are just as empty.

Officially, today, Marano has around 50 permanent residents. On the Saturday in March when I visited, little seemed to support that number — a few parked cars, smoke from a chimney, and a couple of well-fed cats, one watching me from a rooftop with unblinking curiosity.

SUMMER CROWDS

But Marano has a second life. In August, the town fills with hundreds of people who have bought holiday homes here or returned to houses inherited from parents and grandparents who left for Rome and Avezzano in the decades after the Second World War. For a few weeks every summer, those people come back.

The festa of the patron saints has been moved to August to accommodate the returning families. For four days, the programme runs from religious Masses and marching bands to a cake competition, a pasta auction — a tradition of decades' standing, raising money for the parish — *tombola*, a *torneo di briscola* games and live concerts. Then September comes, and everyone leaves, and Marano quietly waits — as it has always waited — for the people to come back.

Photos: (top) a carved door detail dated 1887; an archway in Marano

WHAT REMAINS

When I walked the old streets of Marano in early spring, I didn't meet a soul. Yellowed magazines dated from 2021 still jutted from letterboxes, waiting for owners who had not returned; an electricity meter reading notice from 2024 was still wedged in a door. What struck me most was the street names, written in a careful, loving hand on paper, laminated and fixed to the walls. A Ju Casteju. Piazzetta San Rocco. Someone had done this quietly because no one else would. The painted street signs that once appeared on the walls in a uniform, official style — still visible in old photographs and videos — have long since faded. Marano is too small and too forgotten for the municipality to bother. It is these private, tender acts of care that cut deepest — proof that someone still loves this place, even as it quietly slips away.

The 11-century Chiesa dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo tells a more visible story of neglect. Closed for decades, its roof has partially collapsed, leaving the interior exposed to rain and damp that are slowly destroying its precious Renaissance and Baroque frescoes. "I have spoken with the various bishops of Avezzano, the Diocese of the Marsi. Even when I was a senator, I tried to find the funds, but the answer was always the same: it would cost a great deal of money, and neither the Church nor the State has it," says Di Orio.

Photos: (from top right) the top part of Marano where the castle once stood; Chiesa dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo; a handwritten street sign

At the entrance to Marano dei Marsi, a sign describes it as a *paese di respiro*, a place of clean air. But that is not the only reason to come here. Here, history arranges itself in layers before your eyes: medieval fortified walls, Renaissance windows, Baroque *palazzi*. And the wounds of abandonment, too — those are part of the record. The empty streets and the August crowds are not only Marano's story. They mirror many towns in modern Abruzzo, places with centuries of history, running out of people to remember it.

The Facebook group *Sei di Marano de' Marsi se…* shares news, announcements, and information about events in the town.

THE LAST JUDGEMENT OF SANTA MARIA IN PIANO

By Maria Giovanna Palermo

On the outskirts of Loreto Aprutino, the town rich in history and renowned for its high-quality olive oil, stands the church of Santa Maria in Piano, a small jewel of Romanesque architecture. It is known among the locals as the church of San Rocco because inside there is a beautiful statue of the saint.

Built on the ruins of a pagan temple, the church has undergone numerous renovations over the centuries, taking the current form after the last one in 1500 when the elegant portico with curved arches and the bell tower were added. The octagonal spire is decorated with colourful *maiolica* (glazed pottery) elements made at the first factories of Castelli. Many church towers in Abruzzo have those green, red, and blue maiolica discs which earned them the name "sister towers." While its exterior is magnificent, you need to step inside the church to see what makes it truly special.

VIVID COLOURS

On the counter façade wall, you will find one of the most beautiful artworks in Abruzzo: a depiction of the Last Judgement known locally as *particolare*. It was painted by an unknown master in the third decade of the 1300s and is considered one of the most unusual Gothic depictions in Italy, without equal, although something similar — but not as well preserved — exists in the church of Santa Maria della Rocca in Offida in the Marche region.

The church of Santa Maria in Piano and its Last Judgement fresco.

Its vivid colours make some experts believe that the masterpiece was painted using an elaborate encaustic technique. This would involve dissolving coloured pigments in heated beeswax — as opposed to the more conventional fresco painting technique, where the dry-powder pigment is painted on freshly laid lime plaster — which preserves the brilliance of the colours over time, making them look as if they have just been applied.

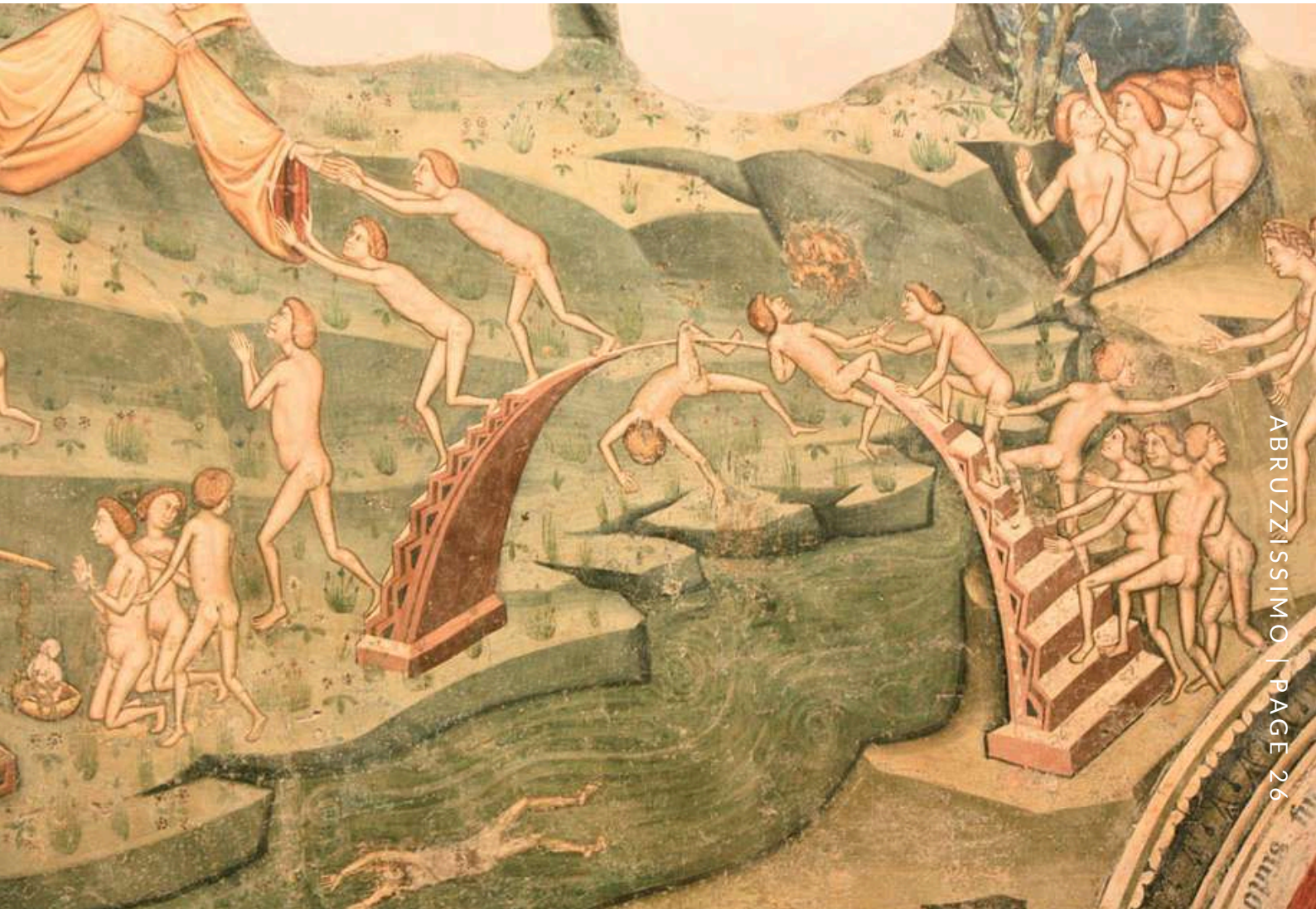
NOT YOUR AVERAGE JUDGEMENT

The section of the fresco that depicts Hell has been partially destroyed over time, but the Purgatory and Paradise sections are well preserved. The real peculiarity is found in the lower part, where we see a scene different from traditional Judgement scenes (when the good and the bad are separated). Here, individual souls are judged one by one. What earned this depiction the name "particular" is that it is drawn on the so-called Vision of Fra' Alberico (which is also described by Dante Alighieri in *The Divine Comedy*), a manuscript by a Cassinese monk who lived around 1100 — and not on the Apocalypse of Saint John in the final book of the New Testament, like most frescoes of this kind.

We see the souls taking a test of courage. They are asked to prove their faith by crossing a river of boiling tar over the so-called *Ponte del Capello*, as thin as a hair. It is one of very few known iconographic depictions rooted in the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism and its Chinvat bridge, or the bridge of judgement, which separates the world of the living from the world of the dead.

The poor, frightened, naked souls flock at the bridge, hesitant to continue. There are those who try to leap forward, those who fall, those paralysed with horror. Only those few not weighed down by sins manage to cross it. Waiting for them on the other bank of the boiling tar river is a psychopomp, an angel who escorts the brave souls to the majestic Saint Michael. The archangel-warrior, having abandoned his habitual armour, wears a precious red cloak, weighing souls. His scale

Below: Ponte del Capello; right: Saint Michael

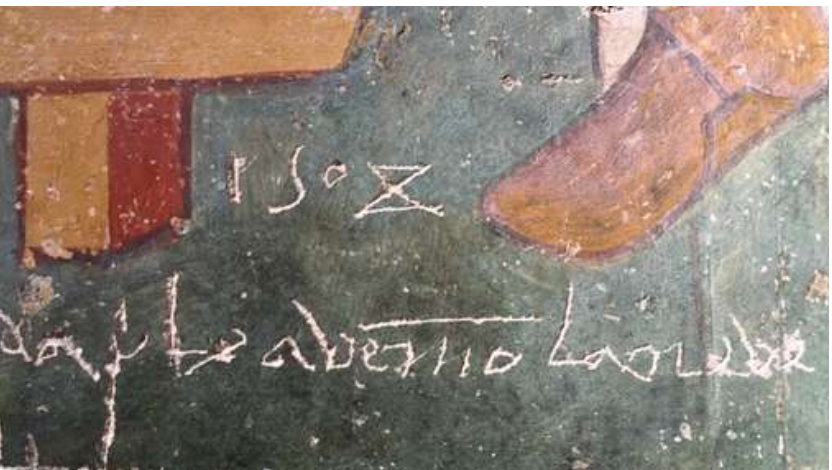


is the final verdict for granting or denying access to the Garden of Earthly Delights and the Tower of Paradise, where Saint Peter guards the entrance. Above, on the clouds, five delightful angels wearing flower wreaths play heavenly music.

OTHER FRESCOES

The church preserves the primitive layout with a single nave, five simple arches, and side chapels, all decorated with frescoes. One of the chapels is devoted to the life of St. Thomas Aquinas. One particular scene, dated to 1410 and depicting the funeral of the Saint, has attracted the attention of art historians, as they believe it shows a self-portrait of the frescoes' painter standing among religious figures. If you look closer, you will see inscriptions scratched over the frescoes by worshippers over the centuries. One of them mentions a solar eclipse in July 1590: "*Adi ultimo di luglio 1590 si oscurò il sole.*"

Below: centuries-old worshippers' inscriptions; right: the Garden of Earthly Delights



Finally, in the apse, there is a precious gilded wooden altar containing a rare 15th century pietà depicting the Virgin cradling Christ's dead body.

The church of Santa Maria in Piano was damaged by the earthquakes of 2016 and 2017 and underwent a long restoration. It is reopening to the public on April 24. Keep an eye on the municipality's website and Facebook page for announcements about the opening hours.

Maria Giovanna Palermo is an art historian and tour guide. Follow her Facebook page Sull'Arte. Photos by Anna Lebedeva.

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Anna Lebedeva

Editor of Abruzzissimo Magazine

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A LONG-EARED ADDICTION IN GORIANO VALLI

By Linda Dini Jenkins

German-born Saskia Steigleder lives with her husband, Giuseppe Turavani, their children Fabio, Matteo and Luisa, and about 30 donkeys in the isolated mountain town of Goriano Valli, in the heart of the Sirente-Velino Regional Natural Park. Organizing donkey treks and running a small "scattered" agriturismo are just the tip of the iceberg for this ambitious family.

Giuseppe was born and raised in Goriano Valli and has never left. After attending agricultural school, he worked for several years with the environmental association Legambiente at the former Monastery of San Giorgio. Saskia, originally from a small town near Heidelberg, first arrived in Goriano Valli in 2005 while still in university to take part in a Legambiente volunteer camp at the former monastery. It was there that she met Giuseppe and, after returning several times, decided to settle permanently in Goriano in 2008.

PLUSES AND MINUSES

While there are similarities in living in any small village, Goriano had some big plusses: the surrounding landscape, the silence, the nature, the history. But, as Saskia says, "As for the village itself, there's still a lot to be done."

"There may be 60 inhabitants year-round, but so many people have left — mostly the young people. In the summer, of course, there are maybe 300 or 400 people," she explains. "But fortunately, for the past two or three years, something has been starting to grow, a few seeds, a bit of a movement that makes us hopeful."

She's referring to the MuDI (see our article in the September 2024 issue) — a museum "scattered" among some of the old houses in the village which tells about life in the town in the past. "In summer it's beautiful because there is life here, with lots of people walking around," she enthuses. "But winter can be quite tough at times."

Saskia Steigleder with one of her donkeys, Carotina

KEEPING BUSY

Saskia rejects the notion that living in a small, isolated village is depressing. "I'm not someone who needs nightlife, theatre, cinema, those things. I've never been like that, so I don't need it," she explains. " At first I thought, oh dear, but in the end I realized that if I wanted the city, Rome is only two hours away, but, honestly, I never go there."

In winter she usually greets the donkeys in the morning, lets them out, checks the fence, has a

look around, and then goes back inside. If she and Giuseppe have guests coming in the winter time, she goes to prepare the rooms.

In summer the days are full because people come regularly to stay, or to walk with the donkeys, and there is always work to do. Then their days start at seven in the morning; in winter at six, because they have to wake the children for school. "With three children, there's always something going on," she says, smiling.

KIDS AND DONKEYS

Their youngest child is six, the middle one twelve, and the eldest is sixteen. The younger ones go to school in Fontecchio, about fifteen minutes by school bus. The eldest now goes to L'Aquila, and leaves every day at 6:40 for the hour-long journey. He attends agricultural school and likes it a lot, but he hasn't committed to coming back to work with his parents in Goriano. "He says he might want to do something else, and I think it's important that they first go away and see other things, not stay here straight after school without options."

At the moment, the couple tends to some 30 donkeys on their property, with up to 10 used for trekking. They are large and small, grey, brown, black, young, and old. Alongside them are two shepherd dogs, Bianca and Neve.

"It's a bit crazy," laughs Saskia. "Some of them are very old, and we've become almost like a sanctuary. People bring us donkeys they can no longer keep. Here we put them in the fields, where they graze and live out their lives peacefully."

The trekking idea actually began for them in Germany. She and Giuseppe went to a travel fair and met the owner of an alternative travel agency, who told them about donkey trekking — their first contact with this kind of tourism. It felt right for this land, according to Saskia, because in these mountains, donkeys were once part of everyday life, of work, of memory, until cars and tractors replaced them.

Saskia and Giuseppe

"Even today, old mule tracks still trace those earlier routes. In 2009 we began our small farm, Abruzzo Mio, and organised the first treks," she remembers. "It all started with Pauline, a gentle miniature donkey whose affectionate, stubborn, loyal, slightly mischievous nature drew us in. From there grew what we jokingly call a 'long-eared addiction'."

Saskia and Giuseppe offer two types of donkey trekking. There's a short half-day or day trip near the village of Goriano, up to the medieval tower. It's easy, suitable for children and families, and appeal to mostly Italians.

Then there are the longer treks. "Germans, Swiss, Austrians . . . they look for a challenge," says Saskia. "They go for three, four, five, even six days with the donkey." She explains that the groups go on their own after a long briefing session where she explains everything, accompanies them for a stretch, and offers telephone assistance if they run into problems. Over the years, a whole network has formed around these treks, with accommodations and restaurants in the valley and beyond. The groups move from one village to another at their own pace.

THE AGRITURISMO

In 2013 the couple bought their home, which included a small apartment created from what used to be a stable for donkeys and sheep. They felt as if the place had been waiting for them and, at that point, they decided to welcome guests. Over the years they

added three more, restoring them with care to keep their character intact. Giuseppe started to farm when he was very young — it was an early passion. His uncle has a farm, so he had some experience and a bit of help. When Saskia arrived, she pitched in. “People always talk about me, because I’m the one who goes to events, gives interviews, ends up in the photos, talks to the guests. In the end, he does all the really hard work,” she says.

Among the biggest challenges with the farm is the issue of wild animals: between the deer, the foxes, and the bears, it can get pretty discouraging. But they always come up with something new and carry on. Saskia and Giuseppe’s main product is saffron, but recently they also started growing spelt, which seems to cope better with the local soil. They’ve even added some products to their line, like spelt crackers and chips.

“On the tourism side, the main difficulty is the lack of infrastructure. You don’t always know where to send guests to eat, and they often need a car, because public transport is limited,” admits Saskia. “It’s beautiful because you’re in a wild part of Italy, not a tourist hotspot. That’s what people like. But there are things missing. Still, in recent years, perhaps since Covid, there have been small improvements.”

SMALL VILLAGE

When Saskia first moved to Goriano, Giuseppe’s family welcomed her straightaway. “It’s a close-knit community up here in the mountains,” she explains. “We are so few that when someone is unwell, or needs help, everyone knows.”

With what little free time she has, Saskia has become part of the board of the village’s social cooperative. Since 2024 both of them have been actively involved in the slow renewal of their small village. Together, the residents have opened a small shop in the local bar, launched the scattered museum, and begun to shape forms of tourism that are rooted in the place itself.

She and Guiseppe try to remain optimistic about the future of their little piece of paradise, but there are still uncertainties. “There’s a fear that the village is fading, because there are so few of us, and many are elderly,” she sighs. “What would really make a difference is having a few young families move here. Our hearts are tied to Goriano and we hope it will not follow the path of so many mountain villages that slip into memory.”

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.

Photos: (below) one of the guests trekking with donkeys; (right) the view from one of the rentals Saskia and Giuseppe run in Goriano Valli

STA 'BBONE ROCCHE, STA 'BBONE TUTTA LA ROCCHE!

By David Ferrante

"If Rocco's alright, then everything's alright!" On the surface it looks like a pun — a play on the name Rocco and the word *rocche* (castles) — but underneath it carries a very concrete idea. Said with the right dose of irony, it becomes a perfect snapshot of everyday selfishness. The meaning is clear: as long as I'm alright, the rest can go to ruin.

In Abruzzo, the phrase is typically used as a gentle reproach, a way of calling out the individualist who turns a blind eye to everyone else's troubles. If Rocco is doing well, then the whole village of Rocca must be fine. Never mind if someone nearby is struggling, if the community needs help, if something is quietly coming apart. It sounds light, almost playful but it carries a sharp moral jab.

Anthropologically, the expression is interesting precisely because it was born in contexts built on solidarity. In the small villages of Abruzzo, survival depended on mutual aid, which meant that selfishness was noticed, remarked upon, and openly mocked. To say "Sta 'bbone Rocche..." is to point a finger at whoever is tending only their own little garden.

Sta 'bbone means *sta bene* (in English "is well"). The double *b* and the dropped final vowel are typical of Abruzzese dialects. *Tutta la Rocche* means "all of Rocca" — referring to the village (*Rocca* being a common place name in Abruzzo, often part of longer names like Rocca di Mezzo, Rocca di Cambio, etc.). So the full phrase plays on the double meaning: Rocco the person and Rocca the village share almost the same name, which is where the pun lives.

"*St*" is pronounced like "*sh*" in English (e.g., in she).

David Ferrante is a writer, sociologist, and passionate researcher of Abruzzo's culture and traditions.

QUICK STOP

BIG BENCH IN CAMPO DI GIOVE

A giant yellow bench sits at the top of **Campo di Giove (AQ)**, looking out over a sweep of Apennine peaks. You can drive right up to it, climb on, and suddenly feel about six years old again — which is entirely the point.

It is part of the Big Bench Community Project, a non-profit initiative founded in 2015 by American designer Chris Bangle and his wife Catherine, who live in Piedmont. The idea is disarmingly simple: an oversized bench, placed in a panoramic spot, shifts your perspective so completely that familiar landscapes become extraordinary again. As Bangle puts it, we are so obsessed with discovering new things that we deny ourselves the interesting experience of encountering well-known things in a different context.

The project has grown into a quiet force for rural tourism, drawing visitors to villages they might otherwise never have stopped in. The design of the benches is copyright-protected but licensed free of charge, on the condition that each bench is placed in a panoramic spot outdoors, accessible to everyone, always part of a shared experience rather than a private installation.

Abruzzo has around 22 of these benches, scattered across the region in places like **Roccaspinalveti (CH)**, **Rendinara (AQ)**, **Giulianova (TE)** (you can find the locations on the project's website).

Campo di Giove's bench is easy to reach by car (see the location here). Go, sit, look up, and let the mountains do the rest.

For more on Campo di Giove and what to see there, read our article in the July 2024 issue.

EASY TRAILS

THE VALLEY OF AMPLERO AND THE NECROPOLIS OF THE MARSI

- **Length: about 10 km**
- **Time: 3 1/2 hours**
- **Starting Point: park near the Capella di Sant'Antonio, Collelongo (AQ)**

From **Collelongo (AQ)**, a dirt road leads past a cemetery turn-off and along a dirt track to the Chapel of Sant'Antonio. From this panoramic viewpoint at 840 metres above sea level, the walk proper begins.

Descend onto a vast, open meadow where horses and cattle graze beneath magnificent old trees scattered across the grassland — one of those landscapes that feels genuinely timeless. Cross the meadow and enter a cool woodland of holm oaks and turkey oaks, following the trail to the Necropolis of Cantone: an ancient burial ground of the Marsi — the Italic people who inhabited this territory in pre-Roman times — with pit graves and two tomb markers bearing the names of the dead. Tomb 14 yielded an exquisite bone funerary bed, now in the *Museo Archeologico di Chieti*.

Higher up, barely visible through the dense undergrowth, lie the remains of a small fortified Marsi settlement enclosed by double circular walls. At its heart, archaeologists from the University of Pisa uncovered what is believed to have been a sanctuary: a place of pilgrimage where the Marsi left offerings — terracotta female faces, a bronze Hercules, figurines of mothers nursing newborns.

You can return the way you came or extend the adventure with a loop route back to Collelongo (see the trail on Wikiloc). The walk can be enjoyed year-round though in summer it's wise to set out early or wait for the cool of the evening. The trail is not well waymarked, so it's worth downloading a hiking app such as Outdooractive before you set out.

DOLCI DI PASQUA FROM ABRUZZO

By Anna Swann

Walk into any supermarket in Abruzzo in the weeks before Easter and you'll be confronted with towers of *colomba pasquale* boxes – that dove-shaped cousin of *panettone* that has become the default Easter sweet across the country. However, if you want to understand what Easter actually tastes like in Abruzzo, you need to go to small bakeries. The region's Easter *dolci* are wonderfully varied and stubbornly local – many are almost unknown beyond the borders of a single town.

The most widespread is *il fiadone dolce*, a semi-shortcrust pastry filled with a mix of fresh cheese or ricotta, and eggs. When it's made well, it has a moist, spongy interior with a delicate flavour. The recipe shifts subtly from village to village – in Gessopalena (CH), for instance, the filling uses a local fresh cheese called *macciocco* for a distinctively grainy texture. In Popoli Terme (PE), I go to the bakery **Il Fornaio** (Corso Antonio Gramsci, 30) to buy excellent sweet *fiadoni* (in the photo) shaped like little baskets (also called *fraungelle* in some towns), but only in the two weeks before Easter, so mark your calendar. A close relative of *fiadone* is the *soffione* – a ring-shaped pastry with a thin crust and a sweet ricotta filling – which you can find year-round in some bakeries (e.g, **Alla Chitarra Antica** in Pescara, Via Sulmona, 2).

Then there is *pizza di Pasqua*, a fragrant sweet bread made with anise, candied fruit, and raisins, eaten on Easter morning alongside cured meats and hard-boiled eggs. By tradition it is prepared on Good Friday, so the dough has time to rise and rest. In the Teramo province it takes a cylindrical, panettone-like form; around L'Aquila it resembles more a loaf.

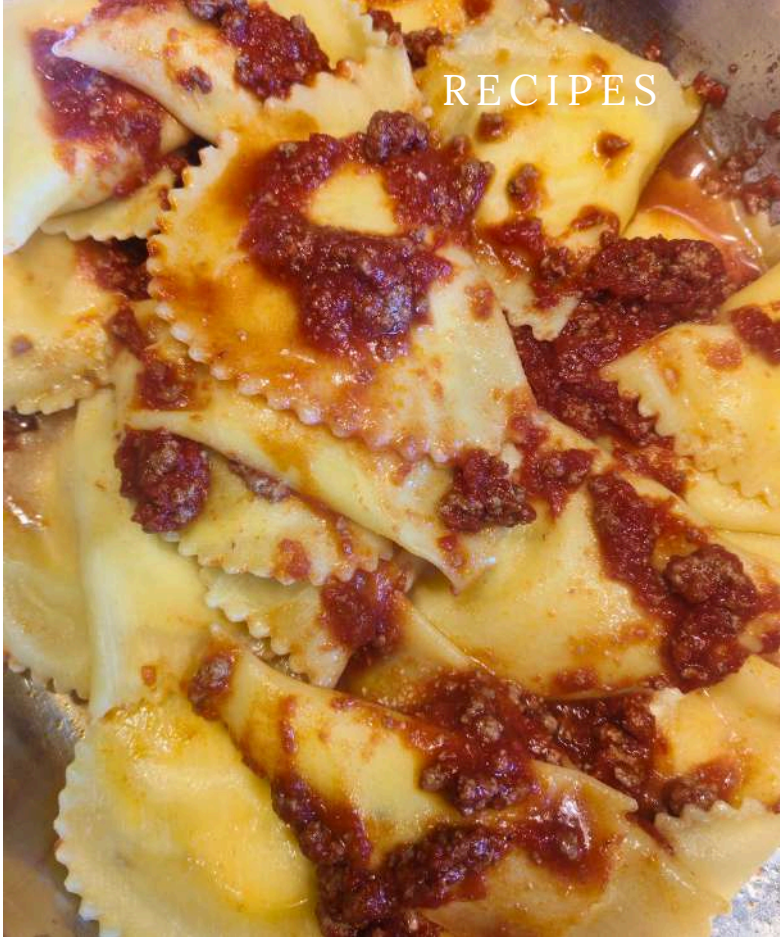
Every Abruzzese family has its own version of *pupe* or *cavalli* – shortcrust figures shaped as women with big bosoms and horses, sometimes decorated with whole eggs as symbols of love and prosperity. Originally exchanged between the families of betrothed couples, over time they became a gift for children, with grandmothers traditionally making them on Holy Thursday. Today you'll find them plain, covered with colourful icing, or finished with a chocolate glaze.

For something truly rare, head to Pescocostanzo for *la scarsella* – a shortcrust shell stuffed with three cheeses (*primo sale, caciotta vaccina*, and *pecorino*) mixed with citrus zest, candied fruit, raisins, and cinnamon (see the recipe in the April 2025 issue). By tradition, a small hole is made with a sprig of olive blessed on Palm Sunday in each pastry through which the melted cheese – *la lacrima di Cristo* – weeps during baking. *La scarsella* is sold over Easter at **Biscottificio Artigianale Donatelli** (Strada di S. Francesco, 70) and **Biscottificio Di Giacomo** (Via della Fontana, 3). It has become so popular that a few years ago the local police had to be called in to manage a forty-metre queue outside Di Giacomo, so order ahead if you can.

And if you're in Castel di Sangro (AQ) for Easter, look for *la pigna* – a large, ring-shaped sweet bread fragrant with orange and anise, traditionally served in the bread basket at Easter lunch (see the recipe on page 36).

RAVIOLI DOLCI TERAMANI

By Annalisa Di Francesco



My mother talked about sweet *ravioli* for as long as I can remember – how good they were, and how, after she moved to Pescara, she could never quite reconcile herself to the savoury kind. “They lacked flavour," she'd say, despite the fact that her town was barely 15 kilometres away from the city. And yet in the kitchen, that distance felt like another world entirely.

I grew up never having tasted them, puzzled by the idea. A sweet *raviolo* with meat sauce – how could that possibly work?

Years later, my friend Oraziana – from Tortoreto, in the province of Teramo – said word for word what my mother had always said. On a hunch, I asked my mother if my grandmother might have had Teramane roots. She did. The *ravioli dolci* recipe had brought me home.

When I finally tasted them, I understood: the sweetness of the filling and the savoury depth of the ragù is a combination that shouldn't work but absolutely does.

Annalisa and Oraziana run traditional cooking classes as *Le Presentose in Cucina* — follow them on Instagram and Facebook.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 4 portions

For the pasta:
400g type 0 soft wheat flour, 4 eggs, 1 sprig of fresh marjoram, finely chopped (optional), a pinch of salt.

For the filling:
500g ricotta, 150g sugar (about 6 heaped tablespoons), 2 egg yolks, 40g grated Grana Padano cheese (or similar), a generous pinch of cinnamon (about ⅓ teaspoon), grated zest of ½ lemon.

For the sauce:
300g minced beef (or a mix, as preferred), finely chopped ½ stick of celery, ½ onion, 1 small carrot, 30ml white wine, 1 litre tomato passata, 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, salt to taste

PREPARATION

Prepare the sauce. Heat the oil in a saucepan and gently sauté the chopped vegetables over a low heat for about 5 minutes until softened. Add the minced meat and cook, stirring, for about 10 minutes, then deglaze with the white wine and continue stirring until the alcohol has evaporated. Add the tomato passata and salt and leave to cook for about an hour. Adjust the seasoning at the end if needed.

For the pasta, arrange the flour in a mound on a board and add the pinch of salt. Break the eggs into the centre and add the finely chopped fresh marjoram, if using. Begin beating the eggs with a fork, gradually incorporating the flour. When the dough starts to come together, work it with your hands until smooth and elastic. Cover with a bowl or cling film and leave to rest for about 30 minutes.

For the filling, place the well-drained ricotta in a large bowl. Add the sugar and egg yolks and mix until smooth and creamy. Add the grated Grana Padano cheese, cinnamon and lemon zest and mix everything together well until you have a soft but firm filling, ready to use.

Roll the pasta out thinly with a rolling pin or pasta machine, fill with the ricotta mixture and shape into ravioli. Cook in plenty of salted boiling water, drain and serve with the ragù sauce.

PIGNA FROM CASTEL DI SANGRO

By Anna Swann

I found this recipe on Facebook in a popular group called *Ricette abruzzesi per tutti i gusti*. It came with a warning: "*Armatevi di pazienza, è un lavoro con più step e il tutto avviene in tre giorni*" — arm yourself with patience, this is a multi-step process that unfolds over three days. If you are impatient, don't even try.

Several versions of *la pigna* exist: in Molise it is sometimes made with boiled potato in the dough; in Castel di Sangro it is made without, and decorated with colourful sugar sprinkles.

La pigna is prepared on Palm Sunday, and for many families its making was bound up with a small ritual: a blessed sprig of olive tree was placed on the stove, and if the leaves remained unscorched, the family could go ahead and make the bread — if not, they had to do without. There was even a rhyme that accompanied this custom: "*Palma benedetta che vieni una volta l'anno, dimmi se mamma fa la pigna quest'anno*". The bread is traditionally served with *salami* and *prosciutto* at the Easter Sunday lunch.

INGREDIENTS

Pre-dough:

- 125g all-purpose flour
- 3g fresh yeast
- 75ml water

Dough:

- 5 eggs
- 250g sugar
- 10g anise seeds
- raisins to taste (softened in anisetta liqueur or rum)
- 100ml milk
- grated zest of 1 lemon and 1 orange
- vanilla extract or 1 vanilla pod
- 750g flour (350g all-purpose flour and 400g type 00)
- 75g lard
- 7g fresh yeast
- 1 egg yolk and milk for glazing

PREPARATION

This is a three-day recipe. Start the pre-dough two days before you want to bake.

Day 1. Mix the pre-dough ingredients into a ball, place in a covered container and refrigerate for 24 hours.

Day 2. Remove the pre-dough from the fridge 2–3 hours before you begin. Beat the eggs thoroughly with the sugar and flavourings. Add the lukewarm milk in which you have dissolved the 7g of yeast, the anise seeds, the lard (soft but not melted), the pre-dough ball, and the flour. Knead well — around 20 minutes in a stand mixer or by hand, until the dough is smooth and elastic. Add the squeezed raisins towards the end. Place the dough in a large container (it will triple in size) and leave to rise overnight at room temperature.

Day 3. Work the dough briefly by hand, shape into a ball, then stretch it from the centre to form a large ring. Place on a baking-paper-lined tray and leave to rise for 5 hours. Glaze with egg yolk and milk, scatter with coloured sugar sprinkles if you like, and bake at 200°C for 10 minutes, then reduce to 180°C for a further 40 minutes. Cover loosely with foil if the surface browns too quickly.

Photo by Maria Rosaria Mapelli.

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