

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



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Rendinara. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 8.

## LEFT:

Rendinara. Photos by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 8.

# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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## Editor's Note

ABRUZZISSIMO turns six this month! What began as a lockdown project during the COVID pandemic has grown into a small but mighty community of people from across the globe, united by a love of Abruzzo. In six years, over 5,000 people have subscribed to the magazine, and hundreds continue to support us by purchasing and renewing their premium subscription every year. We must be doing something right – nearly 80% of our premium subscribers have been with us from the very beginning.

Recently, I have been rethinking how we connect with you. I have been stepping back from Facebook, realising it no longer serves the ABRUZZISSIMO community the way I'd like – and that many of you are not on it at all. In its place, I am focusing on more meaningful ways to reach you – free webinars, regular updates by email, and more posts on our website, [Abruzzissimo.com](https://www.abruzzissimo.com).

Now, to this issue.

In the spirit of ABRUZZISSIMO's founding philosophy – shining a light on the lesser-known corners of Abruzzo and its culture – we explore the soprannomi in **Rendinara (AQ)**. These are family nicknames, passed down through generations, each one carrying the memory of an ancestor, a habit, a story half-remembered and half-invented. We had a webinar about soprannomi two weeks ago and the recording is available for our premium subscribers.

We also visit Vasto, where an extraordinary contemporary ceramics project brings thousands of local children together to create public art – and, tile by tile, a deeper sense of civic belonging. And we take a walk through the monumental cemetery of **L'Aquila**, where some of the city's most remarkable figures are buried. Plus the story about Abruzzo's beloved pasta, spaghetti alla chitarra, recipes, a walk to the magical Fairies Hill above **Roccacasale (AQ)**, and a visit to a beautiful botanical garden in **Loreto Aprutino (PE)**.

Six years in, and we have barely scratched the surface. There are always more stories to tell, more people to meet, more villages to explore – and I can't wait to share them with you.

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

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



## ABRUZZOS WOLF POISONING CRISIS

21 wolves – a protected species – have been found dead across several locations within the **Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park** and buffer zones over the past three weeks, in what authorities are calling a major wildlife emergency. Laboratory analysis has confirmed the animals were killed by poisoned bait laced with agricultural pesticides. Prosecutors in Sulmona have opened an investigation, with an agricultural pesticide identified as the poison used. Other wildlife – including small mammals and raptors – have also fallen victim to the indiscriminate baiting, highlighting the broader threat to the entire ecosystem.

The killings come amid a charged political climate. The EU recently downgraded the wolf's protection status from "strictly protected" to "protected," a move backed by Italy's government, which effectively green-lit population management measures. Environmental groups warn this has emboldened those hostile to predators. Even Coldiretti Abruzzo, the farmers' association, condemned the killings as "ignoble," while calling for serious dialogue about the growing impact of wolves on agricultural businesses. The Abruzzo regional government has said it is prepared to join the criminal proceedings as a civil party.

For updates about the emergency keep an eye on the park's [website](#).

## RISING INCOMES – BUT NOT THERE YET

Household incomes in Abruzzo grew by 3.43% in the last two years, outpacing the national average, according to a Unioncamere–Centro Studi Guglielmo Tagliacarne analysis. The standout performer is Teramo, which recorded nearly 5% growth – the fifth highest increase of any Italian province – a surge likely linked to the economic activity generated by post-earthquake reconstruction. Chieti remains the wealthiest province by annual disposable household income (i.e., what's left after outgoings), at €7,547, while Pescara leads on income per head at just under €22,000 – 60th in the Italian rankings. However, incomes across the region still remain around €18,000 below the national average.



## GREAT TIME TO RENT, PRICIER TO BUY

Buying a home in Abruzzo is getting pricier, with the average now at €1,385 per square metre and **Pescara** – the region's most expensive city – pushing past €2,100/sqm, according to Immobiliare.it Insights. **Chieti** remains the most accessible option for buyers at €1,080/sqm. The rental picture tells a different story: supply has jumped by over 20% while demand has actually dropped, meaning renters have more choice and potentially more bargaining power than they've had in a while. **Pescara** tops the rental market too, at €9.8/sqm, with **Teramo** the most affordable at €6.4/sqm.



## WINE EVENTS SEASON KICKS OFF

This May, Abruzzo hosts two of its most anticipated wine events of the year. Viva la Vite returns to **Pescara** in Porto Turistico on May 10–11, bringing together natural and artisan winemakers for two days of tastings, food stalls, and low- and no-alcohol options. The festival celebrates authentic, sustainable winemaking – natural, organic and biodynamic – with producers who work directly from vine to bottle.

Another big event, Vinorum – the Abruzzo Wine Festival – returns to **L'Aquila's Piazza Duomo** on May 15-17 with wine tastings, masterclasses, producer meetups, and street food. More details on the event's page.

## AI WEIWEI BRINGS "AFTERSHOCK" TO L'AQUILA

MAXXI L'Aquila hosts Aftershock, a major exhibition by Chinese artist, designer, activist, architect, and filmmaker Ai Weiwei, running until September 6. The show explores the lasting impact of natural disasters, human conflict, corruption and tragedy, while reflecting on resilience and creative resistance. The exhibition creates a poignant dialogue between one of the world's most influential contemporary artists and Palazzo Ardinghelli – a baroque building itself rebuilt after L'Aquila's devastating 2009 earthquake.

Born in Beijing in 1957, Ai Weiwei is one of the world's most influential contemporary artists, known for large-scale installations, architecture and film, as well as for his outspoken activism against the Chinese government, which led to his arrest and detention in 2011.

## DID YOU KNOW?



## THE GENIUS FROM POPOLI TERME

Every time you see a Vespa scooter – that timeless Italian icon – you're looking at the genius of a man from Abruzzo. Corradino D'Ascanio was born in Popoli (PE) in 1891, and it was from these hills that he went on to design groundbreaking helicopter prototypes and the most recognisable scooter ever built.

At 15, he built a rudimentary hang glider, testing it from the hills around Popoli after studying the wing proportions of birds. By 1925, he had patented a helicopter with two coaxial rotors, decades ahead of his time, though poor government support meant the technology was never fully developed at home.

Then came the Vespa. In 1945, approached by industrialist Enrico Piaggio, D'Ascanio designed a simple, affordable scooter for a war-weary Italy. The Vespa became the symbol of postwar reconstruction – by 1956, one million had already been built.

His restless mind ranged far beyond aviation and scooters. From his Popoli engineering studio in the 1920s, he registered dozens of patents – a soap dispenser, an electric oven, a speed-warning device for vehicles, and an electro-pneumatic document retrieval machine using punched cards that anticipated the computing age by decades. His complete archive, held today at the State Archive in Pescara, continues to attract researchers, design historians, aviation scholars, and students.

In Popoli Terme, a plaque marks the family *palazzo* on Corso Gramsci where he was born, a Vespa club proudly bears his name, and there are talks about a motor museum in his honour.



## LOVING VASTO, ONE TILE AT A TIME

By Giuseppe Buono

**Ask a child in Vasto which neighbourhood they live in, and there is a reasonable chance they can point to a ceramic installation they helped make – a staircase riser, a glazed parapet, a street sign in the borgo – a few kilometres away.**

Vasto is a city with a long memory: Roman mosaics, a magnificent castle, medieval centre that rises sharply above the Adriatic, and the trabocchi – those extraordinary wooden fishing machines that crouch over the water on stilted legs, like giant insects poised to drink from the sea.

It is not, at first glance, a place you would associate with a contemporary ceramics movement. And yet, since 2001, our small family-run workshop has been giving Vasto's schoolchildren an unusual assignment: learn the history of your neighbourhood, then make something permanent out of it. Since then, more than 2,000 students have taken part, leaving their work on staircase risers, parapets, and street signs across the city.

My wife Michela Montedodorisio and I opened Creta Rossa, our ceramics workshop, 25 years ago. Some thought it was a strange thing to do in Vasto, a city with no artisanal tradition in ceramics – nothing like the

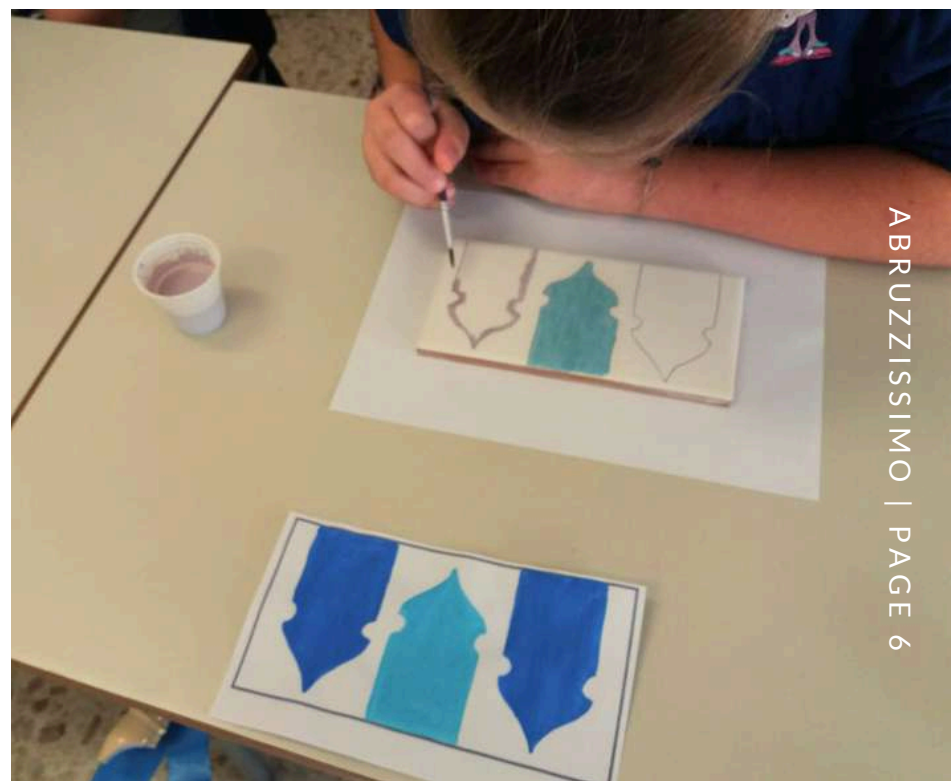
**Photo: Balustrade "Vasto città di grazia" created by schoolchildren**

centuries-old kilns of Castelli or Rapino, Abruzzo's towns where master ceramists worked. That absence, rather than discouraging us, became the point. We built it as both workshop and school – open to the street, so anyone walking past could look in and watch the wheel turn, the glaze applied, a piece take shape; and equipped for those who wanted to sit down and try.

## ARTE IN BORGO

Together with the Lions Club Vasto we have started Arte in Borgo, a recurring urban regeneration initiative with city's schools. The first edition, in 2013, saw around 60 students from the city's Liceo Artistico spend five days glazing, painting, and firing approximately 500 ceramic tiles, which were then used to restyle the staircase adjacent to the birthplace of the poet Gabriele Rossetti – decorative motifs drawn from local traditions, with several steps dedicated to verses Rossetti wrote about his city. In another edition of Arte in Borgo, primary school pupils decorated the maiolica parapet running alongside the same staircase. Each child painted an individual tile in blue and white, colours drawn from the coastal landscape, which was then fired in our kiln at around 950°C for ten hours.

### Schoolchildren painting tiles at the studio



Over time, we connected with schools, institutions, and local associations. The projects we developed together have by now involved thousands of students across every level of education, and the results are permanently embedded in the streets of Vasto: over 20 ceramic installations across the city, each one made by the students who live nearby.

## CIVIC SENSE, KILN-FIRED

The process matters as much as the finished piece. Before any clay is touched, students spend time with historians and local figures, gathering testimony, learning about the memories of a street or a neighbourhood. Only then does the design begin – and when the work is finally fired and installed, the students understand, in a way that is difficult to manufacture through any other means, that what they have made becomes part of the city's architecture, and it will be there long after the school children have grown up and moved on.

This creation and participation in shaping the urban space changes something. We have seen it consistently over the years: a reduction in vandalism and neglect in the areas where installations exist, and a palpable shift in how young people relate to their neighbourhood. Beauty made by a community tends to be protected by that community.

Recently, the project has extended beyond Vasto itself. A few kilometres away, in the hilltop town of Monteodorisio, students have completed two editions of ceramic street signs – thirty plaques in total, each one hand-lettered and fired, marking the old village's lanes in a way that has become an attraction for visitors exploring the borgo. That curiosity from outsiders is not incidental. It confirms something we believe: that authentic local expression, rooted in real history and made by real hands, is more interesting than any imposed decoration.

Vasto now stands as a rare example in Abruzzo, and among the very few of its kind in Italy, of a sustained, community-driven programme of ceramic urban art. The sheer accumulation of interventions – the staircase, the parapets, the neighbourhood markers – demonstrates what becomes possible when the work is not a one-off project but a long-term commitment.

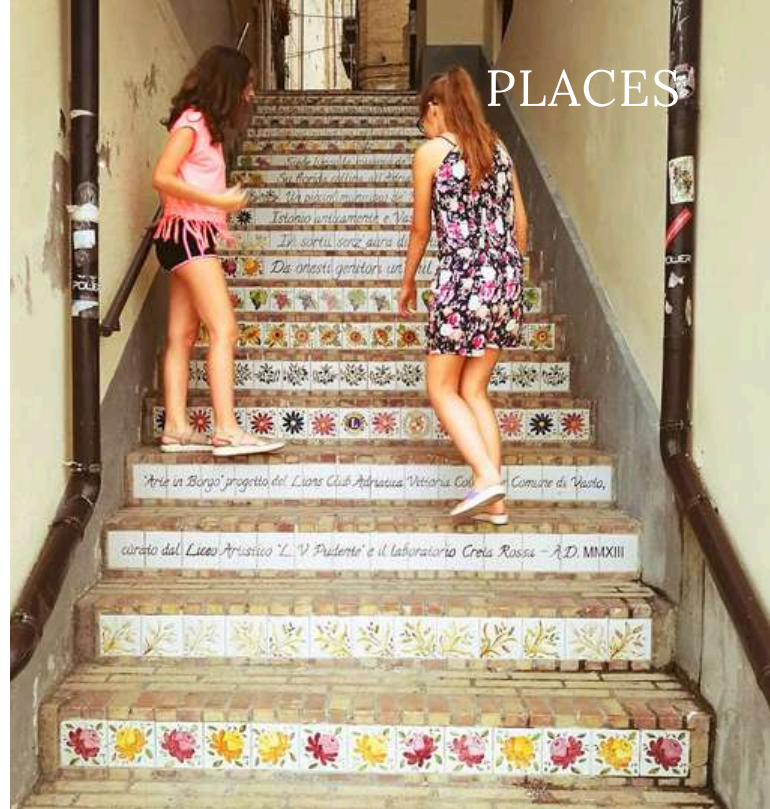
## COMING IN MAY

Two new inaugurations will mark the next chapter of this work, both supported by the Lions Club Vasto.

On 8 May, Vasto will unveil its first public artwork dedicated to its patron saint, San Michele Arcangelo. This is a project unlike anything we have attempted before: more than 100 primary school pupils have been involved in its creation over recent months, each contributing to a work that will now become a permanent part of the city's landscape.

On 17 May, the third edition of Arte in Borgo will add a new maiolica parapet with a floral motif to the Loggia Amblingh – a historic panoramic promenade in the old city centre overlooking the Adriatic gulf – created in our workshop by 36 third-year students from the city's secondary school, selected specifically for the project.

For more details about the inaugurations, see the Creta Rossa Facebook [page](#) and [website](#).



Scalinata "Rossetti" in Vasto

## WHERE TO SEE THE CERAMIC URBAN ART IN VASTO

### Scalinata "Rossetti"

Loggia Amblingh – belvedere, centro storico

### Parapetto "Vasto città di grazia"

Loggia Amblingh – belvedere, centro storico

A balustrade decorated with quotes about the city by illustrious figures, from D'Annunzio to the Rossetti family.

### Parapetto "Terra deliziosa"

Loggia Amblingh – belvedere, centro storico

Another ceramic balustrade at the same belvedere, celebrating Vasto's landscape and identity.

### Parapetti "La storia di San Michele Arcangelo"

Belvedere San Michele, centro storico

Ceramic panels narrating the story of Saint Michael the Archangel, patron of the city, at a second historic viewpoint.

### Parapetto "Il brodetto vastese" Vasto Marina

Viale Dalmazia – Vasto Marina

Down by the sea, this balustrade celebrates the city's iconic fish stew – a tribute to local culinary tradition, visible along the marina promenade.

*Photos courtesy of Creta Rossa.*



## MORE THAN A NAME: THE SOPRANNOMI OF RENDINARA

Text and photos by Anna  
Lebedeva

In Rendinara, in the Valle Roveto, a surname has never quite been enough to say who you are. The soprannome – the family nickname, passed down through generations – carries the memories of ancestors, their habits, their stories.

As you enter Rendinara (AQ), a small village sitting at 900 metres above the Valle Roveto at the foot of the Ernici mountains, the temptation is to look up. The surrounding peaks of the Ernici fill the sky, the valley drops away below, and the views demand attention. Which is why it is easy to walk straight past one of the first houses in the village without noticing what covers its wall: 138 ceramic tiles, each bearing a name. These are *stirpi* – family lineages, the official term for what locals have always called *soprannomi*, or nicknames. And in Rendinara, almost every family has one.

"Some people in Rendinara identified more with their nicknames than family names," says Di Marzio. "Some of the original *stirpi* are 400 or 500 years old and nobody even

Photo: Some of the *stirpi* displayed in Rendinara

## WHAT IS A SOPRANNOME?

The Italian tradition of family nicknames, *soprannomi di famiglia*, is ancient and widespread, particularly in rural areas and small provincial towns. According to the Treccani encyclopaedia, the *soprannome* is "the most emblematic and creative of all forms of naming." It often recalled physical characteristics, habits, trade, and geographic origin of the subject and the family to which it referred. Where an official surname identifies, a *soprannome* describes – it carries what linguists call a plusvalore, an additional layer of meaning that the bare surname cannot convey.

Family nicknames were born out of practical necessity. In southern Italian villages, where the firstborn son is named after his paternal grandfather almost without exception, a community

remembers where they came from and what they mean. It was enough that your grandfather was called, say, Maddefiore, like in my family's case, and all his descendants carried that name." Some entries in the municipal and parish registers date to the late 18th century, but the oral tradition clearly reaches further back.

Rendinara is one of the few villages in the Valle Roveto that refused to abandon its original site after the catastrophic earthquake of 1915. Where other communities relocated to the valley floor and started again, Rendinara rebuilt on its own rubble. It is a small but telling detail: a village that chose continuity over convenience. Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that this is also a place where the old *stirpi* have survived in living memory – and where the Pro Loco has now given them a new, permanent form: ceramic plaques attached to doors and walls across the village, each one naming the lineage of whoever lives, or once lived, there.

**Photos: (right) one of many murals in Rendinara; the view of the village; a door in Rendinara**



can quickly end up with dozens of Giuseppes, Salvatores, and Giovannis – often sharing the same surname too. The dialect *soprannome*, slotted after the first name and often used in place of the family name, solved the problem. Passed down through generations, it became, in many cases, more familiar than the name on the birth certificate.

## A WEIGHTY PROJECT

Today, there are barely 140 full-time residents in Rendinara, with other rendinaresi scattered across Rome, the United States, Canada, and England. In August, the village's population explodes to about 2000, as many come back with their families. Come September, the narrow streets quiet down again, with fat resident cats snoozing on stone benches and empty porches.

It was this same community – present and dispersed – that a few years ago inspired the Pro Loco to act. They sat down with elderly residents and recorded 138 local nicknames, then put them, together with each family's surname, on ceramic tiles. The result was a 700-kilos mural at the village entrance, and individual plaques attached to houses throughout Rendinara, marking the families who live or once lived behind each door.

Photos: (below) the stirpi ceramic mural; (right) a tile with the family nickname on a house in Rendinara

The project took two years and was funded entirely by voluntary contributions – from current residents, and the vast diaspora in Rome and abroad.

## NAMES WITH STORIES

If you ask locals what their *soprannome* means, not many will be able to explain, as most meanings have been lost to time. For instance, Albarola seems to trace back to a woman who had a way with medicinal herbs (*erbarola*, *albarola*). But Di Marzio is candid about how much of the story has been lost: "We didn't manage to go very deep. Some meanings are still remembered, but nobody can explain anymore – the villagers who might have known the origins of these nicknames died a hundred years ago." Still, some stories have survived. Take *Uaccanda*, which means *quando* (when) in the local dialect – it latched onto a family because one of its members, way back, couldn't stop using the word. Or *Concettona*, an old nickname that was almost certainly given to a Concetta who was, well, a big woman (the suffix -ona means "big" or "large") – and her family proudly carries it ever since.



Rendinara's family nicknames are also "fossilised" in local toponyms with place names tied to old landowners. The linguist Davide Boccia, in his study *Dialetti e toponomastica della Valle Roveto: Morino e Rendinara*, documents several soprannomi that have been preserved in the names of hills, springs, fields and ruins. A cluster of stables outside the village is still known as *lë Štallë Cappëllittë*, preserving the diminutive nickname, *Cappëllittë*, of a 19th-century owner. Another ruin carries the name *Ciammëllónë* – "big ring cake" – likely a reference to a former owner's physique or character. The hill *i Còllë Sparacannónë* takes its name from a nickname whose bearer is now entirely forgotten.

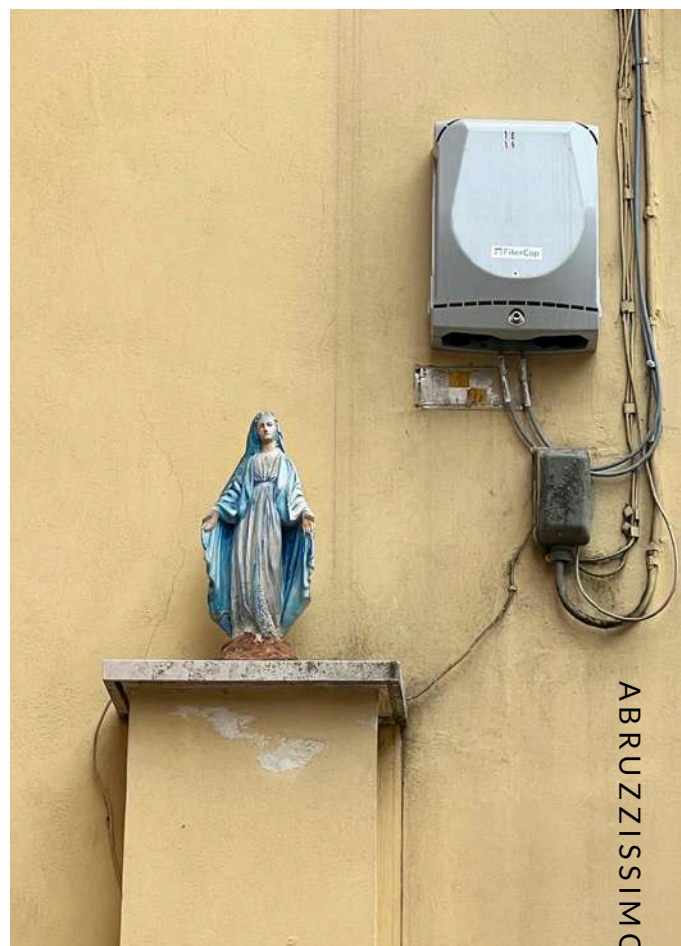
## LIVING TRADITION

Despite the emigration and shrinking population, the *stirpi* have not become museum pieces. In Rendinara, everyone knows everyone. Nicknames remain the quickest way to place a person, to locate them within the web of local families. They survive, above all, in conversation. Di Marzio himself lives in Rome but returns often and knows everyone in the village by their *stirpe*. "I don't call my friend by his name, Liliano," he says. "I call him Mecaruse – his family nickname, that they've had for a long time."

Beyond the plaques, villagers also love wearing T-shirts emblazoned with nicknames like *Mangiocca*, *Pellanera*, and *Ficozza* during the local festivals (see below), when Rendinara comes alive with returning families and visitors.

The *soprannomi* are not unique to Rendinara and Abruzzo. The most interesting case elsewhere in Italy is perhaps Chioggia, the fishing town near Venice, where two surnames – Boscolo and Tiozzo – are shared by roughly a fifth of the population. The situation became so unwieldy that in 2009 the Italian state officially recognised the town's nicknames, entering them into the civil registry as legal second surnames.

Across Abruzzo's small towns and villages, the *soprannome* survives as one of the last threads connecting daily life to an older sense of belonging, a world built on intimate, rooted community where everyone knew exactly where everyone else came from. Introduce yourself by your official name to an elderly local who doesn't know you, and the response might be: "*Si, ma come ji se dice?*" – "Yes, but what are you called?" It is the *soprannome*, the family nickname, that tells them who you really are. Because you are never quite just yourself – you are also everyone who came before you.



Photos: On the streets of Rendinara

## IF YOU GO TO RENDINARA

As you walk around the village, you will see the soprannomi plaques attached to the houses throughout Rendinara. Keep an eye out, too, for the ceramic plaques with local proverbs in dialect, dotted along the streets and small piazza (we explain one of them on page 23)

## ENJOY LOCAL FESTIVALS

Despite its small size, the village hosts many lively festivals throughout the year. For almost 30 years, the first week of June has brought the *Festa della Pastorizia* to Rendinara. Organized by the ProLoco, the festival features workshops, music, and plenty of local food – including live *ricotta* and cheese-making demonstrations, and traditional shepherds' dishes such as *pecora alla cottora* (slow-cooked lamb) and *arrostiticini*. In August, the village holds nearly a week of feste patronali celebrating Santa Liberata, Madonna del Buon Consiglio, San Giovanni Battista, and Sant'Ermete, the town's patron and protector. Then, on the first weekend of November, the *Sagra della Castagna* takes over the

**Photos: (below) a street in Rendinara; (right) a tile with the family nickname on a house**

village streets. For the occasion, the old cantinas throw open their doors, where well into the evening visitors can sample classic Rendinara dishes – *petaccelle e fagioli*, *polenta*, *gnocchi*, *arrostiticini*, *frittelle di pane*, *calascinetti*, and wine alongside local roasted chestnuts. For information on the upcoming festivals see the ProLoco [page](#).

## SIT ON A BIG BENCH

Above the village, a giant orange bench looks out over the sweep of the Roveto Valley and the surrounding mountains – and it is just a short, easy walk from the road (though there is a brief rocky stretch, so wear sturdy shoes). Climb on and feel about six years old again.

The bench is part of the [Big Bench Community Project](#), a nonprofit initiative founded in 2015 on a disarmingly simple idea: an oversized bench, placed in a panoramic spot, shifts your perspective so completely that familiar landscapes become extraordinary again. Search "*Panchina gigante Rendinara*" on Google Maps to find it.

## TAKE A HIKE

Some of Abruzzo's most spectacular hikes start in Rendinara, heading up to Monte La Lota, Monte Passeggio, and Monte Pizza Deta. Most trails are for experienced hikers, but the walk to the beautiful Cascata Zompo dello Schioppo is easy and suitable for everyone. For details about the hikes see this [page](#).





## A WALK THROUGH L'AQUILA'S MONUMENTAL CEMETERY

By Lea Bianchini

**L'Aquila's monumental cemetery is an open archive of nearly two centuries of city history, where neoclassical chapels, Gothic spires, and weathered epitaphs tell the stories of those who shaped it.**

The cemetery dates to roughly the 1860s and 1870s, emerging from one of the defining public health reforms of 19th-century. Before the Edict of Saint-Cloud – Napoleon's decree banning burials within city limits – reached Italian soil, the dead were everywhere. “The wealthy deceased were buried in churches or in private chapels built inside their homes,” explains Andrea De Petris, an actor and local history enthusiast who has been leading tours of the cemetery since 2017. “For ordinary people the solution was simpler – a pit was dug in a field set aside as a cemetery and a wooden cross was placed there, sometimes not even that. Cemeteries, for a long time, were little more than mass graves.” The edict changed all that, mandating that each city designate a dedicated space outside its walls for the burial of the dead.

L'Aquila's cemetery began as a modest core – what today is its ancient monumental part – and expanded outward over time, absorbing new wings and sections as the city's population grew.

**Photo: The monumental cemetery in L'Aquila**

## MARBLE AND CLASS

Walking through the oldest section is a lesson in social stratification. The wealthiest families of 19th-century L'Aquila commissioned extraordinary funerary architecture — neo-Gothic chapels with elaborate stone tracery, neoclassical mausoleums, neobaroque structures decorated with giant carved angels. "A tomb of that kind was ammunition for the wealthy," De Petris notes. "When these chapels were built, a tomb inside one cost more than a house. We may all be equal in death in the sense that nobody comes back, but here in the cemetery, the class divide is plain to see."

The chapels belonged to the merchants, lawyers, doctors, and illustrious families who shaped modern L'Aquila — massive and imposing, visible immediately from the entrance, sometimes featuring full-length sculptural portraits of the deceased alongside detailed epitaphs recounting entire life histories. "Moving further from the monumental core, the architecture diminishes in scale — smaller chapels, simpler crosses, eventually graves marked only by a number, the identity of the occupant lost," describes De Petris. "At the margins, the communal

**The old part of L'Aquila's monumental cemetery**

ossuary holds the remains of those whose families never came to claim them." The structure dating back to the Fascist era is built at least two floors underground, with piled up bones that have arranged themselves over time into an almost geometric pattern, making it strikingly similar to the Paris catacombs.

## PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE DEAD

One of the most haunting features of the older graves is the presence of portrait photographs mounted on the headstones, a practice rooted in Victorian-era custom. For 19th-century families, a photographic portrait was a luxury — so often the only image a family possessed of a lost loved one was taken post-mortem. The practice, familiar from Victorian England and America, existed in Italy, too. The dead were dressed and positioned within a family photograph, sometimes making it hard to tell the living from the dead. Children who died before their 12th birthday often appear in these portraits alongside their relatives — a last keepsake before the grave. A morbid practice by modern standards, but in an era before photography was commonplace, it was simply an act of love.



## LIVES WORTH REMEMBERING

Andrea De Petris grew up near the cemetery boundary. "From the age of eight, my friends and I would sneak in out of curiosity, peering at monuments and wondering about the names carved on them," he recalls. Those childhood visits inspired a lifelong obsession with the stories behind the names, one that would eventually lead him to begin offering guided tours of the cemetery.

During his years of research, De Petris uncovered fascinating stories about people long forgotten, piecing together their lives from epitaphs, archive records, and the accounts of locals who remembered fragments of their histories.

One stop on De Petris's tour is the grave of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, and the story behind it is one of the most remarkable in the cemetery. Ulrichs, a jurist and scholar of Latin and Greek, publicly called for the abolition of laws criminalising sexual relations between men in the German Confederation at a meeting in Munich in 1867. He argued that prosecuting people for being naturally attracted to others of the same sex was an injustice. He moved to L'Aquila to teach at the Regio Liceo Classico, where he made no secret of his relationship with his companion, appearing openly with him in public.

Ulrichs did not choose L'Aquila by chance as his final resting place. "We are a people often described as very closed," says De Petris, "but the city was very welcoming to Ulrichs, who had been forced to flee Germany because he was persecuted for his openly declared homosexuality. Here he taught until his death, and here he wished to be buried alongside his companion." Today his tomb has become a site of pilgrimage for LGBTQ+ communities and history enthusiasts from across Italy, with commemorations held at the cemetery; it is also listed on Findagrave.com, the international database cataloguing the graves of historically significant figures.

Among the graves De Petris stops at on his tours is that of Francesca Chiodi, known by her stage name Paolina Giorgi – a cabaret singer celebrated across



**A family mausoleum at the cemetery**

early 20th-century Italy. Born into a working-class family, she reinvented herself to escape her origins as a domestic servant. By the age of 16 she was performing in Rome's café-chantant circuit, counting Gabriele d'Annunzio among her admirers, and earned enough to help her brothers found what would become Abruzzo's first public transport company, Chiodi & Capranica.

But fame made her vulnerable. In 1911, a former lover shot Paolina at a theatre in Genoa during her final performance when she was only twenty-seven.

The cemetery's stories are not all of artists and outcasts. Also buried here is Ondina Valla, who at the 1936 Berlin Olympics became the first Italian woman to win an Olympic gold medal, taking the 80 metre hurdles and setting a world record in the process. In Fascist Italy, a regime hostile to women in sport was forced to revise its position overnight, elevating her as a symbol for Italian women to emulate.

What makes L'Aquila's cemetery remarkable is precisely this – that beneath the moss-covered epitaphs and crumbling angels, beneath the grand mausoleums and the unmarked crosses, lie the stories of an entire city: its wealthy and its poor, its celebrated and its forgotten.

**Andrea De Petris runs L'Aquila cemetery tours (in Italian only) on request. You can contact him at 0039 349 0871974.**

*Photos courtesy of Andrea De Petris.*

## THE CHITARRA MAKER OF PRETORO

Text by Anna Lebedeva

Photos by Eliana Iezzi

For centuries, the town of Pretoro was known for its skilled artisans who worked with wood. Today there are only three men who continue the tradition. Giovanni Iezzi is one of them.



Giovanni specialises in making the *chitarra*, a traditional tool for cutting *pasta alla chitarra* (square spaghetti) that has been used in Abruzzo for centuries. He learnt the craft from his father at 14 and started working for himself at 20.



Giovanni makes 15,000 *chitarre* per year, as well as smaller wooden pasta-making tools. Most of them are sold in Northern Italy as gifts.





Giovanni uses eight different machines and dozens of tools, many of which he inherited from his father, to make the seemingly simple *chitarra* frames.



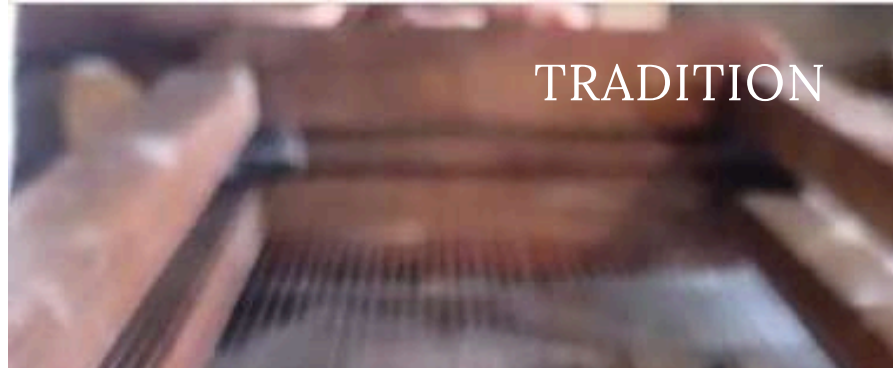
There are 20 steps to make a *chitarra* and it takes time, patience, and skills. Wood is cut, the pieces are carved, shaped, drilled, and polished.



Little nails are inserted to hold the steel strings (hence the name *chitarra*, which means "guitar"). 45-50 metres of wire are strung on the frame.



The strings can be tightened later with a special bolt mechanism to make sure the cut on the dough is neat and precise.



## TRADITION

Many Abruzzese families keep precious old *chitarre*, some up to 100 years old. When they need to be fixed, Giovanni is the man to do the delicate task. "Giving a second life to an old *chitarra* is one of my favourite jobs," he says.



Giovanni's daughter Eliana is studying music and runs the bottega's Instagram account for him. "Unfortunately, there is no one I can pass my skills on to. The workshop will close when I retire," he says.

You can follow Giovanni Iezza and his *La Bottega della Chitarra* on [Instagram](#).





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Anna Lebedeva

Editor of Abruzzissimo Magazine

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# A DIGITAL NOMAD IN ROCCAMORICE

By Linda Dini Jenkins

**Originally from Salt Lake City, Utah, Ronda Thomas is relishing the outdoor life here in Abruzzo while keeping up with her career thanks to the digital nomad visa program. She describes her recent move as culture shock, but in a good way.**

Although Ronda and her partner Martin Maier didn't know much about Abruzzo when they started looking for properties online, they soon discovered the 7% tax incentive for retirees — a key draw for Martin, who is retired, while Ronda continues to run the global marketing and sponsorship strategy firm she founded 30 years ago. Both share a love of the mountains and the outdoor lifestyle, drawn to Abruzzo's the dramatic scenery and fresh air. "Once we got here and saw it, we were sold," she says.

## ENTER THE DIGITAL NOMAD VISA

As a business owner, Ronda had been following the Italian government's discussions around introducing a digital nomad visa with close interest. "I wasn't sure if it would be the right fit, until they actually announced what the requirements were," she explains. "And it fit me perfectly, which was really important, because I have clients all over the world."

Ronda says it took her a few months to pull together all of the necessary documentation, and she ultimately hired an attorney out of Rome to help navigate a few sticky questions. To qualify, she first had to demonstrate that she had been doing remote work for more than six months and that she met the minimum annual income threshold of €28,000. She also needed to show that she held a college degree — or could prove equivalent training and experience in her field — and to provide a registered lease or purchase agreement for a home of at least one year. Rounding out the requirements



**Ronda Thomas and Martin Maier**

were valid health insurance and evidence that she adds value to her profession, which was one of the reasons she brought in legal help.

## PROVING YOUR VALUE

Proving her value was a bit of an odd requirement — thirty years of running her own global firm speaks for itself, after all. But when her attorney asked whether she had done anything important, Ronda didn't have to think twice. "I told her I had done some work with the White House and also with the International Olympic Committee, and that I had thank-you letters and documentation to support that," she explained.

Her attorney also suggested she draw on any Italian connections she had — and as it happened, Ronda had exactly the right ones. She had hosted the Italian women's ski jumping team at her house in Park City while they were competing, and had stayed in touch with an Italian national champion who was kind enough to write her a letter. As it turned out, the most useful thing you can pack for a visa application is a good address book. Proof!

By far the biggest bureaucratic hurdle involved her degree certification and transcripts. "Because I'm older, it was a bit difficult," she explains. Her university had only digitized records back to a certain point, and she had graduated five years before that, making the standard online certification process impossible. She had to get creative.

Armed with original copies of her diploma and transcripts, she had them certified and translated at the consulate in San Francisco before resubmitting. Then she was finally issued her visa. While it sounds like a long, Byzantine process, the time from the application date to actually hopping on the plane was only about eight weeks. She considers herself very lucky!

Ronda's visa indicates that she can do lavoro autonomo (self-employed work). So she can do any kind of work outside of Italy, but must follow prescribed tax and invoicing procedures. As a result, she pays taxes in both the United States and in Italy.

## A TYPICAL WORK DAY

After moving to Abruzzo, she made the decision to try to not work the long days she was working in the States. So now Ronda works closer to 30 hours a week instead of 50 and her days are more relaxed.

"Martin, my partner, is very kind. He's my personal barista, and he makes me a coffee when I get up. We sit outside and listen to the birds and the church bells," she reports. "And then my day is structured around time zones. I generally work for European clients in the morning and then catch the US clients in the late afternoon through emails and Zoom meetings. I usually sign off around 8:00 in the evening."

## SMALL TOWN

Ronda and Martin have a small, beautifully restored, traditional stone house just outside the Maiella National Park in Roccamorice (PE), a



The view from Ronda and Martin's house

mountain town of about 900 inhabitants in the province of Pescara. From her home office, a Juliet balcony opens onto sweeping views of the valley – the Maiella Mountains on one side, the Adriatic glittering in the distance on the other. The town, built in stone, layers medieval and 19th-century houses around a central tower, and just outside town, two hermitages carved into the cliffs of the Maiella mark where Pietro da Morrone lived as a hermit before his election as Pope Celestine V.

The mountains here are popular with climbers and cyclists, with the Giro d'Italia regularly passing through. The area's dramatic landscape has attracted filmmakers too, with both *The New Pope* and *The Name of the Rose* shot among its peaks and hermitages.

The couple found the house together in the fall of 2022, and Martin moved in full time when they closed in March 2023. Ronda was commuting for a while but moved in permanently in July of 2025. A lot of the decisions – including redesigning the kitchen and the fireplace – were made long distance over the phone and video calls. "He had to deal with all of the builders in Italian," she laughs. "I just had to say, oh yeah, that looks great!"

## THE GOOD AND THE SLOW

The one lingering headache is internet service. Although fibre optic cable runs right past their house, all their utilities are underground and there is no pole to connect to – and getting permission to run a direct connection has been a three-year work in progress. For now, they use ADSL, which works well enough, even if it's not quite fibre.

## A HOME BY ANY OTHER NAME

On the other hand, Ronda says, the cost of living compared to the U.S. is significantly less, often by 50%. Take wine, as an example. She explains, "If I go out and have a glass of wine in town, it's maybe three euros, maybe a little more if I go with a really nice wine. In the U.S., a decent glass of wine would be \$15 to \$18 these days."

Learning the language was harder than she had hoped. While she's making progress, she has to remind herself that language-learning is a marathon, not a sprint. It's not just a class that she's trying to pass – it's a learning process.

Ronda and Martin wanted a place just outside of town but still walkable, and at about three kilometres from the centre, they got exactly that. The walk into town is a favourite – a lovely, quiet route where neighbours always come out to say hello, turning what should be a 15-minute stroll into 45. "Our neighbours have been very inviting, and the local shop owners, the restaurant owners – they recognise us, they know us by name," she enthuses. Either way, they make a point of sitting with the locals and practising their Italian.

Some neighbours have had them over to meet their families and have dinner, something which Ronda reports is pretty rare in the U.S. Another aspect of life here is the wonderful mix of ages – seeing the older generations sitting outside, with teenagers running around and small children kicking a ball in town. She's happy to see that the "age ghetto" concept is not a thing here. "We tend to take our elderly and put them in homes," she muses. "It's nice to see them still out and about."

She misses some of her friends and family, of course, but now considers Italy to be her home. "I've been fortunate with work. It's required a lot of travel, and I've lived in several different places in the U.S. and even in London," she says. "I've always defined home by the people that I love and the friendships and the lifestyle that I can establish. So, by that definition, home is here."

*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.*

**Roccamorice. Photo by Marco D'Ascanio**



# SPEAKING ABRUZZESE

**QUANNA VIDE L'ACQUA ALLA VIA Ù SORA  
TULL' LA ZAPPA E UA' A LAVORA.  
QUANNA VIDE L'ACQUA ALLA VIA OGLIE  
SCHIOPP' TULL' GL' ASENE E UA' A  
GALOPP'**

*If the rain comes from Sora, put down your worries – grab your hoe and get to work. But if it rolls in from Avezzano, or from Lo Schioppo, don't hesitate – saddle up your donkey and gallop home.*

Before weather apps and satellite forecasts, the farmers of Rendinara read the sky the way others read a book – with patience, experience, and a wisdom passed down through generations. One of the most representative proverbs of the village captures this perfectly, and it concerns something every contadino knew intimately: the direction of the rain.

The logic of this proverb is rooted in geography and observations. Rendinara sits tucked into the mountains of the upper Liri valley, and its farmers learned over centuries that clouds drifting up from the south, the direction of Sora, tended to pass quickly, little more than a grumble. Nothing to interrupt a day's labour. But weather coming from the north, around Zompo lo Schioppo and Capistrello, meant a heavy downpour was building – the kind that soaks you to the bone before you can reach shelter, so you ran back home, to Rendinara.

The proverb is displayed on a ceramic tile in Rendinara's main piazza, which is part of a project documenting traditional local sayings. A companion app that will be launched soon lets anyone scan a plaque to read translations in Italian and English.

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# QUICK STOP

## A HIDDEN GARDEN OF LORETO APRUTINO



As temperatures rise and the midday streets empty, head for the foot of Loreto Aprutino, where Alberto Colazilli has spent the better part of three decades turning a derelict 1930s garden into something extraordinary. When he started in 1998, the place was a wreck. What he has built since is a layered, breathing world of green architecture – laurel and privet trees trained into living tunnels, bamboo pergolas framing statues and amphorae, sudden views opening over the medieval rooftops of Loreto.

This is not a tidy municipal park with labelled beds and benches at regular intervals. It is a personal obsession made real, plant by plant, year by year. The botanical collection ranges from exotic rarities to native Mediterranean species chosen specifically to attract butterflies, bees, and birds. A small lake, added in 2006, brings water plants and a whole new ecosystem into the mix.

Colazilli is a trained landscape specialist with a focus on historic garden restoration, and it shows – but what you feel here is not academic rigour. It is passion, and the particular kind of patience that turns a ruin into something alive.

The garden puts on a good show through the seasons, with lavender and wild orchids among the highlights. Allow about an hour for the visit. Entrance includes a guided tour in Italian and costs €6. For more details see the park's Facebook [page](#).

# EASY TRAILS

## IN THE STEPS OF THE FAIRIES: FROM ROCCACASALE TO COLLE DELLE FATE



- **Length: about 4 km**
- **Time: 2 hours**
- **Starting Point: Piazza San Giovanni XXIII**

From Piazza San Giovanni XXIII, follow signs for Colle delle Fate. The route climbs to the right along Via della Rocca, winding past the last houses, with a magnificent old castle on the left.

As you follow the trail, you'll soon reach a grotto carved into an old quarry, known as Lu Caularoin, where locals venerate Saint Michael the Archangel. Further up, the path opens into Mediterranean scrub – broom, hawthorn, and fragrant aromatic herbs – before the gradient eases and, after roughly an hour's walking, you arrive at Colle delle Fate (721 metres), enclosed by ancient Italic walls.

Colle delle Fate looks out over the whole Valle Peligna, its towns dotting the valley in every direction, but the hilltop is far more than a scenic viewpoint. Archaeologists have identified what was likely an acropolis during the Italic period – a sacred enclosure roughly 70 by 30 metres – with three separate rings of dry-stone walls still visible for long stretches. Scattered terracotta fragments hint at centuries of human presence. Local legend adds a darker charm: people say that babies who disappeared from Roccasasale were stolen by le fate – the fairies – and later found up here on the hill, crying.

On your way back down to the piazza, stop at the Castello di Roccasalegna – a 10th-century fortress built into a rocky outcrop that dominates the surrounding countryside.

With little shade along the way, avoid the midday heat and come in a cooler season.

# THE ART OF PASTA ALLA CHITARRA

By Anna Swann

Forget what you think you know about spaghetti. The Abruzzese version isn't round, but square, slightly rough to the touch, and it's made with a... guitar, well, sort of.

*Pasta alla chitarra* (also called *spaghetti alla chitarra*) is made on a wooden frame strung with steel wires, across which you lay a sheet of egg dough and roll a pin across the wires until they slice cleanly through it and the pasta strands fall away. Run a finger along the wires afterwards and they hum like a guitar, which is exactly where the name comes from: *chitarra*, or *lu carrature* in dialect.

The *chitarra*'s ancestor dates to the early 1500s – a ridged rolling pin called *ruzzolo*, used by shepherds on the move during the transumanza. By the 1700s it had evolved into the *maccherunare*: a proper wooden frame, copper or brass strings, built to last and valuable enough to be written into a bride's dowry.

The tool itself hasn't changed much since. Cherry or maple frame and steel strings pulled taut. The distance between the strings decides the width of the pasta: string the frame more finely and you get *chitarrina*, the thinner, more delicate version. It also requires a certain touch. The rolling pin has to come down with exactly the right pressure – enough to drive the dough through the strings cleanly in two or three passes, no more. The *chitarra* needs regular tuning too: the wires must stay taut enough to cut, not just press. Once, every village had a master who built and maintained them. Today only a handful remain in the region (see the article from our archives on page 16).

Square pasta isn't just a quirk. Those four edges instead of a smooth, round shape make the sauce stick better and the Abruzzesi figured it out centuries before anyone was writing about it.



The classic condiment for *spaghetti alla chitarra* in the province of Teramo is *pallottine*: tiny meatballs of minced veal or beef, fried and then cooked in tomato sauce. A slow-cooked sheep ragù (*ragù di pecora*) works beautifully with the thicker cut. The finer *chitarrina* handles lighter sauces – seafood, zucchini, creamy cheeses and a sprinkle of saffron, or a simple tomato sauce.

Most traditional restaurants in Abruzzo will have *pasta alla chitarra* on the menu. For fresh pasta to take home, look for a *pasta all'uovo* shop, though don't expect all of them to still use an actual *chitarra* tool. Most have switched to machines that cut the dough to shape, which is faster and makes commercial sense.

One exception is *Alla Chitarra Antica* in Pescara, ([Via Sulmona, 2](#)) where the old *chitarre* are still in use – in different sizes, for different cuts. The oldest, a century-year-old *lu carrature*, has earned its retirement and hangs proudly on the wall at the shop front. Claudio, the shop's owner (in the photo with a *chitarra*), once made me a quick *spaghetti alla chitarra al limone* – sharp, bright, and gone in minutes (I will share the recipe in the next issue).

# FRASCARELLI ABRUZZESI

By Anna Swann

Few dishes tell the story of Abruzzo's past like *frascarelli*. Once a staple of peasant tables, this simple pasta made from just flour and water fed large families and, according to tradition, helped new mothers produce milk. I first tasted it at a dinner dedicated to historic recipes, hosted by Gino Primavera, the revered chronicler of Abruzzese cuisine.

*Frascarelli*, also called granetti in some parts of the region, look like coarse polenta or couscous. They could be dressed with a simple tomato sauce or a richer, thicker sauce with hearty sausages. Its name comes from the tiny twigs, *frasche*, once used to splash water onto the flour. In place of the traditional *frasche*, I use a small bundle of fresh rosemary to gently sprinkle the water over the flour.

For this recipe, you will need a small sieve to separate the tiny, moistened grains from the dry flour. The process takes time and patience, especially the first attempt, and the flavour is simple, but it carries the memory of Abruzzo's kitchens of long ago, where a humble mix of water and flour could nourish an entire family.

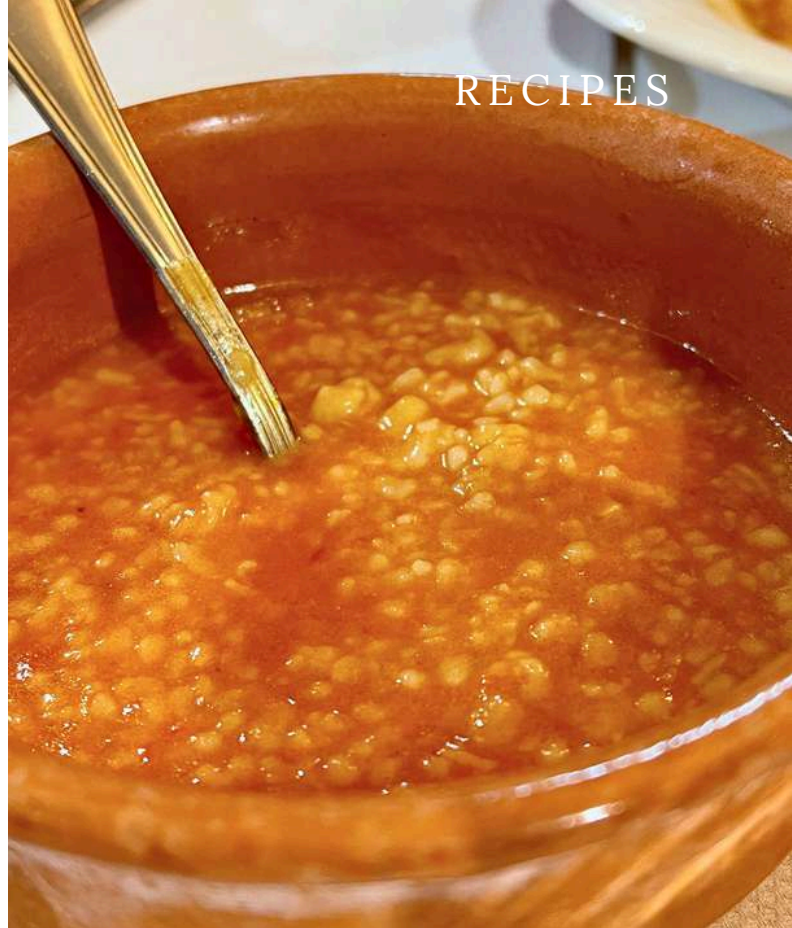
## INGREDIENTS

### Makes 3-4 portions

- 200 g all-purpose flour
- 100 g semolina (coarse durum wheat flour)
- 200 ml water

### For the sauce:

- 60 g golden onion
- ½ glass red wine
- 1 tin (400 g) canned tomato passata
- 80 g *Pecorino* cheese
- A small bundle of fresh rosemary (for sprinkling water and a little for the sauce)
- Chili pepper flakes to taste
- Salt to taste
- Optional: 250 g Italian-style sausage, diced in small chunks



## PREPARATION

Spread a thick layer of flour on a work surface. Gradually sprinkle hot water over it using a small bundle of rosemary in place of the traditional *frasche*, so the flour forms tiny clumps. Pass these bits through a fine sieve: the dry flour will fall through, leaving the tiny dough grains behind in the sieve. Collect them in a bowl and continue sprinkling water over the remaining flour, repeating the process until all the flour has been used.

Make the sauce. Dice the sausage (if using) and sweat it in a pan with a little olive oil. Add the chopped onion and chili to taste and sauté briefly. Deglaze with red wine, then add the canned tomato passata, a little rosemary, cover and simmer for about 20 minutes until the sauce is rich and fragrant.

Cook the *frascarelli*: Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the *frascarelli*, stirring constantly to prevent the grains from sticking. Cook just a few moments; the pasta should remain tender.

Drain the *frascarelli* and fold them into the tomato sauce (add some cooking water if too dry). They should be quite thick but still a little brothy. Serve immediately, sprinkled generously with grated *Pecorino*.

# PREZZA-STYLE BREADED ARTICHOKE

By Margareth Pacelli

Some years ago, we visited my husband's family in Sulmona and made our way to the *Sagra del Carciofo* (the artichoke festival) in the nearby town of Prezza. This small town is renowned for the quality of its artichokes, and at the festival we tasted several dishes showcasing them. One that I especially liked was *carciofi impanati*: pieces of tender artichoke heart, battered and deep-fried to crisp, golden perfection. I approached the ladies at the stand selling them and asked for the recipe. Like so many traditional Abruzzese cooks, they gave me only a brief description with quantities measured *a occhio* – by eye.

Back home, I searched for similar recipes online and experimented many times, adjusting the batter and the technique with each attempt. It took patience, but I am pleased to say I have finally perfected this version, which captures the simple, satisfying taste I remember from that sunny afternoon in Prezza.

The *carciofo di Prezza* is prized for its delicate, slightly nutty flavour, and is harvested between late March and April. However, this recipe works beautifully with most artichoke varieties. Choose smaller, more tender ones when possible, as they will have fewer tough outer leaves to remove, and will be more tender and sweeter once cooked.

## INGREDIENTS

- 5-6 medium artichokes
- 3 eggs
- 150g plain white flour
- 1 lemon
- 150g breadcrumbs
- ½ teaspoon of fresh thyme leaves, finely chopped
- salt and pepper to taste
- sunflower or other vegetable oil for frying



## PREPARATION

Start by preparing the artichokes: strip away the tough outer leaves and, where present, scoop out the fuzzy, inedible centre. Cut them in quarters or halves (if small). As you work, drop each cleaned artichoke into a large bowl of cold water with the lemon juice squeezed in, along with the lemon halves. The acidulated water prevents discolouration and takes the edge off any bitterness. After about 15 minutes, remove the artichokes and pat them dry.

Cut the artichokes into wedges. How thick you cut them is a matter of taste: thinner wedges turn wonderfully crisp all the way through, while thicker ones offer a heartier bite with a tender, almost creamy interior.

For the coating, beat the eggs in a shallow bowl and season with thyme, salt, and pepper. Working one piece at a time, dust each wedge lightly in flour, dip it into the egg, then press it into the breadcrumbs to form an even crust.

Fry in an ample quantity of very hot vegetable oil, turning the pieces regularly until they are a rich, even golden brown on all sides. Remove and drain on kitchen paper.

Add any extra salt only just before serving. If salted too early, the coating will absorb moisture and lose its crunch. Serve hot.

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