

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



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## ON THE COVER:

Villa Badessa. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 13.

## LEFT:

Villa Badessa. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 13.

# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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*Periodico diffuso in via telematica non  
soggetto a registrazione ai sensi degli  
artt. 3 e 3 bis della legge n. 103 del 16  
luglio 2012.*

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## Editor's Note

When the *sagre*, festivals, and concerts fill every weekend of the calendar, you know that summer has arrived in Abruzzo. Every year I keep trying to squeeze a few of them into one weekend but there are still so many to attend! As always, in June, we publish a mega-supplement with *sagre* and festivals to help you plan well ahead. This year we've gathered 121 of them in one supplement! with a handy calendar! The biggest ever! Find it at the end of the issue (free for our premium subscribers; it can be purchased separately [here](#) or with a [premium subscription](#)).

This month we visit Villa Badessa, the only Arbëreshë community in Abruzzo, which was founded in the 18th century. Its magnificent collection of Greek-Byzantine icons is one of the biggest in Italy.

In August, a new movie by Ridley Scott will be released and Abruzzo will be centre stage in it, as many of its most dramatic scenes were filmed in the region. I spoke to Piercesare Stagni, the president of the Abruzzo Film Commission, about the filming and other cinematic locations in Abruzzo.

David Ferrante tells us the story of the Passatella, a drinking game that was played for centuries in Abruzzo and even made a Pope and a King lose their tempers. Put aside some extra time for this article, because the rules were complex and the division of players into masters and victims can seem confusing to the uninitiated.

This month, after 400 years, L'Aquila welcomes back a masterpiece by Raffaello. Read about its history and make sure to visit the exhibition at the Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo.

ABRUZZISSIMO is taking a slightly longer break this summer, as I am working on an exciting publishing project that I can't wait to share with you soon; so the next issue will be in your inbox on September 5, but I will be sending you news and updates throughout the summer.

In the meantime, if you want to share a story, suggest an idea for one, or ask a question, write to me at [editor@abruzzissimo.com](mailto:editor@abruzzissimo.com). And if you know someone who would love the magazine too, please spread the word!

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

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



## THE BELLS OF L'AQUILA RING OUT AGAIN

For 17 years, the bells of **L'Aquila's Duomo** were silent – brought down by the earthquake of 6 April 2009 and left, for a time, lying on the *piazza* outside. This month, their sound has returned to the historic centre. The Cathedral of Santi Massimiliano e Giordano dates to the second half of the 13th century, built alongside the founding of the city. Among the seven historic bells now remounted on new seismic-proof structures is the great bell cast in 1601 by local masters – its sound once marked market days and religious feasts. For many *aquilani*, hearing the bells again is less a technical achievement than something far more personal – a familiar voice, long missed, finally home.

## ITALY'S YOUNGEST MAYOR ELECTED IN ABRUZZO

At just 22 years old, Sergio Panzone has become Italy's youngest mayor after winning the local election in San Benedetto in Perillis (PE), one of the region's smallest municipalities, a quiet village of roughly 100 residents. Panzone, who works at the village's only café, *Caffè di Centro*, secured 58.33% of the vote. His election is seen as a sign of generational renewal in a mountain community long affected by depopulation and shrinking services. He envisions a village that supports families, attracts young people back, and restores community life without losing its identity.



## YOUR GUIDE TO ABRUZZO'S SUMMER FESTIVALS 2026

Our annual summer mega-supplement is back – and this year's edition is bigger than ever, with 121 festivals and *sagre*, from pasta feasts to open-air concerts and street art events, plus travel tips to help you make the most of the season. Free for premium subscribers – find it at the end of this issue. Not yet a premium subscriber? [Upgrade](#) your subscription or [purchase the supplement](#) separately.

## ENERGY BILLS ARE AFFORDABLE BUT STILL HIGH

Households in Abruzzo on variable-rate energy contracts paid an average of €1,896 in utility bills in 2025, only slightly less than 2024 but significantly higher than 2018, when annual costs were under €1,200, according to an analysis by Facile.it based on over 21,000 users. Gas accounted for the bulk at €1,231, while electricity averaged €665 – placing Abruzzo third among Italian regions for lowest power bills. **Pescara** had the highest electricity costs provincially, while **Chieti** led on gas. With the war in Iran now threatening to push energy prices higher, the region's small advantage may not last long.

## PRE-ROMAN NECROPOLIS NEAR VASTO REVEALED

A remarkable archaeological discovery near **Vasto** can now be revealed after being kept secret for months to protect it from looters. Experts from the Chieti-Pescara Superintendency conducted a painstaking excavation in complete secrecy at the **Punta Penna** industrial area, uncovering a pre-Roman necropolis of at least 100 burials (see photos [here](#)) dating to the 4th and 5th centuries BCE, belonging to the ancient Frentani people. Around 40 burial mounds have yielded human remains alongside grave goods including pottery, jewellery, weapons, and bronze fittings. All finds have now been safely transferred to the Superintendency's laboratories in Chieti for restoration and study. Experts describe it as one of the most important archaeological discoveries in the region in recent years.



## NEW AIRPORT BUS SERVICE FOR ABRUZZO

Travelling to and from **Abruzzo Airport** without a car has long been a headache – that is about to change. Launching this month, **TUA4Fly** is a new bus service synchronised with actual flight arrivals and departures (unlike the previous service, Pescara Airlink), running direct – no intermediate stops – between the airport and **Pescara** city centre, connecting to the railway station, urban and regional bus terminals, and the Pescara-Montesilvano trolleybus line. Buses depart the airport around 30 minutes after landing; return services are timed to get passengers there at least an hour before departure. The ticket costs €3, is valid for 90 minutes, and can be used on other urban lines too. It can be purchased on board by contactless payment, via the [TUA GO app](#), or through Trenitalia alongside a rail ticket.

## DID YOU KNOW?



## THE STRINGS OF SALLE

For over four centuries, the small town of **Salle (PE)** supplied strings to the musical world – gut strings, hand-twisted from sheep and bovine intestines, made in family workshops by craftsmen known as *cordai*. No one knows exactly when this tradition began, but for generations Salle's families thrived on it. Sheep were everywhere on the surrounding hills, and their intestines became the raw material for a craft that would travel the world. The work was entirely family-based: every member of the household had a role, specializing in one of the many stages of production – scraping, splitting, twisting, refining, and polishing.

As pastoral life declined and raw materials grew scarce, many string-makers emigrated, opening workshops in Naples, Genoa, Rome, Florence, and even France. During the mid-20th century, the industry diversified into tennis racket strings and surgical sutures. By the 1950s and 60s, rising demand from the music world brought producers back to their roots, now combining gut with steel and nylon.

The largest musical instrument string manufacturer in the world, J. D'Addario & Company, started with two brothers, Charles and Rocco D'Addario, who emigrated from Salle in the early 20th century. Three generations later, the family business is headquartered in Farmingdale, New York and employs more people than the entire population of Salle where it started.

Today, only the Toro family still makes gut strings by hand, specializing in Baroque and early music instruments – a craft that has found a new, global audience. Beniamino Toro also runs the *Museo delle Corde Armoniche* (in the photo), the only museum in the world dedicated to this craft (open on request; tel. 0039 338 482 8801). In summer, Salle hosts Baroque music concerts. For more details, visit the municipality's [page](#).

## RAPHAEL'S VISITATION RETURNS TO L'AQUILA

**For almost four centuries, one of Raphael's most celebrated late works has hung in Spain, in the Prado museum thousands of kilometres from L'Aquila, for which it was made. Now, in a moment of extraordinary cultural significance, The Visitation returns to L'Aquila, on display at the MuNDA (Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo) from 27 June 2026 as part of the exhibition La Visitazione all'Aquila. Raffaello e Pontormo.**

"This is an exceptional loan – one of the highlights of the entire programme marking L'Aquila's year as Capital of Culture," says art historian and regular contributor to ABRUZZISSIMO, Maria Giovanna Palermo.

The Visitation depicts the meeting between the Virgin Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, both pregnant, as described in the Gospel of Luke. The painting's origins are deeply rooted in the life of the city – and in a personal friendship. Giovanbattista Branconio dell'Aquila was a papal protonotary and close friend of Raphael, and it was at his father Marino's request that the commission was placed around 1517. Marino's wife was herself called Elisabeth – lending the choice of subject an intimate, private meaning beyond the purely devotional. The question of who actually held the brush, however, is more complicated than tradition suggests. Raphael provided the design – and was paid 300 escudos for it – but the painting itself is believed to have been executed by workshop assistants Giulio Romano and Giovanni Francesco Penni, a collaborative practice typical of his busy final years. The work remained in the Branconio chapel for over a century, until it was plundered by the occupation troops of Philip IV of Spain in 1655, eventually making its way to the Prado. The church of San Silvestro, which suffered severe damage in the 2009 earthquake and reopened after a €6.7 million restoration in 2019, today displays a copy in its place.



**The Visitation by Raphael**

The exhibition pairs the Prado work with Pontormo's Visitation, on loan from the small church of San Michele in Carmignano, near Florence. Painted at the end of the 1520s, it is one of the masterpieces of Florentine Mannerism – the same scene rendered with shimmering colours, elongated forms, and psychological intensity, a world away from Raphael's serene High Renaissance grace. Together, the two paintings chart, in a single room, the shift from Renaissance classicism to the anxious energy that followed.

Maria Giovanna Palermo describes what makes the Raphael so enduringly powerful: the way meaning flows through gaze and touch – "Elizabeth's gaze capable of revealing a silent bond, and the meeting of their hands, a clasp that shines as a symbol of the encounter between the Divine that Mary carries and the humanity of Elizabeth." For the people of L'Aquila – a city that has endured so much – the chance to stand before that image in its home city, after nearly 400 years, is a rare and deeply felt gift.

*For more information about the exhibition, visit the [MuNDA website](#).*



## LA PASSATELLA: THE GAME THAT WORRIED GOVERNMENTS

By David Ferrante

For centuries, in Abruzzo, a deceptively simple drinking game divided players into masters and victims, attracted the attention of governments, and inspired a 68-rule rulebook. Meet the *Passatella* and its most unlucky figure, the Elm.

I find myself thinking of my grandfather, who on Sundays would go "to the tavern for the *Passatella*" – a way to pass the long afternoons in small villages. The *Passatella* is much more than a card game; it is a fascinating, and at times violent, social ritual. In Abruzzo, as in much of central and southern Italy, it is the expression of a popular culture where the conviviality of wine collides with the intoxication of power and the risk of a brawl. And my grandfather would take his Ape Piaggio to go and compete for "a quarter-litre and a soda" amid the sharp smell of wine and beer, between smiles and foul words. It was tough to hold out as the Elm, but equally tough to hold your liquor – which is why my grandfather always kept some salted cod in his pocket – the logic being simple: salt makes you thirsty, and thirst keeps you in the game.

Photo: Il gioco della passatella, 1831, by Bartolomeo Pinelli

## A GAME THAT MADE GOVERNMENTS NERVOUS

The *Passatella* has its roots in ancient convivial rituals, such as the Greek symposium where the *symposiarch* (the leader) dictated the rules. In Rome, it was known as *Rex Vini*. Its essence, however, has remained unchanged: the temporary power of one individual over the other guests. The aggression the game unleashed was serious enough to attract government attention for centuries. In the Kingdom of Naples, the minister Bernardo Tanucci tried to ban it outright in the 18th century, seeing it as a breeding ground for idleness and disorder. The unified Italian state took a similar line, keeping the *Passatella* under watch in its public safety legislation. The game had a way of making authorities nervous.

Popular history has dressed the game in remarkable anecdotes that highlight its symbolic power. Even Pope Sixtus V, according to legend, was reduced to fury when his cardinals conspired to make him repeatedly the Elm during a game he had organised to understand its violent reputation. In another account, Ferdinand II of Bourbon, known as King Bomba, fell into a similar trap during a courtly version of the game, where ministers ensured he too ended up empty-handed, reduced from sovereign to excluded player. Only then did the King supposedly understand the psychological trigger built into the game, becoming more lenient toward the violence it caused and recognising it as a "crime of passion" provoked by the outrage of being made the Elm.

## THE RULES OF THE GAME

At the table stood a small hierarchy. The *Padrone* held authority over the bottle, supported by the *Sotto*, an ally and advisor who helped shape decisions. Alongside them were the *Pari* (the Equals), all engaged in constant negotiation as advantage shifted from one side to another.

Each round unfolded through a sequence of proposals around the table: the *Padrone* suggested who should drink, the *Sotto* supported or challenged the decision, and the group responded before a glass



Men playing cards in a bar in Cocullo. Photo by Anna Lebedeva

of wine was assigned. Round after round, these exchanges altered the balance of the table. The aim was that, by the end, all players would have drunk except one: the *Olmo*.

The *Olmo* is not formally chosen in a single decision, but emerges over successive rounds as shifting agreements gradually leave one player without assigned drinks, becoming the focus of collective teasing and playful punishments.

Everything unfolded through bargaining. The *Padrone* steered advantage toward selected allies, while the *Sotto* reinforced or countered those choices by reshaping agreements and testing loyalties. The rest of the table formed fragile, temporary alliances, adjusting constantly to avoid exclusion in later rounds.

## THE ELM

The word *olmo* – elm – carries several possible origins, and all may hold some truth, as folk language rarely has a single clean source. In peasant tradition, the elm was the tree used to support grapevines, strong but unproductive, sustaining life without bearing fruit. Another origin points to the medieval town square, where agreements were struck beneath the elm at its centre; those who failed were left exposed and empty-handed.

More simply, "holding the elm" came to describe a condition of endurance without reward. The tree stands firm while everything else moves around it, offering support yet receiving nothing in return.

In the *Passatella*, this image becomes a social role. The Elm is the player who gives structure to the game's tension by absorbing its outcome. Chosen as the one who does not drink, he becomes the focus of the table's humour and humiliation, a temporary outlet for the group's shifting hierarchies.

## THE SCAPEGOAT

The dynamic is as old as human groups: the outsider defines the insiders. By making one man the Elm, the rest become a community – united, for the duration of a bottle, by the shared pleasure of not being him. More often than not, the evening would end in argument or brawl. It is from this tension that the expression "to hold the Elm" means to endure humiliation without breaking, absorbing the pressure until it passes.

Today, the *Passatella* has not so much disappeared as faded – retreating into memory and occasional

**Men in a cantina in Roccamorice, 1950-1960s. Photo courtesy of [Roccheggiando Roccamorice per immagini](#)**

folkloric re-enactments. In my part of Abruzzo, a small group kept it alive until about ten years ago. Then time stepped in, claimed the role of *Padrone*, and made the old tavern hierarchies its final Elm.

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

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## NOTES FOR THE READER

***Nu quarte e na gazzose*** – "a quarter-litre of wine and a soda" – was the typical stake of the game. The fact that people came to blows over something so small is precisely the point: the *Passatella* was never really about the wine.

**Bernardo Tanucci** (1698–1783) served as chief minister of the Kingdom of Naples under two Bourbon kings. In 1756 he had the kingdom's highest court issue an edict threatening severe penalties for playing the *Passatella* – a sign of how seriously it was taken at the highest levels.

**Ferdinand II of Bourbon** earned this nickname **Re Bomba** – King Bomb – for ordering the naval bombardment of Messina and other Sicilian cities during the popular uprisings of 1848. It became a byword across Europe for royal brutality.





## HOW RIDLEY SCOTT FELL IN LOVE WITH ABRUZZO

The president of Abruzzo Film Commission, Piercesare Stagni, tells how one of Hollywood's greatest directors secretly chose Abruzzo's mountains as the backdrop for his new post-apocalyptic epic.

Ridley Scott's new film, *The Dog Stars*, is due for release in August, and it is unlike anything the director has made before. Based on Peter Heller's celebrated novel, it is a post-pandemic survival story in which the protagonist — a man who has survived a mass-casualty

Piercesare Stagni in

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