

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



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ON THE COVER:

Casalincontrada. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 12.

LEFT:

Casalincontrada. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 12.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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Editor's Note

Summer flew by, and ABRUZZISSIMO is back after a long break. I stepped away for a few months to work on a new publishing project – you, my readers, will be the first to hear about it soon – but for now, I'm glad to be writing to you again. It was a hard summer for Abruzzo: hailstorms, relentless heatwaves, and one wildfire after another, and autumn can't come soon enough.

This issue leans into the season's shift. My story goes inside the workshop of one of the very few *materassai* left in the region, still hand-making the *materasso di lana* in **Raiano (AQ)** – the wool mattress that generations here slept on.

September's cooler temperatures are perfect for a walk around **Casalincontrada (CH)** to see the *case di terra*, the earthen houses that dot the surrounding countryside. Built from raw earth, they hold a steady temperature year-round, and after decades of neglect they're drawing fresh interest. Read the full story on page 12.

There's also a change I'm glad to introduce. The People section has always been about foreigners who made Abruzzo their home – but their stories are only half the picture. So from this issue, we'll cover both. We begin with Liberata, who ran an escape line in **Abbateggio (PE)** during the Second World War, and her American granddaughter, who is returning to turn that history into a documentary.

Finally, a reminder that ABRUZZISSIMO is reader-supported. Subscriptions and donations are what keep it alive, so if you can, please consider a [premium subscription](#) or a [donation](#).

It's good to be back. I hope this issue finds you well, and that autumn is kind to us all.

Enjoy the September issue!

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor

DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS



TOURISM IS BOOMING

Abruzzo is outpacing Italy's tourism boom, and its mountain towns are leading the charge. In the first half of 2026, arrivals climbed 7.2% and overnight stays 7.7% against a year earlier. The real surprise: visits to small villages surged 10.9%, as travellers head for backroads, borghi and inland trails. The figures, released by the Ministry of Tourism, point to a region winning over people who want somewhere real—the kind of tourism Italy is keen to spread around.

ABRUZZO'S YOUNG ARE LEAVING

Abruzzo is losing its young people, and the numbers are stark. Over the past decade the region shed 34,235 residents aged 15 to 34—a 12.1% drop, according to CGIA Mestre, with L'Aquila hit hardest. The drain is regional and national at once: between 2002 and 2024, nearly a million under-35s left the South for the Centre-North, and of the net loss in the 25–34 bracket, some 270,000 held a degree. Abruzzo shares in that exodus. Politicians of every stripe will read these figures to suit themselves—but the plainer truth resists spin: the will to stay isn't missing, only the housing, jobs, and services that would make it possible.

THE RETIREES' FAVOURITE

Abruzzo has become the top Italian destination for foreign pensioners drawn by the country's 7% flat tax on overseas income. Ministry of Economy figures, presented to parliament, show 221 retirees have settled here under the scheme—ahead of Puglia, Sicily and Sardinia. Together those four southern regions account for over three-quarters of all foreign retirees using the incentive, which lets newcomers who move to southern towns of under 30,000 people pay a flat 7% for up to nine years.



THE MAYOR'S PETROL

As petrol tops €2 across Italy, in the mountain town of **Valle Castellana (TE)** the municipality sells petrol and diesel almost at cost, 10 to 20 cents below what drivers pay elsewhere. Locals call it "la benzina del sindaco" — the mayor's petrol.

The town hall bought the pump four years ago when the owner wanted to close it — the paperwork took roughly two years, partly because there was no precedent in Italy. It sells petrol and diesel with almost no margin, a saving of 10 to 20 cents a litre against the private pumps. As word spread, drivers began coming from across the Teramo province: turnover rose to around €500,000 a year, up from €75,000. "Now other towns are calling me, wanting to know whether they could try the same thing," says mayor Camillo D'Angelo.

ANCIENT KILNS UNDER PINETO

The region's heritage authorities have announced what they have learned about a Roman kiln unearthed at the coastal town of **Pineto (TE)**: it most likely fired amphorae for shipping the prized local Atrian wine some two thousand years ago. The kiln came to light during work on a gas pipeline along viale delle Rose last year and has yielded amphora fragments, stoppers, bricks, a coin and even a bronze fishing hook. It served the trade of Atri, the Roman town on the hills above. Pineto now plans to protect and open it to the public.



GRAPE FESTIVALS SEASON BEGINS

Despite a difficult season of hail, drought, and poor yields, Abruzzo is celebrating its grape-harvest traditions with sagre and festivals throughout the month. **Atri (TE)** kicks things off on September 6 with a grape festival that coincides with a lively organetto festa. From September 11 to 13, **Mosciano Sant'Angelo (TE)** hosts its much-loved grape festival, where you can meet local winemakers. And on September 20, **Città Sant'Angelo (PE)** holds the 39^a Sagra dell'Uva, featuring a blessing of the tractors and harvest and a parade of wine-themed allegorical floats that's always a great show. See more details via the organisers' pages linked here.

DID YOU KNOW?



WHEN ORTUCCHIO WAS AN ISLAND

Castello Piccolomini, in the small town of **Ortucchio (AQ)**, was one of only two castles in Italy you could enter directly by water. The other is Sirmione, on Lake Garda. Until the 19th century the fortress stood in Lake Fucino — once the third-largest lake in Italy — surrounded by a moat fed by the lake itself, with boats mooring at a dock inside the walls.

The castle owed this distinction to a remarkable setting. Depending on the water level, the whole town of Ortucchio was sometimes an island, sometimes a peninsula — rather like Mont Saint-Michel — and its very name may come from the Latin *Ortus aquarum*, "risen from the waters." When Lake Fucino was drained in 1878, the castle was left standing on dry land, still reached by its drawbridge, looking out today over the fertile Fucino plain.

The Renaissance fortress dates to 1488, when Antonio Todeschini Piccolomini rebuilt it after an earlier medieval stronghold was destroyed by Napoleone Orsini. The oldest surviving part is the battlemented keep. Damaged by the 1915 earthquake and restored in the 1970s, the castle is now a national monument.

It also carries a legend: on quiet nights, the ghost of the "Pale Virgin" is said to appear on the tower. The daughter of a lord of Ortucchio, she fell in love with a young fisherman but was forced to marry the lord of Celano. Heartbroken, she leapt from a window to her death, while her beloved was killed in an ambush laid by her father.

Castello Piccolomini di Ortucchio is open to visitors every day in September.



EDWARD LEAR, THE NONSENSE POET WHO PAINTED ABRUZZO

By Antonio Bini

To most English readers, Edward Lear is the man who wrote "The Owl and the Pussycat" and a whole genre of glorious nonsense – the limericks of *A Book of Nonsense*. Few realise that Lear thought of himself not as a poet but as a landscape painter, as the inscription on his gravestone in San Remo attests. And in some of his finest work he painted in Abruzzo.

For most of the 18th century, European travellers, writers, artists, poets, musicians, and archaeologists were drawn to Italy. Young aristocrats – the English above all – set off on the Grand Tour, a significant stage in their education, following a fixed circuit that always led to Rome. Abruzzo was left off the map as it had few carriage roads, a fearsome reputation for brigantaggio – the banditry that made the interior genuinely dangerous – and a landscape of harsh peaks and cold winters that deterred all but the determined.

The Romantic movement changed the region's fortunes. Where the 18th century had prized order and classical ruins, the 19th prized wildness, solitude, and the emotional bond between people and nature. Travellers began to trickle in and Lear was among the most important, and the most observant.

Photo: Lake Fucino, illustration by Edward Lear

THE ILLUSTRATED EXCURSIONS

Lear arrived in Rome in 1837 and lived in Italy for much of his life. His curiosity about Abruzzo, according to his biographer Peter Levi, was first stirred in Rome itself, by the *zampognari* (bagpipers), the shepherd-musicians who came down to the city from the mountains each Christmas. He liked the idea that these herdsmen crossed the land freely, ignoring borders, and he was eager to trace the paths they followed back into the mountains.

Lear made his Abruzzo journeys in the summers of 1843 and 1844, travelling with his friend Charles Knight, and in 1846 he published the *Illustrated Excursions in Italy*, two volumes of tinted lithographs, made from his own sketches, with a preface insisting he had kept "a close fidelity to the originals." It is, as the Grand Tour scholar Attilio Brilli has noted, the first detailed description and pictorial record of Abruzzo's itineraries, landscapes, and towns.

THE ROUTE

A tireless traveller, Lear preferred to venture into the lesser-known Italy, favouring the mountain and hill villages, moving on horseback, on a donkey, or on foot along the mule tracks. His book lets you follow the itinerary almost village by village. Leaving the outskirts of Rome, Lear went by way of Frascati, Galliciano, and Guadagnolo to Carsoli, then to Tagliacozzo and down toward the great basin of Lake Fucino – Avezzano, Luco dei Marsi, Trasacco, Celano. From there he crossed to Goriano Sicolì, Raiano, and Sulmona, then through Corfinio and Popoli to Chieti and the coast at Pescara, turning inland again through Penne and the mountain villages – Calascio, Santo Stefano di Sessanio, Barisciano – to L'Aquila, before continuing toward Antrodoco and Cittaducale. Many of the places he drew can still be found, and several of the palazzi where he was a guest are worth seeing even from the outside, for their architecture and their history.

One of Lear's subjects has since vanished from the earth. He sketched the shores of Lake Fucino, then



Edward Lear, 1866

the third-largest lake in Italy, filling a wide basin in the western mountains. In the 1870s the banker-prince Alessandro Torlonia completed a vast engineering project that drained the lake entirely, converting its bed into one of Italy's most fertile agricultural plains. Today his illustrations preserve a landscape no living person has seen.

THE LANDSCAPE AND THE PEOPLE

Lear's drawings convey his fascination with Abruzzo, though not without evident Romantic touches. He let the natural setting dominate – the vast sweep of hills, mountains, and Lake Fucino – and set the villages carefully within it, seeking the harmony of built and natural. The people are always there: women in local costume, farmers, shepherds, small figures that complete the scene rather than command it.

Lear's fascination with the mountain musicians runs through the whole account. These were the *zampognari* and the *pifferari*, players of the shrill *piffero*, a folk oboe. His interest went beyond the picturesque: at the end of his Abruzzo account he added, as an appendix, a transcription of a tune he had heard again and again in the mountains. Because the tradition was oral and the shepherds could not write it down, this is very likely the earliest surviving record of the Abruzzese pipers' music.

A BOOK WORTH READING

His prose is clear, quick, and unusually frank — free of the polite conventions that stiffen so many travel accounts of the period, which lets a reader drop straight into the life of the time. Lear was genuinely enchanted by the country; he could also be blunt about the poverty and squalor he found in the houses of some of his hosts, and that honest double vision is part of what keeps the book alive. When he later travelled in Calabria, he found himself missing the hospitality of Abruzzo.

Sulmona, illustration by Edward Lear

Abruzzo even slipped into his nonsense. One of the limericks in *A Book of Nonsense* runs:

*There was an Old Man of th' Abruzzi,
So blind that he couldn't his foot see;
When they said, "That's your toe,"
He replied, "Is it so?"
That doubtful Old Man of th' Abruzzi.*

Abruzzo has not entirely forgotten Edward Lear: Sulmona and Anversa degli Abruzzi have both named streets in his honour. Yet although the *Illustrated Excursions* has been translated into Italian, very few people in the region have read it. I invite you to read it — in English (available for free download [online](#)) or in Italian — and to hold the landscape of nearly two centuries ago against the one that exists today, measuring all that has changed, and all that endures as it was in Lear's time.

Antonio Bini is the author of several books on the history and traditions of Abruzzo and a regular contributor to ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine.





IL MATERASSAIO AND THE KING OF MATTRESSES

Text and photos by Anna
Lebedeva

In rural households in Abruzzo, a materasso di lana was a luxury. If looked after, it lasted a lifetime and beyond. It was not furniture so much as patrimony: it entered a household with the bride, as part of her corredo, and it was still there when her children married.

Not everyone could have one, as wool was expensive. The families who didn't have sheep and couldn't afford to buy one slept on mattresses stuffed with dried maize husks or straw, which had to be emptied and refilled every single year, because the leaves dried out, crumbled, and turned to dust. What you slept on announced what your family was worth.

I first slept on a materasso di lana at Sextantio, in Santo Stefano di Sessanio. For all its designer finishes and fixtures, the albergo diffuso is an immersive experience rather than a luxurious stay: you sleep on a handmade wool mattress, under handwoven blankets. It was thinner but firmer than my delicate modern back was used to, and surprisingly comfortable. I had assumed the mattress at Sextantio was a heritage detail, made to order just for the hotel. However, after some research, I was surprised to find out that there are still artisans in

Photo: Eugenio Trinetti in his workshop



Photos: (above) a traditional style wool mattress; a needle for sewing a mattress

Abruzzo who make them the way they always have, to order, for anyone who asks. So I went to see a *materassaio* — a mattress-maker — at work: Eugenio Trinetti, in his workshop in Raiano (AQ).

He learned the trade at thirteen, from his father, who learned it the same way from his own father. His father worked all over before settling: "Genoa, then Chieti," he tells me, "and in the end he came home to Goriano Sicoli (AQ) because the mattress work was here, in the mountains."

The workshop is spacious but filled with old mattresses waiting to be restored, mountains of springy foam sheets, rows of fresh spring blocks ready to replace worn ones, and huge steel tables where Eugenio and his brother work. Everything is done by hand here, and the boxes of soft, unspun butter-coloured sheep fleece, the thick cotton threads and the enormous needles — from 12 centimetres up to 35 — give away the old roots of what happens in this room.

FROM VILLAGE TO VILLAGE

I ask Eugenio how it worked in the old days, when he travelled with his father from town to town. The season ran from spring to autumn, April through October, because the work was done outdoors — in courtyards, in the narrow alleys between houses — and needed dry, sunny weather. "We'd load everything into the car and set off, village by village, through all of Abruzzo," he says. "My father, my mother, and I would make or restore anything between 15 and 25 mattresses in a day. We had the



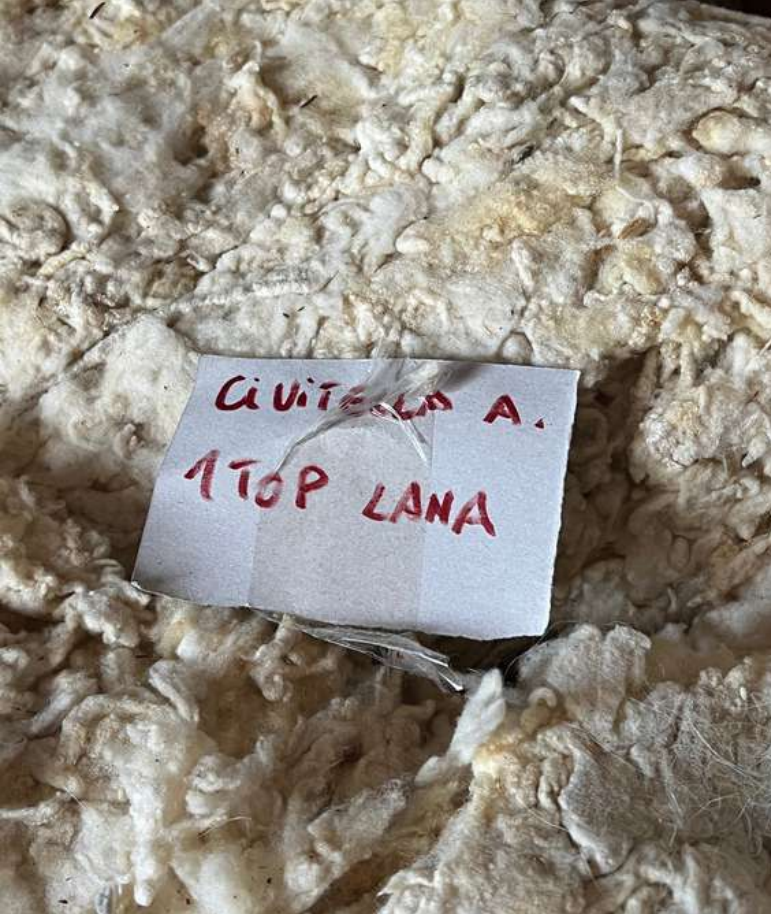
TRADITION

appointments booked in advance." Those numbers were possible because the work was mostly refills rather than builds from scratch, and the wool was handled differently then. "Back in those days the wool wasn't washed," he explains. "It was only combed and teased open." His job as a boy was to prepare the ground and card the fleece.

RITUALS

"The wool mattress was the most important thing in a household," Eugenio says. "It lasted for generations." People still bring him their grandmothers' mattresses to repair. He points to the one on the table in front of him: "That one is at least forty years old."

Small rituals grew around the making of wool mattresses. Eugenio remembers one in particular, from Campo di Giove (AQ). "When the bride's mattress was finished, the mother of the bride would throw coins and sugared almonds onto it — and all of it went to the mattress-maker." In Scanno, a town that earned its riches on sheep farming, the



Photos: (above) raw fleece from Civitella Alfedena in the workshop; Eugenio Trinetti

mattresses were among the most generously stuffed anywhere. And the work itself was a kind of feast. "They'd offer you coffee, they'd bring out sandwiches, feed you," he says. "It was a real celebration, those days."

MADE BY HAND

These days, the feasts and the sugared almonds are gone, but the technique has changed less than you would expect. The old mattress is unpicked, the wool washed, disinfected and carded — by machine now, rather than with the nailed wooden boards his father used — and then comes the part no machine has taken over. Eugenio rolls the new cover up like a sack and feeds the fleece in by hand, shaping it as he goes. "You can't just take the wool and pile it up," he says. "It has to be arranged — the corners first, then you work toward the centre. The middle has to come up higher, because that's where the person's weight sits." Then it is basted, quilted, bordered by hand and pressed. A double mattress holds anywhere from

28 to 40 kilos of wool. "It has to have substance," he explains.

When Eugenio works alone, the handwork on one mattress takes him around three and a half hours. Add the washing and it comes to roughly five hours in total. With the wool prepared in advance he can start early and deliver the finished mattress by the following evening. A memory foam mattress, he points out, takes fifteen minutes to half an hour on modern machinery.

The wool comes mostly from Abruzzo itself, with some from elsewhere in Italy — Merino above all, which he rates highest for mattresses, alongside English fleece. A new double bed in pure wool costs around €1,100, a single roughly half that. But there is a cheaper route, and it is the one that tells you most about the craft: bring him the wool from your old mattress and he will wash it and rebuild the mattress for about €600.

"THE KING OF MATTRESSES"

Eugenio is a big advocate of *materassi di lana*: they breathe, regulate temperature, draw moisture away

from the body." You can remake it every couple of decades, or every five or six years if you want a fresh one. The only thing you throw away is ten grams of twine. Everything else gets reused." Set against a foam mattress, which ends its short life in a landfill, that is his whole argument. "Who knows what chemicals they use in that foam, but the wool is natural. Everyone talks about green, green, green: they can invent whatever materials they want, but the wool mattress is the king of them all."

He is realistic about why so few still make them. Industrial spring mattresses arrived in the early 1980s, and he moved with the market: by 1983 he was building sprung-and-wool ones himself: the spring block in the middle, thick layers of carded wool packed above and below, so you still sleep on wool while the springs hold the mattress flat for 20 years. Memory foam followed around 2000. He makes those too — memory, latex, whatever a customer asks for, though he leaves no doubt about which he prefers. The old-style mattresses made of nothing but wool — no springs, no foam, just carded fleece inside a cotton cover — are now a small share of the work: "Out of all my orders, I make four or five percent in pure wool." The week I visit, he is finishing one for a customer in Pescara.

The Trinetti workshop is one of very few in Abruzzo where sheep wool is still used and mattresses built by hand. A few other older artisans still work around Avezzano, L'Aquila, Pratola Peligna, and the craft survives here and there beyond Abruzzo, too. But the makers grow fewer every year. His mattresses, meanwhile, travel a long way from Raiano — to Treviso, to Germany, to London, even to Cape Verde and Samoa. A community of Samoan nuns slept on them while they were stationed nearby and shipped a container home when they left; a group of Cape Verdean women married in Sulmona now do the same for their families.

A wool mattress, Eugenio says, is eternal — unpicked and rebuilt regularly, it will outlast the people who sleep on it. What it cannot outlast is the last person who knows how to make it.



Washed wool ready to be packed into a mattress cover

WHERE TO ORDER A WOOL MATTRESS IN ABRUZZO

Eugenio Trinetti works under the name **Semmiflex** in Raiano (AQ).

A few other artisans in Abruzzo still make and restore materassi di lana as well. Most work to order and will rebuild a mattress using wool you already have — and because each one is built by hand, you choose the weight, the density, and the firmness.

- **Valle di Lana** in Pratola Peligna (AQ)
- **Di Domenico Fabbrica D'Arredo e Riposo** in Avezzano (AQ)
- **La Fabbrica del Materasso** in L'Aquila



CASALINCONTRADA, A TOWN OF EARTHEN HOUSES

By Anna Lebedeva

Casalincontrada (CH) has the region's largest cluster of earthen houses — humble, ingenious, a living record of how people once built with little more than earth, straw, and water.

The town sits in the clay hills that roll from the Majella massif toward the Adriatic. Rain and time have carved the surrounding land into *calanchi* — dramatic badland furrows where the vegetation gives way and the pale clay skeleton of the landscape shows through, its weathered layers exposed metres deep.

This is sub-Apennine clay, a marine sediment laid down millions of years ago on a submerged seabed and later pushed up into these hills. Local people simply call it *terra*. For generations they raised their homes from what the land offered in abundance: hillside clay made an excellent material for sturdy *case di terra*, or earthen houses.

The earthen houses of Abruzzo spread through the countryside in the 19th century, when the end of the feudal system and a rising population broke large estates into smaller holdings and created a sudden, pressing need for farmhouses. Families had little money and few materials.

**Photo: Borgocapo, an earthen house in Casalini Contrada.
Photo by Sergio Camplone**

"The earth dug from below the thirty centimetres of topsoil, worked together with straw, was an excellent and cheapest building material," explains Gianfranco Conti, an architect who has run since 1993 the *Centro di Documentazione delle Case di Terra Cruda (CEDTerra)*, the documentation centre for raw-earth houses, in Casalincontrada. "Peasant families pooled their labour helping each other to build houses. Mud and water were mixed using animal power, and the women shaped the massoni, the loaf-like blocks of earth and straw at the heart of the technique."

HOW A MASSONE HOUSE IS BUILT

The local technique is called *massone* – the Abruzzese form of what the French know as bauge and the English-speaking world calls cob. It needs earth with a high clay content, at least 40 to 50%.

Builders begin by tracing the outline of the house in a trench dug thirty or forty centimetres deep. From there the walls rise not in bricks but in horizontal courses, or "rings," roughly sixty to eighty centimetres high, built up from wet loaves of straw-mixed earth. After each ring the work pauses to let the material settle under its own weight; then the top is wetted and the next ring begun, its joints deliberately offset from the one below so that the whole wall knits together into a single monolithic mass, dense and without cavities. The finished walls taper as they climb – a metre or so thick at the base of a two-storey house, narrowing toward the top (see more details on the [Casediterra website](#)).

Photos: (below) clay and straw blocks; clay hills of Casalincontrada



The case *di terra* were humble homes that asked little and gave much: those thick earthen walls held the day's heat out through the summer and stored warmth through the winter without any of the machinery a modern house depends on.

VANISHING HERITAGE

Yet, for all their ingenuity, the earthen houses very nearly did not survive the 20th century in Abruzzo and Italy. After the Second World War, as the countryside emptied and the economic boom pulled people toward concrete and the city, earth came to stand for everything a modernizing Italy wanted to leave behind – poverty, hardship, backwardness. It was seen as a material that could never signal prosperity, and the skills to build with it were abandoned within a generation.

A national rural-housing survey in 1934 recorded around 7000 massone buildings in Abruzzo, more than 3000 of them in the province of Chieti alone. By a regional census at the close of the century, only several hundred remained. "A census at the end of the 20th century recorded about 800 still surviving, across 44 Abruzzese municipalities," Conti says. By one calculation, close to 90% of Abruzzo's earthen heritage vanished in the space of a few decades – and follow-up surveys suggest the losses have continued since.

Casalincontrada has the largest cluster in the region, with around 70 houses, while others are scattered across Manoppello, Chieti, the river valleys of Teramo province, and the Pescara and Foro valleys. Rarely lived in, neglected, often half-collapsed or reduced to rubble, they are a world on the edge of extinction.



CASA DI TERESA

One of the few restored earthen houses in Casalincontrada is *Casa di Teresa*. Small and neat, its thick walls plastered in clay and straw, warm-toned and rough, almost sensual under the hand. Nothing here is the smooth, sterile white of a modern interior. This was once the humble home of a peasant family: turkeys, sheep and a few pigs on the ground floor, the people squeezed into tight quarters above. Today it belongs to the town, and it serves as the public face of CEDTerra.

Named after its last owner, the little house had two parts — an older west block from before 1950 and an eastern extension added in the mid-1950s as the family grew — and by the time the municipality bought it in 2008 to save it from ruin, it had been abandoned for forty years, its roof partly gone, its poorly anchored walls slowly failing. Between 2008 and 2015, it became a hands-on workshop with more than two hundred people participating in rebuilding it, working alongside experts, artists, universities and building schools during the Earth Festival organised by CEDTerra. The finished house was given discreet modern comforts — a separate brick block for toilets, a new internal staircase, heating and electricity run from solar panels — without erasing what it had always been. The whole intervention cost around €116,000, paid from regional funds. It cost far more per square metre

Photos: (below) Casa di Teresa; earthen walls inside Casa di Teresa

than a conventional restoration would have, but the money bought not just a building but the transfer of a nearly lost craft.

The permanent documentation centre on raw-earth houses holds one of the most complete libraries in Europe on the subject and organizes research, seminars and visits. Every September it runs the Festa della Terra, the Earth Festival, in Casalincontrada, which since 1997 has drawn scholars, architects, teachers and enthusiasts from around the world. Crucially, CEDTerra also teaches people to build. "For almost twenty years now we've kept up this training work," Conti says, "attended by students, professionals, and also enthusiasts who want to learn to build their own house themselves."

ECO-FRIENDLY HOMES

"In recent years, more and more people have grown passionate about *case di terra*," Conti says. With his wife and collaborator Stefania Giardinelli, he restored Borgocapo, a beautiful earthen house with panoramic views that is now a bed-and-breakfast with an educational workshop attached. The couple also restored the D'Orazio home, where the original family still lives.

But it is worth being clear about the scale: only six earthen houses in Casalincontrada have been restored recently. These are careful, dedicated exceptions, not the front edge of a revival — for every one saved, dozens of others are left to decay.



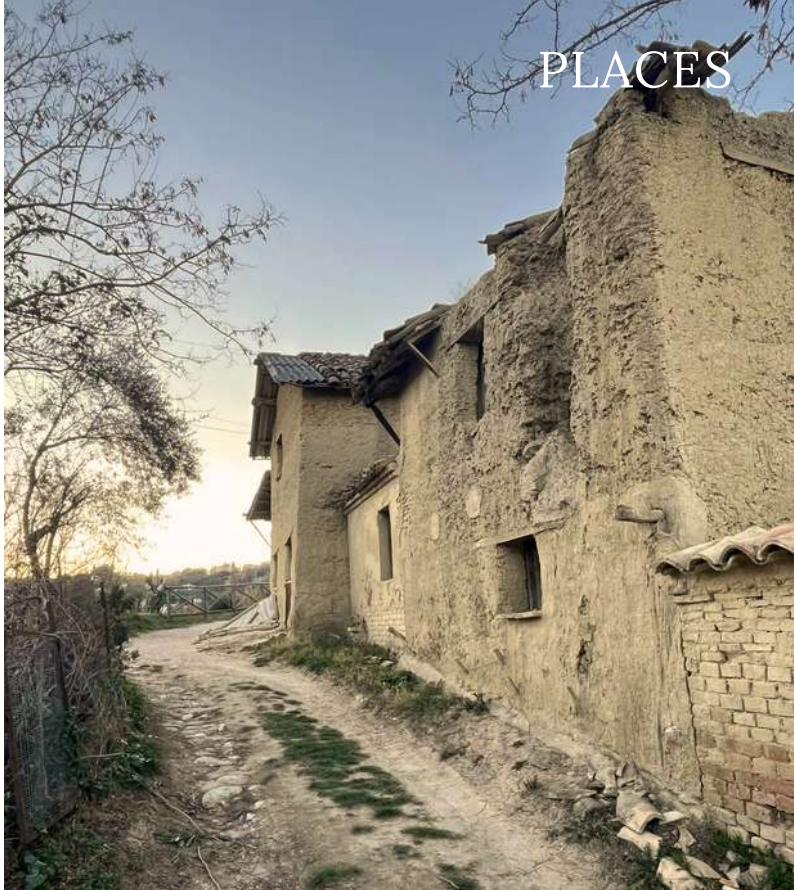
Building a new earthen house in Abruzzo and Italy remains difficult. The national building code does not recognise raw earth as a load-bearing material — unlike Germany, which has formal earth-building rules. "Earth isn't recognised as a building material," Conti explains. "It isn't forbidden, but it isn't regulated and is treated as experimental construction. But we've done several projects where the earth carries no structural load: you can build a frame of timber and reinforced concrete and use the earth as infill and insulation. It costs more, so you need real motivation."

Much of Abruzzo sits in a high seismic-risk zone, which makes approval harder still. And because almost no one builds this way anymore, there is no market in certified materials and no simple way to standardise the massone technique. A permit means a long, costly, case-by-case process, though Abruzzo has passed regional laws to protect and encourage restoration and state or regional grants can offset up to 80 percent of the cost, or as much as 100 percent when the house is a recognised cultural-heritage site. The deeper problem is cultural: for generations, families have drifted away from the countryside, leaving earthen houses to crumble behind them. Yet Conti is optimistic: "We've noticed that younger generations see earth as an eco-friendly material, and there's a new trend toward building with natural materials that has revived interest in the case di terra."

WORTH SAVING

A third of humanity still lives in earthen buildings, and 15 percent of rural France does; in Iran, earthen towers built for pigeons rise 20 metres high. Even within Italy, Abruzzo is not where the tradition is strongest — Sardinia alone has around 25,000 earthen buildings, though many are now in ruins. Seen against that backdrop, the houses of Casalincontrada might seem inconsequential, but even a small place can hold a history worth saving.

"The lifespan of an earthen house is two or three generations," Conti says. "If it is abandoned, it naturally returns to the earth." An earthen house is not a monument built to outlast its makers; it is a living thing that survives only through use. Left empty, it dies. Kept warm and repaired by the people inside it, it endures. More than any other kind of house, it has to be lived in.



Photos: (top) the hamlet of Malandra Vecchia in Casalincontrada; a casa di terra in Turrivalignani (PE); photos courtesy of CEDTerra

That fragility is exactly what makes Casalincontrada worth visiting now. Of the town's surviving earthen houses — still among the largest concentrations anywhere in Abruzzo — many can be seen from the roads and lanes around the town, standing in the clay landscape that produced them, some sound, some visibly failing. A few have been carefully restored and can be visited or stayed in, among them *Casa di Teresa* and *Borgocapo*. They are best seen soon: this is a world in retreat, and each empty house is one season closer to the earth it was raised from.

MORE ON THE EARTHEN HOUSES

WALK A CASE DI TERRA TRAIL

To see several earthen houses in and around the town, follow the route mapped on the CEDTerra [website](#). There's little shade along the way, so avoid the hottest days. The loop begins at the Cappella di San Rocco and runs out to Malandra Vecchia, a small hamlet just outside town and one of the few anywhere still built almost entirely of *case di terra*, takes Casa di Teresa, Borgocapo and a few others. For a guided tour, you can contact the Associazione Terrae ODV through their [website](#).

LEARN HOW TO BUILD WITH EARTH

Every September, Casalincontrada celebrates the *Festa della Terra*, where Italian and international artisans run workshops on the construction techniques behind the *case di terra*. This year's dates are September 14-20; check the CEDTerra Facebook [page](#) for details.

SEE A PHOTO EXHIBITION

This month the art space *La Dama di Capestrano* hosts an exhibition of photographs of *case di terra* from across Abruzzo by Tiziana Francavilla, who also co-authored a [book](#) about them, *Abitare il tempo in Abruzzo*. The exhibition runs until 27 September and can be visited Friday and Saturday from 5 to 8pm and Sunday from 11am to 12pm.

Photos: (from below clockwise) in the streets of Casalincontrada; fiadoni from Forno Pasticceria Malandra

AROUND THE TOWN

TASTE LOCAL CHEESE PASTRIES

The town's Forno Pasticceria Malandra is known for its *fiadoni*, the traditional Abruzzese cheese pastries. Rita, who runs the bakery, makes hers a little differently: she works a touch of sugar into the dough, so the savoury cheese filling is set off by a subtle sweetness. Always fresh, and worth the stop.

SEE THE CENTRO STORICO

On the town's main square, Piazza de Lollis, gaze down a deep well that once served as *la neviera*. Built of brick in 18th century it served as a refrigerator with snow packed and compressed into this deep, cylindrical pit through the winter and drawn on in summer. Stroll around the old centre to see the 14th - century pointed-arch town gate and the medieval churches of Santo Stefano Protomartire and San Domenico.

JOIN THE CORN FESTIVAL

Every July, for more than 30 years, Casalincontrada's old centre fills with food stalls, live music and street performers for the Sagra della Marrocca. The star is the *marrocca* itself, an old Abruzzese variety of corn, served boiled or roasted straight off the cob, alongside a spread of regional classics: *arrosticini*, *pecora alla callara*, *pallotte cacio e ova*, *gnocchi*, *polenta* and more. For next year's dates, check the [festival's Facebook page](#).





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Anna Lebedeva

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LIBERATA CATALANO'S WARTIME ESCAPE LINE

By Anna Lebedeva and
Linda Dini Jenkins

During World War II, an Abruzzese mother hid dozens of escaped Allied soldiers from the Germans. Decades later, her granddaughter set out to tell the story in a documentary.

Rosanna Catalano is an attorney living in Tallahassee, Florida, whose father, Remo, came to the US in 1948 from Le Piane, a contrada of Abbateggio (PE). He often talked about his wartime childhood, including feeding Allied soldiers hiding in nearby caves at night. Rosanna, together with her husband and two daughters, pieced together these incredible stories, conducted dozens of interviews in Abruzzo, and is producing a documentary called *Liberata*, soon to be released at select film festivals.

HUMANITARIAN RESISTANCE

Following the fall of Mussolini, the new Italian government secretly negotiated an armistice with the Allies, announced in September 1943. The Italian military command largely disintegrated; as German troops moved in, POW camp guards abandoned their posts, and prisoners slipped into the countryside before the Germans could take full control. Many headed south through the mountains and villages toward the Allied lines. As they went, ordinary families began to feed, hide, clothe, and guide them — work that could get a household executed under German occupation. Italian historians call it *resistenza umanitaria*, humanitarian resistance, to set it apart from the armed partisan war.

In the rural villages of Abruzzo, much of that work fell to women and their children. The men were at the front, in hiding, or emigrated, so it was the women who kept the farms running — and who had



Liberata Catalano with her twins, Romolo and Remo, 1933

to understand, at their own doors, whether the strangers in front of them were escaped Allies or German infiltrators. Most took the risk anyway, sheltering British, American, South African, French, and other Allied and Commonwealth soldiers, often with no language in common.

Liberata Catalano — Rosanna's grandmother — was one of them, between 1943 and 1944 she ran an informal escape line, sheltering an estimated 40 soldiers. The front was close. The Gustav Line — the fortified German position the Allies were fighting to break — lay just across the Majella mountains, a walk of some 50 km south of her home.

By the time the war reached Abruzzo, Liberata was raising the family alone. Her husband, Donato, had gone to America years earlier, working on New York's construction sites and sending money home. Their eldest son, Pasquale, had left with him; the three youngest — Neliana and the twins, Romolo and Remo, born in 1933 — stayed with her in Le Piane. She kept the household going through the war years — growing what food she could, harvesting olives, raising the young children.

Rosanna grew up with the story in fragments. "This is a story that my dad would just tell us when we were little," she says. "He would say things like, 'Oh, when we would go in the middle of the night to feed the soldiers.' " Young as they were — shepherds by the age of 10 — Remo and Romolo carried food up to the caves for men their mother had decided to help. "We knew to keep our mouths shut because we'd seen relatives being shot against a wall," Remo told his daughter later.

TWO SOLDIERS

As a young girl, Rosanna wondered about the card that arrived every Christmas from a North Dakota address. "We don't know anybody in North Dakota.

The Catalano-Flury family (from left): Michael, Rosanna, Neliana (Nellie), Gladys (Rosanna's mother and Remo's wife), Keegan

Who's this?" she recalls thinking as a kid. "And my mom would explain: 'Oh, it's some people your grandma helped save in World War II.'"

The people, it turned out, were Arthur Sayler and Elwyn "Buck" Vanous. Both were barely into their twenties when they met at Campo 59, a POW camp in Servigliano, in the Marche, and bonded over being from the same state. After the armistice, they broke out and headed south toward the Allied lines, and somewhere in that flight through the mountains they came into Liberata's care.

Most of the men she sheltered moved on within a day or two; Sayler and Vanous could not. "They stayed about four months in the cave," Rosanna says. "It was a brutal winter, so they couldn't move." When it was safe, the soldiers and Liberata's sons passed the time together, playing football. They almost never came down to the house; she kept them far enough off that if they were found, it would not be obvious who had been feeding them.

The Saylers sent the cards for years after they returned to the US, but the full meaning of them reached Rosanna only when she had children of her own. "Why in the world would my grandmother send her children to go help a stranger?" she says. "What the hell was happening in the world that would cause you to put your life and your children's lives on the line?"





Liberata (left) and Rosanna, circa 1975

WHY SHE DID IT

The answer, as Rosanna understands it, runs through her uncle Pasquale — Liberata's oldest son, and a soldier in the US Army himself during the war. Her grandmother, she believes, made a kind of bargain with the world: "If I help these guys, maybe somebody somewhere in the world is going to help Pasquale if he gets into trouble somewhere." "I guess for her it was a karma thing," Rosanna says. "If I do this good, then it'll pay back."

And it did, in a way. Pasquale survived the Battle of the Bulge and lived to 103. "He was driving into his 90s, chopping his own wood," Rosanna says. He died this past December, five days after Remo.

In 1948, Liberata and her three youngest children emigrated to the United States to join Donato, reuniting a family split for years. She lived there until her death in 1991, at 90. Rosanna spent childhood

summers at the nonna's house in the Bronx. "She was very quiet, serious, and very much an observer of people," Rosanna says. "We hardly ever saw her laugh as kids." Liberata spoke to her grandchildren almost entirely in Italian and her Abruzzese dialect, though everyone knew she understood English perfectly well. "If we didn't understand what she said, she'd exhale, roll her eyes, and repeat the words in English."

The two boys who once carried bread to soldiers in the hills above Le Piane both built careers in America — Remo went on to own an insurance company, and Romolo rose to senior vice president at Merrill Lynch.

VISITS TO ABRUZZO

Rosanna has been to Abruzzo four times, the first in 1992, with her father, mother, and sister. They stayed in Le Piane, in Remo's childhood home, and walked through Abbateggio, where her father was certain he would be recognized even after more than forty years away. "We challenged him to knock on a door and

see if they knew who he was," Rosanna recalls. "A woman opened the door and in Italian my father said, 'My name is Remo Catalano and I'm visiting from the United States.' And she threw her arms around him, saying my grandmother's and grandfather's names. She knew who he belonged to. That was my first real introduction to Abruzzo."

MAKING THE FILM

Rosanna had wanted to make a documentary about Liberata for a while; her husband, Michael, was sceptical. "Do you even know how to make a documentary?" he teased me," she says. "I didn't, but I figured I could watch some YouTube videos and work it out. It was so naive. But I also wasn't going to let not knowing stop me."

What moved her from someday to now was a death. 'The impetus was when my dad's twin brother died, my uncle Romolo,' she says. 'It was gut-wrenching, and I just realized — I'm running out of time here.' Remo was 88, and he was the first person they filmed.

The crew came together by luck. At a conference where Rosanna was helping a friend interview participants, she got talking with the cameraman Josh McLawhorn, an Emmy-winning cinematographer just off his own first documentary, *Unfiltered*, about the oyster beds of Apalachicola Bay. He agreed to film Liberata and has mentored the family since.

In 2023 the family travelled to Italy with McLawhorn for on-location filming. Alongside interviews with historians and researchers, they captured drone footage of Le Piane, filmed inside the caves where the soldiers hid, and shot at Campo 59, the POW camp at Servigliano. Rosanna's relatives still live near Pescara, and the original family home is standing — one more reason, she says, to come back more often.

The documentary became a family production. Rosanna's husband, Michael Flury, is credited as executive producer; their older daughter, Keegan, serves as creative consultant; and their younger daughter, Nellie, who interned with McLawhorn each summer through high school, is director and editor. With those newly honed skills, Nellie



Liberata Catalano's home in Le Piane, Abbateggio

is now making several cuts of the film, to qualify it for both major and student festivals. The list is ambitious — a major festival on the Adriatic, several in Florida (Tallahassee, Fort Lauderdale, Miami, Sarasota), and the ones they are truly reaching for: Sundance, Tribeca, Venice. The museum at Campo 59, where Sayler and Vanous first met, has asked for a shorter cut. "It is such an honour for us," Rosanna says.

LIBERATA'S KINDNESS

Remo watched all four hours of raw footage before he died this past December. His dementia had taken much by then, but not this. "When he saw the video of Le Piane, he knew that was his home," Rosanna says. "He never forgot about the soldiers, the story." His voice is still in the house. "When my daughter's editing, I can hear my dad's voice from the kitchen while I'm cooking," she says.

What Rosanna wants people to carry out of the film is the simplest thing in it. "In these difficult times, I love that my Italian grandmother is reminding everybody: do not let anybody go hungry," she says. "Let's show kindness to others and take care of each other."

Rosanna and her husband are self-funding the project; a [GoFundMe](#) is open for anyone who would like to contribute. Watch the Liberata trailer on [YouTube](#).

SPEAKING ABRUZZESE

COME È BELLO ABBACCHIARE LE NOCI DA TERRA

By Giancaterino Gualtieri

"How lovely it is to knock walnuts down from the ground" – the proverb needles anyone who makes hard work sound easy while someone else does it.

It comes from the walnut harvest, which begins in September across the Abruzzo countryside. Walnut trees are part of the rural landscape, and unlike almonds, which can hang on the branch until the following autumn, walnuts have to be gathered the moment their husks split. In San Benedetto in Perillis, a small village above Popoli Terme, where I'm from, some owners set out before dawn, wrapped in heavy cloaks and old hats, carrying a petrol lantern to signal their presence and warn off thieves. Stripping someone else's trees in the dark was common enough, since walnuts were valuable.

The harvest is gruelling. Men climbed high into the branches and beat the nuts loose with a long pole, working through the tree almost one nut at a time. The trees are tall and the danger is real, so a family without a steady head for heights had to hire help: young men or seasoned hands who didn't mind the climb.

There is another saying in Italian in the same spirit: *"Chi sta a guardare ne sa più di chi gioca"* – "the onlooker knows more than the player." The spectator always imagines he understands the game better than the person actually in it.

Giancaterino Gualtieri is a local historian who has spent years chronicling the traditions of Abruzzo, and his native San Benedetto in Perillis in particular, across several books.

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QUICK STOP

PARCO LAVINO AND ITS SULPHUR SPRINGS



Parco Lavino sits in a landscape you would otherwise drive straight through – **Scafa (PE)** is not a pretty town, its old cement works (once the Italcementi plant with its sixty thousand square metres) now being dismantled, its main road loud with traffic. But turn off it and within a hundred metres the noise fades.

The park takes its name from the Lavino, whose sulphurous waters run an improbable blue-turquoise. Dissolved sulphates and particular algae give the pools, springs, and little streams their colour – locals half-jokingly call it the "Maldives of Abruzzo." The smell of sulphur reaches you before you see the water. It is a protected area (since 1987, forty hectares at the foot of the Majella), so no swimming is allowed.

Near the entrance there's a picnic area with wooden tables, benches, and a playground. Flat, easy paths thread through riverside woods to the Mulino Farnese, a sixteenth-century mill the water once powered, now standing abandoned. In autumn the turquoise water is framed by yellow leaves, and the whole place becomes magic (if you don't mind the sulphur smell!).

Stop for an hour, or bring lunch and settle in for a proper picnic under the fig, hazelnut, and plum trees. Entry is free. Just avoid weekends if you can: the small car park fills fast, and the quiet that makes the place worth it goes with it.

To reach the place, enter "Parco Lavino Scafa" in your Google Maps.

EASY TRAILS

TO THE CASTELLO DI PAGLIARA FOR SPECTACULAR VISTAS



- **Length:** 2 km
- **Time:** about 1 hour
- **Starting Point:** Lago di Pagliara

Park on the road near Lago di Pagliara, a mountain wetland ringed by woods and green clearings. The well-beaten path slips into the trees before a brief climb up the rocky spurs where the ruins of the castle stand, roughly 980 metres above sea level, gaining about 100 metres along the way. The final stretch is steep but short; where the rock falls away, steel cables are fixed to help you up in safety. It sits at a crossroads of old routes that once carried people and trade over the mountain.

Castello di Pagliara dates to the 9th century. What survives today are medieval walls and traces of round 16th-century bastions, strung along the ridge in a long, narrow shape with a ruined tower at each end. The view from the top is spectacular. It sweeps across the northern side of the Gran Sasso's eastern chain, from the north face of Monte Camicia to the great wall of Corno Grande, and on clear days as far as the Sibillini and the Monti Gemelli. Toward the valley, most of the province of Teramo unfolds to the Adriatic.

And rising up from below, loud enough to carry all the way to the ruins, the roar of the Cascate del Ruzzo and the stream running beneath them. On the way back, it's worth a detour to the falls themselves: leave the car by the road and walk down for a picnic by the water.

SPAGHETTI WITH FRESH ANCHOVIES AND LEMON

By Lorraine Di Giulio

I first tried spaghetti with anchovies and tomato in Martinsicuro (TE), visiting my husband's relatives. It was served to us at lunch – the anchovies pounded to a paste with garlic and vegetables, then simmered down into a sauce – and I loved the taste. But my two children were picky eaters back then and wouldn't touch anything with tomato, so I started looking for alternatives. The following summer, at Le Meraviglie del Mare, a fish shop and small restaurant in the town, we were served a magnificent spaghetti acciughe e limone. It's been a family favourite ever since.

The quantities below are for whole, uncleaned fish: 500 g of whole anchovies yields roughly 250–300 g of cleaned fillets, so scale down if you buy them already filleted. Ask your fishmonger to clean them if he will – it's the only fiddly part, and everything after it is about ten minutes of work.

Turn the heat down before you add the lemon juice, and keep the sauce at a bare simmer afterwards – never let it bubble down. Lemon's acidity survives heat but its aroma doesn't, and a sauce that has boiled is sour without tasting of lemon.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 4 servings

- 400 grams spaghetti
- 500 grams fresh anchovies (whole, to be cleaned)
- 1 lemon, juiced
- 1 lemon, zested (can be the same one)
- flat-leaf parsley, small bunch
- 1 garlic clove
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1/2 tsp salt, plus more for the pasta water



PREPARATION

Bring a large pot of well-salted water to the boil and cook the spaghetti until al dente. Time it so the pasta is ready just as the sauce is – the sauce comes together in only a few minutes, so you can start it once the water is on.

Meanwhile, clean the anchovies: pull off the heads and tails and remove the central bone so you're left with open fillets. Rinse them gently under cold water and pat dry with paper towel.

Finely chop the parsley and garlic. Let them sizzle in the olive oil over low heat for about a minute, just until fragrant. Cut the anchovy fillets into small pieces and add them to the pan. Cook for just a few minutes. Season with the salt, then pour in the lemon juice. Keep the sauce warm over the lowest heat while the pasta finishes.

Drain the spaghetti al dente and tip it into the pan with the sauce. Add a ladleful of the hot pasta water and toss everything together for a couple of minutes.

Off the heat, grate over some lemon zest. Serve straight away, finishing each plate with a little more chopped parsley.

RICOTTA SEMIFREDDO WITH BLACKBERRIES

By Anna Swann

Many restaurants in Abruzzo have *semifreddo* on the menu, and cafés display magnificent *torte di semifreddo* in their windows. The name means "half-cold", and that is a fair description: this is a frozen dessert that never sets as hard as gelato. No machine is needed as you beat air into cream, sugar and eggs (the yolks or the whites). Fruit, chocolate, chopped nuts or a splash of liqueur go in before it goes into the mould. What comes out is closer to a chilled mousse than to churned gelato.

Over the years I have tried many *semifreddi*, and the ones I have come to love are made with *ricotta*. They are easy to make and a rich, satisfying end to a meal or a *merenda* on a hot day. I use sheep *ricotta* from a farm nearby, which has a strong flavour; if you prefer something more delicate, use *ricotta di mucca* instead.

If you would rather not use condensed milk, beat 100 g of icing sugar into the *ricotta* instead. In that case I recommend adding half a shot glass of liqueur as well, or the *semifreddo* will turn icy in the freezer.

You can also freeze the *semifreddo* in ramekins as individual portions.

INGREDIENTS

Serves 6

- 500g sheep *ricotta* (or cow's)
- 200ml fresh cream
- 150ml condensed milk
- 70g icing sugar, for the sauce
- 300g blackberries, fresh or frozen



PREPARATION

Put the *ricotta* in a bowl with the condensed milk and beat until smooth.

Whip the cream to firm peaks, then fold it into the *ricotta* with gentle movements from the bottom upwards, taking care not to knock out too much air.

Set half the mixture aside in a second bowl. To the remaining half add 100 g of the blackberries and whip gently again to break up the berries into an even mix.

Line a loaf tin with cling film and pour in the white mixture. Lay a line of blackberries down the middle (about 50 g), then spoon the berry-*ricotta* mixture over the top. Level the surface and freeze for at least 3 hours.

Meanwhile, put 100 g of the blackberries in a small shallow pan with the icing sugar and a splash of water. Simmer for 15–20 minutes, until slightly syrupy and thickened, then set aside to cool.

Turn out the *semifreddo*, decorate with the remaining blackberries, and serve with the sauce, a few shavings of dark chocolate and a few mint leaves.

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