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TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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ON THE COVER:

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

LEFT:

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

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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Editor's Note

Deer rutting calls echo through Abruzzo's mountains, the trees are turning red and yellow, and chestnut festival dates have been announced across the region. October is here!

In this issue, I want to talk about the devastating fire on Monte Morrone above **Roccacasale (AQ)**. I asked Simona Pace, who lives in the town, to tell us what it was like to watch her community's beloved mountain burn and what remains of its beautiful forests.

If you haven't been to **Bolognano (PE)**, I invite you to visit this pretty town above the Orta gorge. It is known as the town of Joseph Beuys, the German artist who returned here year after year to work and debate art and nature, but there is more to it than its artistic past.

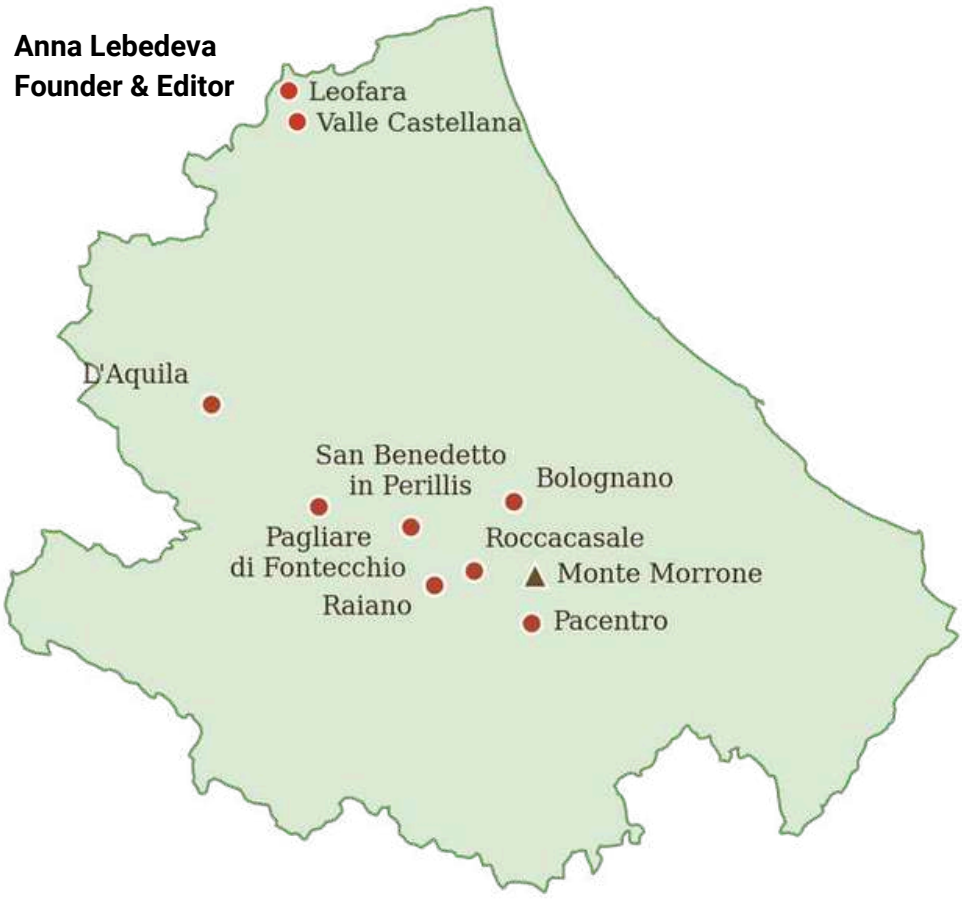
"*Alluch't!*" *"Si vuole allocare?"* You might hear these in Abruzzo's villages. Barbara Summa explains what they mean, and why the simple invitation to sit down changes from one valley to the next.

Did you know that Italy's youngest mayor was elected in Abruzzo? Sergio Panzone, 22, wants to bring young residents and families to **San Benedetto in Perillis (AQ)**, and we talked about how he plans to do it.

In this month's issue you will also find an easy walk, a quick stop at a hidden early medieval church near **Pacentro (AQ)**, traditional recipes and more.

Every pin on the map below marks a place where this month's stories take you.

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor



DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS

RECORD YEAR FOR PESCARA AIRPORT

The region's airport in **Pescara** handled almost a million passengers in the first eight months of 2026, more than in the whole of 2024, and is on course to beat last year's record well before December. Summer traffic alone rose by a fifth. Much of the growth comes from Ryanair, a low-cost airline, which expanded after the region scrapped a surcharge on air tickets and now keeps two aircraft based there all year. Officials say the airport is now heading towards 1.5 million passengers a year.

FEWER PUPILS IN SCHOOLS

Schools in Abruzzo have about 3,800 fewer pupils this year, roughly one in every 40, as Italy's falling birth rate, among the lowest in Europe, works its way through the system. The steepest fall is in the provinces of Chieti and Pescara, according to estimates from the regional education office. One bright spot is L'Aquila, where upper secondary schools gained 205 students, possibly as families return to areas rebuilt after the 2009 earthquake.

INFLATION BITES

Abruzzo faces a winter of rising costs. Inflation there hit 3.7% year on year in August, the latest regional figures from Istat, Italy's national statistics office, against 3.3% nationally. Only Calabria and Sicily fared worse. National inflation has since jumped to 4.2% in September, the highest in three years, driven by energy: regulated domestic gas prices rose 47.2%. Regional figures for September were not available at the time of writing. Price comparison site Facile.it expects household bills from September to December to be nearly 40% above last year.

MARSICAN BEARS ON THE RISE

Abruzzo's famous bear is holding on and starting to roam. A recent genetic survey by ISPRA, Italy's environmental research institute, the first to cover the Marsican brown bear's entire range, puts the current population at 81. In 2014 the estimate, from a far smaller area, was 50. There is more good news: about 16 bears now live outside the historic stronghold, the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park, including six in the Maiella National Park. Despite the rise, Marsican bears, found only in central Italy, remain endangered.

ROBOTS IN THE VINEYARD?

Humanoid robots could soon be picking grapes in Abruzzo's vineyards. Hadrianoid, a start-up based in **Atri (TE)**, has signed a deal at the IFA trade fair in Berlin to become a European distributor for China's *AgiBot*, one of the world's fastest-growing robot makers. The robots will first be deployed in farming, hotels and security, handling harvests on steep slopes, greeting guests and patrolling premises at night. The company's founder, Piero Pavone (right in the photo), who also owns the *Vinum Hadrianum* winery in Atri, says the robots will take on jobs that are tiring, dangerous or hard to fill, not replace workers.

THE ROME–PESCARA RAILWAY UPGRADE

Work continues to double the railway linking Rome with Pescara, on the coast. The first two sections, about 13 km inland from Chieti to Scafa, employ an average of 500 workers a day. The full project should cut the journey from three and a half hours to about two hours and add a stop at Pescara airport. Doubled stretches can carry 10 trains an hour instead of 4, but single-track sections through the Apennines will still limit services to Rome. The current works are due by 2028; no date has been set for the whole line.

DID YOU KNOW?

THE RAIANO NUNS GO VIRAL

In **Raiano (AQ)**, a dozen elderly nuns have become social-media stars. The Ravasco sisters — from the order of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary — share a convent, a chapel, and more than 200,000 followers on Instagram and 77,000 on Facebook. Not bad for a community whose brightest new talent is 99.

Last year Sister Nayiby Jimenez, a 45-year-old Colombian who runs Casa San Giuseppe, the care home for the elderly nuns, posted a few tender clips of frail Sister Italia talking about her faith. She had 80 followers at the time. Now the sisters film daily: praying, reminiscing, hurling cardboard boxes labelled stress, anxiety and selfishness out of the window — a tidy bit of spiritual decluttering. Another reel shows a nun on a treadmill beneath a portrait of Jesus, working through routines with names like "the pilgrim's march," "the holy warm-up" and "the stretching angel."

The breakout star is Sister Maria Chiara, 99, who invites anyone in need to send a prayer request. Her video passed 3.8 million views, and roughly 40,000 requests have since arrived, each name copied by hand into a notebook. The comments under reels run into the thousands now, from believers and non-believers, the young and old, even a self-described Buddhist.

If you visit the town, you may spot the sisters in their beige habits taking a walk. Say hello, and tell them you follow them on Instagram — exactly the right thing to say to a 99-year-old nun in Raiano in 2026.

“OUR MOUNTAIN BURNT, AND WE COULD ONLY WATCH”

By Simona Pace

For a month and four days this summer, fire consumed the woods of Monte Morrone above Roccacasale (AQ). We asked a local what the town lost that no one can count in hectares.

I was born and raised in Roccacasale, and I chose to live and work here, with all the sacrifices that come with it. When it was time for university I never even considered leaving Abruzzo; I went to study for my degree not far from home, so I could come back whenever I got the chance.

For me, and I think for so many others here in Roccacasale, the Morrone, the mountain that rises above the town, is not that giant, inanimate thing you see from far away. It is part of the town, part of our life — a living being, a great container of memories, ours as much as its own. We have so many legends and stories tied to it. So when I say the mountain burnt, I don't mean we lost some scenery. I mean something alive died. For us this is a bereavement, the way it is when a person you love dies.

”LIKE ENTERING A CATHEDRAL”

Since childhood I would go up there with my father, in the late afternoon, when he came home from work, just to be there. The place closest to my heart is La Fossa, where rare silver firs grow among marvellous, centuries-old beeches. Walking

Monte Morrone burning above Roccacasale. Photo by Brugnera Ivo

in there was like entering a cathedral — Notre Dame, or one of those vast churches that give you the feeling of the sacred. The silence, the age of those living things: it felt holy. The trails are still closed, so I don't yet know whether the firs survived the fire; some say they're gone, some say they were spared. Everyone in Roccacasale carries memories of the Morrone. One place matters to the whole town: the spot just above us dedicated to the Beato Mariano, where every year we climb for the procession and walk the Via Crucis together, believers and non-believers alike. We've been told it may have survived. And there is the Vallone delle Fate, where local legend says fairies gathered; I've gone up there more times than I can count to hold my meditations.

UNDERESTIMATED

The fire began somewhere between Popoli and Roccacasale. Honestly, I wasn't worried at first. It looked manageable, and I never imagined it would grow the way it did, destroying most of our woods over several weeks. I underestimated it, as everyone did. Then one Sunday, a week after it began, I was on the beach and saw the images online — fire coming down the slope, a moving line of flames. That was when I understood it would not simply fold back on itself.

At one point we prepared for evacuations. The smoke rose right behind the Roccacasale castle and even seeped into the houses, so people kept their windows shut despite the heat — and very few of us have air conditioning. At night it was worse than by day. By day you see only smoke; at night you see the flames devour the trees, and in an instant a tree you were looking at is nothing but a charred trunk.

We still remember the 2017 fire on the Morrone, but this time it seemed bigger. The hardest part this year was that we could do nothing but watch our mountain burn. It was too dangerous to help, so the authorities left it to the professionals and the *Protezione Civile*, who know how to manage fire. And I think they did everything they could — even more, given the force this fire had. Canadair water-bombers and helicopters flew over our heads for days, and firefighters ran their hoses to keep the flames from the town. But how do you fight a fire

A silver fir at La Fossa before the fire. Photo by Simona Pace

when the wind keeps restarting the flames again and again? We were dealing with the elements. Fire, water, air — they are wilful. How do you manage them?

We never had to leave our homes, and the town was saved, but our hearts are heavy. When we are finally allowed up, we know we'll find most of the mountain charred. Most of us alive now will never see a Morrone thick with green again. Nature will take its course, and one day it will be beautiful, but only the younger ones will see it. Still, I wait to climb back up, to see with my own eyes what has happened to us.

Simona Pace is a yoga teacher based in Roccacasale. Interviewed by Anna Lebedeva.

THE FACTS OF THE MORRONE FIRE

The blaze on Monte Morrone burned for a month and four days before the Vigili del Fuoco packed up their mobile units at the Roccacasale sports field, which had been the operational centre of the emergency. What the weeks of fire left on the record:

The first alarm sounded on August 9 in the Valle dei Preti, and from there the fire crossed one slope after another until it came within about 500 metres of the first houses of Roccacasale.

Breakdowns repeatedly held up the firefighting. In mid-August, four of the seven state aircraft sent to Abruzzo's fires were grounded by faults, and one afternoon, as the wind rose, three of the four Canadairs on the Morrone broke down. On the ground, the Army bulldozer brought from Rome to cut firebreaks was out of action until a local mechanic repaired it.

By the time the operational phase closed in mid-September, some 1,152 hectares of largely wooded land had been destroyed, close to the toll of the 2017 fire, which took roughly 1,200 hectares and burned mainly on the Sulmona side of the massif, up towards the hermitage of Sant'Onofrio al Morrone. It was the third major fire on the mountain in nine years.

The fire burned through the hottest August Abruzzo had recorded since 1974, and the heat barely broke. In Valle Peligna the thermometer climbed past 41°C, and even at 1,300 metres the air stayed above 30°C, the woods were bone-dry, and the wind kept reviving the flames.

The response was long and costly: helicopters and Canadairs made more than 7,450 water drops, and around 3,400 people rotated through the operations on the ground, with the aerial effort alone estimated to have cost close to €10 million.

A Canadair throwing water on the fire on the Morrone. Photo by Canadair Realforest Firetovirtual

Having ruled out arson, the Procura di Sulmona is investigating the handling of the emergency including whether errors or negligence contributed to the fire's three restarts. The mayor of Roccacasale has suggested it may have been started by a lightning strike, given how hard the point of ignition was to reach. The 2017 fire on Monte Morrone was treated as arson from the outset, as investigators concluded the mountain had been set alight deliberately; no one, however, was ever identified or charged.

HANGING BY A THREAD: THE ANTIQUE LACE OF L'AQUILA

For more than five centuries, L'Aquila's women have worked lace by hand in linen so fine it barely weighs anything. The city's antique bobbin lace is still alive, taught to anyone who wants to learn, but not everyone believes it has a future.

The earliest records of lace in L'Aquila date back to the end of the 1400s. "Queen Isabella came to L'Aquila on a visit, and those who accompanied her — the chroniclers of the day, let's say — admired the beautiful women of the city and admired the lace on their dresses," says Rita Fattore, a

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Editor of Abruzzissimo Magazine

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