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ISSUE NO. 65 • OCTOBER 2026

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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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

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.

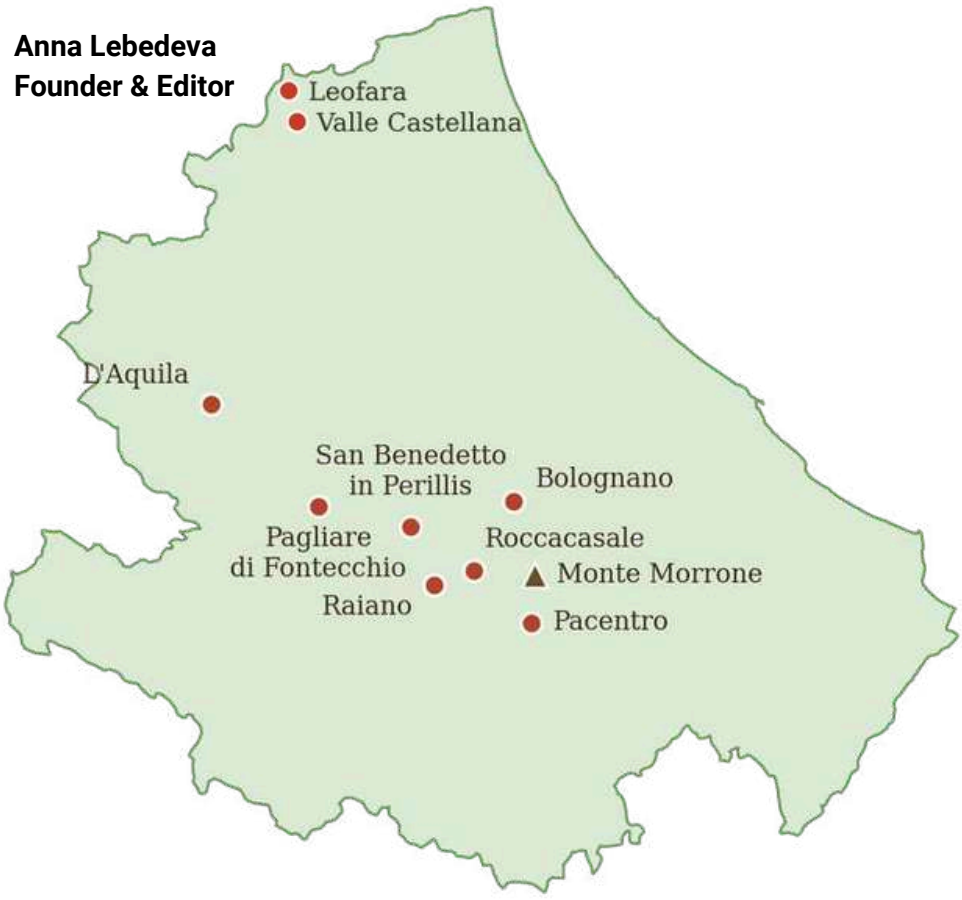
"*Alluch't!*" *"Si vuole allocare?"* You might hear these in Abruzzo's villages. Barbara Summa explains what they mean, and why the simple invitation to sit down changes from one valley to the next.

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

By Anna Lebedeva

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 lacemaker and teacher who has researched the craft's history in the city's archives. By the mid-1500s the technique had become well known beyond L'Aquila, and the name *antico aquilano* settled into use around the turn of the 17th century. Over the centuries it decorated brides' wedding gowns and the fine cuffs of men's shirts, handed down from one generation to the next and, more formally, through the *merlettaie* who taught their pupils in afternoon gatherings. The technique itself has stayed essentially unchanged, Fattore says: the lace preserved in the city's museum matches what her students make today, but it is now more often made to be framed and hung as a work of art.

Fattore founded the *Associazione Il Miracolo Bianco delle Mani* in 2006 and co-authored a book about the *tombolo*

Photo: Antico aquilano lace taking shape. Courtesy of Cristina Bravi

aquilano. Her fascination began in childhood, watching lacemakers at work in the doorways of L'Aquila's lanes, their bobbins dancing with a soft, soothing sound. She took it up herself more than 50 years ago. "Watching it being worked, I fell in love with this form of craftsmanship," she says, "and so I began, little by little, to work the tombolo."

IMPROBABLY FINE

The word *tombolo* comes from the cushion the lace is worked on: large, soft and handmade, traditionally stuffed with straw, with a paper pattern pinned to it and reproduced in thread.

The *antico aquilano* is always made with linen thread so fine it is finer than ordinary sewing thread. The background net is built over graph paper ruled in two-millimetre squares, so each tiny hole is no bigger than that. The lace is worked entirely with bobbins — the small wooden spools, *fuselli* in Italian, that hold and carry each thread — and a single piece can require anywhere from 50 to 700, depending on the design. It is made all in one piece, in a single pass, the maker never doubling back over threads already laid, which is why it comes out so exceptionally light. "To make one square centimetre, it takes three to four hours," says Fattore.

At that pace, a single piece can take months, which is why the earthquake of April 2009 cost Fattore so much. Her house collapsed and buried much of her work. Some pieces later came back from friends who had borrowed them, others returned from exhibitions, and the rest she has made in the years since — more than 20 pieces in all, with flowers, figures, and the monuments of L'Aquila worked onto the fine linen net. In the months after the earthquake, she has said, working the bobbins was what kept her from going mad.

Abruzzo has more than one bobbin-lace tradition, Pescocostanzo and Scanno being the best known, but those laces use a thicker thread and mix techniques: a crochet hook, or the spillone pin in Pescocostanzo.

Photos: (top) many bobbins are used to make *antico aquilano*; lace made by Rita Fattore featuring the L'Aquila's *Fontana Luminosa*

IS THERE A FUTURE?

The *tombolo aquilano* has had lean years as industrial textiles took over, and the schools that once trained lacemakers, the city's art institute and girls' technical school, were gradually closed.

Associations formed in recent years have kept it going, and a few artisans still make the real thing and teach the technique. The lace has even found its way into high fashion: in 2021, Fendi trimmed its Baguette bag with Aquilan lace made by the lacemaker Simona Iannini.

However, not everyone is convinced it will last. Cristina Bravi learned the craft on a course run by the region in 1985 and made a living from it for almost 40 years, taking orders for wedding-dress trimmings, gifts and lace jewellery. "After the earthquake of 2009 everything changed," she says. "I held on for years, but in 2022 I had to close my workshop." With their homes destroyed, people had other things to think about than lace, and in the years that followed, tastes gradually moved on. "Now people prefer to buy something ready-made quickly online than wait months for their order."

The commissions that still come are rare. She recently finished a lace fan for a client from Tuscany. "It took me 450 hours to make the lace, which I attached to a mother-of-pearl frame from the early 1900s," Bravi says. Her grandmother was also a merlettaia, and it was finding her 3,000 bobbins as a child that first drew Bravi to the craft. In nonna's memory, she made an exact copy of one of her lace fans. "That one took two and a half years, working five hours a day. You can't work longer with *tombolo*; it's hard on the eyes."

She sees little ahead for the craft. The *antico aquilano* is barely known within Abruzzo, she says, let alone beyond it. "There are no shops that sell *tombolo aquilano*, no proper course to train artisans. It only exists as a hobby for a few passionate people."

Cristina Bravi with the copy of her nonna's fan. Photo by Gianni Piergentili

LEARNING THE CRAFT

The *Associazione Il Miracolo Bianco delle Mani* runs *tombolo aquilano* courses for amateurs year-round, with about 20 people currently enrolled. Learning begins with a sampler worked on 40 bobbins; as the work gets harder the bobbin count climbs, and some students today are working on 100 to 200. The first stitches take about three months to learn — roughly 12 to 14 hours in all to grasp the fundamentals. The cost is little more than the membership fee, plus a small contribution for electricity and gas over the year. "We have students of different ages, from a 10-year-old girl to an 84-year-old woman," Fattore says.

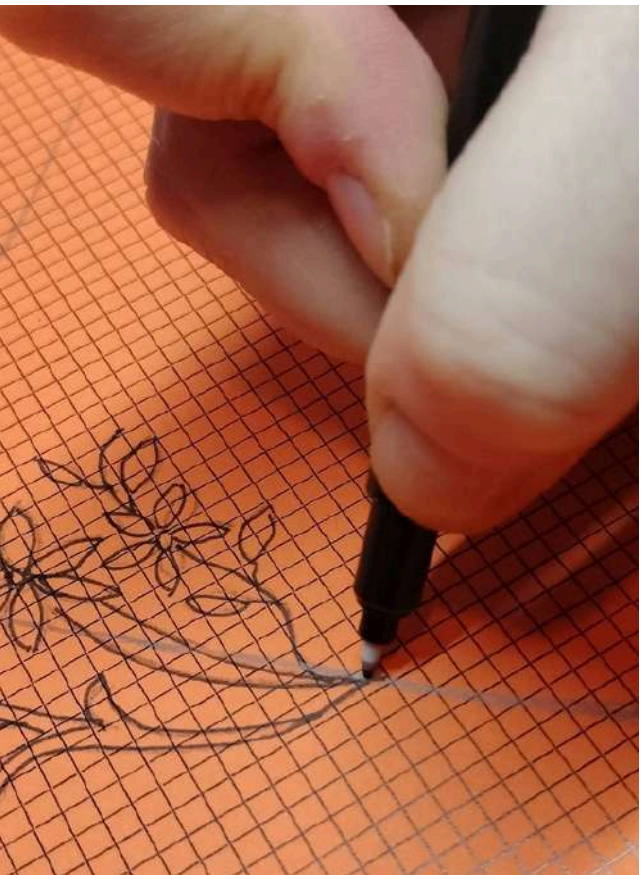
Several *merlettaie* teach privately for a fee, Cristina Bravi among them, with occasional classes in L'Aquila and Rome. Daulia Pannunzio opened a shop-museum in Santo Stefano di Sessanio (AQ) where she makes traditional cushions, blankets, sheets and towels trimmed with lace, alongside lace jewellery — bracelets, earrings and pendants worked in delicate metal wire. She also teaches lacemaking.

Photos: (from top right) a fan made to order by Cristina Bravi; a piece of *antico aquilano*; preparing a pattern for lace. Courtesy of Cristina Bravi

WHERE TO SEE TOMBOLO AQUILANO

The city's MUNDA museum holds the oldest surviving pieces, but its textiles and lace section remains closed after the 2009 earthquake. Staff will, however, show the collection on request. Some noble Aquilan families keep antique pieces privately; years after the quake, a few are reportedly still packed in boxes, displaced by the long reconstruction.

The *Associazione Il Miracolo Bianco delle Mani* fills the gap with a small display at its headquarters on via Cascina 36, open three days a week through the end of December and likely to be extended into the new year.



BOLOGNANO: AFTER THE ARTISTS LEFT

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva

More than half a century ago, the German artist Joseph Beuys and his patron set out to fill the town with contemporary art. The great years are over, but Bolognano, with its cliffs, its lanes and its people, was never only about that.

Bolognano (PE) sits at 276 metres on a spur of hill above the gorge of the river Orta, about 40 km rninland from Pescara. It falls inside the Majella National Park, and the land around it does the dramatic work: the Orta has cut a deep limestone gorge, the Riserva Naturale della Valle dell'Orta, with the Grotta dei Piccioni — a cave that held a prehistoric sanctuary — hidden in its walls. The historic centre has kept its medieval shape, a knot of stone houses and narrow vicoli on the ridge, with four frazioni — Musellaro, Piano d'Orta, Fara and Santa Maria del Monte — scattered around it.

People have lived here a very long time. The caves above the Orta hold Neolithic remains, among the more important prehistoric sites in Abruzzo. The written record begins in the tenth century: the Chronicon Casauriense notes the fortification of "Bolonianum" in 943, after the place was given to the powerful abbey of San Clemente a Casauria. From the

Installation by Stefano Soddu overlooking the Orta Gorge

Middle Ages it passed hand to hand through feudal families — the Caracciolo, the Branconi, and finally the Durini, the last barons of Bolognano.

Bolognano's more recent history is the one shared by most of inland Abruzzo: it is emptying out. The comune counted around 1,340 residents in 1991 and roughly 1,090 in 2025 — a slow, steady drain in a generation, spread across the town and its frazioni. The historic centre on the ridge holds only a fraction of that number. It is the familiar arithmetic of Abruzzo's hinterland: young people leave for work, the old stay, houses close up. Matteo Federico, who heads the local Pro Loco, describes a town thinned out to the essentials — mostly elderly now, he says. There is no real bar and no shop, only a tabacchino that also does a coffee. “Forty years ago there were something like three butchers and a handful of other businesses. Now we have the little van that brings bread and fruit to the town some mornings, one of those lovely characteristics of small towns, but they offer what they can offer," he says.

In the streets of Bolognano

In summer the handful of B&Bs in Bolognano fill with visitors, mostly Italians touring the surrounding towns, and some of the old houses have been taken by Belgian and French owners who spend part of the year here.

ART DESTINATION

In the early 1970s, Joseph Beuys — one of the most influential and most controversial artists of the 20th century — began coming to Bolognano, and made the town a base for the last great project of his life.

Beuys worked with strange, deliberately humble materials — fat, felt, honey, dead animals — and who is remembered less for objects than for ideas. He coined the phrase "social sculpture," the notion that society itself is something everyone shapes, and the slogan that went with it: every person is an artist. He also built a considerable personal mythology: having served in the Luftwaffe in the war, he later spun from it a much-repeated story that he had been shot down over Crimea and nursed back to life by Tatars who wrapped him in fat and felt — a tale historians now largely treat as myth-making rather than memory.

The artist came to Bolognano at the invitation of Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, a baroness by marriage into that old feudal family, and an art collector. She became Beuys' patron and disciple. He was already one of the most talked-about artists in Europe when he first came to Abruzzo, in 1972. On land the Durini family owned just outside the town, Beuys began his *Difesa della Natura* ("Defence of Nature"), a long-running project of tree planting, organic farming and public debate, which he considered the masterpiece of his life. In 1984, two years before his death, he planted the first Italian oak of the project here and was made an honorary citizen of Bolognano. The project would occupy the last 15 years of his life, though he never settled here: he came for a few weeks each year.

For decades after his death, De Domizio Durini kept the project alive, bringing well-known Italian and international artists to the town and installed their work in and around it — turning the town, in her phrase, into a "Living Sculpture." Houses became small galleries, alleys acquired night-lit windows holding artworks. The *Piantagione Paradise*, the plantation on her estate outside town, grew into a park of rare trees dotted with art installations. For a stretch of years, an ordinary agricultural village in the Majella foothills was, improbably, a stop on the international contemporary-art map.

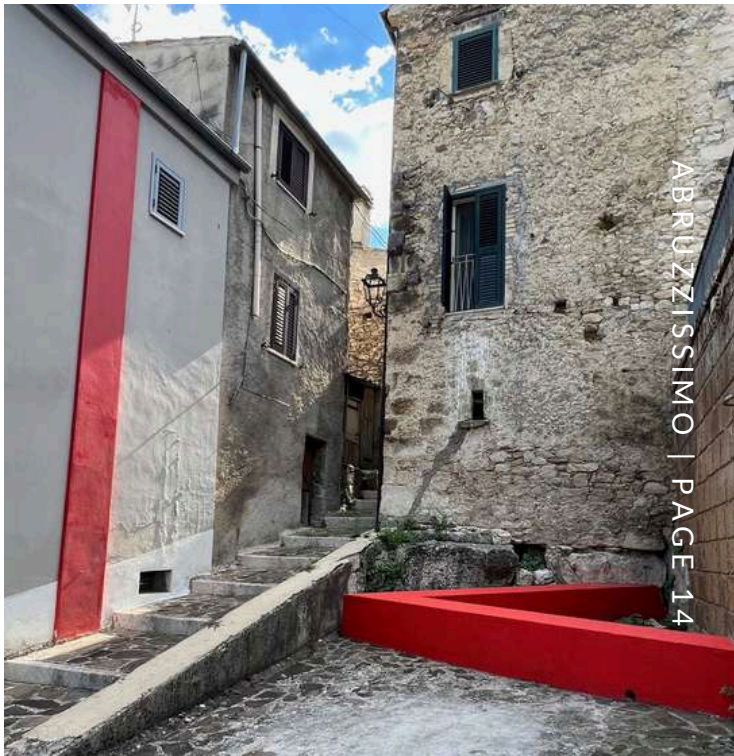
FADED ART

Today, when you visit Bolognano, you find the traces of that buzzing art scene, and you find them faded. Walk the old centre and the plaques are still there — house after house bearing an international artist's name and, always, the line “Curated by Lucrezia De Domizio Durini.” But the houses are empty, some have cracked windows where artworks once sat.

One lane used to be called *Rua del Sacco* — *rua*, an old dialect word for a street, *del Sacco*, of the sack, its exact origin lost to whatever medieval trade or event first earned it. It is now Strada Harald Szeemann, after the Swiss curator, with a board fixed to the wall informing passers-by that he was "the greatest thinker in the history of contemporary art".

I asked two women on their way to Sunday Mass whether artists still come. "Not anymore, not for many years," one said. "The baroness is old now and doesn't bring them here."

Photos: (below) a street sign; Installation by Marco Bagnoli in Bolognano



Others in the town told the same story, with more detail. The Beuys archive tied to his Bolognano years belongs to the baroness. Ginello Cimini, a local councillor several people pointed me to as someone doing a lot for the town, said the art festival that once drew art lovers was suspended by the baroness years ago — though, he added, future collaboration isn't ruled out, and the comune is planning to open a modern art museum next year.

The museum that already exists is the Paradise Museum, opened in 2021 for the centenary of Beuys' birth, in the underground space beside Palazzo Durini, but it is not a walk-in affair. To visit you email the baroness directly, and it opens mainly for groups of art directors and art-world visitors rather than for the casual traveller who has simply driven up to see it. The oak that Beuys planted is on the Durini private estate, not on public ground.

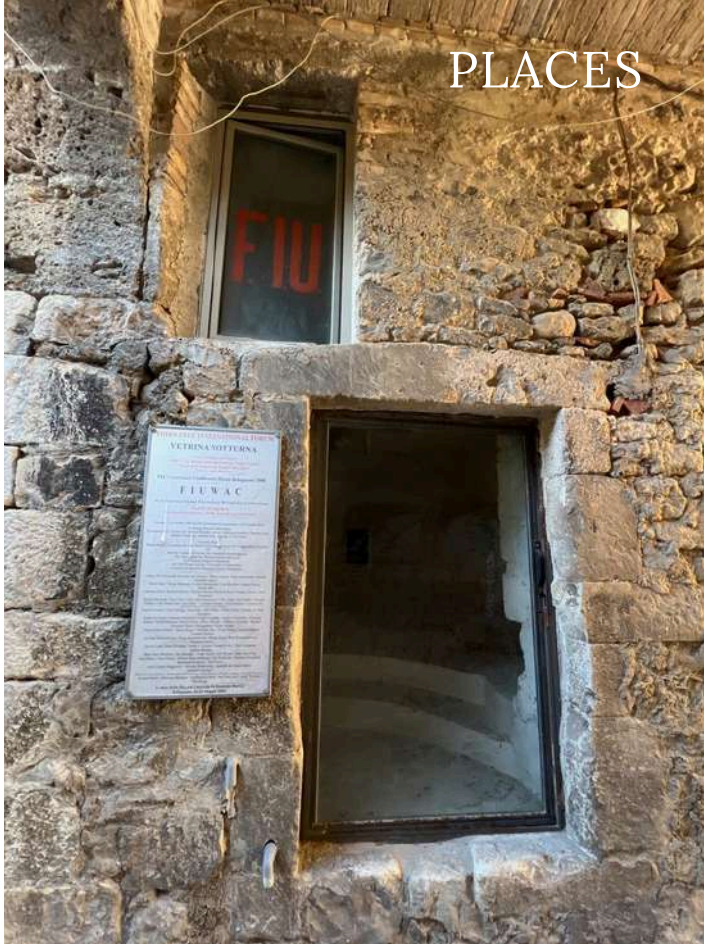
But the archive is far from dormant, and this is the happier part of the story. It has gone out to exhibitions beyond Bolognano: to the hermitage of Santo Spirito a Majella, in Roccamorice, in 2018, and, right now, to Tuscany. The exhibition *Remember Joseph Beuys*, at the Santa Maria della Scala museum in Siena (on show until November 15), gathers photographs, works and documents from the De Domizio Durini collection and archive, and puts the *Difesa della Natura* before a new public. A person from the baroness' circle told me that arrangements are in place for the archive, and for the Beuys works in her collection, to be looked after when she is no longer able to.

BEFORE AND AFTER BEUYS

Bolognano's connection to art did not begin with Beuys. Almost a century before he arrived, the cliffs below the town had already made their way into one of Abruzzo's best-known paintings, on their own, without a plaque or a curator.

On Piazza Cesare Battisti, a metal viewing window frames the magnificent cliffs that rise above the river Orta. A board beside it explains that these limestone walls caught the eye of Francesco Paolo Michetti — the great Abruzzese painter, born just up the road in Tocco da Casauria in 1851 — who took their shape and turned it into the castle-like form rising behind his celebrated *La raccolta delle zucche* ("The Pumpkin Harvest") of 1873.

Photos (from top): an abandoned art display window; in the streets of Bolognano



Squeezed between the neglected Beuys garden and two shuttered houses with artists' names on them, I stumbled on a tiny workshop where Tonino Marcucci, a local man, makes sculptures out of recycled metal, stones and old railway beams. When I called him an artist he laughed. "Ma che artista — I'm a nobody," he said. "I didn't study art; I just love making things from wrought iron, and some people like what I make, and even buy it."

He spoke about Beuys with real reverence. Black-and-white photographs of the German artist, printed off a home printer, were pinned around his walls. He showed me a metal figure of a man planting a tree: "I made it looking at the photo of Beuys planting trees here in Bolognano." Many of his other pieces are contadini, peasants at work in the fields. "The contadini are what Bolognano is," he said. "That's the town."

Tonino is, without meaning to be, a better proof of Beuys' most famous idea — every person is an artist — than any plaque in the town. He told me the baroness had bought and gifted houses in the old centre to artists; there is one right in front of his studio and his parents' house. There was a big party when it was handed over, a few years ago, and the artist never came back. Next door to his workshop, a blue house, Casacielo, billed as a "habitable sculpture", has stood empty for as long as Tonino can remember. Now and then he cleans the garden dedicated to Beuys beside his family's house himself. "It's abandoned," he said. "Everything in the town is abandoned."

THE TOWN TODAY

Bolognano is a town holding an unrealised possibility, a place where something remarkable was once attempted, and some of it is still there to see: a few art installations among the houses, each by an international artist; Piazza Beuys and the oak planted there in his memory. But there is also the ordinary town — medieval lanes whose names recall its past (Via dei Notai, Via del Castello), friendly cats in the little houses someone has lovingly built for them, and a blacksmith who will show you a Beuys he made from a photograph.

Tonino Marcucci with his sculptures; photos of Beuys in Tonino's workshop

And whatever else you do, walk to the edge of the town, on Via Figurelle, where the Orta gorge opens below you and its cliffs rise on the far side. The most complete defence of nature in Bolognano isn't the plantation or the museum. It's the view, which costs nothing, belongs to no one and asks only that you stop and look. Everything with a plaque on it is fading. The cliffs will outlast it all.

WHAT TO DO AND SEE IN BOLOGNANO

You can see several art installations in the old part of Bolognano. To see the **Paradise Museum**, in the underground space beside **Palazzo Durini**, you'll need to arrange it well ahead and mostly in a group by writing to lucreziadedomizio@gmail.com.

Tonino Marcucci's workshop is in the cellar at Via di Sotto 36. If the door is open, he's in, usually in the mornings and on days when the town holds events. He has an Instagram page, though he rarely posts on it.

If you love nature walks, from the historic centre, take the trail A9 that drops to the **Cascata della Cisterna**, a waterfall tucked into the Orta gorge, though there hasn't been much water lately; a separate short path, the A10, reaches the **Grotta Scura**, a Neolithic "dark cave" — a fossil river bored through the rock — that opens onto the canyon of the Orta. The first stretch of the cave is free to explore. If you want to go deeper, you'll need a guide. Keep an eye on the **Archeoclub Piano d'Orta - Vado del Ceraso** page where they announce organised visits or contact them for private tours.

The town hosts some lively festivals. In August the Pro Loco runs a **Festival Canoro**, a song contest revived three years ago after a lapse. On an early-November Saturday comes the wine sagra, **Novello in Piazza**, with roasted chestnuts, plates of sagne e fagioli, and music. In mid-January the **Falò di Sant'Antonio**, the patron saint's bonfire, is lit on the piazza in front of the town hall, and in June the **Fuoco di San Giovanni**. For dates, you can follow the Pro Loco on Instagram.

In the streets of Bolognano

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ITALY'S YOUNGEST MAYOR HAS BIG PLANS FOR SAN BENEDETTO IN PERILLIS

By Anna Lebedeva

Sergio Panzone became the youngest mayor in Italy after an election a few months ago. He divides his days between the town hall, the village bar and a construction business, and has five years to double the population.

San Benedetto in Perillis is small enough that everyone knows everyone. Around a hundred people are registered as residents, but only about half of them live here all year round; the rest keep their roots, and their vote, in the village while working or living elsewhere. On election day 61 people went to the polls, and 35 of them voted for Sergio Panzone. In a city that number would barely make up the queue at a single polling station. In San Benedetto it was enough to hand a 22-year-old the keys to the town hall and make him the youngest mayor in Italy.

To those who think that is too young to run a municipality, he replies that his age is an advantage, not a handicap: it gives him a fresh view of the future and an easier dialogue with his own generation, the one the village most needs to hold on to.

APPETITE FOR CHANGE

Those 35 votes were not easily won. In a village this size there are no anonymous voters, no party machine and no advertising campaign to lean on. Every vote belongs to a neighbour, a customer at the bar, someone who has known the candidate since he was a child and has to decide whether to trust him with the running of the place they call home. Winning a clear majority of them, 58% against the outgoing mayor, is no small achievement, and it

Sergio Panzone with his partner Francesca Ianos at the Caffè del Centro

says as much about the village's appetite for change as about the young man who asked for it. In a place that has watched its houses empty one by one, his civic list, *Ripartiamo da San Benedetto* ("Let's start again from San Benedetto"), sounded less like a slogan than a plea, and the voters decided it was worth a try.

Strictly speaking he was born in Popoli Terme, about 8 km from the village, because that is where the nearest hospital is. "I was born in Popoli Terme, which is a neighbouring town, because the hospital was there, but from my first four days of life I have been in San Benedetto," he told me. His family still lives in the village. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he never left: he could have followed others his age to the cities, but, as he

puts it, his whole life is here. Politically Panzone calls himself mostly centre-right, but he belongs to no party, and he is quick to add that in a place this size people judge what you do rather than the label you wear.

MAYOR, BARMAN, ENTREPRENEUR

Panzone did not step into office from a university or a party youth wing. He is a small-business owner with two jobs already. With his partner, Francesca Ianos, he runs the Caffè del Centro, the only bar in San Benedetto in Perillis. It is open every day except Tuesday, and the couple share the shifts with a woman from the village. He also runs a building firm that specialises in finishing work on building sites around the area.

The mayor's allowance in a municipality this small is modest, and he takes only part of it. "The salary should be around €1,700 but I only receive half of it, which is what is paid for a municipality as small as ours," he said.

His days are long and busy. "I wake up around half past six, get ready, organise the breakfasts at the bar and the work for the building firm, and at about nine I arrive at the town hall," he explained. "I see what needs dealing with and stay more or less half a day, until noon or half past twelve. Then I eat and go back to the bar and the construction business." On top of that, the new role has brought a steady stream of events, official meetings and long drives to fit around his other work. In the evening he is often back behind the counter, when many villagers gather at the bar for an aperitivo. Whatever time is left goes to his family vegetable garden and olive trees, to the traditional wooden door locks of San Benedetto that he makes with his uncle, and to the organetto, the Abruzzese button accordion, which he sometimes plays with friends.

A VILLAGE WITH HISTORY

San Benedetto in Perillis sits at 878 metres on a rocky spur between the Piana di Navelli, the Valle Peligna and the Valle Subequana, looking out over the Conca Peligna. The oldest part of the village grew up around a fortified Benedictine monastery, whose defensive walls are still punctuated by semicircular towers. Beneath the houses runs a network of caves and tunnels cut into the rock, where villagers once kept their animals and gathered on winter evenings. The village is also known for its wooden door locks, found nowhere else in Abruzzo and believed to have been brought here centuries ago by Benedictine monks from Egypt.

San Benedetto in Perillis

At the top of the village stands the abbey of San Benedetto, one of the oldest churches in Abruzzo. Badly damaged in the 2009 earthquake, it reopened in June 2025 after 16 years and an €800,000 restoration.

For centuries the village lived from sheep farming. Then came 20th-century emigration, which never really stopped. By the early 2000s depopulation was so severe that a merger with Popoli was discussed. "Throughout the year we have about 50 residents," Panzone says. Yet he rejects the idea that it is a village of the elderly. "Strangely, even though people here live long lives, the average age is fairly low, more or less around 48 to 50," he says. The youngest residents are still few: three children and three teenagers. Half go to school in Popoli, half in L'Aquila, where their parents work.

FOUR STAFF AND A TIGHT BUDGET

On the day of his victory Panzone promised to be "the mayor of everyone, including those who did not share our proposal, with a commitment to listen to every voice." In San Benedetto, that promise is tested over an espresso at the bar counter. "Keeping everyone happy in such a small village is very difficult, because resources are limited, and when you're friends with everyone it's sometimes hard to say no," the mayor admits. "But my job sometimes means giving people negative answers. On the other hand, the fact that we all know each other helps when we organise events, because you immediately know who can do what. And regardless of who they voted for, people here are always very active." The local Pro Loco, the volunteer association that runs festivals and events, is busy all year, and the council plans to add more.

The council has about four staff, only one on a permanent contract. "The most complicated thing is managing resources and small budgets … and then there is all the bureaucracy needed to do anything at all, whether it is public works or cleaning the streets," says Panzone.

DOUBLING THE VILLAGE

The young mayor's main goal is ambitious: to bring young people to the village and encourage families to move to San Benedetto. "That means making rents cheaper, promoting remote working, simplifying the bureaucracy for anything people want to do, and increasing the services available at the town hall," he says.

Housing is the most concrete lever, and the council is setting up a noticeboard listing every house for sale or rent in the village. Rents for a habitable house run from about €150 to €400 a month. Some houses sell for €10,000, while whole blocks go for around €200,000.

Then there are the MAPs, prefabricated homes built after the 2009 earthquake. The council will rent them for €1 a month for the first three years to anyone who actually moves in. "They are perfectly liveable, and they cost little to heat in winter because they are well insulated," Panzone says.

San Benedetto in Perillis is better connected than it looks. Fibre internet has arrived, and there is a post office, a small grocery shop and several B&Bs, including Charme in Perillis, a restored 18th-century residence. A bus stops five times a day, and the council keeps the roads clear of snow.

Popoli Terme is a short but winding drive away. It has the hospital where Panzone was born, schools, and a station on the Rome–Pescara line, putting the coast and the capital within reach without a car.

When I asked whether depopulation here can be reversed, or only managed with dignity, Panzone was optimistic. "I am convinced that within 7 to 10 years people who are tired of city life, a life that has become impractical and difficult, will come back and repopulate the villages."

Asked what would make his five years a success, Panzone sets a clear goal. "Increasing the population by 100%, going from 50 year-round residents to 100, and above all making our community younger." The first new arrivals are on their way: two young families are expected this autumn. For a village that has spent decades watching its young people leave, its best hope now rests with a 22-year-old mayor and five years to fill its empty houses.

ALLUCH'T, ASCITT' AND MAKE YOURSELF COMFORTABLE

By Barbara Summa

There is a precise moment when you know you are home in Abruzzo. It is the moment someone invites you to sit down. Curiously, that invitation changes completely from one valley or village to the next.

My brother reminded me of this recently, as we chatted in the Netherlands, where we both live. Out of nowhere he said, *"Alluch't!"*, and I was back in the Tortoreto of our childhood. The word comes from the Latin locus, "place", and literally means "take your place" — though it really just means, "Come, have a seat."

On the coast, from Villarosa to Roseto degli Abruzzi, people still use variations of this expression. Dialect speakers often don't even realize how unusual it sounds outside their own area. I still remember an elderly gentleman on a bus, many years ago, politely asking a young woman, "*Signorina, si vuole allocare?*", instead of the standard Italian *vuole sedersi?* He had unconsciously "Italianised" the local verb, and nobody around him seemed to find it strange.

Travel further south and inland, towards the Abruzzo-Molise border, and even the verb "to be" changes a little. In many Abruzzese areas you would say me so' *'ssettat'* for "I sat down", but in some villages closer to Molise people say *m'seng assettat'*. It is only a small difference, but a local would know immediately where you come from.

When I return to Ofena, the village where my father grew up and where I heard this dialect from my grandmother, I feel I am back in the language of my childhood. Here the *s* often takes on the local *sc* sound, and *assitt'*, heard elswhere, becomes *ascitt'*. As children we would often hear the longer, very Abruzzese version: *ascitt' i zitt'*, "sit down and be quiet!"

Barbara Summa, an Italian translator, interpreter and teacher in Amsterdam, was raised in Abruzzo. She runs the Madrelingua Italian summer school in Ofena (AQ), with weekly courses for small groups. For information and bookings, visit her website.

QUICK STOP

THE HIDDEN CHURCH OF SANT'ANGELO IN VETULI

Blink and you'll miss it. A few metres off the road from Sulmona to **Pacentro (AQ)**, hidden by brambles and olive trees, sits one of the oldest churches in Abruzzo. There is no sign or information board, just a cave, three stone arches and nearly a thousand years of silence.

Sant'Angelo in Vetuli was built straight into the rock of Colle Macerre. Its early medieval builders were thrifty: they raided Roman ruins for columns, capitals and inscribed stones, then stacked them into a church in miniature. Three round arches, the middle one taller and wider, lead into three tiny naves. If you look closer at the arches, you'll spot a fish and an hourglass, early Christian symbols carved by hand.

At the end of the central nave, a wall holds fragments of a shrine added in the 17th century and if you squeeze further back you'll find an oval basin cut into the rock, still catching water as it drips from the cave ceiling, drop by drop, as it has for centuries.

Historians believe the church may be Lombard in origin, although it enters the records only in 1170, when Mallerio Manerio, Count of Palena, handed it to the Diocese of Sulmona. Its name might refer to Vatulae, a Roman rural district that stood nearby.

To find the church, follow the SR 487 from Sulmona towards Pacentro. Near the cemetery, around km 3, pull into the small lay-by. A rough, overgrown 10-minute path will lead you there (see the location here).

EASY TRAILS

FROM PAGLIARE DI TIONE TO PAGLIARE DI FONTECCHIO

- **Length: about 4 km**
- **Time: about 1 ½ hours**
- **Starting point: park on the road at the entrance to Pagliare di Tione**

High above the middle Aterno valley, at more than 1,000 metres, two clusters of stone houses sit in open pasture beneath the peaks of Monte Sirente. These are the *pagliare*, summer settlements built by farmers and shepherds from the villages below. Each spring they moved up the mountain with their flocks to graze the high meadows and farm the mountain terraces, living in the hamlets from April to November. They kept up this seasonal migration until the late 1960s.

This easy trail links the **Pagliare di Tione** with the **Pagliare di Fontecchio** and loops back, following old paths once walked daily to reach the fields. Today many of the houses have been restored as weekend retreats, but the place keeps its timeless, slightly surreal feel.

A century ago these slopes were almost bare, stripped for firewood and building timber, and every patch of land was farmed or grazed. Now the opposite is happening: abandoned fields are giving way to advancing woodland.

The trails themselves depend on volunteers who clear them periodically, so expect some rough or overgrown stretches and wear sturdy boots.

The *Associazione Il Melo di Nonno Dario* organises walks and events at the Pagliare di Tione. If you'd like to combine your walk with one of them, check their Instagram page for announcements.

THE MARRONE DI VALLE CASTELLANA

By Anna Swann

Come October, Valle Castellana smells of woodsmoke and roasting chestnuts. In this corner of the province of Teramo, folded into the Monti della Laga, the chestnut was the bread tree: for 700 years its fruit has been roasted, boiled, dried and ground into flour, and whatever families couldn't eat, they sold by the sackful. Today the *marrone di Valle Castellana* is officially recognised as a *Prodotto Agricolo Tradizionale* (PAT), a traditional agricultural product of Abruzzo.

The chestnut groves climb the mountainsides between 500 and 1,200 metres. They are all privately owned and farmed the old way: no chemical fertilisers, no pesticides, nothing but rain, sun and the turn of the seasons. The cool air and rich soil suit the trees so well that some outlive generations. Near the village of Morrice stands the Piantone di Nardò, one of the largest chestnut trees in Italy and thought to be at least 500 years old.

In August and September the undergrowth in chestnut groves is cleared and the harvest opens in October. Growers beat the burrs from the branches and pile them into heaps called ricciaie, where the prickly cases split open. Higher up, in the villages of Morrice and Pietralta at 800 to 1,000 metres, the fruit ripens about 15 days later, and farmers simply wait for it to drop.

A *marrone* is easy to recognise: oval and slightly elongated, with a generous tip, the torcia, and a glossy brown shell streaked with red. The thin inner skin peels away easily from the compact flesh that has a sweet, delicate taste.

To make the harvest last, growers still practise the curatura: the chestnuts soak in water for five or six days, then dry out, and keep for months. These days the marrone means extra income rather than survival, but many families still hold back a few bags for themselves, to roast over embers and wash down with *vino novello*, the season's first wine. The rest become flour for cakes and homemade pasta, or go into hearty bean soups and main courses.

WHERE TO TASTE THE MARRONE DI VALLE CASTELLANA

Leofara (TE), a small hamlet of Valle Castellana, surrounded by chestnut groves hosts every year in the last week of October its chestnut festival, ***Festa della Castagna*** (this year October 24-25). The stands serve caldarroste alongside local cheeses, arrosticini, polenta, chickpea soup, chestnuts with mushrooms or apples.

On October 31 and November 1 you can buy the famous marroni roasted on the spot or raw to take home, along with excellent mountain potatoes and local dishes at the ***Sagra della Castagna e della Patata*** in Valle Castellana. For more details see the organisers' page.

Read our dedicated post about other chestnut festivals in Abruzzo.

CROCCHETTE DI PATATE

By Anna Swann

The first time I tried potato croquettes was at the weekly market in Sulmona, on Piazza Garibaldi, at the *La Porchetta Venditti* stand. I loved them, and since then they have become a must-have street food for me. I also started making them at home now and then. They aren't a strictly traditional Abruzzese dish, but you'll find them almost everywhere in the region: at weekly markets, in takeaways and in supermarket freezers. And, of course, on nonnas' tables, made for their nipotini.

The first secret to perfect *crocchette di patate* is choosing the right kind of potato. There are white-fleshed potatoes, with a floury white flesh; yellow-fleshed potatoes; and red potatoes. For these croquettes you can use either yellow or white-fleshed potatoes. Avoid new potatoes, though, or the croquettes will tend to break apart while frying.

I love the potatoes from the Fucino plain. They have a low water content and a firm, compact flesh, which makes a mixture that holds together during cooking. The Agata variety in particular, which is richer in starch, works very well for soft croquettes.

INGREDIENTS

Makes about 20 croquettes

For the croquettes:

- 600 g potatoes
- 60 g Parmigiano Reggiano DOP, grated
- 1 egg yolk
- Salt, to taste
- Pepper, to taste
- Fresh parsley, to taste

For the coating:

- 1 egg (or just the egg white left over from the yolk)
- Plain flour (Italian 00), as needed
- Breadcrumbs, as needed

For frying:

- Vegetable or seed oil, as needed

For a melting centre (optional):

- Scamorza or mozzarella, cut into small sticks

PREPARATION

Boil the potatoes in salted water. I usually cook them whole for about 30 minutes; if you're in a hurry, cut them into pieces and the cooking time will roughly halve.

While the potatoes are still hot, or at most warm, mash them with a potato ricer and put them in a bowl. If you don't have a ricer, a fork will do. Add the Parmigiano, the egg yolk and a little chopped parsley, then season with salt and pepper to taste. Work everything together into a smooth dough.

Shape the dough into small cylinders, the classic croquette shape, or into balls if you prefer. For a melting centre, press a stick of *scamorza* or *mozzarella* into the middle of each one and seal the dough well around it so the cheese doesn't leak out while frying.

Coat each *crocchetta* first in flour, then in the beaten egg (or egg white), and finally in breadcrumbs.

Heat plenty of oil in a deep frying pan or a small high-sided saucepan. Fry the croquettes a few at a time for a few minutes, until golden all over. Lift them out and lay them on kitchen paper to drain the excess oil.

Serve hot but they are also delicious cold as a snack.

CALCIONETTI DI CASTAGNE

By Lindsey Di Bartolomeo

Many years ago my aunt Maria, who lived in Montorio al Vomano in the province of Teramo, made us *calcionetti di castagne*, a kind of deep-fried sweet *ravioli*, crisp on the outside and creamy inside. I never forgot them, but only as an adult did I start asking relatives whether anyone knew the recipe. Then one day my cousin sent me a link to a YouTube video of the young chef Lorenzo Di Bartolomeo making them. It took me a few tries and tweaks before my calcionetti tasted as good as my aunt's. Given the shared surname, I couldn't help wondering whether Lorenzo was a distant cousin. No such luck.

In Abruzzo calcionetti are usually a Christmas sweet, but my aunt made them in autumn, when the first cold evenings arrived. Her neighbour had a chestnut grove and gave her a small bag at the start of the harvest, and that was all the excuse she needed.

I make them in autumn too, when I know guests are coming, because they are best eaten fresh while the shell is still crisp. They keep for a few days, but by the next day the pastry softens and they don't taste the same.

INGREDIENTS

Makes about 40 calcionetti

For the filling:
- 400 g boiled chestnuts, peeled and mashed
- 120 g sugar
- 30g unsweetened cocoa powder
- 50g dark chocolate, finely chopped
- 50g toasted almonds, finely chopped
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 3 tbsp rum

For the pastry:
- 500g flour 00
- 100ml water
- 100ml dry white wine
- 70ml extra virgin olive oil
- seed oil for frying
- icing sugar or granulated sugar

PREPARATION

For the filling, combine the mashed chestnuts with the chocolate and almonds, mixing well after each addition. Add the sugar and mix, then the cocoa, cinnamon and rum. Cover tightly with cling film and chill for 1-2 hours.

To make the pastry, heap the flour on the work surface and make a well in the centre. Pour in the oil, water and wine and start drawing the flour in with a fork. Then knead by hand until the dough is soft and no longer sticky. Wrap in cling film and chill for about an hour.

When ready, take a small piece of dough, keeping the rest covered, and roll it through a pasta machine, making a thin long strip of dough. Place a few walnut-sized spoonful of filling, spaced evenly in the centre of the sheet, fold the pastry over, press gently around the filling heaps with your fingertips to seal and push out any air, then cut with a pastry wheel.

Heat the oil to 170–175°C. Fry the calcionetti a few at a time for two to three minutes, until golden, then lift them onto a tray lined with kitchen paper.

Let them cool and dust with icing sugar.

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