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TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



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Civitella Roveto. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 14.

LEFT:

Civitella Roveto. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 14.

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Editor's Note

The peaks of the Majella are dusted with snow, the olive harvest is nearly over (and what a harvest it was!), and there is a chill in the air. In November many small towns celebrate the Feast of San Martino with *vino novello*, the new season's wine. The tradition is centuries old: in the farming calendar, San Martino closed the harvest and marked the end of the agricultural year.

In the best Abruzzese tradition, I will be raising a glass of *vino novello* not only to see out the year but also to say a last farewell to Daniele Kihlgren, a visionary who died on 7 October. In the late 1990s this Milanese entrepreneur of Swedish descent began buying the crumbling, abandoned houses of **Santo Stefano di Sessanio (AQ)** and turned them into *Sextantio*, an *albergo diffuso* restored with almost obsessive respect for the village's original stone and timber. His conviction that a dying borgo could be saved by respecting what was already there changed how Italy thinks about its inland villages, and Abruzzo owes him a great deal.

This month's stories share a common thread: what Abruzzo chooses to keep, and what it is slowly losing. We head up to the **Gran Sasso** to revisit the golden years of **Hotel Campo Imperatore**. Today it is best known as the place where Mussolini was held prisoner in 1943, but in the 1930s it was one of Italy's most glamorous mountain resorts.

I visit **Civitella Roveto (AQ)** and wander its old town in search of *nicchie votive*, the small shrines set into house walls that are an almost forgotten expression of popular devotion.

We also celebrate 100 years of *parrozzo*, visit an 18th-century water mill in **Scafa (PE)** that still works today, walk up to the old stone *capanne* above **Lettomanoppello (PE)**, and invite you to try a recipe for *tacchino alla canzanese*, turkey in its own jelly, that goes back to 1850.

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

Enjoy the November issue!

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor



DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS



ITALY'S BEST RESTAURANT IS IN ABRUZZO

Reale, Niko Romito's restaurant in **Castel di Sangro (AQ)**, is Italy's best, according to Gambero Rosso, one of the country's leading food and wine guides. The 2027 guide gives it 99 out of 100, the highest score in the guide's history, ahead of Massimo Bottura's famous *Osteria Francescana* in Modena. Romito (in the photo), who taught himself to cook after taking over his family's trattoria now cooks at Reale/Casadonna, a former monastery. There was more good news for the region: *Osteria dei Maltagliati* in Torano Nuovo, near Teramo, is the guide's Restaurant of the Year.

SOS FOR LOCAL SHOPS

Abruzzo's historic town centres are losing their shops. Between 2012 and 2025, **Teramo** lost 29.3% of its stores, **Chieti** 23.5%, **Pescara** 21.4% and **L'Aquila** 19.7%, according to Confcommercio, Italy's main retail and services association. It calls the trend commercial desertification: as local shops close, historic centres slowly empty out and residents move to where the services are. The association's Abruzzo branch has written to the region's mayors proposing a joint plan to revive centres, including special economic zones within cities offering tax breaks, simpler paperwork and incentives for new openings.



BUMPER OLIVE HARVEST

Abruzzo is celebrating a bumper olive harvest. At the time of writing the region's mills had already pressed more than 10,000 tonnes of olives and Coldiretti expects oil output to rise by about 30% on last year, behind only Tuscany and Sicily. The fruit comes from some 15,000 olive farms and more than eight million trees. For shoppers, the news is good: extra virgin oil that sold for €13–15 a litre over the past two years should cost no more than €12 this season.

MORE PENSIONS THAN JOBS

Abruzzo now pays more pensions than it has people in work, according to a CGIA Mestre report based on 2025 INPS and ISTAT data: 520,676 pensions against 512,273 employed people, a gap of 8,403. Pescara is the only province where workers outnumber pensions, by 3,454. Teramo has the widest gap, followed by Chieti and L'Aquila. On a positive note, employment has grown faster than the number of pensions in the region since 2024. Nationally, workers still narrowly outnumber pensions, 24.1 million to 23.2 million: almost one to one, down from three to one in the 1980s.

Only 52.6% of women aged 15–64 are in work in Abruzzo, compared with 72.1% of men, a large untapped workforce.



L'AQUILA'S THEATRE REOPENS

L'Aquila's 500-seat Teatro Comunale reopens on 17 November, 17 years after the 2009 earthquake forced it to close. It is one of the most awaited moments of the city's year as Italy's Capital of Culture: a generation of Aquilani has grown up without ever setting foot inside. The theatre first opened in 1873 with Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera,* and it returns with Verdi again, staging *La Traviata*. The performance open to the public is on Sunday 22 November at 5pm. The full programme and tickets are available on the website of the theatre company, *Teatro Stabile d'Abruzzo*.



NEW OIL, NEW WINE

November is when Abruzzo tastes its new harvest: olio nuovo from the mill, peppery and bright green, and vino novello, the young wine made from this year's grapes. Villages mark it with festivals in mills and cellars. At *Frantoi Aperti* in **San Vincenzo Vecchio (AQ)**, on 7 and 8 November, residents open their cellars in the Valle Roveto and serve local dishes with oil from the valley's mills. **Treglio (CH)** opens old wine cellars and olive presses the same weekend. On 13–15 November, **Frisa (CH)** holds its new-oil festival with food tastings.

DID YOU KNOW?



CHARLIE CHAPLIN'S DOUBLE FROM ABRUZZO

Chaplin's stand-in came from **Rosciolo dei Marsi (AQ)**, a village at the foot of Monte Velino, about as far from the Hollywood studios as a young man could get. Vincenzo Pelliccione left the village in his early twenties: by 1929 he was in Hollywood living on $2 a day: one dollar for food, one for English lessons. Then Chaplin spotted him in a Hollywood restaurant and was so struck by the likeness that he hired the young Abruzzese as his stand-in.

Under the stage name Eugene De Verdi, Vincenzo put on the bowler hat and baggy trousers to stand in for Chaplin during rehearsals and promotional shoots for *City Lights, Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator*. He also joined Chaplin's tours of Florida and California, playing the Little Tramp on stage and copying every waddle so well that audiences struggled to tell the two apart. Some of the iconic Chaplin photos from those years show Vincenzo (in the photo above).

When Chaplin let him go after a decade, reportedly irritated that people kept mistaking his double for him, Pelliccione turned to the technical side, designing lighting and special-effects machinery for 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, Ben-Hur and Cleopatra.

He later returned to Italy and finished his career at Cinecittà. He died in a Rome nursing home on 20 June 1978, aged 84, a few months after Chaplin himself. He was brought home to rest in Rosciolo's cemetery, and in the small garden named after him, off Via Monte Velino, stands a metal silhouette of the Little Tramp that he spent a decade impersonating.



ABRUZZO HAS LOST A VISIONARY

By Anna Lebedeva

Daniele Kihlgren died on 7 October at the age of 60. He came from Milan, from a wealthy Swedish family of cement industrialists, and Abruzzo can count itself fortunate that his path led him to these mountains. In 1994 he arrived in Santo Stefano di Sessanio (AQ), a village slipping into abandonment. Where others saw crumbling houses, he saw heritage: not the churches and palaces of historic city centres, but something more fragile. The village was built from the mountain's own limestone and laid out along the contours of the slope, so that houses and landscape formed a single picture, and he argued that one concrete block was enough to spoil it. Sextantio, the *albergo diffuso,* or scattered hotel, with rooms spread among the village's restored houses, was his answer. With it, Kihlgren showed that a small mountain village does not need to be transformed to be beautiful, and that preserving one means preserving a piece of our own memory.

I had followed his projects for years, stayed at Sextantio more than once, taken clients there and sat in the audience at the premiere of *Our Stone*, the documentary about his work. Then, in February 2024, an email landed in my inbox: "*Gentile Anna, Le chiederei un appuntamento telefonico per quanto sotto. Cordialmente, Daniele Kihlgren, Sextantio.*" (Dear Anna, I would like to arrange a phone call about the

Photo: Daniele Kihlgren. Courtesy of Sextantio

matter below). With it came a text opposing the council's plan to build a new town hall. He was reaching out to the press to make his case public, and I was one of those he contacted. I replied at once, and two long phone conversations followed. They led to my feature on Santo Stefano di Sessanio and to an article signed by Kihlgren himself, which we reprint on page 7. The following year the council decided to demolish the former Ostello del Cavaliere, an oversized building put up with Cassa per il Mezzogiorno money, empty for decades, that hid part of the medieval village from view. It was a small act, and exactly the kind he had called for.

HOUSES AS THEY WERE

When Kihlgren began his project, in 1999, 75.5% of Santo Stefano's homes stood empty, according to a study by the University of Chieti-Pescara. He had the eye to see what those houses were worth, the stubbornness to defend them and the means to act, so he bought many of them and turned them into rooms scattered through the village, making the lanes, the stone and the Gran Sasso itself part of the stay. No new buildings were added and only local materials were used, and wherever possible the original room divisions and furniture were kept. Photographs from the *Museo delle Genti d'Abruzzo* and the memories of the oldest residents guided him in bringing back the food and crafts of mountain life.

The Italian and international press soon took notice, visitors followed, and so did other people willing to invest in the village. Places to stay in Santo Stefano went from 1 to 23, and restaurants, shops and craft workshops opened one after another. In 2021 the municipality recorded roughly 15,000 overnight stays, 13 times the provincial average relative to population. Not every one of those nights was spent at Sextantio, but nobody doubts who started it. Kihlgren went on to apply the same approach in the Sassi of Matera and on an island in Lake Kivu in Rwanda, where the profits pay for health insurance for poor families.

SAVING THE STONES

Antonio Bini, a regular contributor to this magazine, knew Kihlgren well, and says nothing revealed the man's attachment to Santo Stefano more clearly than the days after the earthquake of 6 April 2009. The restored rooms of Sextantio came through almost untouched, but many other houses, some of them empty, were badly damaged. "In those days Daniele's concern was above all to save the door jambs, arches, cornerstones and coats of arms. It made no difference who owned them: what mattered was protecting the village as a whole and defending its authenticity," recalls Bini. "Working with the council, the Civil Protection and the volunteers, he saw that every piece was recovered and carefully stored. What I saw in Santo Stefano I did not find in any other village in the crater." Those stones have long since returned to their places, helping to restore the harmony of the village.

My work as a journalist takes me to small towns and villages across Abruzzo, many of them half abandoned, and over the years I have often heard people say that Kihlgren wanted to buy houses in their village, or had even signed a few deeds. In the end, Santo Stefano was the only one where he could see his project through, and the village has not forgotten it. In its tribute after his death, the council called him "a radical guardian of the soul of the mountain," a man who gave dignity back "not only to the houses, but to the collective memory of an entire Apennine civilisation."

To learn more, watch Our Stone*, a beautiful documentary about Daniele Kihlgren's attempts to bring Santo Stefano di Sessanio and other old Italian villages back to life, and to preserve their ancient charm even at the cost of losing money. Available to rent on Amazon or Vimeo.*



SAVING THE OLD TO SHAPE THE FUTURE

By Daniele Kihlgren
First published in
Abruzzissimo in April 2024

I arrived in Abruzzo in 1994, and while riding my motorbike on mountain roads, I started noticing many stunning villages, some abandoned, others still partially inhabited. One day by chance, on my way to Rocca Calascio, I took a dirt road and from above I saw Santo Stefano di Sessanio. I thought it was by far the most beautiful village I had ever seen. What made it special was the harmony between its old buildings and the landscape around them, both unchanged for centuries. It made me realise that the 'heritage' status of these small villages, known as borghi storici minori, differs from the classical heritage typically found in the historic centres of Italian cities. Instead, it stems from the modest, vernacular architecture of these places: houses built into the slope, some reaching three storeys below the street, in keeping with the landscape around them. Where tourism revived these villages in the last century, badly spent public money and private building often destroyed that balance for good, even if the local economy gained, as in Scanno and Pescocostanzo.

Photo: Santo Stefano di Sessanio. Courtesy of Sextantio

CONSERVATIVE RESTORATION

I am convinced that the fewer modern buildings a mountain village has, the greater its historical, aesthetic and emotional value. This belief prompted me to initiate the Sextantio project, aimed at preserving Santo Stefano di Sessanio as it was. Through conservative restoration, combining the old fabric with modern comforts, it became a scattered hotel, an *albergo diffuso*.

Humble old houses are rarely seen as heritage, so they are often altered beyond recognition. We preserved everything that could be preserved: traces of daily life, the soot-blackened walls, salvaged floors and old furniture. We also hired an anthropologist, who collected stories from elderly residents about the area and its past. It was not easy to explain to architects that we wanted to protect these places as they were.

THE DAMAGE DONE BY PUBLIC MONEY

Small villages continue to see the rise of new construction unrelated to the public interest and the needs of their residents. Despite extensive media coverage, both nationally and internationally, highlighting Santo Stefano di Sessanio's integrity and its positive economic influence on the local area, the council is discussing a new town hall to replace an abandoned school built in the 1970s with public funds. This move seems unnecessary, given the declining population. A large part of the village is still abandoned and, I believe, old buildings should be restored without adulterating the village with modern architecture. Councils should be barred from new building in these villages, and stricter rules should protect them. Protecting minor historic heritage and upholding the harmony between landscape and historic architecture should be at the forefront of political agendas.

A MODEL FOR OTHER VILLAGES

Sextantio's economic return for the village has been significant: since work began in the late 1990s, places to stay have increased from 1 to 23, and new restaurants and shops have opened. People now have a reason to stay; the exodus has stopped because they can find work in Santo Stefano di Sessanio.

This successful model could be replicated in the inland areas of Southern Italy, where abandoned villages abound. The aim is to protect their identity and historical landscape. However, without proper rules, these villages are likely to vanish despite their cultural and socioeconomic significance.

In conversation with Anna Lebedeva.

Photos: Albergo diffuso Sextantio in Santo Stefano di Sessanio. Courtesy of Sextantio







THE MANY LIVES OF HOTEL CAMPO IMPERATORE

In the 1930s, a cable car and a bright red hotel turned the Gran Sasso into a weekend escape for skiers coming from Rome. Less than a decade later, the same hotel became the mountain prison of a fallen dictator.

To get to know L'Aquila better, you have to look up. Beyond the rooftops, church domes and stone façades rises the Gran Sasso, the highest massif in the Apennines, close enough to be part of the city's everyday view. For those of us who live below, it marks the passing seasons: the first snow we scan the peaks for, spring wildflowers, summer

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Anna Lebedeva

Editor of Abruzzissimo Magazine

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