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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.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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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. Holiday rentls, 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

By Marianna Colantoni

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 days when we head uphill to escape the heat, and the changing colours of the trees in autumn.

I was born in L'Aquila, and this everyday connection with the mountains is part of how I tell the story of my home. My first clear memory of the cable car dates from the ski lessons my school organised when I was 14. Growing up here, we learn to enjoy the mountains early, sometimes by swapping the classroom for the slopes. Though I never learnt to ski, my love of the mountains stayed with me all the same, and it keeps growing on long walks along trails that always seem to hold something new.

Photo: Hotel Campo Imperatore, 2022

The road out of the city climbs through Assergi to Fonte Cerreto, where the cable car starts, and on to the high plateau of Campo Imperatore. Even here, more than 2,000 metres above sea level, you are still in L'Aquila. The municipality is one of the largest in Italy, and its boundaries reach far beyond the city into the mountains.

From the lower station at Fonte Cerreto, your eye follows the cabins gliding up the mountainside towards Campo Imperatore, roughly a thousand metres above. At the top, a striking red building stands out against the bare slopes: the Hotel Campo Imperatore, best known as the place where Mussolini was held prisoner before German forces freed him in September 1943. It was built almost a decade earlier, for skiers and summer visitors.

A SKI RESORT FOR THE CAPITAL

A vintage travel poster captures the excitement of those early days. An enormous "3 ORE" (three hours) sweeps across the image, linking Rome with L'Aquila, the cable car and the peaks of the Gran Sasso. The poster promised that you could leave Piazza Colonna in central Rome and be on the snow at Campo Imperatore three hours later. A mountain that might once have felt remote was becoming somewhere to spend a weekend or settle in for a longer stay.

Behind that promise was Adelchi Serena, L'Aquila's podestà, the government-appointed mayor under fascism, from 1926 to 1934. As the Fascist regime reshaped the city and its surrounding territory, the cable car, visitor accommodation at Fonte Cerreto and the hotel above were conceived together, with the aim of drawing travellers to the Gran Sasso from well beyond Abruzzo.

The Milanese company Ceretti & Tanfani built the cable car, which opened in 1934. In those days, passengers changed cabins at an intermediate station before continuing their ascent. At the top was the Hotel Campo Imperatore, where guests could stay for a skiing holiday or enjoy the mountain summer. Its designer, Piedmontese



The vintage travel poster advertising the cable car on the Gran Sasso

engineer Vittorio Bonadé Bottino, had already worked on the development of the Alpine resort of Sestriere and the Hotel Principi di Piemonte in Turin. Here, he brought Italian Rationalism to the Gran Sasso. This modernist movement of the 1920s and 1930s favoured simple geometric forms and function over ornament, and you can see it in the hotel's plain, curved façade and its rows of identical windows facing the valley.

This was no simple mountain refuge. When the *Corriere della Sera*'s Luigi Bottazzi rode up on the new cable car in November 1934, he stepped into "a bright hotel lounge that seemed carved out of the rock". There were 3 luxury suites among its 36 rooms, mosaics on the floors, and frescoes by Virginio La Rovere, mixing Art Deco and Rationalism, on the walls of a tall, circular reading room. Many archive photos of the hotel from the 1930s can be viewed online, and a short 1938 *Giornale Luce* newsreel shows the hotel and the cable car in operation.

Building at such an altitude meant battling cold, bad weather and the difficulty of getting supplies up the mountain. According to a 1933 bulletin from the Italian Alpine Club, the cable car was already in use before the hotel opened, taking workers and materials up while the interior was being finished.

MUSSOLINI'S PRISON

In the summer of 1943, the hotel's purpose changed abruptly. On 25 July, the King dismissed Mussolini and had him arrested. Officially, Italy and Germany were still allies, but the new government was secretly preparing to leave the war, and it feared Hitler would try to free Mussolini and put him back in power. So it kept moving him from place to place. After spells on the island of Ponza and at La Maddalena in Sardinia, Mussolini was brought to the Gran Sasso at the end of August. He was first held at the Villetta, an inn at Fonte Cerreto, while the hotel above was emptied of its guests, and was then taken up the mountain. With the cable car as the only easy way in, the hotel seemed the perfect prison.

Within a week, the situation changed. On 8 September, Italy announced an armistice with the Allies, and overnight Germany went from ally to occupying power. On 12 September, the Germans launched Operation Oak, *Unternehmen Eiche*, to free Mussolini from the hotel. In the valley, paratroopers led by Major Harald Mors drove up to Fonte Cerreto and seized the lower cable car station, cutting the hotel off. On the way, they shot dead two men: Giovanni Natale, a member of the Carabinieri, Italy's military police, and Pasqualino Vitocco, a forest guard. At the same time, on the mountain, gliders landed on the rough ground beside the hotel. The Italian guards surrendered without firing a shot, and within minutes Mussolini was flown away in a small Fieseler Fi 156 Storch plane. The two men killed in the valley have not been forgotten: today, the cable car's upper and lower stations are named after Natale and Vitocco, each marked by a plaque placed with honours from the Carabinieri and the State Forestry Corps.





Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-567-1503C-14 / Fotografin: Schneiders, Toni

Photos: Gliders in Campo Imperatore, with the hotel on the background; Mussolini surrounded by his liberators. German Federal Archives, photographer Toni Schneiders

STILL RIDING UP

After the war, the cable car returned to carrying skiers, hikers and families into the mountains. In 1988, the original structure was replaced with a direct connection between Fonte Cerreto and Campo Imperatore, doing away with the change of cabins halfway up. You can still see something of those pioneering years in the old cabin and original upper station, both open to visitors, where the view across the valley gives you another reason to linger. And getting here is easier than the vintage poster promised: thanks to the A24 motorway, the drive from Rome to the cable car now takes about half the advertised three hours.



Photos: vintage cards showing the hotel and funivia, 1950s-1960s



The hotel was remodelled after the war and went on welcoming skiers and summer visitors for decades, with Mussolini's room kept as a museum, its 1943 furnishings left in place. In December 2011, after a period of closure, it reopened alongside a renovated cable car.

In 2015, I went there to see Operazione Quercia, a play about Mussolini's rescue. That night I also visited the room where he had been held and it made the history feel real, but what struck me most was the bar lounge, where a piano stood in front of a window that seemed to open onto nothing but sky.

In 2017, the hotel closed again and for now you can only see it from outside, next to the upper station. Even so, this is where I like to invite you to discover another side of L'Aquila: recognising the peaks in the old photographs and looking at the red hotel knowing what happened within its walls. Then walk out onto the plateau, as I still do, returning to familiar trails or choosing new ones, always happy to find there is something left to surprise me.



Marianna Colantoni is the founder of Taste Abruzzo, a destination maker and communications specialist.

PRACTICAL INFO

The Hotel Campo Imperatore stands next to the upper station of the Funivia del Gran Sasso, the Gran Sasso cable car, about 2,130 metres above sea level. You can get there by cable car or by road (in winter the road is often closed, so check before you go). The cable car leaves from Fonte Cerreto, just off the Assergi exit of the A24 motorway (follow the signs for the Funivia del Gran Sasso; there's a free car park at the lower station). Without a car, take the AMA city bus from L'Aquila to Fonte Cerreto, a journey of about 40 minutes.

The cable car is busy in both summer and winter: between June and September 2026 alone, it recorded nearly 30,000 rides. On winter weekends and holidays, queues at the Fonte Cerreto ticket office can start as early as 7am, with cabins leaving roughly every 15-30 minutes.

The top station is also the starting point for the main summer routes up the Corno Grande, the highest peak in the Apennines, and for the short walk to the Rifugio Duca degli Abruzzi.

For up-to-date cable car timetables, see the *Centro Turistico del Gran Sasso* website, visit the Gran Sasso Info Point in Piazza Battaglione Alpini, by the Fontana Luminosa in L'Aquila, or contact it at infopoint.ctgs@ilgransasso.it, +39 0862 191 0737. Staff can also tell you how to visit the old cabin and the historic upper station.

At the time of writing, the Hotel Campo Imperatore, which is owned by the city of L'Aquila, is closed for renovation. The plan is to reopen it as an upmarket resort with a spa and pool, while restoring original features such as the mosaics and the floors of the main hall. By September 2026, work on the roof and façade, including earthquake-proofing, was nearly finished, but the interior, some 6,000 square metres in need of new heating and water systems, had yet to be started, and no reopening date has been confirmed.

The old funivia station today





CIVITELLA ROVETO: WHERE THE SAINTS KEEP WATCH

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva

In the lanes of Civitella Roveto (AQ), saints and Madonnas gaze down from niches cut into house walls, put there by families asking for help or giving thanks for it. Fewer of them survive with every passing decade.

In the old centre, families once kept a flame burning day and night outside their front doors, in front of a Madonna or a saint set into a niche in the wall. The flame carried a small piece of the domestic hearth out into the lane, placing the house and everyone who lived along it under the image's protection, and where the niche stood on a corner, it did one more job.

"They were placed at crossroads because in the old days there was no public lighting, and the only thing that could light the street was these little images, which were always lit, day and night. Usually it was wax candles, sometimes acetylene or carbide lamps, but they were always burning, and as well as the sacred image they lit up the crossroads,"

Photo: Civitella Roveto

says Patrizio Colucci, a local historian who spent years photographing them and has written a book, *Nicchie Votive, alla scoperta delle edificanti espressioni della fede civitellese*.

According to Colucci, Civitella Roveto, in the Valle Roveto, has one of the highest numbers of nicchie votive of any town in Abruzzo: a recess above a front door, a shallow arch beside a window, a carved frame on the corner of a *palazzo*. Once I start noticing them I keep finding them, and each one says something about how people here farmed, what they feared, which disasters they lived through and what they honoured.

Italic villages once stood below the present centre. Rome took the valley after the Second Samnite War; later the counts of the Marsi drew people up the slopes into a fortified *castrum*, and in the 16th century the Colonna family ran their barony of the valley from here. Today, with about 3,000 residents, shops, restaurants, a railway station and a state road over to Lazio, Civitella is one of the liveliest towns in the valley, though its population is ageing and slowly shrinking.

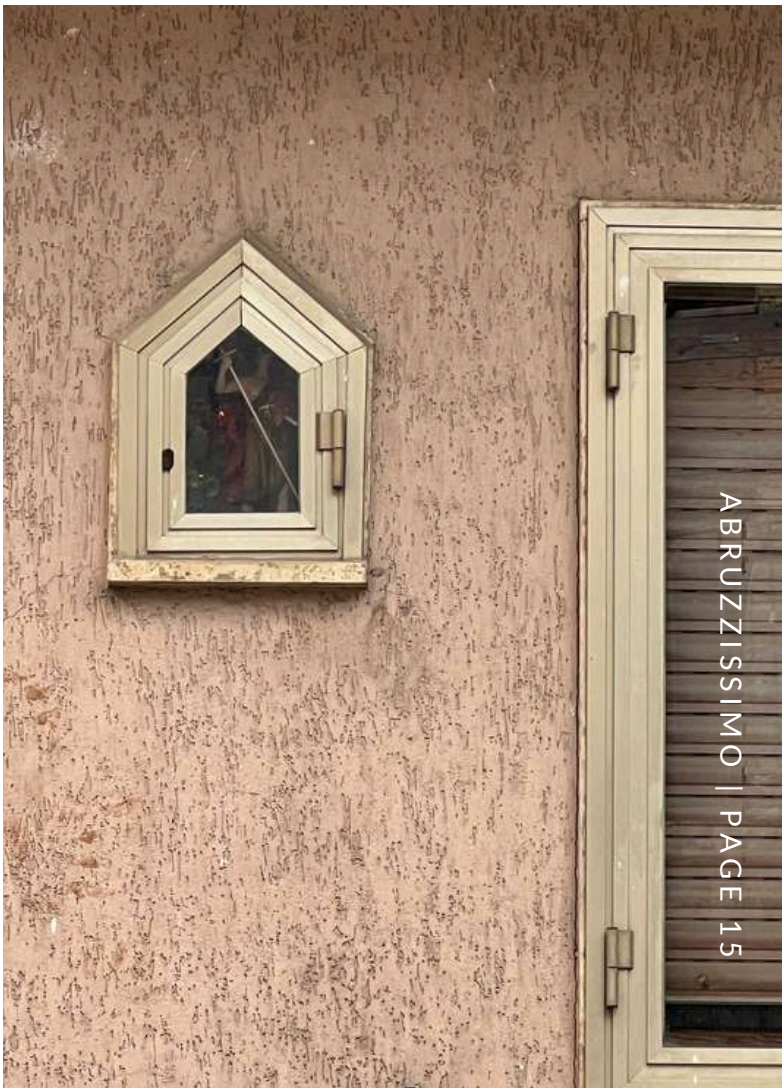
THE OLDEST SHRINES

The old centre's narrow, steep streets climb to the parish church of San Giovanni Battista at the top. I climb towards the church through narrow lanes. Houses with gaping windows and padlocked doors stand wall to wall with lovingly restored ones and every so often a niche looks down at me from above a door or on a corner.

In Piazza San Giovanni, on the corner of a *palazzo* facing the town's main church, dedicated to San Giovanni Battista, is one of the oldest niches still visible from the street, now holding a terracotta Madonna del Buon Consiglio, a figure venerated throughout the valley. The oldest one Colucci can date is hidden from passers-by nearby: a *papier-mâché* Sant'Antonio da Padova from a 16th- or 17th-century Neapolitan workshop, set above a staircase inside another *palazzo*, behind a street door that is usually shut.

Photos: (left) a nicchia votiva with the Madonna del Buon Consiglio; (right) one with San Giovanni Battista.





Many of the niches around the church date from between 1853 and 1937 and, according to Colucci, seem to be linked to the Oratorians, who had a house beside it. Founded by San Filippo Neri, this congregation of priests set out to bring faith closer to ordinary people.

ON THE WAY TO THE FIELDS

Colucci was researching farming life in the valley, the rhythm of ploughing and sowing, when he noticed that every house he visited had a little shrine. “If they didn’t have one outside, they had one inside the house. When I asked, they would tell me it was already there when their grandfather lived there, and when they talk about grandfathers it means we are going back 100 or 150 years.”

In the countryside, people had long set up small shrines on boundary stones and at crossroads to protect fields and harvests and to mark the way in and out of a village. In town, the shelter for the saints was carved straight into the wall, from where they watched over the house, the stable below it and sometimes a workshop on the ground floor.

For people who worked the land, the holy hole in the wall also stood in for the church. “In the peasant world people had little time to go to church, because they left for the fields very early in the morning, and the church might still be closed. So they stopped in front of this little image. Saying a short prayer, kneeling, or just taking off their hat was a religious act, as if they had attended Mass. Then they went to the fields for the whole day and came back late in the evening. ”This was exactly the kind of everyday devotion the Oratorians encouraged, bringing faith to people who couldn’t come to it. Grandparents stopped there with children too, which is how the prayers were passed on.

PER GRAZIA RICEVUTA

The densest stretch is Via Luigi di Savoia, where Colucci counted 18 niches on the street and the lanes around it. Above front doors and beside windows, the niches are capped by round, flattened or pointed





Photos: a street in Civitella Roveto; a *nicchia votiva* on via Luigi di Savoia

arches, some with a moulded frame around the opening. Each once held a statuette, in terracotta, plaster or wood for ordinary families and carved or worked stucco for the better off, or more rarely a fresco painted straight onto the back of the niche. Walking the street today, I find many of them empty, and others where the image has given way to an old oleograph, a modern print or a photograph. On a once-grand *palazzo* with peeling paint, I spot a niche damaged when a modern window was cut in beside it. The owners chose to keep it, and an amateur hand has repainted its Madonna and Child with more devotion than skill.

Many *nicchie* still have lights, though not all are switched on in the evening, and some have *lumini votivi*, small battery-powered candles. In the old days, blue *lumini*, the colour of heaven, burned as perpetual lights; white ones could stand for purity, or be lit for a feast or to ask for divine intervention. Families once tucked holy cards around the image, along with photographs of the dead placed under the saint's protection and of the living who had received a grace, a custom that has now almost disappeared. Those who believed a saint had healed a heart, a hand or a foot once hung a silver model of it beside the image. Almost all of these ex-votos have since been stolen or moved to the cemetery. Their successor is the small plaque marked P.G.R., per grazia ricevuta, for a grace received, sometimes with a name and a year. Half the niches Colucci could date are tied to three events of great social weight: the cholera and famine at the end of 1867, the First World War and the Second World War.

The Madonna looks out from more niches than any other figure, under many titles, though the Madonna delle Grazie and the Madonna del Buon Consiglio

Photos (from top right clockwise): two niches in Località Peschiera; a Madonna on via Luigi di Savoia







are local favourites. There are also Sant'Antonio da Padova, Sant'Antonio Abate, the Holy Trinity and, of course, San Giovanni Battista, Civitella's patron. He is still honoured with an ancient ritual on 24 June, when devotees gather at dawn on the banks of the Liri, which flows through the town, hear Mass and step into the river in memory of Christ's baptism in the Jordan.

LITTLE TEMPLES

On the edges of town and along the roads beyond, between the hamlets and the fields where farmers once worked, stand the *tempietti*: little temples that rise from the ground, sometimes up a few steps, closed by a gate or a pane of glass like chapels in miniature. Most were built by families who felt that a grace received from a saint deserved more than a statuette in a wall, and the ones I pass are still looked after, with pots of fresh flowers at their feet.

Following Via delle Frazioni as it climbs steeply towards the mountain, I come to a *tempietto* with a lit cross on top and a *lumino* burning inside. Its inscription reads *"1941 per la grazia ricevuta, la famiglia Montaldi Paolo"*. An elderly woman drives past and crosses herself without slowing down.

Photos: (left) a tempietto on Via delle Frazioni; (right) a niche in Località Peschiera



Colucci remembers how one farmer explained why his family built their *tempietto*, out among the fields they had worked for generations. "Their pair of oxen took fright, attacked by a swarm of wasps. They bolted in terror and fell down into the drop below, and the oxen came to no harm. One only broke a horn, when from that height they should have died." In gratitude, the family dedicated their little temple to the Holy Trinity, because for a farming household a pair of oxen could be most of what it owned, and losing only a horn instead of two animals was nothing short of a miracle.

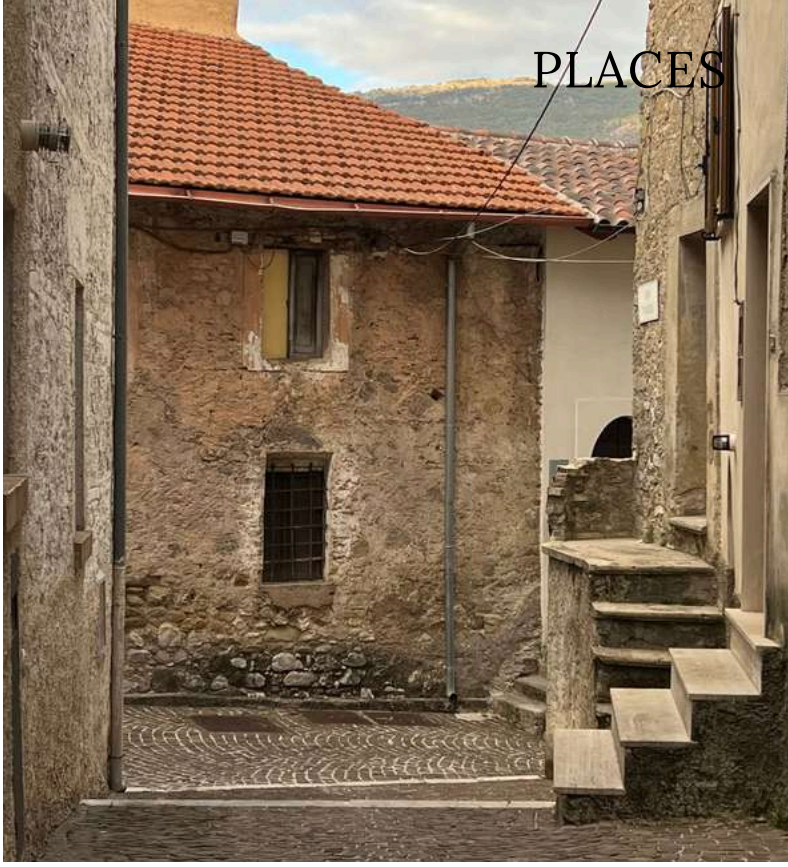
The oxen story is a rare case of a shrine whose origin still survives in living memory. For most of Civitella's niches and *tempietti*, the reasons they were built have been lost, because the people who built them are long gone.

THE LAST KEEPERS

In the early 1990s, Colucci walked the historic centre and the municipality's hamlets of Meta, Pallocco and Peschiera and recorded 67 niches. He believes







Photos: (left) a niche in Località Peschiera; (right) a street in Civitella Roveto

there were once far more, but the 1915 earthquake, which devastated the Marsica, and the rebuilding of the Fascist years took many that were never replaced. Since his census, he estimates that at least 10, and perhaps as many as 20, have gone, removed when owners restored their façades or put to more practical use, with an electricity meter fitted where the saint once stood.

Nobody in Civitella builds new shrines, and Colucci doesn't expect anyone to. "It's a devotional expression that has been lost," he says. "Maybe someone has made one inside their own home, but I don't know of any, and the new houses being built today don't have this."

In a small niche on Via Monti Simbruini, I find fresh chrysanthemums and yellow crocuses set in front of an image of the Madonna. In località Peschiera, above the old town, signora Fabiola comes out to chat and shows me the way to a very old niche on a beautiful stone house further up. "Nobody looks after it any more," she says. "The owners died a long time ago, and now the roof has fallen in."

On a 17th-century house in the historic centre, Colucci's own family still looks after its niche. His grandfather, devoted to Sant'Antonio da Padova, bought a plaster statuette of the saint for it; later an uncle replaced it with a terracotta Madonna del Buon Consiglio. The figure has changed, but the niche has stayed. "It was already there in my grandfather's time, so it was probably there in his father's time too. We look after it and keep it in good order, because it has been there for so many years."

On my way back down from the old town, I pass niches orphaned by families who left long ago, some empty, others holding a weathered printed image and faded artificial flowers. Most of them have no written history, so each time one vanishes under a restored façade or is left to crumble after its last keeper dies, a little of what Civitella Roveto feared, prayed for and lived through goes with it.

IF YOU GO

To see *nicchie votive* in Civitella Roveto head to via Luigi di Savoia, Piazza San Giovanni, and Piazza Buon Consiglio. Some of the most beautiful *tempietti* and niches are also further out, on Via delle Frazioni, Località Peschiera and the Strada per Meta.

Patrizio Colucci runs the *Museo Etnografico de' Colucci* (Via Regina Margherita 13/a), where about 700 objects fill two rooms: antique farming and trade tools, and household objects. Visits are by appointment; call Colucci (Italian only) on +39 330 431121.



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Anna Lebedeva

Editor of Abruzzissimo Magazine

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MOUNTAIN LIFE IN DECONTRA DI CARAMANICO

By Anna Lebedeva

An American couple swapped Vermont for a small hamlet in the Majella mountains. They found the trails and snow they were looking for, and a slower pace that took some getting used to.

Decontra sits on a ledge across the valley from Caramanico Terme, the municipality it belongs to, at the end of a road that twists up through a string of hairpin bends. Until the 1970s there was no paved road and no electricity. That long isolation kept the hamlet much as it was: houses of Majella stone, steep-roofed barns, old stone drinking fountains, terraced vegetable gardens. Above the village an old transhumance track climbs towards the high pastures, past dry-stone huts overlooked by magnificent peaks.

Hanni Guinn and her husband, Ryan Kerrigan, first arrived here on foot. They hiked up out of the Orfento gorge and found the hamlet sitting above it without realising a road led to it.

They have now lived in Decontra for a year and a half. Ryan is a mountain runner and running coach who has long been involved with US Skyrunning, taking young athletes to international races run on steep, high-altitude mountain terrain, among them an event held every two years in L'Aquila, on the Gran Sasso. Hanni grew up in Utah, where her father was a ski coach, and has worked for 25 years as a Rolfer, using hands-on techniques to improve people's posture and movement.

The couple left Vermont for Puglia, spending eight months north of Bari while Ryan's Italian citizenship paperwork went through. Friends in L'Aquila drew them to Abruzzo for what was meant to be a few months. They rented a house in the mountains near Sant'Eufemia a Maiella, spent a summer climbing Monte Amaro and the Morrone with their two dogs, and stayed for the winter. Around Christmas, heavy



Hanni Guinn and Ryan Kerrigan with their dogs Uma and Derby

snow fell, and they could ski straight from the front door. "It was quite a dream for us, because it had been a couple of years since we skied," Hanni says. "That's one of my favourite sports. I grew up skiing since age three."

On damp, dark days they would drive over to Decontra, which gets more sun. When a house came up for rent there, they took it.

A WINDOW ON THE MAJELLA

From her window Hanni looks down into the Orfento valley and across green wooded slopes, with the rocky peaks of Monte Amaro and Pescofalcone rising above them. Birdsong fills the day, eagles that nest in the gorge often circle

overhead on her walks, and in autumn the bellowing of red deer echoes off its walls. Wild boar roam the woods around the village, and for a while a family of about six wolves lived on the hill just above it, appearing every so often in twos and threes.

"When I describe Decontra to people, I say it's like you step back in time," she says. "People who live here love to walk down the street and talk to their neighbours. They love to sit on their porch and just look at the view. Time slows down, and the incredible energy from the mountains fills your body."

By Hanni's rough count, about 55 people live in Decontra full time, most of them elderly, with only a few children. Among them is a small expat community of Belgians, British and Americans, some restoring old stone houses in the centre of the village. In summer the hamlet fills up with holiday-home owners, many of them from Pescara.

What struck Hanni most was her neighbours' love of the mountains. "There are many mornings when we'll be outside with our dogs, talking to the neighbours, and they get really excited and ask where we're going today, what trails we're taking," she says. "We'll stand looking up at Monte Amaro and they'll be naming the different peaks and trails they used to love. There seems to be a culture here of really appreciating the land and the history of this small village."

TWO WHEELS OR FOUR

With the nearest shops a fair distance away, errands take some planning. Caramanico Terme, 10 minutes' drive across the Orfento, has a pharmacy and a grocery shop, while San Valentino in Abruzzo Citeriore, a little further in the opposite direction, has more shops and a great gelateria. The couple own a car, but the local police have told them their American licences won't do for much longer, and they are working through the process of getting Italian licences.

For a while Hanni and Ryan were drawn to the idea of getting around on bikes alone, and they have bought e-bikes. "It's been an interesting experiment, thinking about living in the mountains and having a simple life," Hanni says. They even wondered whether bikes might be all they needed. The road home has tempered that dream, since the ride down to Caramanico is quick but the climb back up takes about 45 minutes, and doing the shopping by bike has turned out to be far from convenient. Once the licences come through, the car will stay.

Decontra di Caramanico



Life at the top of a mountain road has its inconveniences, but for Hanni and Ryan they are a small price to pay for what lies beyond the front door. “Being able to leave the house and go straight out onto a trail, with or without the dogs, is a big part of our lives,” she says. “We also work from home, so it’s simple. We can go out and do what we love, then come home and work.”

The couple came to Decontra well prepared for mountain winters, having lived in a house in the middle of the Vermont woods with a wood stove as its only source of heat. “It’s funny that people around here think we don’t understand stacking wood, or winters,” Hanni says. “But in Vermont it’s much colder than it is here. We always heated our house with wood and I love stacking it. So we’re very comfortable living in a winter environment in the mountains.”

LEARNING TO SLOW DOWN

There is no bar, and events rarely go beyond a summer film night, yet news still travels fast, passed on in person. There is a WhatsApp group for the whole village, but it is seldom used, except in an emergency or when someone needs a lift. “For the most part, if something’s happening, you just go outside and talk to somebody,” Hanni says. “The old men in the town are always walking and chatting with each other at the fountains or on their porches, you just need to ask them for news.”

Hanni can follow the local dialect reasonably well, though the conversation doesn’t always flow the other way. “When I talk to them they really can’t understand me,” she laughs. “They just look at my husband, like, what did she say?”

Beyond the language barrier, Hanni has found that making real friends in a village this small takes more effort than she expected. “In the US I had friends for 20 years and clients I was talking to all day long, so I’d always want to go home and retreat into solitude with my husband,” she says. “Now we’re seeking more connection. I’ve realised it’s a fundamental need that maybe I took for granted.”



Firewood stacked by Hanni outside the couple’s home

Adjusting to the slower pace of village life, which was part of what drew them here, proved just as difficult. “I thought a slow life was going to be so good and I’d be so content,” she says. “But my nervous system actually wasn’t used to having time. I would almost feel a panic if I wasn’t busy.” Now she lets a conversation in the road run as long as it needs to, and the couple’s days have shifted: outdoors in the morning, lunch at one, sometimes a nap.

WORK IN THE MOUNTAINS

With clients harder to find in rural Abruzzo, Hanni has also had to move much of her practice online. “It’s funny, because I thought in Decontra I’d start weaving baskets or something rural like that,” she says. “But no, I’m learning how to build websites and use Zoom.” Her favourite classroom, though, is a flat clearing above the village, where she teaches Tai Chi and Qigong to a small group of expats. Next April she will bring an international group to Decontra for a week-long retreat devoted to Qigong and practices for calming the nervous system, taking over almost the whole village to house them.

Hanni and Ryan still rent, with a couple of houses in the US to manage, but have no plans to leave. “Renting feels a little safer to us at this point,” Hanni says. “We want to make sure we find a place, a house that we’re happy with, that’s maybe not too much work and has all the things we like.” Whatever they find, it will be in the mountains, with running trails and spectacular views.

AREPUSE 'SSA COCCE

By David Ferrante

"Rest that head of yours."

The phrase invites someone to let their head rest, but it carries several shades of meaning. It can mean: don't take on too much, don't rush, think it through. It's the advice given to someone who is making life complicated for themselves, piling up thoughts and plans without limit.

But said with a raised eyebrow and a hint of irony, it becomes almost a telling-off: stop talking nonsense, don't speak without thinking.

Arepuse. "Rest!", the imperative of the verb arepusà (Italian *riposare*, "to rest"). The extra a- at the start is typical of central and southern dialects, which often add it to verbs beginning with r- (*compare, arrefatte*, "made" or "remade", from the verb *rifare*). The final -e is barely pronounced, close to the neutral "uh" sound in English "about", as at the end of most Abruzzese words.

'Ssa. "That", short for *chessa*, the dialect equivalent of Italian *codesta*. It's feminine because cocce is feminine. Italian has largely lost codesto, but many dialects keep it: it points to something near the person you're speaking to, so *'ssa cocce* means "that head of yours" rather than just "your head". The apostrophe marks the dropped first syllable.

Cocce. "Head", a colloquial word, like Italian *coccia*, which also means a hard shell or rind. It's the everyday, slightly blunt way to say head, as opposed to the more neutral *capo*. That bluntness is part of why the phrase can sound curt when said with irony.

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



QUICK STOP

18TH-CENTURY MILL STILL TURNING IN SCAFA



Molino ad acqua Di Cesare in Scafa (PE) is one of the last mills in Abruzzo still running entirely on water. There is no motor anywhere in the building: the river Lavino turns the stone millstones, and the flour falls into wooden chests before it is bagged for sale.

Most of what's milled here is old grain varieties, all grown in Abruzzo or Italy. *Solina*, an old soft wheat, is prized for bread and pizza dough; *Saragolla*, an ancient durum wheat, is the one for homemade pasta. There's also spelt, maize for polenta and a five-grain mix, and each grain sits in a small jar for the curious. Fresh flour is milled almost every day as it sells out quickly. Stone-ground flour keeps more of the wheat germ, which makes it turn rancid sooner, so buy what you'll use within a few months and store it somewhere cool.

The building dates from the 1700s, and an original millstone still greets visitors at the entrance. The Di Cesare family worked the mill for five generations before buying it outright in 1992. Domenico Di Cesare, the miller since 1968, was born in a room upstairs.

Call ahead if you want to see the mill at work. Afterwards, drive to Parco Lavino, where the river that turns these millstones runs turquoise from its sulphur springs (see our feature in the September 2026 issue).

Molino ad acqua Di Cesare, Via F. Turati 2, Scafa (PE). Open Monday to Friday 8:00–12:30 and 15:00–19:00, Saturday 8:00–12:30; closed Sunday. Tel. 085 854 1282.

EASY TRAILS

THE MOUNTAIN STONE HUTS OF LETTOMANOPPELLO



- **Length: about 6 km**
- **Time: about 2 hours**
- **Starting point: park on the road from Lettomanoppello (PE) to Passo Lanciano, near the stone wolf sculpture on a sharp bend after Fonte Pirella**

An old mule track above **Lettomanoppello (PE)** climbs between dry-stone walls through farmland that is more densely terraced than anywhere else on the Majella, with small and medium-sized stone huts (*tholos*, or *capanne*) standing at the edges of the fields. The path is wide at first, so it is easy to step off onto the terraces, and on the right-hand side they curve round in a semicircle, rising in even tiers like the seating of an ancient Greek theatre.

The route then crosses an area known as *Piano delle Cappelle*, where the huts are so numerous that it has earned the name "Parco dei Tholos". You won't find large farm complexes here, because the land was divided into tiny plots and families came up in small groups for short periods to work them, sheltering in these corbelled stone huts while they did.

Most of the huts were built in the 19th century, when farmers moved their fields higher up the mountain and used the stones they cleared to build walls and shelters. By the middle of the 20th century they had been abandoned, and scrub has since spread over parts of the terraces, although some of the capanne have recently been restored. You can do the first part of the trail or continue up following the white and red waymarks to close the loop. Have your camera ready for spectacular views!

A HUNDRED YEARS OF PARROZZO

By Antonio Bini and Anna Swann



In 1926 a Pescara pastry maker called Luigi D'Amico registered the trademark for a cake he had been perfecting since the early 1920s. The model was the *pane rozzo*, the "rough bread" of Abruzzo's farmers, a domed yellow loaf of maize flour baked in wood-fired ovens. D'Amico replaced the maize with eggs and ground almonds, which give the crumb its pale yellow colour and rich texture, and covered the dome in chocolate to imitate the scorch marks on the bread's crust. Gabriele d'Annunzio, Pescara's most famous poet, gave the cake its name and later celebrated it in a dialect poem, *La Canzone del Parrozzo*.

Success led D'Amico to open the *Ritrovo del Parrozzo* on Piazza Garibaldi, a bar, pastry shop and tea room. An advert from 1 January 1939 shows its arched window, wrought-iron chandelier and painted plates, and boasts that imitations and counterfeits only confirm the excellence of the "Parrozzo d'Abruzzo". Customers are told to insist on the name and the round box, and to admire an "imposing collection of d'Annunzio autographs dedicated to the parrozzo". The advert gives no address, as none was needed: the *Ritrovo* stood "opposite the poet's house", today the d'Annunzio birthplace museum on Corso Manthonè. After the original premises were destroyed in the second world war, the Ritrovo moved to Via Pepe 41.

The trademark D'Amico was defending in 1939 still stands: parrozzo is today registered exclusively to LDA srl, the D'Amico family company. Yet the cake belongs to the city as much as to its owners. It is officially listed as a traditional food product of Abruzzo, and many Pescara bakeries make their own, some all year and others only at Christmas. Locals eat it with coffee, a sweet spumante or a glass of Aurum, the citrus liqueur made in Pescara.

The packaged version found in supermarkets and delicatessens, a great gift to bring home from Pescara, has its own history. In the 1960s the business passed to D'Amico's daughter Teresa and her husband Giuseppe Francini, and in the 1970s a modern packaging line stretched the cake's shelf life from one month to seven. Pierluigi Francini now runs the company, still making the cake with semolina, eggs, sugar, sweet and bitter almonds and a dark chocolate coat. Today's hexagonal box, which replaced the round one of the 1939 advert, is designed by Pescara ceramist Armando Cermignani and still carries d'Annunzio's verses about the cake.

WHERE TO BUY PARROZZO

Ritrovo del Parrozzo (Via Pepe 41, Pescara) sells the original, and upstairs a gallery still displays a century of tributes from famous customers.

Alla Chitarra Antica (Via Sulmona 2, Pescara) makes its own version of small *parrozzini* most of the year, though not in summer. Claudio, who runs the delicatessen, serves them soaked in *ratafia*, Abruzzo's sour-cherry liqueur. The shop also sells small boxes of the original D'Amico *parrozzo*.

Many bars sell single-portion *parrozzi*, and most supermarkets stock the boxed version on the packaged cakes shelf.

To bake one at home, follow the recipe on our website.

TACCHINO ALLA CANZANESE

By James Ranallo



We have cousins in Teramo, and on one of our first visits to the Abruzzese branch of the family they treated us to *tacchino alla canzanese,* turkey in its own jelly. The whole turkey is boned, tied and cooked slowly with its own bones, bay leaves and garlic around it, then eaten the next day, cold and sliced, with its clear, wobbly jelly.

The recipe comes from the town of Canzano. My cousins told me it dates to around 1850, when two local farmers made turkey broth one morning for a dinner with friends and found by evening that it had set into a jelly that made the meat richer. It remained a home dish until the 1930s, when the town butcher, Domenico Piersanti, began selling it. Today it's on Abruzzo's official list of traditional food products and is celebrated every July at the *Tacchinando* festival.

INGREDIENTS

Serves 8 to 10

- 1 hen turkey, about 4–5 kg
- 3 garlic cloves
- 4 bay leaves
- 1 tsp black peppercorns
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- About 3 litres water

PREPARATION

Bone the turkey completely, leaving the skin attached to the meat, and set aside every bone, including the neck and wings. Trim off any loose fat.

Put the boned turkey in cold water for at least two hours. It will keep the jelly clear.

Open the boned turkey out flat, skin underneath and meat facing up. Rub the meat all over with a cut garlic clove, then season with salt and pepper.

Roll it into a firm cylinder, skin on the outside, and tie it at intervals with kitchen string.

Crush the bones with a heavy knife or meat mallet so they release their gelatine. Put them in a deep roasting pan with the tied turkey, the remaining garlic, the bay leaves and the peppercorns. Pour in about 3 litres of water: it should come well up the sides of the turkey without covering it.

Heat the oven to 200°C and cook for one hour, then lower it to 180°C and cook for two to three hours more, turning the turkey every so often and adding a little hot water if the liquid drops below halfway. It's ready when a skewer slides easily into the thickest part of the roll.

Lift the turkey into a deep dish and remove the string. Pass the cooking liquid through a fine sieve and discard the bones. Skim off as much fat as you can, then pour the broth over the meat.

Let everything cool to room temperature, then refrigerate overnight. By morning the broth will have set into a soft jelly. If it stays liquid, boil the broth down by a third and chill it again.

Slice the turkey thinly while it's cold and serve each portion with a spoonful of jelly, good bread and a side of cold roasted peppers.

PIZZA RUSTICA CON BROCCOLI, RICOTTA E SALSICCIA

By Anna Swann



Across Abruzzo, *pizza rustica* changes from town to town and kitchen to kitchen. The shell might be shortcrust, savoury frolla or puff pastry; the filling is almost always some mix of cheese, cured meat and eggs. The pizza (often called *torta rustica*) turns up in picnic baskets and on buffet tables, and it is just as good cold the next morning as it is warm from the oven. In summer, I fill mine with whatever vegetables the garden gives me. When the weather turns, I want something more substantial, so I make a filling of broccoli, ricotta and crumbled *salsiccia*.

In the past the crust was made with lard; nowadays it is mostly butter or, as in this recipe, good local olive oil. You can also use shop-bought pastry and make the *pizza rustica* square or round. It is one of those recipes you can adapt endlessly.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 6-8 portions

For the crust:

- 260 g plain flour
- ¼ tsp salt
- 50 g extra-virgin or mild olive oil
- 130 g cold water

For the filling:

- 450 g broccoli, cut into florets
- 2 Italian sausages (about 200 g), casings removed
- 200 g ricotta, well drained
- 1 egg, plus 1 yolk for brushing (optional)
- 1 garlic clove, sliced
- 30 g grated aged pecorino or Parmigiano Reggiano
- A pinch of chilli flakes
- Extra-virgin olive oil

PREPARATION

Whisk the flour and salt in a bowl. Add the olive oil and water and stir until a shaggy dough forms, then knead briefly on the work surface until smooth. Wrap and rest for 30 minutes at room temperature.

Blanch the florets in plenty of salted boiling water for four-five minutes, then drain well. Warm a drizzle of olive oil in a pan with the garlic and chili flakes, add the broccoli and sauté for a few minutes, breaking it up slightly with a spoon. Leave to cool.

Crumble the sausage into a hot pan and cook for 4 to 5 minutes until browned. Drain off excess fat.

In a large bowl, combine the ricotta, egg, broccoli and sausage. Season with salt and pepper.

Heat the oven to 180°C. Divide the dough into two pieces, roughly 60% for the base and 40% for the top. On lightly floured baking paper, roll the larger piece to fit a 23 cm pie dish or springform pan, leaving a slight overhang. Transfer to the pan and spread the filling evenly. Sprinkle with the grated cheese.

Roll out the remaining dough, lay it over the filling and pinch or crimp the edges tightly to seal. Pierce the top a few times with a fork and brush with the beaten yolk, if using.

Bake for 40 to 45 minutes, until the crust is deeply golden and the filling is set. Serve warm or at room temperature.



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Howling wolves and a life-size nativity

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The mercenary who ravaged Abruzzo

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