

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



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tradition meets modern art**

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ON THE COVER:

Lettomanoppello. Read the story on page 5. Photo by Anna Lebedeva.

LEFT:

Campo di Giove. Read the story on page 14. Photos by Anna Lebedeva.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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There are some unassuming towns in Abruzzo that might not appeal to a distracted traveller looking for the obvious architectural gems, gilded décor and sumptuous frescos. They require going beyond the first superficial impression to discover their true soul. **Lettomanoppello** is one of those places.

One of the pleasures of running ABRUZZISSIMO is helping you, our readers, discover small towns like that and their hidden treasures. In this issue we talk about **Lettomanoppello's** stone-carving tradition and its growing collections of magnificent *pietrales* (stone murals).

We also visit **Campo di Giove** which, unlike many other small mountain towns in Abruzzo, is thriving as a popular tourist destination, with a strong local economy and many young people choosing to stay and keep the community spirit alive.

Sulmona's spectacular *Giostra Cavalleresca* is happening at the end of July and we take you to a small workshop in a 15th-century palazzo where Stefania Bonitatibus makes the magnificent Renaissance costumes for the event.

Have you tried the humble Abruzzese peasant dish *chicocce e patane*? Read about the dish and find the recipe on page 27.

We are taking a break in August, so the next issue of ABRUZZISSIMO will be coming out on September 5.

Have a beautiful summer!

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor

ABRUZZO STRUGGLES TO ATTRACT FOREIGN VISITORS

ISTAT and the Ministry of Tourism report an increase in visitors to Abruzzo between 2022 and 2023. Over 1.7 million tourist arrivals and 6.5 million overnight stays were recorded by regional hotel and non-hotel lodging. Of these, over 85% were Italian tourists. According to the ministry, Abruzzo is falling short of promoting itself abroad and is currently at the bottom of the national ranking for foreign guests.

The regional branch of the National Tourism Confederation highlighted that the cancellation of routes from Turin and Milan Linate, crucial hubs for foreign tourists, at Pescara exacerbates the issue.



NO PROTECTED STATUS FOR ABRUZZO'S ARROSTICINI

National agricultural organization Confagricoltura opposed a proposal for PDO (Protected Designation of Origin, a European Union quality label used for agricultural products and foodstuffs that are produced, processed, and prepared in a specific geographical area) status for Abruzzo's beloved *arrosticini*, sheep meat skewers. It cited a severe crisis in local sheep farming and the fact that most *arrosticini* are made from imported sheep, totalling 700,000, compared to fewer than 150,000 ones farmed in Abruzzo.

According to Confagricoltura, the region faces daily closures of livestock farms due to economic challenges and cannot guarantee quality standards required for PDO certification.



FERROVIA DEI PARCHI A HIT WITH TRAVELLERS

The scheduled trips on the Ferrovia dei Parchi are almost sold out for the entire 2024 season. The historic, old-style trains carry tourists to small towns between **Sulmona** and **Roccaraso** or **Castel di Sangro** along a scenic route, stopping at several picturesque mountain villages. This year, 6,800 people are expected to ride the rails – 800 more than in 2023.

The operators bill the trips on the historic train as “a journey through nature, traditions, and customs”. Two departures are scheduled for July, seven for August, and four in September.

ABRUZZO DRYING UP

D'Annunzio University in Pescara has analysed the region's river flows, rainfall, and temperatures since 1985 revealing that Abruzzo is in danger of “desertification”. Although still called “the green region of Europe”, it risks significant decrease in water levels by 2100 due to prolonged droughts.

The impact of this water loss is already felt in Penne, where levels of the reservoir created by the Penne dam are currently insufficient. Area farmers face difficulty in irrigating their crops this summer, particularly if they have two plantings per season. This will significantly affect the production of the area's signature crop, the Tondino del Tavo bean.



TRADITIONAL SHEPHERDS' FAIRS

Two historic events celebrating Abruzzo's pastoral heritage are coming up this summer: the Shepherd's Fair (*Fiera della Pastorizia*) in **Piano Roseto** (TE) on July 6-7 (see the programme [here](#)) and the *Rassegna Ovini di Campo Imperatore* on August 4-5. Both will showcase native sheep breeds and local gastronomy amidst stunning mountain vistas. **Rassegna Ovini di Campo Imperatore** is the region's biggest event of its kind where visitors can see over 10,000 sheep.

These events attract thousands of visitors annually and offer an opportunity to taste typical products from Abruzzo's mountains such as cheeses, saffron, truffles, and honey.

FROM ETNA TO GRAN SASSO

The colourful annual festival Dall'Etna al Gran Sasso returns to **Citta' Sant' Angelo** (TE) on July 20-28. Twinned with the Sicilian town of Nicolosi, Citta' Sant' Angelo celebrates their connection with displays of traditional arts and crafts of Abruzzo and Sicily, a parade of Sicilian carts, dancing in the square, musical and folklore shows, and food stands with typical Sicilian specialties. The full programme and details of activities can be found on the event's [website](#) and [Facebook page](#).

See our ebook [65 Festivals and Sagre in Abruzzo](#) for this summer's rich calendar of events.

DID YOU KNOW?

AN IRISH HERO IN CIVITELLA DEL TRONTO

As you stroll through Civitella del Tronto (TE) you will see a grand memorial to the Irish hero Matteo Wade and his small band of defenders who stood against the might of Napoleon's forces – a fascinating piece of Abruzzo's rich history.

Civitella's position, between the Kingdom of Naples and the Papal States, had long made it strategically important and its fortress served as a loyal border stronghold for the Bourbon monarchs. Matteo Wade, originally Matthew Wade, was an Irishman who found himself in command of the fortress in 1806. As Napoleon's French forces aimed to conquer the Kingdom of Naples, Wade, with a garrison reduced to just 40 men, fought to defend the fortezza against the vastly superior French army.

Wade's strategic brilliance and the unwavering courage of his small force created a formidable resistance. Despite being vastly outnumbered, Wade's defenders managed to repel multiple assaults through ingenious tactics, frequently changing uniforms to deceive the attackers about their numbers.

The siege culminated on May 21, 1806, when the French launched a relentless bombardment and assault on the town. Wade's men, though diminished and exhausted, held their ground until the fortress could no longer be defended and they were forced to surrender. The onlooking French army was no doubt amazed as just eight officers, ten infantrymen, and eleven artillerymen marched out from the fortress, led by an elderly soldier blinded in the siege who carried the Bourbon banner.

King Francesco I of the Kingdom of Two Sicilies commemorated Wade's heroic defence with a monument that stands today near the town's post office.

PLACES



LETTOMANOPPELLO

WHERE TRADITION MEETS
MODERN ART

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva

Lettomanoppello, a small, unassuming town in the Majella mountains, is an unlikely destination for art lovers, yet those in the know come here to admire the growing collection of *pietrales*, beautiful stone murals that blend history and traditional craftsmanship with contemporary artistic expression.

Pietrales are murals made of carved stone slabs, mounted on the walls of houses. The name was coined by Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, a distinguished art historian and educator known for his influential contributions to contemporary art in Italy and beyond. A Lettomanoppello native with a long, illustrious career in art curation, academia, and museum management, he knew exactly how to translate the centuries-old craft into modern art.

Photos: (below) "Senza titolo" by Andrea Catolino, Yan Yun Xuan; (right) "L'eterna Lotta" by Michele Montanaro

CENTURIES-OLD TRADITION

"For a long time, Lettomanoppello had been the town of *scalpellini*, with the quarries around it that supplied Majella stone," explains Di Pietrantonio. First mentions of *scalpellini* – the artisans who carved the soft, ivory-coloured limestone – date back to the Middle Ages, but it was in the late 1800s - early 1900s that Lettomanoppello truly embraced this craft, evolving into an artisan community with the entire population involved, directly or indirectly, in the working of the stone. There were stone cutters and carvers, quarrymen, and carters to transport stone blocks to the workshops in the town. The local women brought their men lunch and filled their baskets with smaller chunks of stones to take back. Fathers taught the craft to their children, who carried on the tradition, one generation after another. During this period, Lettomanoppello earned the nickname "little



Carrara" for its burgeoning stone industry. There is still an active stone quarry near the town, but only a few *scalpellini* continue to work these days. However, rather than fading away, this tradition has inspired the creation of *pietrales*.

REVIVING THE CRAFT

The stone murals are carved during the annual festival *10 Giornate in Pietra* that brings together 10 - 14 artists from around the world. Lettomanoppello transforms into an open-air workshop and gallery, with Italian and international sculptors, stonecutters, and art students creating their works right on the streets.

"Each year, the festival focuses on a different theme, allowing for diverse and meaningful artistic interpretations," explains Stefano Faccini, a sculptor and the festival's artistic director. "In its inaugural year, the theme was 'stone carvers and miners,' highlighting the town's two main trades of the past. Subsequent themes have included 'the environment and nature' and 'water,' reflecting broader concerns and interests that resonate with both the artists and the local community."

It was the ancient stone carving traditions that brought Faccini to Lettomanoppello. Born in Bergamo, Faccini arrived in Abruzzo many years ago to master the art of working with Majella stone. Local *scalpellini* taught him traditional techniques for crafting fireplaces and doorways, which he incorporated into his own artworks. Over time, Stefano's work has evolved, and he now undertakes both monumental sculptures and intricate restoration projects, including his current commissions as part of the artisans team at the ancient Imperial Fora in Rome. Having learned from the local masters, he brings a deep respect for tradition and understanding of craftsmanship to the festival.

Photos: (from top) "Ciclo Vitale" by Evrim Kilic;
"Ciclica" by Mauro Antonio Mezzina; a street in
Lettomanoppello



OPEN-AIR GALLERY

10 Giornate in Pietra was born in the 1990s and, after a long pause, relaunched several years ago switching from large sculptures to *pietrales*. “Initially, there was some scepticism, as locals were unsure about the value and future of such a project and we struggled to obtain permission from residents to use the walls of their houses,” says Giacinto Di Pietrantonio. “By the third year, however, people were asking us to put *pietrales* on their home.” Interest and support have been growing, with locals volunteering during the festival, helping to install the artworks, maintaining the *pietrales* on their walls throughout the year and adorning the neighbouring streets with flowers. “In the

“Ritrovamenti” by Claudia Zanaga; a fragment of “Ti invito a vedere panorami diversi” by Dangyong Liu

Middle Ages, the people of Siena believed art should, first of all, enhance the beauty of the city,” says Di Pietrantonio. “*Pietrales* not only do that, but also attract visitors and revive the tradition of stone craftsmanship.”

Lettomanoppello’s *pietrales* collection grows every year, transforming the streets into an open-air gallery with artistic itineraries. Remarkably, modern masterpieces do not look out of place beside old stone carvings on doorways and balconies crafted by local *scalpellini* a century or two ago. The town serves as a testament to how artistic vision, bolstered by support from local authorities, can place a rural location on the cultural map – a rare achievement in Abruzzo’s small towns, where new projects frequently falter due to changing administrations, short-sighted politics, and inadequate funding.



IF YOU GO

This year's dates for the *10 Giornate in Pietra* haven't been announced yet. Keep an eye on the festival's [page](#) for updates and program details.

There are currently 41 *pietrales* in Lettomanoppello, on the main streets in the historic centre as well as smaller alleyways. The best way to discover them is to wander around the town. No map is available at the moment, but guided tours can be organised on request (in Italian; for more information, call the municipality at 0039 085 8570755).

SUGGESTED ITINERARY

I suggest following this short itinerary to see some of the best *pietrales* in Lettomanoppello:

- Start at Bar Maggi on Corso Vittorio Emanuele at the entrance to the town. Follow the road to a small street called Via Cappellini that branches to the left (past a small butcher's shop).
- On the right, you will find the *pietrales* "*Il caos sensibile*" by Petra Lange.
- Continue to the right, onto Piazza Carlo della Chiesa, and down a narrow street. You will come out in front of the beautiful *pietrales* "*Ciclo Vitale*" by Evrim Kilic.
- Turn left, then left again past house number 47, up a narrow street. At the yellow house number 17, turn right to find a magnificent work by Andrea Catolino and Yan Yun Xuan on the left wall. A little further down, on the right, is a *pietrales* by Valeria Vitulli.
- A few metres on, and you will come to the central piazza where the municipal building stands. It is decorated with elaborate acanthus leaf ornaments carved by local *scalpellini* almost 200 years ago.
- Turn right, down the street (not the one that goes up). There, on house number 6, you will find a *pietrales* by Matteo Marovino depicting a miner and a stone cutter.
- Further down Via Nino Bixio, on the right, see "*Ritrovamenti*" by Claudia Zanaga, showcasing the traditional tools used by *scalpellini* and miners.
- Down the same street, on the left, is the ethereal "*L'eterna Lotta*" by Michele Montanaro.
- Continue down that street to see several other *pietrales*, and a hundred meters forward, opposite the Santa Liberata park, you will find the lovely little *bottega*-museum of *scalpellino* Gennaro D'Alfonso.



Photos: (from top) "*Il caos sensibile*" by Petra Lange; "*Minatore e scalpellino*" by Matteo Marovino

CRAFTING RENAISSANCE FASHION IN SULMONA

By Teresa Mastrobuono

The city of Sulmona in L'Aquila province is best known for two things: its sugar-coated almond *confetti*, and the annual *Giostra Cavallesca* – a jousting competition preceded by an historical parade (*Corteo Storico*) of more than 600 people in meticulously crafted Renaissance costumes. Many of those costumes are created in the *Sartoria Storica* by Stefania Bonitatibus, in the heart of Sulmona.

Stefania's passion for clothing design began at an early age. When she was 16 years old, Stefania made her first dress. "My mamma had a very nice old pink silk bedspread," she recalls. "I liked the fabric and the colour, so I took it, cut it up, and designed my first period costume." She designed the pattern and the fit with her own imagination and resources. Although her mother was furious at the destruction of a prized silk coverlet, Stefania wore it to that year's Carnival celebration.

LA GIOSTRA

After graduation from *liceo* (high school), Stefania went on to study fashion in Rome at design academies, but eventually returned to Sulmona. She began making costumes not only for theaters and cinema, but also creating magnificent attire for historical reenactments in cities as far afield as Genoa.



A Renaissance costume for the Corteo Storico made by Stefania Bonitatibus

It was only natural that Stefania got involved in working for *La Giostra Cavalleresca di Sulmona*, being a native of the city. It is an annual historical reenactment of jousting tournaments that took place from the Middle Ages to the 17th century in the city. Held in July and August in the historic centre of Sulmona, this event features knights from the town's seven neighbourhoods and districts (*borghi e sestieri*) competing in intense jousting matches in the spectacular Piazza Garibaldi (for more see our article [here](#)). Beyond the knightly joust, *La Giostra* includes costumed parades, cultural activities, and social gatherings, attracting thousands of spectators from Italy and abroad.

Each district in the town has a seamstress who makes and mends the costumes.

Stefania has been crafting Renaissance attire for her home district, Porta Bonomini and, occasionally, for clients from other neighbourhoods as well. When asked how many items she has created during her career, she replies: "So far, I have probably designed and made several thousands of costumes. I have no idea how many exactly. There are too many to count!"

INSPIRING PALAZZO

Stefania works from a small room in the 15th-century *Palazzo Tabassi* (see page 13 for more about the *palazzo*), located in the historic centre of Sulmona. To reach her workspace, she enters through an imposing wooden gate and walks through a stone-paved courtyard. She then ascends a grand staircase to a flower-decked loggia. Is there a more fitting setting for someone who makes Renaissance costumes? Stefania admits that she finds the palazzo "very inspiring." The last *Giostra antica*, held in 1643, was won by Scipione Tabassi, a scion of the noble Sulmonese family that still owns the palace where



Photos (from top right clockwise): Stefania Bonitatibus in her workshop; Stefania wearing the first dress she made from a bedspread; Renaissance costumes made by Stefania Bonitatibus



Stefania crafts costumes for the modern-day re-enactment of this historic event.

A cutting table with a high-tech sewing machine resting on it dominates the centre of the small room. Rows of notions and threads, bins of fabrics and trims line the walls around it, all carefully arranged. The walls are covered with photos and posters of theatrical productions from Sulmona's Teatro Maria Caniglia. One of the photos depicts Stefania wearing that first dress from the luxurious pink silk bedspread that launched her career.

A dark wooden bookcase in the workshop is filled with volumes on costume design and Renaissance art. "When a client comes in to commission a historic piece for La Giostra, I flick through these albums and try to match the personality with a costume that I might have seen in a painting," explains Stefania.

METICULOUS CRAFT

Up to 20 metres of fabric is needed to make just one dress. Stefania admits that it would be too expensive to use opulent silk, velvet, brocade, and satin, as in the 16th - 17th century designs, so she substitutes with more affordable fabrics. Although they might not be as luxurious as in the past, Stefania meticulously crafts each ruffle, puffed sleeve, fold, and slit. It takes between one and three weeks to complete a single outfit. Intricate embroidery is done using modern methods. "I find a pattern I like, put it through a computer, and then use my embroidery machine." Hundreds of beads are sewn by hand on each dress with the help from Stefania's cousin. The results are stunning and historically accurate, reproducing the elegance and detail of the original Renaissance garments.

Stefania teaches costume-making in a local college, but working for *La Giostra* takes up most of her time. She researches and designs for the event throughout the year and, as the date for the historical re-enactment draws nearer, other seamstresses from the town join her in the workshop to make sure that the knights and noblewomen get their beautiful



In the *Sartoria Storica* workshop

costumes on time to parade through the streets of Sulmona, evoking the town's glorious past.

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This year, *La Giostra* will be held on July 27th and 28th, with the European Tournament on August 3. See the full programme on the event's [website](#) or Facebook [page](#).

PALAZZO TABASSI IN SULMONA

Palazzo Tabassi on Via Ciofano, in the heart of Sulmona's historic centre, is a typical 15th-century noble residence. A grand, imposing building, it was badly damaged by several earthquakes. Only the Neapolitan-style main portal, a magnificent bifora window above it and several other fragments remain from the original palazzo. The impressive entrance was built by a Lombard master, as indicated by the inscription in Teutonic characters on a stone slab on the top right side: "MASTRO PETRI DA COMO MADE THIS DOOR. A.D. MCCCCXLVIII."

Just above the entrance, there is the famous bifora window (divided vertically into two openings by a small column and topped by arches; the style was typical of the Romanesque and Gothic periods). It is the only one that survived from a series that decorated the façade. Its intricate ornaments and delicate carvings were chiselled by an unknown master.

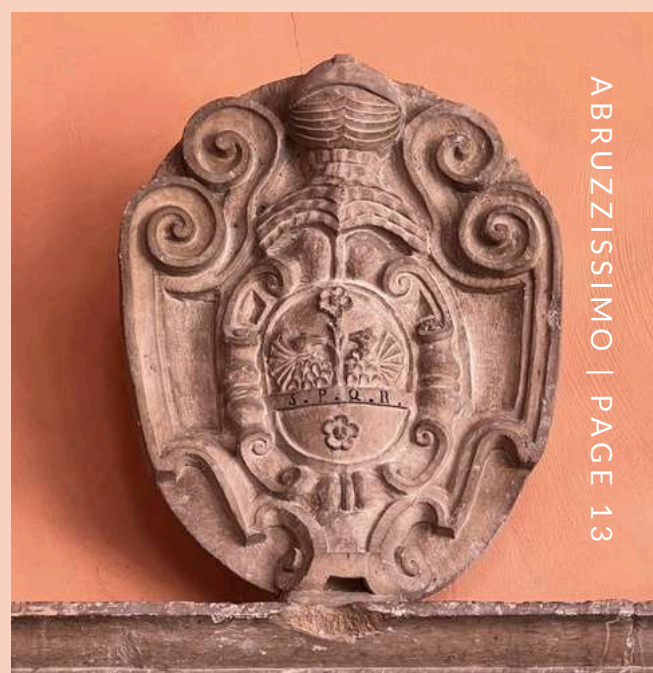
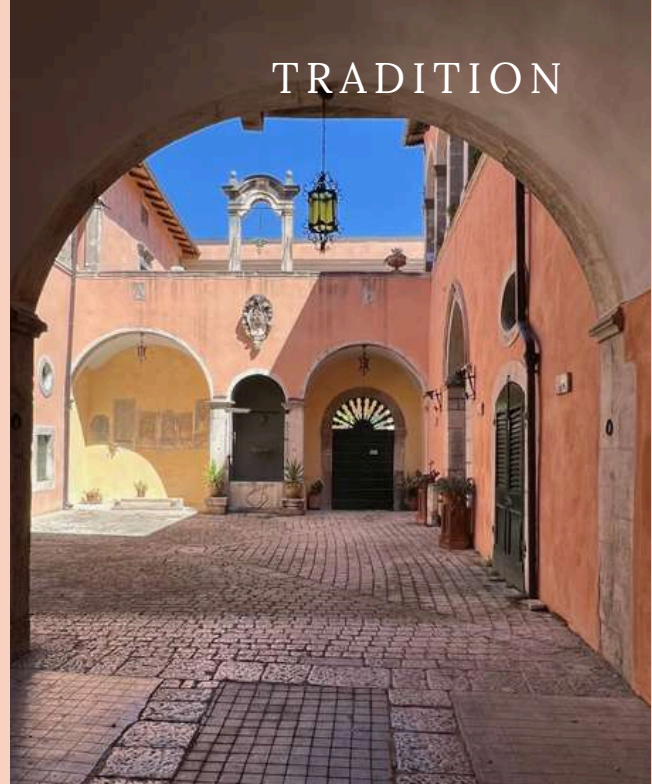
In the courtyard you will see an old well with the Tabassi family coat of arms. Six ancient Roman funerary inscriptions are embedded on the left side wall beside the well. Preserved by the Tabassi, passionate antiques collectors, these inscriptions immortalise slaves and freedmen who lived in Sulmona during that era.

The courtyard is overlooked by the elegant upper loggia, with a large staircase leading to the upper noble floor. The Tabassi family still resides in one wing of the palazzo and the front rooms are rented out to the town hall and are used for school theatre rehearsals and the *Sartoria Storica* where Stefania Bonitatibus works.

The *palazzo* is closed to the public, but you can have a quick look around the courtyard when the entrance door is open (normally, on Saturday afternoons or some mornings).

You can read more about the noble Tabassi family on their [website](#).

Photos (from top): the courtyard of the palazzo; a loggia; the Tabassi family coat of arms



CAMPO DI GIOVE: THE LITTLE TOWN THAT COULD

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva

Despite its remote location, Campo di Giove has successfully navigated social and economic changes over the centuries, becoming a lively mountain community and a popular tourist destination. In this mini-guide, we explore the town's past and present and suggest things to do and see.

Situated at 1064 meters above sea level beneath the towering peaks of the Majella range, Campo di Giove is the highest municipality in the Maiella National Park with spectacular vistas. Leveraging these scenic setting to develop a thriving winter tourism industry helped to keep the local economy afloat. In the 1970s, much like the neighbouring communities of Pescocostanzo and Roccaraso, the town strategically invested in the development of a winter resort and ski lifts at the nearby Le Piane location which brought many tourists.

THRIVING COMMUNITY

Although the number of full-time residents dropped to only 750 in recent decades, Campo di Giove is a lively town. “Many young people have decided to stay in Campo di Giove, started families here and

keep the town alive. Just recently, another baby was born, adding to the town’s population,” told me Domenico Capaldo, the vice president of [Tavola Rotonda](#), the local social cooperative.

There is an elementary school with nine children, all in a single, multi-grade class, while older kids go to school in Sulmona, which is a 40-minute bus ride away. Tennis courts, a swimming pool, and football fields buzz with activities in summer months. There are several bars, restaurants, a butchers’, bakery and small food shop. The town is quieter during off-season, but its community remains strong and active throughout the year. Since 2018, the Tavola Rotonda social cooperative has been providing essential services that are often reduced or absent in small mountain towns and villages. “We deliver medications for elderly people living alone, organise car pooling or shuttle services for young people and elderly to go to Sulmona to the theatre, cinema, or events in other locations,” explains Capaldo. “We have about 80 members in the cooperative, a significant number for such a small population, which means most of the local families are involved.” The cooperative also manages a bar and [camping site](#), takes care of the public green spaces in Campo di Giove, and runs a project related to the recovery of mountain agriculture

Campo di Giove



and indigenous crops. Last year, they opened a mini-mill where anyone can grind their grain into flour. Over the last few years, the Tavola Rotonda cooperative has managed to create eight full- and part-time jobs, allowing eight young people remain in their hometown rather than leave seeking employment elsewhere—a notable achievement considering the mountain areas in Abruzzo struggle with declining population and youth unemployment.

TURBULENT PAST

Campo di Giove's advantageous location along trade routes in the Valle Peligna and its proximity to religious centres like the Abbey of San Vincenzo al Volturno, meant it was a desirable, strategic town for many rulers over the centuries. From ancient Romans to medieval lords, Campo di Giove lived through sieges, looting, fires, earthquakes, and turbulent feudal rivalries. The town flourished and grew in the Middle Ages, ruled by the powerful noble families such as the Cantelmo and Caldora. Its fortunes ebbed and flowed with alliances and conflicts between competing powers, including the Kingdom of Naples and the Papal States. As the feudal system waned, Campo di Giove turned towards agriculture and the transhumance tradition.

During World War II, in 1943, Campo di Giove, due to its strategic location near the Gustav Line, became a German headquarters under the command of Albert Kesselring. Oppression and violence marked this period, but the town was spared destruction, as the Nazis refrained from adopting the scorched-earth tactic there.

RAILWAY CONNECTION

One of Campo di Giove's unique features is its railway—a historic line dating back to 1897—that connected Pescara to Naples. From the town it continues to Rivisondoli-Pescocostanzo, situated at 1260 meters, Italy's second-highest railway station after the Brenner Pass in the Alps. The railway provided many local jobs, which slowed depopulation—a plight that has emptied many mountain villages in Abruzzo.

Photos: archways and stone buildings in the old part of Campo di Giove





Ten years ago, the railway was relaunched as a tourist attraction by Fondazione FS Italiane and has become a huge success. Dubbed the Transsiberiana d'Italia (the Trans-Siberian of Italy), the route starts in Sulmona along a scenic mountain route every Saturday and Sunday bringing thousands of visitors to Campo di Giove and other small towns along the line every year.

THE FUTURE

Domenico Capaldo says that the people of Campo di Giove have come to realise that banking on the town's natural beauty is the right choice for the future, although some adjustments need to be made as the town's ski resort deals with the climate changes. "Unfortunately, the amount of snow has decreased in the last decades. It is not like what we had in the 1960s anymore." Another unexpected set back happened this year when the small, picturesque Lake Ticino on the town's outskirts dried out. And yet, Campo di Giove's charm remains strong. Hundreds of tourists arrive on the Transsiberiana d'Italia trains on weekends all year around; locals organise live music concerts atop mountain peaks above the town on warm summer nights; the camping site and town's hotels fill up with happy tourists in high season, and, in winter, the central piazza glows with the twinkling lights of the annual Christmas market. Through centuries of change, Campo di Giove's community continues to adapt and thrive.

Photos: on the streets of Campo di Giove



THINGS TO DO AND SEE IN CAMPO DI GIOVE

EXPLORE THE HISTORIC CENTRE

Enter the well-preserved old town from Via San Matteo climbing up the 100 steps of the Scala Santa. At the bottom of the steps, you can turn right to walk under the long gallery of arches, known as Via del Supporto, created to make space for additional houses and barns. This street links the alleys that descend from the upper part of the old town, including Vico del Sacco, Vico Quaranta, and Vico del Forno Vecchio. Wander around to see medieval fortified houses and *palazzi* built in the 16th and 17th centuries. Along the streets you will find information boards (in Italian). See Visit Campo di Giove [website](#) for additional details.

ENJOY THE FESTIVALS

The last week of August, the town hosts *Borgo in Festa* with live music concerts, street food and an international short film festival. For more details keep an eye on the ProLoco's [page](#).

In October, during the Harvest Festival, local restaurants set up food stands on the central piazza serving traditional dishes made with the produce from the nearby farms. You can taste indigenous varieties of beans, breads and pasta made with ancient grains growing in the mountains, buy local cheeses and cured meats and meet the producers. The programme is published on the organisers' [page](#).

SAMPLE TRADITIONAL BAKED GOODIES

Be sure to stop by the *Antica Biscotteria* to taste traditional biscuits and cakes made by Signora Angela. Her *crostata di ricotta e marmellata di more*



Photos: (above) Via del Supporto; (below) the Big Bench in Campo di Giove

(*crostata* pie with local ricotta and blackberry jam) and the *dolce del vescovo* (a soft biscuit with almonds and raisins) are so good, you'll want to move in next door! **Address:** Piazza Duval 41.

SIT ON THE BIG BENCH

Follow Via Colle della Croce on foot or by car to the top of the town to find a gigantic bench that you can climb onto to admire the sweeping views below. It is part of the Big Bench Project which aims to encourage people to explore the countryside, make adults feel like little children again, see things from a fresh perspective, and support local tourism. Enter "Big Bench #274 Campo di Giove" in your Goggle Maps navigator to get there.

VISIT THE MERCATINO DI NATALE

Each year, from the end of November, Campo di Giove hosts one of Abruzzo's most charming Christmas markets (*Mercatino di Natale*). Last year, 35,000 people visited the market, setting a record for such a small town. The dates will be announced on the organisers' [Facebook page](#).



**AVAILABLE
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**FESTIVALS AND SAGRE
in ABRUZZO**



DOING IT THEMSELVES IN RAPINO

By Linda Dini Jenkins

Steve Park and Lynn Hood thought they knew what they wanted in a restoration project: water, electricity, and a place they could live in while they restored it. But you don't always get what you want, right? Instead, they're living in an elegant souped-up caravan on their property just outside of Rapino centro, several years into a huge project that began with no roof, no water, and no electricity – doing it their way, and loving it.

“Once we saw this place, we quickly discovered that the things we thought we had to have were not really that important,” explains Steve. “What was much more important was the situation – the land, the views, a well-kept access road, and did I mention the views?” Steve, originally from London and a former Metropolitan Police Protection Officer for the Royal Family has taken the project on with enthusiasm, but with eyes wide open.

Lynn grew up in the north of England. She was a maths teacher and then worked for British Airways – she signed up for two years but stayed for 35, working on the Concorde and then in recruitment for the company. Needless to say, she travelled a great deal and saw most of the world. “I left the airline during Covid but had plenty of opportunity to check out where we might want to go in our retirement,” she says. “Italy was always high on the list for us.”

THE FATES ALIGN

Lynn, an avid researcher, did her homework about which areas of Italy would provide what they were looking for. They wanted a farmhouse, near a village and an olive grove would be a plus.

After a lot of online research, Steve and Lynn decided to see Abruzzo for themselves in 2010. They flew into Rome and embarked on a five-day house search. One day they were driving around the area and met an old man near a house with a



Lynn Hood, Steve Park and Button

Vendesi sign. They were charmed. Later, when the estate agent drove them around Rapino, guess which house he showed them?

“It turns out that the farmhouse had been used by the British and American armies during World War II,” recounts Steve. “And luckily for us, it was a clean sale, meaning that it did not have a multi-family ownership situation, which complicates so many property sales.” They bought the house, which they called Brambletye, in 2010 but, because they were both still working in the UK, they could only come periodically to get to know the area, meet the locals, and – best of all – tend to their new olive grove. They are walking distance to Rapino – Lynn says the locals call them “the people on the hill” – and can produce about 150 litres of olive oil in a good year, bringing their olives to one of the local olive mills for pressing.

CONSTRUCTION BUSINESS

Steve and Lynn bought (and towed from the UK) a caravan to live in while work was being done (“the ugliest one we could find, so no one would steal it,” they joke). Another important purchase they made was Button, a Maremma/Border Collie mix, and the only genuine Italian in the house. He is, apparently, a rock star in the area.

They were eager to start on the restoration of their 300-year-old farmhouse, constructed of Maiella stone on the edge of Maiella National Park, overlooking the Adriatic. Their objective has always been to blend the old and the new, keeping the vaulted ceilings and making as much as they can, while ensuring that they had all the seismic retrofitting in place. “Our goal is for a little piece of 1950s Italy,” explains Steve with a twinkle. “Only with a few modern touches.” And a vegetable garden – they only go to the market for things they can’t get from local farms.

They began by meeting with architects and geometre, but most seemed to want to create their own vision, not what Lynn and Steve wanted. So they waited until they found the right person. Because they wanted to do most of the work themselves, and because they quickly learned that that is not permitted in Abruzzo, Steve

took on the Herculean task of researching all the Italian building regulations and having them translated. “I went to the municipality to find out how to get started and was directed to the municipality’s own architect – Mario,” says Steve. “It was the most fortuitous thing that has happened to us.”

“We spent hundreds of hours talking with Mario and discovered so much about what we needed to learn,” Lynn explains. “Mario knew we wanted to do a lot of the work ourselves, and he was incredulous when Steve told him he was going to start his own company so that would be possible.” They are now “regular” in all respects and the owners of a construction company, Bramlette Costruzione, SRLS.

Although Steve did not have a background in the building trades, he was a practicing commercial draftsman for a time and is very good at getting things done. With the company, he can now manage all the work himself and, as a Chamber of Commerce-designated “artisanal builder,” he can also work on other people’s properties if he wants to. Steve explains that he was frustrated by the quotes he was getting from builders. “They were completely open-ended, with no firm timetable.

Lynn and Steve’s house in Rapino



Now I have a great team of people who know what they're doing and who do high-level work on a reasonable timetable."

LIVING THE DREAM

This restoration project will undoubtedly continue for a few more years. Doing things correctly takes time here in the land of piano, piano and there are always unforeseen events, like finding out that you can't reuse the rubble unearthed on your property, nor can you move it yourself. Or that scaffolding costs about €400 per month to rent (they bought their own) and that there are stiff fines for the builder, the architect, and the homeowner if you go on your property while work is being done. Having his own company circumvents all this and lets him retain control. Visitors to the Brambletye Facebook [Group](#) and [YouTube](#) pages can see the enormous scope of what they're doing and check in on their progress. It's long days of hard work.

Still, they say they are living the dream. They are grateful to live among the locals, and the project has certainly helped with their Italian. Lynn has a natural capacity for languages but, as Steve says, "Everybody

learns languages in different ways." He began by studying Italian phrasebooks while commuting to work on the London Underground. Eventually, a few fellow passengers noticed what he was doing and joined in. He recalls, "It made the commute much more tolerable and we all got something out of it."

Their advice for anyone considering a similar undertaking is to do your research well in advance. "Do the soil analysis, find out if what you want to do is right for a seismic area, understand that things will take a lot longer than you think, learn some business Italian, be prepared for often massive increases in the cost of building supplies, and so on," cautions Steve. That said, Lynn stresses that it's incredibly important to be sociable, be confident, and always put your best foot forward. And take Button everywhere.

Linda Dini Jenkins is a freelance writer and travel planner. She is the author of [Up at the Villa: Travels with my Husband](#), and the new memoir, [Becoming Italian: Chapter and Verse from an Italian American Girl](#).

The town of Rapino. Photo courtesy of Comune di Rapino





THE VANISHING PHYSICIST

by Richard Walmsley

Another mystery novel by the British author set in Abruzzo. In the town of L'Aquila, an anxious wife reports that her husband, Professor Donato Pisano, has mysteriously disappeared. This is no ordinary event, as he is the leading scientist at the Montenero physics laboratory in the Gran Sasso mountain range. Neutrinos traveling faster than light? It sounds impossible! Could this ground-breaking theory be the reason behind the professor's baffling vanishing act? Beppe Stancato is tasked with the investigation. He finds himself entangled in a web of deceit and half-truths, even from those who should be aiding his search. Who are the two enigmatic visitors from America who arrived just as the professor went missing? And what is the connection to the elusive Giada Costa in this enigmatic case?

Despite the obstacles, Beppe's relentless pursuit of the truth keeps him going. The breakthrough arrives from an unexpected clue – a smell. From that moment, the investigation picks up speed as time runs out to uncover Professor Donato Pisano's fate.

Richard Walmsley has visited Abruzzo many times and masterfully portrays the region's character in his other mystery novels with Commissario Beppe Stancato as the main protagonist: *The Case of the Sleeping Beauty* and *A Close Encounter with Mushrooms*.

The books are available on [Amazon](#).



MEMORIE DI GUERRA

by Ester Brown Nannarone

The book provides a poignant account of her experiences in Scanno (AQ) during World War II. As a Swiss national, Ester found herself acting as a mediator and translator for the German forces occupying her village. The memoir vividly portrays the tension and challenges of living near the Gustav Line during the Allied advance, highlighting Ester's crucial interventions that often mitigated potential repercussions for the villagers. This is not a history book, but memories of an ordinary person who lived through the tragedy of war navigating the complexities of survival in a remote mountain village.

The book also sheds light on the broader theme of the so-called "silent resistance" exhibited by the isolated Abruzzese population. Ester's memoirs illustrate how the villagers, cut off from the outside world, self-organized and navigated the moral landscape of wartime, distinguishing between the hungry and the well-fed, marauders and the compassionate, justice and injustice. Through her vivid storytelling, Ester not only recounts personal and communal struggles but also celebrates the resilience and solidarity of her adopted community.

The book (in Italian) is available for free download [here](#).

ABRUZZO'S BUZZ-WORTHY HONEY

By Anna Swann

Abruzzo has a long, sweet tradition of beekeeping that dates back to ancient times. However, the beekeeping as we know it, with beehives, began to take off in Abruzzo in the late 19th century.

Today, beekeeping is an important part of the region's economy. According to Coldiretti (a regional farmers' organization), Abruzzo is home to over 40,000 beehives, more than 1,000 apiaries, and around 700 registered beekeepers. These figures translate into an impressive annual production of 800-900 tons of honey, valued at approximately 4-5 million euros. A significant portion of this honey, 79%, is sold on the market, while 21% is retained for personal use.

The diversity of honey produced in Abruzzo is as varied as its landscapes. The region's honeys include both wildflower and the so-called mono-floral varieties, each with unique characteristics. Wildflower (*millefiori*) honey, derived from the nectar of numerous flower species (up to 80 in spring) is rich and fragrant; *sulla* (French honeysuckle) honey is light and delicate; *lupinella* (common sainfoin) honey has a subtle hay-like scent and flavour; chestnut bloom honey is strong and dark.

The town of Tornareccio, renowned as Abruzzo's honey capital, produces about half of the region's honey. It has been home to apiarist families since the late 19th century. Today, Tornareccio's beekeepers continue the tradition of nomadic practice moving their beehives across Abruzzo (with some apiaries located high up in the mountains, at a minimum altitude of 800 meters) and beyond—reaching Molise, Marche, Puglia, Basilicata, and Lazio—following the blooms to harvest the finest nectars. Most apiarists in the area still preserve the traditional, non-pasteurized production method to maintain natural flavours earning international accolades and numerous awards.



WHERE TO BUY THE BEST HONEY

TORNARECCIO REGINA DI MIELE FESTIVAL

Every year, in September, thousands of visitors flock to Tornareccio to celebrate the town's beekeeping tradition. The two-day festival is a showcase of the region's best honey producers selling their "liquid gold". A highlight of the festival is the prestigious national competition "*Tre gocce d'oro – grandi mieli d'Italia*," honoring the best honeys from Abruzzo and beyond. For more details see the [Tornareccio Regina di Miele page](#).

APICOLTURA LUCA FINOCCHIO

One of Abruzzo's most renowned beekeepers, Luca Finocchio makes honey in Tornareccio, which has been recognized as the best in Italy, winning multiple top awards. Globally, Finocchio's honey has also garnered prestigious accolades. The company makes about 15 varieties including such rare flavours as cherry, clementine, and ivy bloom (see their online [shop](#)).

BOTTEGA IN BORGO DI LATURO

Martina De Gregoris is a young beekeeper who has several hives set up in Borgo di Laturo, one of Abruzzo's most isolated hamlets in the mountains of Teramo province reachable only on foot or in a sturdy 4x4. She makes small amounts of excellent mountain wildflower honey sold in the hamlet's *bottega*. Contact Martina via the Borgo di Laturo [page](#). Read about Borgo di Laturo in the July-August 2022 issue of ABRUZZISSIMO available [here](#).

See a recipe for *calcionetti* with almonds and honey on page 28.

CHICOCCE E PATANE

By Dora Abbonizio

I have learnt to make many traditional dishes from my mother, Antonietta, who is now 86 years old. One of them is a simple yet delicious dish called in dialect *chicocce e patate* (zucchini with potatoes). This dish was a staple during the wheat harvest season.

Back in those days, life revolved around the rhythms of farming. The wheat harvest was a critical time, demanding the full attention and effort of the entire community. From the early hours of the morning, everyone would be out in the fields, working tirelessly under the sun. My mother told me how they began their day at five-six o'clock in the morning, often with little to eat, just stale bread softened with water, drizzled with oil and topped with wild greens. Mid-morning break, *lo sdijuno*, was at around 11am and *chicocce e patate* was one of the dishes everyone ate in the fields together with a frittata (omelette), cheese, peppers fried with eggs, and chard greens with beans, accompanied by wine. The simplicity of the ingredients belied the nourishment they provided. Women would prepare the food in the early hours, carefully packed into it into traditional baskets, which they carried on the head.

At three o'clock in the afternoon everyone would stop for a simple lunch and then continued to work until the evening and went to take care of sheep, pigs or cows.

Together with her family, Dora Abbonizio manages the agriturismo Fattoria Carbonetta near Lanciano. *Chicocce e patate* is always part of their hearty starters menu. You can book a table by calling 0039 087 2220642 or 0039 3498306339.

INGREDIENTS

- 500g zucchini
- 400g potatoes, peeled
- 1 medium onion
- Some olive oil
- Salt to taste



PREPARATION

Cut the potatoes in half and slice them evenly, not too thick and not too thin. Aim for a uniform thickness to ensure even cooking. Do the same with the zucchini and keep them in a separate bowl.

Peel the onion and slice it thinly.

Heat a generous amount of olive oil in a large skillet over low heat.

Once the oil is hot but not smoking, add the onions. Sauté for a couple of minutes, then add the potatoes, a little water and season with a pinch of salt.

Cover with a lid and fry the potatoes, turning occasionally, until they start to become golden but are not yet fully cooked.

Add the zucchini slices to the skillet, mixing them gently with the potatoes.

Continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until both the potatoes and zucchini are tender.

Taste and adjust the seasoning with more salt if necessary.

Serve hot or cold.

TORTA DI ALBICOCCHE

By Teresa Mastrobuono

This delightful apricot cake recipe was given to me by my friend Gloria Francavilla Burke, an Italian American with roots in the small town of Lucoli, just outside L'Aquila. A few years ago, during a visit to her Abruzzese relatives in Abruzzo, Gloria experienced a memorable dinner that concluded with an unforgettable dessert. The evening was filled with a bountiful spread, and after over-indulging in numerous delicious courses, Gloria was ready to forgo dessert. However, when the special homemade apricot cake made its appearance, she couldn't resist.

Despite being thoroughly full, Gloria, the guest of honour, was served the first generous slice. "I didn't think I'd leave alive," she told me later, referring to the sheer amount of food she had consumed. Yet, the apricot cake was so good that it made the discomfort worthwhile.

Gloria asked her cousin for the *torta di albicocca* recipe and it turned out to be a treasured family signature dessert with somewhat mysterious origins – no one seems to remember how it came to be. It's just always been a part of their family celebrations, much to everyone's delight.

Now, you too can enjoy this apricot cake, a dessert that's been passed down through generations, bringing joy and sweetness to every occasion.

INGREDIENTS

- 300g ripe apricots (about 1 ¼ cups)
- 200g wheat flour (1 ½ cups plus a tablespoon)
- 150g sugar (2/3 cup)
- 100g butter (1/3 cup or 7 tbs), melted
- 3 eggs
- 1 packet of baking powder
- a pinch of salt



PREPARATION

Wash the apricots and cut them in half. Remove the stones and cut the fruit into thin slices.

In a bowl, beat the eggs with the sugar until frothy, then add the melted butter and mix well. Add the sifted flour with baking powder and pinch of salt to the liquid mixture, stir gently until smooth.

Pour the mixture into a buttered and floured baking dish, spread the apricot slices on top. Bake at 180°C (350 degrees F) for about 40 minutes.

For an even more mouthwatering apricot cake, you can add a sprinkling of brown sugar to the surface before baking.

If you want to further enrich the flavor of the cake, you can add a handful of slivered almonds on top of the batter before baking. This will impart a crunchy touch and an irresistible aroma.

This cake will keep well for 2-3 days in an airtight container at room temperature.

CALCIONETTI WITH ALMONDS AND HONEY

By Connie De Vincentis

One of the oldest recipes in Abruzzo that takes form in various guises is for the famous calcionetti, cavcinitt, caggntt' or caciunitt – deep-fried ravioli-shaped small pastries with a filling. The name and stuffing vary in different areas of Abruzzo. The most common are either a mixture of chickpeas sweetened with concentrated grape must or with just a basic grape jam.

When I first came to live in Abruzzo, the only recipe I knew was the chickpea version, which my family in Australia made religiously every Christmas. But my mother-in-law, Donnina, introduced me to an amazing version of calcionetti with honey and almonds. Her son, now my husband, is a beekeeper, so her supply of honey was abundant and it was her recipe of choice.

While in my town of Tocco da Casauria, where she lived and where I live now, the chickpea version was the norm, and she introduced her recipe from the province of Chieti to the locals. Considered the expert of the honey and almond calcionetti, Donnina eventually started making them for the whole town during the Christmas season.

Here is my mother-in-law's recipe for calcionetti that I make for special occasions. You will need only a few simple ingredients and some patience for frying them.

INGREDIENTS

Makes about 40 small *calcionetti*

For the filling:

- 300g of almonds, preferably unpeeled as they have more flavour; you will peel them at a later stage
- 3 tbs firm honey (millefiori or similar)



For the pastry:

- 600g all-purpose flour
- 150 ml extra virgin olive oil
- 300 ml white wine
- Vegetable oil for frying

PREPARATION

Boil the almonds for two minutes, strain and peel. Place almonds on an oven tray and toast in the oven until they are golden. Cool and chop finely.

Mix them with the honey and place in fridge while you prepare your pastry.

Place your flour on a pastry board and create a well in the centre. Pour wine and oil in the formed well and add a pinch of salt. Knead the dough gently until it doesn't stick to your hands and is easy to handle, but do not overdo it.

Cut thick dough slices and roll them into long strips (approximately 3 mm thick and 7 cm wide) with a rolling pin or a pasta machine.

Place a teaspoon of the honey and almond mixture in the centre of your pastry strip, ensuring there is sufficient space between the scoops for sealing the edges.

Fold the dough over, seal the edges and cut ravioli-like shapes with a pastry cutter. Seal each *calcionetto* gently with fork tines and place on a floured surface while you prepare the rest.

Heat up the vegetable oil in a pot (at least an inch) and deep fry the *calcionetti* until golden brown. When they have completely cooled, sprinkle with icing (powdered) sugar.

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