

ISSUE NO. 08 • DECEMBER-  
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TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD WINE

# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



**Made in Abruzzo: a Holiday  
Gift Guide**

*page 3*

**The Joyous Presepe  
Tradition**

*page 10*

**A Day in San Benedetto  
in Perillis**

*page 18*



# CONTENTS

## 02. EDITOR'S NOTE

## 03. MADE IN ABRUZZO HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

## 06. ABRUZZO IN PHOTOS

## 07. THE VANISHED METROPOLIS OF PELTUINUM

## 10. ABRUZZO'S JOYOUS PRESEPE TRADITION

*Where to find the most beautiful  
nativity scenes in Abruzzo*

## 14. THE FIERY FEAST OF SAINT'ANTONIO ABATE

*Le Farchie Festival in Fara Filorum  
Petri. A photo essay.*

## 18. A DAY IN SAN BENEDETTO IN PERILLIS

## 22. BYZANTINE CULTURE IN THE HEART OF ABRUZZO

## 24. PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A LOCAL IN POPOLI

## 26. SNOWSHOEING IN A WINTER WONDERLAND

## 30. CHRISTMAS SPECIAL: FOOD & WINE, TRADITIONAL RECIPES

*Dried figs from Atesa, Christmas  
soup, il parozzo cake, desserts  
with nuts, sweet wines*

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# ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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Magazine

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# Ciao a tutti!

How time flies! It is December already and the year is drawing to an end. I am sure most of us are going to be relieved to wave goodbye to 2020. This is going to be the strangest, quietest Christmas, so the least we all deserve is a big Abruzzese-style feast. We prepared a special recipe bonanza with delicious ideas for traditional festive dishes (page 30). And our Made in Abruzzo Shopping Guide will help you to find the best gifts by local artisans (page 3).

There is no Christmas in Abruzzo without nativity scenes, enjoyed by both children and adults alike, religious people and non-believers. We talk about this joyous custom on page 10.

Our photo essay on page 14 takes you to the village of Fara Filiorum Petri to see the beautiful festival with pagan roots: *le farchie*. We invite you to stroll among the ruins of the once mighty Roman city of Peltuinum (page 7) and explore the best mountain trails on snowshoes (page 26).

Do you enjoy reading ABRUZZISSIMO? You can contribute to its upkeep by [making a donation here](#). We are a small team of volunteers who are passionate about Abruzzo and we need your help to make the magazine grow.

We'll be taking a break in January, so the next issue of ABRUZZISSIMO will arrive in your inbox on February 3.

Sending you all warm holiday greetings. *Buon Natale e Felice Anno Nuovo a tutti!*

## **A presto,**

Anna Lebedeva

Editor

# Made in Abruzzo

## HOLIDAY GIFTS GUIDE

At ABRUZZISSIMO, we like all thing Abruzzo. This Christmas, more than ever, small businesses and artisans from the region need support, so we picked our favourite “Made in Abruzzo” gift ideas to inspire and help you with your holiday shopping.



### TRADITIONAL BLANKETS

Coperte Merlino have been making amazing high-quality Abruzzese double-sided woollen blankets in Taranta Peligna since 1870. They still use old traditional patterns, including the famous cherubs, and knot the fringe on each blanket by hand. The factory has an [online shop](#) and ships worldwide.

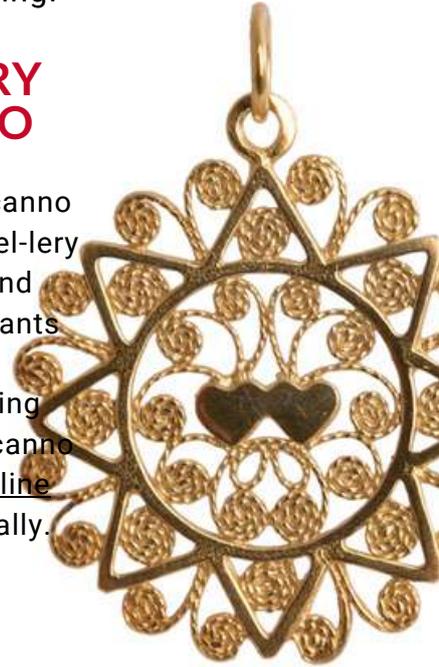
### CONTEMPORARY TABLEWARE



[Abruzzo Creativo](#) designs contemporary tableware decorated with patterns such as the presentosa jewel, the magnificent bridge in the port of Pescara, and the warrior of Capestrano. We love the plates with a trabocco fishing machine and the howling wolves mugs.

### FINE JEWELLERY FROM SCANNO

The Di Rienzo family in Scanno has been making fine jewel-ery since 1850: presentose and the famous amorino pendants (the actress Helen Mirren wore one recently!), amazing pieces with hand-made Scanno lace, etc. They have an [online shop](#) and ship internationally.



### WAFFLE MAKERS

Massimo at Aveia Ars makes amazing waffle irons and cookie stamps with traditional Abruzzese patterns (e.g., *presentosa*, *rosone* etc.) in the earthquake-devastated village of Fossa. To order, contact him via [Facebook](#) or at [aveiaars@gmail.com](mailto:aveiaars@gmail.com).



## COLOURFUL CERAMICS

Domenico Guardiani makes quality colourful ceramics in the centre of Pescara. In his [online shop](#) you can buy vases, plates, mugs, classic and modern, all painted by hand.



## ARTISANAL PANETTONE

The Merlini family makes artisanal *panettone*: with local olive oil and candied olives, organic farro flour, truffles, and vino cotto. Browse their selection in the [online shop](#). Delivery throughout Europe (contact them via email to place your order and inquire about the shipping costs).



## SWEET HAMPERS FROM L'AQUILA

The Calvisi family of [Dolce Aveja](#) has been making delicious traditional confectionery in L'Aquila for 40 years. Their Christmas gift boxes are filled with biscuits, candied almonds, nougat, chocolates, jams, liqueurs – all made in their small pastry shop. International shipping available.



## HONEY GOODIES FROM TORNARECCIO

Great stocking fillers from the award-winning bee keeping company in Tornareccio – Apicoltura Luca Finocchio: sweets, cosmetics, liqueurs all made with local honey. They have an [online shop](#) and ship in Europe.

MADE IN ABRUZZO

## COSMETICS WITH NAVELLI SAFFRON

Tindora high-end cosmetics are made in L'Aquila with organic saffron from the Navelli Plains. The company makes regular donations to support young saffron farmers in the area. Worldwide shipping.



## OLIVE OIL IN CASTELLI CERAMICS

Extra virgin olive oil from a family farm in Penne is great, but when it's sold in beautiful hand-painted ceramic bottles from Castelli, it makes for a very special gift. In this online shop, you will find other delicacies from local producers. We love their hand-painted ceramic boxes with saffron.



## NOUGAT AND CONFETTI FROM SULMONA

The William Di Carlo factory has been making confetti using a secret family recipe since the 19th century. They are also famous for their delicious traditional nougat. For Christmas, they make beautiful gift boxes filled with sweet goodies. We love their old-fashioned tins with four types of nougat. So luscious and decadent. They ship worldwide.



## TRUFFLES FROM ABRUZZO

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## ABRUZZO IN PHOTOS

Our competition "Abruzzo in photos" is closed. We have received many wonderful pictures from our readers and will be announcing the winner in the next issue in February. Until then, we will continue sharing the best photos on our [Facebook page](#). The photo that receives the highest number of likes will win and its author will get the beautiful latest edition of Abruzzo History and Art Guide (in English) by [Carsa Edizioni](#).



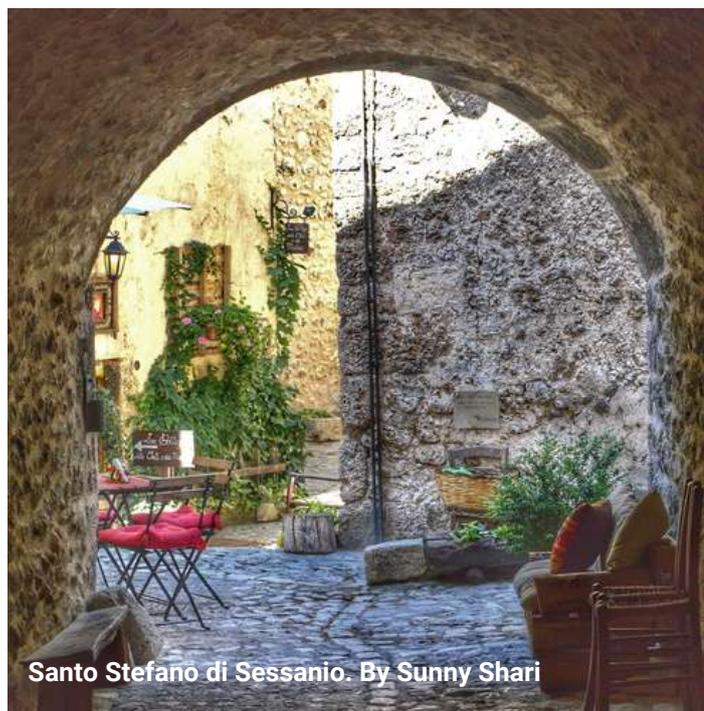
Scanno. By Lise Presseault



Pacentro. By Trish Ellse



Town of Bomba. By Steve Barber



Santo Stefano di Sessanio. By Sunny Shari

## THE VANISHED METROPOLIS OF PELTUINUM

By Camillo Chiarieri

The ancient town of Peltuinum sprawled on the Navelli Plains, between the Sirente and Gran Sasso mountain ranges. Only a few majestic ruins remain from what once was the grand capital of wool commerce.



*Fragments of Peltuinum's city walls. Photo by Linda Dini Jenkins*

The origins of Peltuinum go back to the Italic period, when the city was the main settlement of the Vestini tribe. With the arrival of ancient Romans, it became one of the biggest cities of the Empire in the area. As it was located on the main transhumance route Peltuinum, together with another big city nearby, Amiternum, was an important commercial and trade centre for managing the seasonal movement of flocks.

### METROPOLIS

According to archaeologists, at the peak of its splendour, in II century CE, Peltuinum might have had as many as 70,000 inhabitants. If it

still existed today, it would be one of the biggest cities in Abruzzo.

Some archaeological studies have revealed that, at a certain point, perhaps in the 5th century, Peltuinum was almost completely destroyed by a very powerful earthquake. After the earthquake, the city was painstakingly rebuilt, but the Roman Empire had now fallen into a serious economic crisis heading for collapse, so Peltuinum never returned to its former glory.

The archaeological site is practically unknown to the people of Abruzzo. Not too long ago, the British Academy of Archaeology conducted studies there with ground-penetrating radar to

see what was still hidden under the cultivated fields that today occupy most of what was once the urban area. The scientists discovered many things still to be excavated, including the intact amphitheatre. The radar showed well-preserved streets, the impressive size of the city walls' perimeter, the city grid, and the bases of the buildings under the ground.

Like in all other ancient Roman cities, the theatre as well as the amphitheatre were built on the outskirts, attached to the city walls. That way, at the end of a show, residents could quickly return home, while those who lived in the countryside could easily leave without making too much noise or creating a disturbance. Just like today, football stadiums are often built near the city limits to keep the disorderly fans at a safe distance. The Peltuinum theatre ruins have an interesting feature: archaeologists noticed that in the Middle Ages the westernmost part of the *cavea* (the parts where the spectators sat) had been separated from the rest of the structure, to be used as a base for the construction of a watchtower. This shows how, during the great decline following the

collapse of the Roman Empire, there was no longer any desire to go to the theatre, but only a great need for security and control of the territory. The tower erected on the Peltuinum theatre used to be in the visual field of the important fortress of Rocca Calascio for sending signals.

## FALL OF THE EMPIRE

Why did such a big city like Peltuinum disappear? What happened to its inhabitants? With the collapse of the Roman Empire and the breakdown of public administration, cities as large as Peltuinum became unsafe: subject to attacks by barbarian troops looting vulnerable urban centres, susceptible to epidemics, and scarred by food shortages because the fields had been largely abandoned.

Gradually, groups of city dwellers retreated for shelter to impervious valleys or to the most inaccessible hills, sometimes in the same places where, up to about 600 years earlier, their ancestors' Italic settlements stood. In the space of a century, all the big Roman cities were abandoned and numerous small villages (called *castella* in Latin), sometimes inhabited

**Steps in the theatre. Photo via Peltuinum/Facebook**



by just a handful of families, were born. Almost a thousand years later, they would once again come together to give life to the city of L'Aquila.

Over the following centuries, architectural decorations, columns, and large limestone blocks from the buildings of Peltuinum were re-used to build churches and medieval castles in the valley. The church of San Paolo a Peltuinum in Prata d'Ansidonia was constructed in the 7-8th century with the materials taken from Peltuinum. Stone blocks were cut among the ruins of the Roman city and transferred to the towns nearby to build houses.

Today, in Petuinum it is still possible to see the remains of the theatre, fragments of the monumental city walls and the sacred area where the main temple stood but, unfortunately, it is not a well-preserved archaeological site. The area has been neglected despite its importance and outstanding artifacts, including a particular altar from the Neolithic period. A large rock with a carved "H" is somewhat of a mystery. Some academics say it was an ancient wine press, but many believe it was an altar used by the Vestini tribe for animal sacrifices.

***The church of San Paolo a Peltuinum. Photo via Peltuinum/Facebook***



***The mysterious altar. Photo via Peltuinum/Facebook***

If the site continues to be neglected as it is now, in a few years nature will swallow the ruins and nothing will remain visible.

## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Peltuinum is located 30 km east of L'Aquila, between Prata d'Ansidonia and Castelnuovo and is reachable by car. Enter "Peltuinum" in Google Maps to navigate there. The site sprawls over a large area and is free to access. Unfortunately, there is no marked route and just a few boards with explanations. An organised private tour can take up to two hours.

In summer, the Università di Roma Sapienza runs digs in the area and the archaeologists take visitors for free guided tours (many of them speak English). You can find information about the upcoming digs as well as photos of the recent finds on their [Facebook page](#).

*Camillo Chiarieri is a registered tour guide and author of several books on the history of Abruzzo ([available here](#)). For private tours in Italian contact Camillo via his [Facebook page](#).*

## ABRUZZO'S JOYOUS PRESEPI

By Michelle Reid  
and Anna Lebedeva

Every year, Abruzzo celebrates Christmas with nativity scenes. Miniature and made by local artisans, or live scenes played by children and adults, they are joyous events with a strong community spirit.



A living nativity scene in Rivisondoli.  
Photo via [Presepeviventerrivisondoli.it](http://Presepeviventerrivisondoli.it)

### LONG HISTORY

Just as the Christmas tree is such a symbol of the festive season in many countries, the *presepe*, or nativity scene, is as much, if not more, the Italian equivalent. At Christmastime, model nativity scenes of all shapes and sizes – from the elegantly simple to the incredibly elaborate – adorn corners of houses and piazzas across the country. Just as all the Christmas story figures that are handed down, *presepe* are also handed down and added to through generations of Italian families.

The tradition of nativity scenes arrived in Abruzzo in 1225 in the church of San Domenico in Penne. Over centuries, *presepi* entered private houses of local aristocratic families. An inventory from the Castel of Celano drawn up in 1567 mentions one from the noble Piccolomini household. Not too long ago, a beautiful 17th century *presepe* was discovered in a crate that used to belong to the rich Antinori family in Lanciano. Nativities from Abruzzo have always been known for depicting humble scenes of daily life,

shepherds with their flocks and picturesque mountains.

But nativity scenes are not limited to these intricate miniature creations. One of the most wonderful popular Christmas traditions in Abruzzo – with a long history – is that of the *presepe vivente*, the living nativity. It has become an important annual event in many areas of Italy and, although we may well be biased, we don't think anywhere does it quite like the beautifully evocative mountain villages in this region.

## LIVING NATIVITY

The *presepe vivente* is celebrated in numerous Abruzzo towns and villages from Christmas Day through January 6th. It is a theatrical spectacle that combines local traditions with the magical atmosphere of Christmas and involves whole communities. People from the respective towns and villages participate as inhabitants of Bethlehem, as well as the obvious characters of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the wise men; in some towns more than 100 people make

**A living nativity scene in Rivisondoli. Photo via [Presepeviverivisondoli.it](http://Presepeviverivisondoli.it)**

up the cast of the show. A young baby from the village is also given the honour of playing the role of the baby Jesus, making it a community affair that spans all ages. Locations throughout each of the towns that produce a living nativity are chosen to recreate scenes from the Christmas story. Many places have a walking itinerary which, accompanied by the availability of local dishes cooking and traditional craftspeople working, invoke the aromas and sounds of a long-forgotten past throughout the small streets, really bringing the Christmas story to life.

Almost every village and town in Abruzzo has a manger scene at Christmas, and there are more than 20 locations where *presepi viventi* are staged.

If you haven't yet had the opportunity to visit one of Abruzzo's nativities, put it on your To-do list. You may not get the opportunity this year, but before long we will be back stronger than ever and this tradition that has lasted almost 800 years is not going to go away any time soon!



## PACENTRO

The living nativity has become one of the most important events in the village's annual calendar and is considered a folklore tradition in its own right. Pacentro provides the stage for a show embraced by the wider Peligna Valley communities and has grown into an occasion that brings in tourists from all over. Pacentro's recreation of the nativity scene also incorporates elements of the local farming tradition. Bringing life back into the heart of the historic centre, there are a series of performances that sit side-by-side with the living nativity.

The food stands offer local cakes, pizzas, gnocchi, chestnuts and more, flooding the streets with delicious aromas as visitors walk the itinerary that leads eventually to the cave and the culminating Christmas scene of Jesus in the manger. Cantinas and ateliers offer places to stop along the route and browse local crafts. For updates, see the organisers' [Facebook page](#).

## RIVISONDOLI

Since 1951, the town of Rivisondoli organises a live nativity scene on the evening of January 5. The local tradition of *presepe vivente* was started 70 years ago by a local priest who wanted to lift the spirits of the town ravaged by World War II. The nativity scene was set up inside a ruin of a bombed building and the part of the angel was played by a local girl who miraculously survived the Nazis' massacre of the civilians in Rivisondoli.

Every year, about 100 people are involved in bringing Biblical scenes to life and the roles are assigned months before the event. Baby Jesus is always represented by the town's last newborn. Last year, a famous Italian theatre director was invited to revise the



A living nativity scene in Rivisondoli. Photo via [Presepeviverivisondoli.it](#)

scenography of the manger scene to make sure it was more magical than ever. Rivisondoli gets snow often, which makes the event truly special. It attracts big crowds and the atmosphere is very festive. For more details, see the town's tourism [Facebook page](#).

## CIVITELLA ALFEDENA

Civitella Alfedena looks like a fairy tale town in winter. Add Christmas lights, some snow and a nativity scene, and it becomes pure magic. For one month, starting the first week of December, life-size papier-mâché figures of bakers, blacksmiths, butchers, and cobblers going on about their business are set up in courtyards, wine cellars, narrow alleyways and small squares in the historic centre of the town. Around any corner you might bump into a shepherd carrying a basket of hay, a donkey, or an old lady spinning wool. At the end of the itinerary, at the top of the town, you will find

the manger with Baby Jesus cosily nestled in a natural grotto. The scenes are lit up from 5pm to 11pm. The dates are announced on the local tourism [office page](#). Watch [this video](#) to get an idea of what to expect.

## LANCIANO

Handmade nativity scenes are a serious business in Lanciano. The [local branch](#) of the Italian Association of Friends of the Manger Scene (*Associazione Italiana Amici del Presepio*) runs courses and sells supplies for local enthusiasts. Every December they organise a competition for the best manger scene in the city and have a permanent exhibition of *presepi*, a paradise for those who think Christmas should last all year. You can buy or order figurines for a special “Made in Abruzzo” gift to take home.

Address: Via Garibaldi, vico 44, N°2, Lanciano

## ATESSA

If you're missing Christmas festivities this year, here's a great option: the artisanal nativities exhibition in Atessa, which is open all year around. The 400-square-metre museum-like space is filled with dozens of miniature *presepi* made by local masters and divided in three themes: Atessa in

**Presepi in Atessa (left) and Civitella Alfedena (right)**



miniature, the life of Jesus and scenic nativities. The city scenes meticulously reproduce the old streets of Atessa, with historic and traditional costumes which were studied from archive photos and documents. It feels almost like an ethnographic museum that gives a glimpse of the city's past. You can also see 23 scenes from the life of Jesus with architecturally and historically accurate details. You do not need to be a practicing Christian to appreciate the artistry of the displays. Watch [this video](#) that takes you on a virtual tour of the permanent exhibition. Book your visit via their [website](#).

Address: Piazza Oberdan, Atessa

## VILLALAGO

Without a doubt, Villalago has the most extreme *presepe*. To see it you have to don a scuba diving suit and go underwater! Every year, a group of divers place six ceramic figurines (the Three Wise Men, Joseph, Mary and Baby Jesus) from Castelli on the bottom of Lake San Domenico. Even if you are not into diving, the event itself is beautiful: a campfire is lit on the lakeshore, candles flicker under the arches of the picturesque hermitage overlooking Lago di San Domenico and you can see the divers' lights moving under the dark water. The event normally takes place in December, after Christmas, but there is no set date, so you need to call the town hall to inquire (tel. 0864 740134).

## THE FIERY FEAST OF SAINT'ANTONIO ABATE

By Franco Di Peco

In Fara Filiorum Petri — a small town in the province of Chieti — the feast of Sant'Antonio Abate is celebrated with burning *farchie*, tall bundles of reeds tied together with willow branches.

According to local legend, Saint Anthony protected the town from a French troop invasion in 1799 by setting fire to the oaks that surrounded the town, forcing the army to retreat. Fifteen neighbourhoods in Fara Filiorum Petri start preparations months before the festival, collecting reeds, drying and storing them. A few days before the celebration, teams in each district start building 10-metre-high *farchie* following long-standing traditions of the assemblage. The work is supervised by older members of the community who have been making *farchie* for decades. Each has its own style, but apart from the beauty of the knots and perfectly aligned reeds, the bundles are

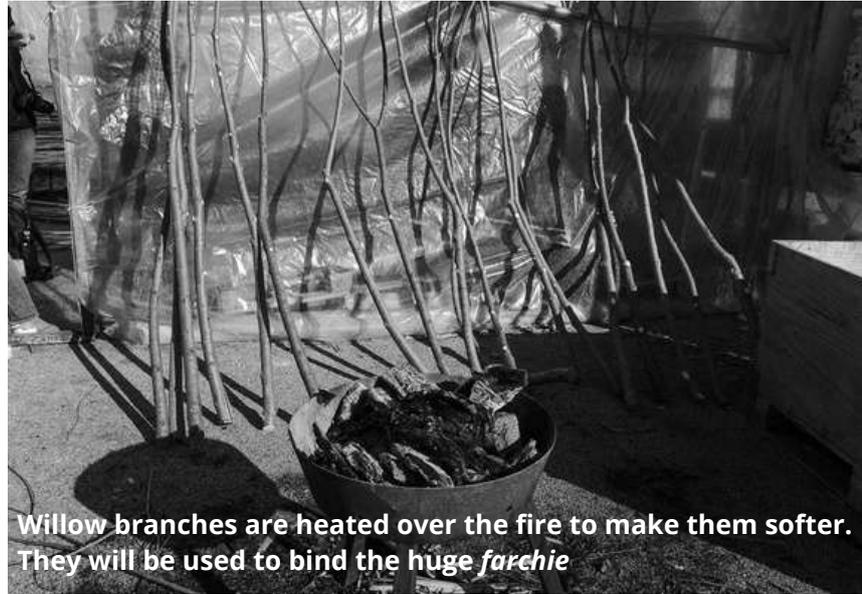
made to burn evenly, from the bottom to the top, with firecrackers attached to them. At sunset, on January 16, the *farchie* are lit up and the town sings, drinks, and feasts on traditional sweet treats. Some families take the ash from the *farchie* to sprinkle in the fields or barns as a blessing. In this photo essay Franco Di Peco captures the celebratory atmosphere of the *farchie* festival which he attended last January.

*Franco Di Peco is a retired software developer and a professional photographer passionate about documenting Abruzzo's traditional festivals.*





A billhook and worked rods that will become the bones and the body of a *farchia*



Willow branches are heated over the fire to make them softer. They will be used to bind the huge *farchie*



Tying the willow branches



The tied-up branches ready to be used



The final touches. The *farchia* is almost ready



In the evenings leading up to the festival, the *farchie* construction team goes from house to house to sing and eat



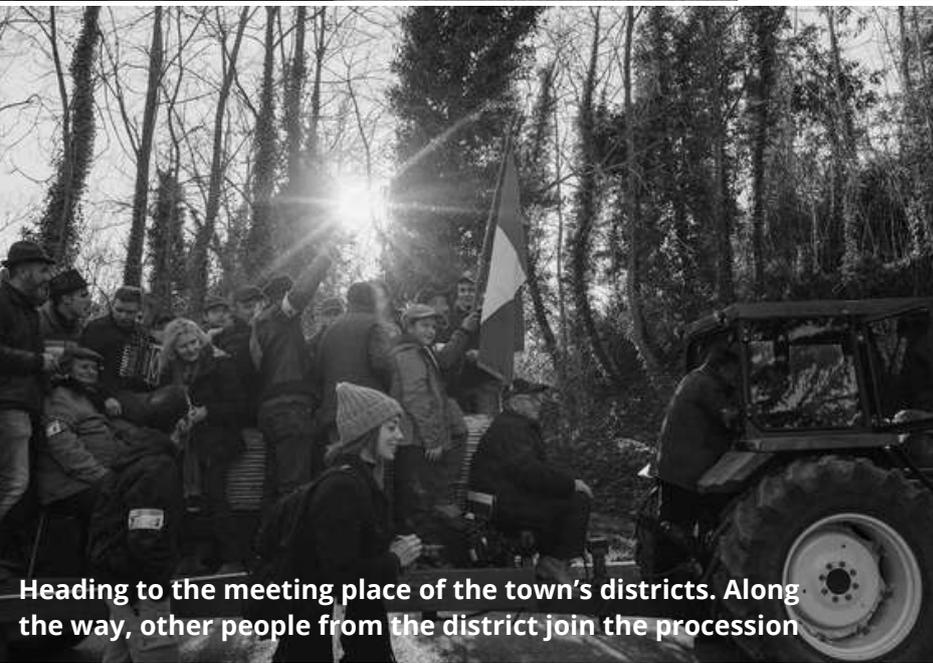
Hosts in each house offer food and wine in honour of Sant'Antonio Abate. The tradition is called *Portare lu Sant'Antoni*



The *farchia* is taken out of the marquee and ready to be transported to the town's square



Waiting to carry the *farchia* to the square; the team rests after hard work



Heading to the meeting place of the town's districts. Along the way, other people from the district join the procession



The party is starting on the tractor while transporting the *farchia*



The *farchie* are lit up and the celebrations continue all night

# A DAY IN SAN BENEDETTO IN PERILLIS

By Anna Lebedeva

For such a small village, San Benedetto in Perillis packs a punch with its unique treasures that few people know about: an underground system of caves and wooden locks which origins are lost in the mists of time.



**San Benedetto in Perillis. Photo via Comune di San Benedetto in Perillis**

The road to San Benedetto in Perillis has seen better days. The village of about 60 inhabitants has been deeply scarred by depopulation, the earthquake of 2009 and somewhat forgotten. A thoughtless bureaucratic decision excluded it from the so-called crater, a list of towns and villages most affected by the devastating tremor, which means rebuilding it has not been a priority for the region. Reconstruction works are slowly bringing wounded buildings back to life, but there is still a long way to go. The recently elected all-female local administration is determined to turn things around, revive the village and re-start the cultural events that once filled the streets with a lively buzz.

The splendid Benedictine abbey, from which the village began in the 8th century, is still clad in scaffolding and fenced off with an unsightly orange plastic net. But don't let all this put you off paying a visit to San Benedetto in Perillis.

Stroll along the cobbled streets, peek through a church window, greet numerous village cats and linger over a drink in the only bar on the central piazza, listening to the jolly barman's banter. Walk to the top of the village, to the overgrown panoramic point to take in the vistas of the mountain chains stretching into the horizon and glance a blue ribbon of the sea. On your slow walk you will find some treasures that are unique to this corner of Abruzzo.

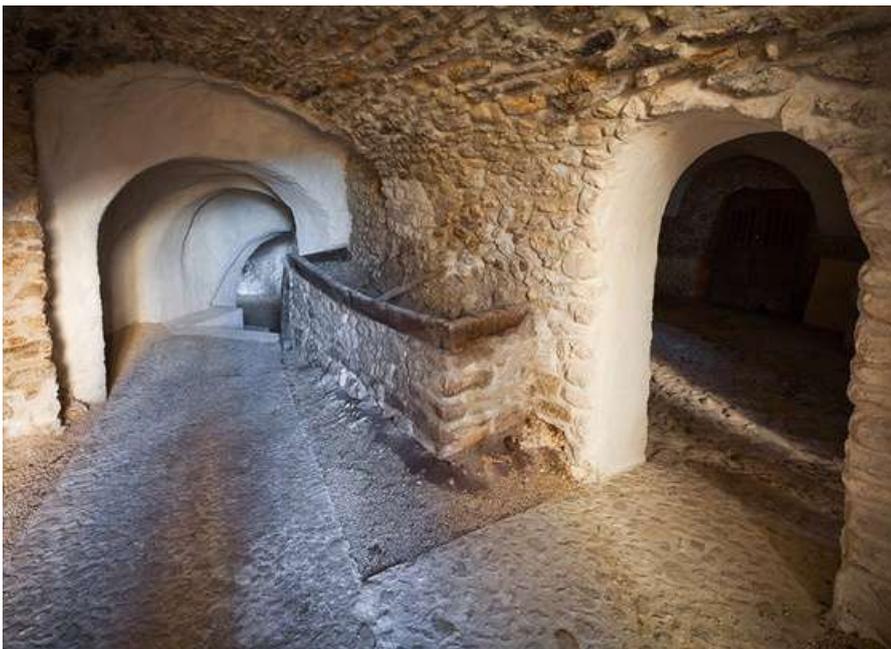
## WHAT TO SEE

### GROTTOS

Many buildings in the village's old centre have grottos underneath – 70 in total – some of them interconnected. They were created over centuries by excavating gravel for sale.

The temperature in the grottos is constant, around +20C throughout the year, so they were used not only for storing food supplies, but also as social clubs. In colder months, from October to April, instead of burning expensive wood that many villagers couldn't afford, locals moved to their grottos under the houses. Imagine: young people brought dates and had dances here, supervised by the elderly; kids played; women brought down their looms for weaving fabric; men made baskets and ploughs. Donkeys, pigs and cows were here, too. Each grotto was known by the surname of the owner. The Grotto Zupone was also called "the Parliament" because men gathered there to discuss communal problems and make important decisions.

#### One of the restored grottos



Up until 50 years ago, the grottos were used on a regular basis. A few of them have been restored in recent years and used for hosting cultural events and concerts. The majority of houses with grottos didn't sustain any significant damage during the earthquake of 2009. Locals believe it was because the empty spaces beneath helped to reduce the impact of the tremor.

### WOODEN LOCKS

On many old houses in San Benedetto in Perillis you can spot wooden locks, identical to the ones used in ancient Egypt in the 3rd millennium BCE. It is believed that Benedictine monks introduced them to the village in the Middle Age. San Benedetto is the only place where the *gliu piàschie*, as the locks are called in local dialect, exist in Abruzzo. They were also in use until the 1800s in a few locations in the region of Apulia and, outside Italy, can still be found in Mali, Niger and Benin. Each lock is made from oak wood and consists of a box, a sliding bolt and a key. The inserted key pushes the notches into the slots and the bolt is released. All locks had a different notch pattern but were easy enough to open, as they were meant to prevent animals from entering the dwellings rather than deter thieves.



Despite their rarity, the regional government has not made any attempts to safeguard the wooden locks of San Benedetto in Perillis. A local cultural association has compiled a small collection of wooden keys from the ruins and demolished houses, which is kept in the Museum of Peasant Culture (see below). It remains somewhat of a mystery why these ancient locks survived only in this village and nowhere else in Abruzzo.

### MUSEUM OF PEASANT CULTURE

In the museum, you can see how the wooden locks work and also browse a collection of fossils found in the area. In a separate room, rolls of beautiful old fabrics made by hand are displayed and an old weaving loom is set up – complete with a metal candle holder attached to it and a pot for hot coals that women kept at their feet to stay warm while working. Among the fabrics is an embroidered white linen necktie, a *pegno d'amore*, or a token of love, that young women of San Benedetto used to make for their beloved. They were worn by men for special celebrations.

In the space downstairs, a beautiful old oil press (*gliù trappùte* in local dialect) has been preserved. It is a lever press, with origins going back to ancient Greece, one of very few remaining in Abruzzo.

#### Wooden keys and locks in the village



Although the date chiselled on one of the beams by one of the last owners is 1875, it is believed that the press was constructed well before then. During olive harvests, it worked non-stop for two months, day and night.

### CHURCHES

The two small churches in the village, the 13th century Chiesa di San Sebastiano, which used to be outside the town's walls, and Chiesa della Madonna delle Grazie have characteristic low windows. Shepherds, who couldn't leave their flocks unattended, watched the Mass from outside through these windows.





Clockwise: Chiesa di San Sebastiano, a street in the village, an abandoned house, a fresco in San Benedetto Abbey

## SAN BENEDETTO ABBEY

Founded in the 8th century, the Abbey of San Benedetto is one of the oldest in Abruzzo, with fragments of beautiful early medieval frescoes. Money had been allocated for its restoration some years ago, but bureaucratic delays haven't allowed the works to start yet. The old part of the village, around the abbey, has retained its medieval character with fortified walls, and a few towers are still standing.

## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

To visit the museum and the grottos, call the town hall at 0039 0862955148 or email at [sanbenedettoinperillis@pec.it](mailto:sanbenedettoinperillis@pec.it). The local administration is very friendly and is always happy to promote their little village. Even though the old centre is fenced off, you can ask them to show you around (no English spoken).



## BYZANTINE CULTURE IN THE HEART OF ABRUZZO

By Giorgio Mendicini

Villa Badessa, a small village in the province of Pescara, has a population of about 400 souls and boasts a stunning collection, unique in Italy, of 77 Byzantine icons dating from the 15th to the 20th century.

The major national tourist organisation, Touring Club Italiano, in its popular series of guide-books recommends a stop in Villa Badessa to admire the collection, calling it one of the fifteen "must-see" destinations in the region.

Villa Badessa is one of the several Italian Albanian communities (Arbëreshe) spread throughout Southern Italy. These diasporas were formed between the 14th and 18th centuries when groups of Albanian refugees fled religious persecutions when the Balkans were invaded by the Ottoman Empire. The founders of Villa Badessa were the last to arrive and set up the only Arbëreshe community in Abruzzo in 1743. Other Arbëreshe communities are found in Molise, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily.

### STRONG CONNECTION

Despite the perilous journey, the people of Villa Badessa brought the centuries-old collection of Byzantine icons and, like other Arbëreshe communities in Southern Italy, have maintained a strong connection to their origins: attachment to the Greek-Byzantine Catholic rite, and lovingly preserved civil and religious rituals. The village's parish of Santa Maria Assunta is part of the Italo-Greek diocese of Lungro in Cosenza, Calabria. The liturgy service sang in Greek, wedding ceremonies, greeting chants in the Albanian language called Kalimere, the Great Holy Week and commemoration of the dead are all fervently observed in the village.



Two villagers dressed in traditional Arbëreshe costumes

The Cultural Association Villa Badessa organises various events to preserve the traditions. In particular, the cult of the dead is very much felt which, according to the Byzantine ritual, is celebrated in February, eleven days from Ash Wednesday. In Arbëreshe communities it is customary to dedicate a week to the memory of the dead. It is believed that Jesus Christ gives permission to the souls of the dead to leave the afterlife for eight days to return to our world and see the places where they lived. In all the houses, during this week, lamps are kept lit, powered by oil, so that the dead



Byzantine icons from the collection

Gara di Ruzzola

entering are not in complete darkness. Furthermore, meals are eaten near the graves of loved ones, and anyone who passes by is invited.

This is a traditional competition that dates back to the Etruscan era and takes place every year in Villa Badessa on May 1. Locals throw wheels of aged, hard pecorino cheese on the roads of the village. The winner is the one who has thrown the wheel the farthest, and receives the cheese of all the participants.

## WHAT TO SEE IN VILLA BADESSA

### The Church of Santa Maria Assunta

Built in 1754, this small church is the only one in Abruzzo which follows the Greek-Byzantine rites. Here you can admire 77 precious icons on the side walls.

### Museum

A small ethnographic museum dedicated to the history of the local Arbëreshe community is located in one of the first houses built in the 18th century by the newly arrived settlers. Open on Saturday and Sunday mornings. To book your visit (in Italian), contact the *Associazione Culturale Villa Badessa* at 0039 348 7374449 or email [info@villabadessa.it](mailto:info@villabadessa.it).

### The feast of Maria Odigitria

On September 8, Villa Badessa celebrates Maria Odigitria (Our Lady of the Way) with an evocative evening procession and "enkomia", the weeping of women during the night vigil over the icon of Christ's deposition.

### Easter celebrations

On Easter Sunday, the villagers walk holding torches that illuminate the last hours of the night in a great silence. After the morning liturgy, everyone exchanges greetings by giving each other painted and decorated eggs.

*Giorgio Mendicini is a journalist, history and photography enthusiast living in L'Aquila. The article was first published on [Abruzzo Travel and Food](#). Translation and additional reporting by Anna Lebedeva.*

# PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A LOCAL IN POPOLI

By Linda Dini Jenkins

After spending some time in Abruzzo, Italian American artist Karin Giusti bought a ruin in Popoli a few years ago, and then the adjoining house, as well. She has grand plans for the space but, at the end of the day, wants nothing more than to be a genuine part of the life of this vibrant, authentic community.

“My family comes from Tuscany,” says Karin Giusti. “From the Lucca and Pisa areas. I visited as an adult and realized this [Italy] was where I belonged.” She received her Italian citizenship in 2015 and began looking for property on the internet. While she was looking, Abruzzo kept coming up – affordable, incredibly beautiful, and not too far away. She took the leap and moved to Abruzzo to check it out: first to Sulmona, and then to Roccacasale, before she got a text from a friend about a ruin in Popoli.

## SWEET OLD HOUSE

“It was this pure and sweet stone house in the old part of Popoli, clinging to a rock wall,” she describes. “This area was filled with *nonne*, was very affordable, and it truly was love at first sight.” It was also just 50 steps from the famous [Terme di Popoli](#). One of the main attractions of the ruin – which took about six months to renovate – was its old, vaulted ceilings. At one point, a wooden roof had to be replaced and, says Karin, “It was like watching artists at work as they completed the job.” Both houses came with cantinas, which will be very



Karin Giusti

useful to her as she progresses with her plans. “I came here to work,” she declares. “Not to retire.”

Karen Giusti, originally from Michigan (her grandfather came to the US in 1917 to work in the copper mines there), graduated from the University of Massachusetts/Amherst and went on to receive an MFA from the Yale University School of Art. She is a mixed media artist, teacher and lecturer, and her work – a fusion of photography, weaving, and sculpture – has been exhibited around the world.

She was called from Popoli to Providence, Rhode Island in January 2020 for an installation and, as she says with a sigh, was trapped in the US because of the lockdown. But her time has not been wasted. After installing her [Dreamweave for a Third Space](#) at the Providence Civic Center, she turned her attention to the project she would most like to bring to Popoli when she gets back.

## INSPIRING LANDSCAPES

Popoli is a lively market town with a glorious past, cosy cafes and elegant palaces in the old historic centre. Home to just over 5000 people, it is famous for its connections with Corradino D'Ascanio, the celebrated inventor of the iconic Vespa scooter who was born here.

Abruzzo in general, and Popoli in particular, provide an inspiring setting for Karin's art and imagination. "Oh, those landscapes," she says, barely containing her enthusiasm. She's done a 360-degree portrait of Roccacasale, a small village nearby, and has already been invited to three villages to do her installations. Not bad for a *straniera* who has lived in Popoli full-time for less than two years!

But at the top of her list when she gets back to Popoli is to create a non-profit association that will offer on-site Artist in Residence programs, and she's in the process of looking for funding right now. There's even the possibility of purchasing a nearby third building which would be used exclusively for a Writers' Residency program. She hopes to make the artistic world aware of this part of Abruzzo and help artists create photography, painting, sculpture, words and much more by taking inspiration from the stunning surroundings and the more traditional lifestyle that Abruzzo offers.

Asked what people who are thinking about coming to Abruzzo should know, Karin is quick to answer. "Learn some Italian," she says. "Some of the most beautiful areas are very rural and most people don't speak English. Make an effort to learn at least the basics."



Popoli. Photos via [Comune di Popoli](#)

Finally, she advises, don't try to impose your way of doing things on people and don't expect work to progress the way it would where you come from. Chances are, it won't. But that's why you're here.

She advises that, if you don't want to own a car, explore the villages that are well serviced by train and/or bus. Public transportation is very good here and lots of people get around this way. When Karin gets back to Abruzzo, her priority will be to go to driving school to get her Italian licence.

When you're next in Popoli (once everybody can return), look Karin up and invite her for a coffee. She will be happy to talk about her life in Abruzzo and share her local expertise. You can see some of Karin's installations [here](#).

Linda Dini Jenkins leads small tours to Italy and blogs about travel at [Travel Italy The Write Way](#).

## SNOWSHOEING IN A WINTER WONDERLAND

By Dougie Reid

Not into skiing but still want to explore Abruzzo's wilderness in winter? Snowshoeing is the perfect way to see the region's most spectacular corners this season.



**Above Passo Godi, Scanno**

My first experience of snowshoeing wasn't much fun . . . it was in Norway, temperatures were around -30°C, I was carrying a heavy backpack and being regularly shouted at by a Royal Marine Mountain Leader to "get up that \*\*\*\* hill." So when I was asked to go snowshoeing with a friend in Abruzzo, I was somewhat reluctant. Needless to say, it was much more enjoyable than I had expected and I've never looked back.

Abruzzo is the perfect winter wonderland for snowshoeing. With kilometres of fields and mountain paths, from wide open mountain plains to narrow woodland tracks full of fresh snow – often with the only other signs of life

being the tracks of the animals that have ventured out before you – you can wander for hours in a white wilderness.

### WHY SNOWSHOEING?

So, how has what started thousands of years ago as an essential mode of winter transportation evolved into a popular sport/pastime? If you've never done it before, you might ask, why even go snowshoeing? Well, here are a few good reasons:

It's great winter exercise. If you're looking for a way to stay in shape out in the fresh air, even when the snow starts to fall, snowshoeing is a really good low-impact aerobic exercise, burning up to 900 calories per hour!

If you love getting into the mountains, you can extend your hiking season year-round and keep discovering the stunning scenery that Abruzzo has to offer from a whole new perspective. On the trips I've taken, I've rarely seen another set of snowshoe prints, and that sensation of breaking through fresh powder snow on a crystal-clear winter's day is exhilarating.

It doesn't have to be a big hike – getting out on snowshoes can be just taking your dog for a walk even when there's fresh deep snow.

All ages and ability levels can enjoy the sport together, as long as you plan your outing with everyone's fitness in mind. It can be tough going and it'll certainly give you a good workout, even over a short distance.

If you already have a decent set of hiking boots and some good outdoor clothing, it is an inexpensive hobby compared to other winter sports. Kit hire and lift-passes for skiing and snowboarding, for example, can be very expensive. But once you've bought your equipment – which itself is much cheaper than equipment for other popular winter sports – snowshoeing is pretty much free.

## THE BASICS

There aren't many outdoor activities that are as beginner-friendly as snowshoeing. It requires only a few basic techniques (walking) to be competent enough across easy ground. However, if you plan to venture off easy trails, or want to head up into the mountains, you'll need to learn how to go up and down hills, traverse slopes, use your poles and learn how to avoid and prepare for avalanches.



**Snowshoeing extends your hiking season year-round**

Due to the shape and orientation of the Abruzzo mountains, there is a risk of avalanches on some slopes. If you are unsure about the area you plan to go to, make sure you research well and employ the services of a professional snowshoeing guide in risk areas.

Decathlon has a good range of snowshoes to suit every budget (they are called *ciaspole* in Italian; prices start from €50). Make sure you choose a pair to suit your weight and, if you can afford it, get a pair with the 'up/down feature'. This allows your foot to 'drop through' the snowshoe outer, making descents much easier. Poles are optional but certainly help you keep your balance when you are learning.



### **Passo San Leonardo**

As with any mountain excursion (snowshoeing is no exception) your safety is paramount. Make sure that you leave details of your planned route with someone and an estimated return time. Should anything happen during your excursion, you will be safe in the knowledge that someone is aware of where you are and can alert the authorities if you are not back when you plan to be.

## **ITINERARIES**

The list of places to snowshoe in Abruzzo is almost endless, but here are some of my favourite locations to get you started:

### **BOSCO DI SANT'ANTONIO, PESCOSTANZO**

The gently rolling slopes of this ancient beech woodland, that plays such an important part in the history and culture of the internal Abruzzo mountain landscape, are easy to tackle for all abilities. Set in stunning surroundings, the trails are well marked and easy to

follow. Snowshoes are available to hire from the Ski Touring School hut in the Bosco di Sant'Antonio parking area.

### **PASSO SAN LEONARDO**

The forests on the slopes of the Morrone mountain range by Passo San Leonardo are good for all abilities. Park at the hotel and head into the forests behind it. In the woods the slopes are fairly gentle, and therefore suited to all abilities, but with opportunities to tackle more challenging areas and push yourself further, should you want to.

### **INTRODACQUA**

There's the valley leading up to Rifugio la Defenz (Defenz mountain hut) above Introdacqua. Starting from Introdacqua village, take the path up past the small

but beautiful 16th Century church of Sant' Antonio, and then continue up the valley on CAI path route 2 towards Monte Genzana. This is a route of medium difficulty and you should have a reasonable level of fit-ness to tackle it. A perfect day out would be snowshoeing up to Rifugio Defenz for a packed lunch and then retracing your path back to the village. The hut is always open and has a table and seating area.

#### FROM BLOCKHAUS TO MONTE CAVALLO

Parking is at Villaggio Mira Stelle. This is a route suitable for more advanced snowshoers and mountaineers. In the winter, the main road is usually closed due to the snow. If the road is closed, head up to the *rifugio* by La Majelletta and follow the direction of the track to the Madonnina del Blockhaus statue. This is a good walk on its own, but if you feel you want to do more you can at this point head up to the peak above at 2140m. If you still feel fresh, extend even further by heading along the ridge up to Monte Cavallo peak at 2171m.

#### PASSO GODI, SCANNO

There are a vast numbers of routes you can take by just parking up at Passo Godi and

#### Passo Lanciano near Blockhaus



heading out on your snowshoes. From easy to difficult, you can make excursions here as straightforward or as strenuous as you like. The *rifugi* at the pass are open year-round and are a great place to stop and have a bite to eat after a day out in the mountains.

Local sections of the Italian Alpine Club (CAI) organise snowshoeing excursions over the winter months. Contacting your local CAI to go out with them can be a great way to meet other winter mountain sport enthusiasts from your local community. In addition, guides from Maj-ambiente, AMA Trekking, Majaexperience have regular group outings on snowshoes throughout the winter.

*Dougie Reid is an ex Royal Navy Officer & now an RN reservist living in Abruzzo. A qualified survival instructor, he loves mountain sports and is a passionate road cyclist.*



# CHRISTMAS SPECIAL



FOOD & WINE,  
TRADITIONAL  
RECIPES

## SPECIAL FIGS FROM ATESSA

By Luana Tusset

Atezza is a charming town located in the Sangro Valley in the province of Chieti and, together with Torino di Sangro, Archi, Perano e Paglieta, has a strongly rooted tradition of making dried figs. For centuries, the region had been home to an important dried fig market, but the industrial development of the 1970s rendered its agricultural production obsolete. Recently, a few young entrepreneurs have decided to revive the ancient tradition of growing and drying the figs with the support of the Slow Food Presidia Project.

Figs have been cultivated in the area since the ancient past. A group of archeologists from Oberlin College, USA, and Oxford University, UK, discovered a carbonized dried fig in a Roman villa in the locality of Acquachiera, an area near Atezza, that they dated to the 1st century BCE. In the local dialect, the dried figs are called *li caracine*, which most likely refers to one of the tribes, *i carracini*, who lived in the territory during the Roman times.

In 1320, Robert of Anjou, King of Naples – to which Atezza belonged – imposed a tax on its dried figs traded by sea. In the following centuries, the dried figs continued to have a central role in the local economy, being used for a variety of purposes, from a trade good to medicine and gifts. For good reason, the people of Atezza are called *squacciafichere* (loosely translated as “fig squeezer”), which implies someone with great skills of preparing figs for drying.

Figs are harvested and dried from the middle of August to the end of September, depending on the weather. The Reale fig variety has a pale greenish-yellow skin with juicy, honey-flavored flesh considered ideal for drying. “The cultivation is rigorously organic, without use of chemicals or synthetic fertilizers,” explains Vincenzo Menna, a member of the association of the Atezza Reale Fig producers. “We pick the figs by hand early in the morning, then lay them on drying racks made out of small canes (*cannizzi*) tied together.” They can be dried whole or partially cut in half, but not completely split. The figs are dried in the sun covered by a net to keep insects away and, in the evening, they are brought inside to prevent the excess of humidity. The process goes on for





several days, to the point in which the figs are dried but still soft. They are then stuffed with a walnut kernel and stored with bay leaves in a dark dry place. *Li caracine* are ready to be enjoyed from early October. During Christmas time, the Atessa dried figs are centerstage in some traditional recipes: cookies, jams, breads and traditional sweets such as the nougat and the *squacciata*, which is a type of nougat covered with chocolate. Or you can simply eat them with a nice glass of *vino cotto* (See the article in our Wine sections).

You can buy organic dried Atessa Reale figs (*Il fico secco reale di Atessa*) online on [Abruzzo Natural](#) or from the Slow Food producer [Azienda Agrituristica La Ruelle](#). Contact Vincenzo Menna for a list of other producers ([vincenzo.menna66@gmail.com](mailto:vincenzo.menna66@gmail.com))

Dried figs are always present on festive tables in Abruzzo. Try this Christmas recipe popular with the locals.

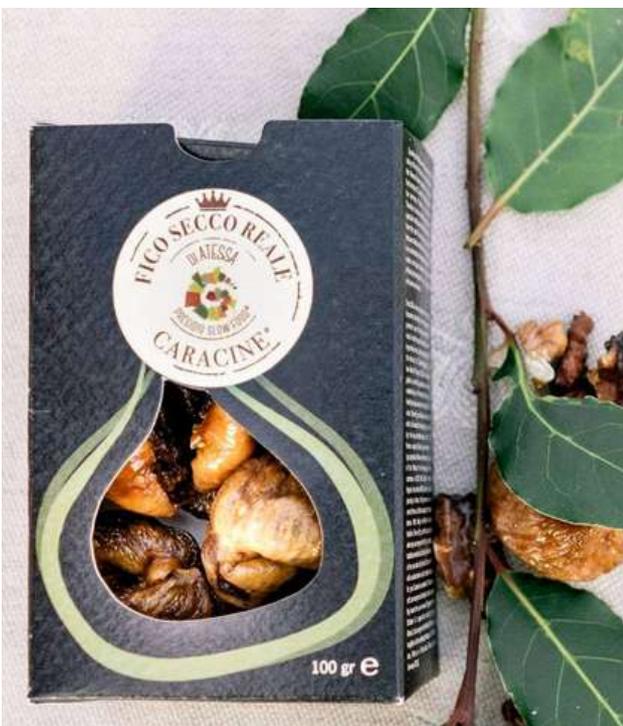
## SPICED DRIED FIGS IN CHOCOLATE

### INGREDIENTS:

Atessa dried figs, toasted almonds, melted dark chocolate, ground cloves and slices of candied lemon.

Place one almond inside each fig, together with a pinch of ground cloves and a candied lemon slice. Close the figs gently and dip them in the melted chocolate. Put them on a greaseproof baking paper to dry. Serve as a dessert at the end of your big Christmas meal.

*Luana Tusset is an Italian-Brazilian restaurateur based in Abruzzo. She is the co-founder of the Brazilian Slow Food Convivium "Primeira Colônia Italiana".*



# CHRISTMAS THISTLE SOUP

Courtesy of [Abruzzo With Gusto](#)

Christmas festivities in Abruzzo mean gargantuan feasts. However, there are some dishes that are meant to give you a break from the heavy meals. Thistle, or cardoon soup (*zuppa di cardo*), is one of them although, as calorie count goes, it is still quite rich. In Abruzzo, thistle stalks are called "Christmas greens" and the soup is traditionally made for *pranzo natalizio*, lunch on December 25.

Several Italian regions have a version of this soup. In Molise, it is made in a capon broth. In Piedmont, butter is added and in Apulia, tomatoes. If you are wondering what cardoon is, imagine a thistle-like plant with impressive large leaves that look like those of an artichoke but with smaller flower buds. The stems are cleaned, chopped and cooked in soups and pies. Small green grocers, as well as bigger supermarkets, sell pre-packed chopped cardoon, although the real Italian mammas prefer buying fresh bunches at farmers' markets and cleaning them at home. Many families add a personal touch to the recipe: the soup can be served with toasted croutons, a sprinkle of nutmeg, a squeeze of lemon juice or small pieces of omelette (*frittata*). Here is the basic recipe for the most commonly used Christmas Thistle Soup from Abruzzo.

## INGREDIENTS

Makes 4-5 portions

500g cardoon, cleaned and chopped  
 200g premium minced veal  
 2 eggs  
 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped  
 50g breadcrumbs  
 2 tbsp olive oil  
 2 tbsp parsley, chopped  
 2 tbsp parmigiano reggiano or pecorino cheese, grated  
 Salt and pepper to taste



## PREPARATION

Put the cardoon in a pot with 2 litres of water and bring it to boil. In the meantime, thoroughly mix the veal mince with one egg and breadcrumbs. Make small meatballs (about 1 cm in diameter). Brown them in a frying pan in olive oil with garlic. Put the meatballs and garlic in the soup and cook for 30-35 minutes.

Beat the remaining egg in a small bowl, slowly pour it into the pot while swirling the soup with a spoon to form thin egg strands. Cook it for another minute. Season and serve with parsley, a sprinkle of cheese and a drizzle of olive oil.

If you prefer the cardoon to be soft rather than slightly crunchy, add 15 minutes to cooking time.

*Buon appetito e Buon Natale!*

# A SWEET END TO A GRAND MEAL

By Anna Swann

Sweet wines (*vini dolci*) from Abruzzo are rarely mentioned and very few producers here make them, but they deserve a special place on your table.

If you think of syrupy cheap concoctions that are often passed for dessert wines outside of Italy, think again. Abruzzo's *vini dolci* are complex, classy drinks with a long history. There are two distinctive traditions of dessert wines in the region: *vino cotto* and *passito*. *Vino cotto* is made by slowly cooking grape must to make a thick sweet reduction that is mixed with non-cooked juice and left to ferment in small wooden barrels. The wine can be stored for decades with annual top-ups of fresh juice. While I am listing it here as a dessert wine, *vino cotto* is also paired with cured meats and cheese. It is really a category apart and merits a separate article.

A centuries-old tradition of *passito* wine exists in Castiglione a Casauria. Since the 1600s, local families cultivated a fragrant white grape called Moscatello that almost disappeared but was saved by the Angelucci winery (it has been recently sold and renamed Tenuta Secolo IX). The stems of the ripe bunches are squeezed and left to "wither" on the vine for a few weeks (other producers dry grapes on racks). This is done to increase the flavour and sugar concentration. I love the original Angelucci Moscatello that is very hard, but not impossible, to find today. (Try Googling Moscatello passito IGT Angelucci to find a few Italian sellers).

If you are not a big fan of dessert wines, there are a few excellent sweetened Montepulciano masterpieces made in the region, which are a blend of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo with some *passito*. The result is a rich, jammy broody wine with a higher sugar content, perfect to accompany desserts, as well as strong liver or wild boar dishes. It is a daunting process to make wines from dried grapes, so the yield is limited and prices are high.

Here are my favourite picks from the region to pair with your luscious Christmas desserts.



## 1. CANTUS VINO COTTO – TENUTA I FAURI

100% Montepulciano d'Abruzzo. Rich, dark and thick with notes of dates and chestnut.

**Buy:** [Tannico.it](http://Tannico.it) or directly from the [winery](#).

**Price:** €20

## 2. MOSCATELLO PASSITO IGT – TENUTA SECOLO IX

100% Moscato bianco "Casauriense" biotype. Grapes dried on the vine, gently pressed. Aged in wooden barrels for at least four years. Beautiful golden hues. Intensely aromatic with hints of dried figs and apricots. Serve cool.

**Buy:** [Wineowine.it](http://Wineowine.it) or directly from the [winery](#).

**Price:** €20

## 3. PASSITO CLEMATIS – ZACCAGNINI

100% Montepulciano d'Abruzzo. Smooth and velvety, with warm notes of cinnamon, blackberry jam and alcohol-infused cherries. Aged three years in small French oak barrels.

**Buy:** [Callmewine.com](http://Callmewine.com) or selected wine shops worldwide.

**Price:** €35-40

## 4. ROSSO JARNO – CASTORANI

100% Montepulciano d'Abruzzo. A complex symphony of black currant, liquorice, prunes and vanilla accents. Aged 24 months in large tonneau barrels, six months in concrete tanks and 12 months in bottle. Pair with chocolate, duck or blue cheese.

**Buy:** [Callmewine.com](http://Callmewine.com) or directly from the [producer](#)

**Price:** from €30



# IL PARROZZO: THE CHRISTMAS CAKE FROM PESCARA

By Michela Portacci

If you ask me, the best traditional cake ever is the *parrozzo* from Pescara! But I am biased: born and bred in the city, crazy about chocolate and almonds, I could eat *parozzo* all year round but, sticking with the tradition, in my family we make it only for Christmas. It is the perfect present to bring when you visit relatives and friends over the holidays.

This traditional Christmas cake was invented nearly 100 years ago, in a pastry shop in the heart of the old town of Pescara. A man called Luigi D'Amico had a "sweet intuition" and decided to create a cake inspired by the shape and the colors of a peasant corn bread called *pane rozzo* (rough bread). He made a heavenly, dome-shaped sponge covered with dark chocolate.

Egg yolks make the dough bright yellow, imitating the corn, and the dark chocolate coating recalls charred bread baked in a wood oven. D'Amico's friend, the famous poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, who lived a few blocks from him, came up with the

perfect name, *parrozzo*. It was an immediate success, so much so that the *parrozzo* trademark was registered in 1926. Even the family's café was named after the cake — *Il ritrovo del parrozzo* (The Hangout of the Parrozzo) — and it was one of the busiest and most elegant meeting places in Pescara before World War II.

Below is the recipe that we use in my family. It was given to me by our friend Signora Annarita from Spoltore, who is a walking encyclopedia of traditional Abruzzese cuisine. The recipe is simple. The tricky part is to take the cake out of the oven at exactly the right moment: it has to be not too dry and not too moist. But that comes with practice, so perfecting the *parrozzo* could be your excuse for baking it all year around, not just for Christmas! The classic *parrozzo* is dome-shaped and is made with a special cake pan. Most kitchen supply shops in Pescara sell them in different sizes.

## IL PARROZZO

### INGREDIENTS

Makes a 22 cm diameter cake

- 6 eggs
- 120g semolina flour
- 160g almonds, chopped finely
- 7-8 bitter almonds, chopped finely
- 250g sugar
- Juice and zest of half a lemon
- 200g dark chocolate
- 1 tsp olive oil (1 teaspoon)

### PREPARATION

Pre-heat the oven in static mode to 180 °C. Separate egg whites and yolks. Whip the egg whites with a pinch of salt.

In a separate bowl, whip the yolks with sugar, then add juice and lemon zest. Combine the whipped parts, pouring the yolks into the whites and not the other way around (it's important because you don't want the amount of air in the mixture to increase).

Add the semolina flour and the chopped almonds, gently mixing everything together. Bitter almonds are the special ingredient because they give an amazing flavour.



Grease the cake pan, sprinkling it with a little flour (shake the pan upside down to eliminate the excess flour). Pour the mix in the pan. Bake for 45 minutes.

In the meantime, melt the dark chocolate, placing it on a plate over a saucepan with boiling water. Add a teaspoon of olive oil to the chocolate to give it brightness and mix with a fork.

When the *parrozzo* is baked, let it cool for five minutes before removing it from the pan by turning it over onto a plate.

Finally, pour the melted chocolate to top of the *parrozzo* and spread it with a wide knife or a pastry brush. Leave it to dry in a cool place for a couple of hours.

To cut the *parrozzo* without breaking the chocolate crust use a serrated knife, preferably warm.

*Michela Portacci works in the regional government and is passionate about promoting Abruzzo and its traditions.*

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## TRADITIONAL (AND YUMMY) NUTTY DESSERTS

By Mary Vischetti

These two Christmas recipes are typical for the Province of L'Aquila, where walnuts and almonds grow in abundance. They only call for a few ingredients and can be made well before the holiday season.

### WALNUT AND HONEY BRITTLE

In my town of Capistrello, the nut brittle has been made for centuries. Here it is called *copeta* and is made with local walnuts and mountain fragrant honey. In late autumn, the elderly members of the family shell the nuts and prepare them for the future *copeta*. My grandmother Maria and my great aunt Carmela usually did this job together, along with a few neighbours. They spent this time chatting and sometimes even ended up arguing about something meaningless!

The preparation of the brittle is always a celebration before the celebration, a few days before Christmas. The whole family gets together one evening and makes the *copeta* with sticky, honey-covered hands. The younger members of the family are in charge of quality control of the chopped nuts, making sure there aren't any hard shell bits. However, the *copeta* itself is prepared by the men of the family. When I was a kid, my grandfather Mario made it and in my husband's home, my father-in-law Gino did. Some families cut diamond-shaped slices and layered them with laurel leaves for an extra flavour.



### INGREDIENTS

1 kg walnuts chopped into small pieces (with a knife, not a food processor)  
600g fragrant wildflower honey

### PREPARATION

Warm up the honey in a pot and let it boil until it turns a darker caramel colour. Drop a little bit of honey in a glass with cold water. If it turns into a toffee ball, it is ready!

Add the nuts to the honey. Stir them continuously (here's where the man's muscle power comes in handy!) so the

brittle doesn't stick to the bottom of the pot. Keep the heat low and cook the mixture for approximately 20 minutes, stirring it constantly.

Put all the cooked honey-nut mixture on a cold wet marble or wood counter or a tray and press it down with a wet rolling pin or a large spoon. Make the layer about ½ cm thick and cut into small square or diamond-shaped pieces. Put the pieces on a tray lined with parchment paper or laurel leaves and store in a cool place for up to 20 days. The copeta is much softer than the usual brittle but it will harden if you make it thinner.

## “DIRTY ALMONDS”

You will often find this simple treat at town festival food stalls and on festive tables for Christmas. In my hometown, we call them *nucci*, which simply means nuts but in other parts of Abruzzo they are called *nocci attorrati* or *nucci n'terrati*, because they seem to have dirt on them (*terra* means dirt). Not very appetising but, trust me, they are delicious.



## INGREDIENTS

200g almonds, whole unblanched  
200g sugar  
1/3 glass of water  
1 teaspoon cocoa (optional)

## PREPARATION

Mix all the ingredients in a pan and place over a moderate heat. The sugar will melt and after a while will start to caramelize. Stir constantly, allowing the mix to caramelize and turn brown and making sure all the nuts are well coated.

Remove from the heat and spread the almonds on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper, until they have completely cooled.

*Mary Vischetti lives in Abruzzo and writes a food blog [Un'Americana Tra gli Orsi](#).*

## LIVE COOKING CLASS



Join Mary for a live demonstration to learn how to make two types of "dirty almonds". Watch the class on our [Facebook page](#) on December 4 at 5pm CEST.

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