

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE



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ON THE COVER:

Torre Medicea in Santo Stefano di Sessanio. Read the story on page 8.
Photo by Anna Lebedeva.

LEFT:

Santo Stefano di Sessanio. Photos
by Anna Lebedeva.

ABRUZZISSIMO MAGAZINE

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*Periodico diffuso in via telematica non
soggetto a registrazione ai sensi degli
artt. 3 e 3 bis della legge n. 103 del 16
luglio 2012.*

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A while ago, I was excited to receive a very special email. It was from one of my heroes – Daniele Kihlgren, the man behind the *Sextantio Albergo Diffuso* project which saved **Santo Stefano di Sessanio**, one of the most beautiful villages in Abruzzo and Italy. Daniele asked if we could talk on the phone about the imminent threat of a new building to be erected in **Santo Stefano di Sessanio** and what damage it could do to the village's image. Over the following weeks we had several long phone conversations, exchanged emails and messages discussing the necessity of preserving small historical villages with their delicate architectural heritage, saving them from the continuous encroachment of new constructions. In this issue, you will find Kihlgren's thoughts on this, as well as my articles about **Santo Stefano di Sessanio** and Valeria Gallese, an artisan who has a small *bottega* in the village.

Many of you might know the fascinating lithographs with the so-called impossible constructions by Maurits Cornelis Escher, one of the world's most famous graphic artists. But did you know that many of Escher's masterpieces were inspired by Abruzzo? In this issue we talk about his visits to the region.

As you know already, ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine is a 100% reader-supported publication. All businesses mentioned in each issue are publicised for free as part of our mission to showcase and promote local enterprises, sharing their stories with the world. We carefully select the ones that we believe deserve recognition and represent the essence of Abruzzo. In this issue, you will find stories about several such local ventures. Please, consider supporting these businesses (and ABRUZZISSIMO) by purchasing their products (please mention that you discovered them through our Magazine) and spreading the word about them to friends, family, and colleagues. Together, let's celebrate and uplift the spirit of entrepreneurship in Abruzzo.

Enjoy this April issue!

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor



PESCARA AND CHIETI SHINE IN ITALY'S CLIMATE INDEX

Pescara and **Chieti** are among the top 10 Italian cities with the best climate in the latest index ranking published by the national newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*. They hold 5th and 7th places respectively. The rankings are based on variety of climate factors culled from the weather site 3bMeteo over the decade from 2013 – 2023. Among the factors taken into consideration are average hours of sunshine per day and average days of extreme rainfall per year.



GOOD NEWS FOR BEARS IN ABRUZZO

After the devastating deaths of two of Abruzzo's beloved bears – Juan Carrito and his mother Amarena – there is good news about the region's rare Marsican bears: the **Abruzzo, Lazio, and Molise National Park** has published a report announcing that 18 new cubs were born last year. These births, from 8 different mothers, were verified by the Scientific Park Service, park rangers, and Forestry Carabinieri. They signal a positive outlook for the future of the animals and the parks. The full report is available [here](#).

CALLS FOR MERGING MOLISE WITH ABRUZZO

A new committee in Molise unveiled a proposal to merge one of Italy's smallest regions with Abruzzo, starting with the incorporation of **Isernia province**. "Directly merging Molise with Abruzzo requires complex steps," explained committee president Antonio Libero Bucci. They opt instead for merging local entities, bypassing the need for a constitutional amendment. A referendum, initiated with a petition, seeks 5,000 signatures. If the plan succeeds, the regional status of Molise with only one province will have to be changed. Proponents explain the move by dire depopulation and lack of adequate healthcare and infrastructure. The region was part of Abruzzi e Molise until it was split into two in 1963. In the meantime, the town of **Montenero di Bisaccia** plans a referendum to vote for merging with Abruzzo.



HERMITAGE OF CELESTINO V REMAINS CLOSED

The 13th-century hermitage of Celestine V (also known as Eremo di Sant'Onofrio) above **Sulmona**, will remain closed until summer's end due to ongoing safety works to secure the paths and rock walls. The works had to be paused last month until July on request by the Maiella National Park to protect the birds nesting in the area in this period. The only consolation is that the hermitage and Hercules Curino's temple will be visible from a distance lit up by two spotlights.



SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE CHURCH IN LANCIANO REOPENS AFTER RESTORATION

Following extensive restoration work, costing approximately €1.1 million, the 12th-century Santa Maria Maggiore church, **Lanciano's** former cathedral and a national monument since 1902, has reopened for worship. Notable additions include a new presbytery, altar, and ambo in travertine, alongside relics and restored artworks. The church will once again house the magnificent processional cross created by the famous goldsmith Nicola da Guardiagrele. A significant discovery was made during restoration: a 15th-century painting portraying Herod's birthday celebration alongside the martyrdom of John the Baptist.

ABRUZZO SECOND IN ITALY FOR WATER LOSS

According to Istat (the Italian Institute of National Statistics), Abruzzo is the second worst offender in Italy when it comes to water loss. The latest report has determined that the region loses 62.5% of its supply when going from source to tap. At the provincial level, **Chieti** fares most poorly, followed by **L'Aquila** and **Pescara**. The province of **Teramo** fares the best, with water loss capped at 27.9%. Concurrent with this, 64.4% of Abruzzese families consider themselves "fairly satisfied" with their water service.

DID YOU KNOW?

WAS TITIAN'S DANAE A COURTESAN FROM LANCIANO?



Many art historians believe that Titian's famous painting, *Danae*, found in the Gallery of the Royal Palace of Capodimonte, Naples, depicts Angela Greca, a renowned 16th-century courtesan from Abruzzo.

Angela Greca was born in Lanciano, abducted, and taken to Rome by a group of travelling rogues during one of the traditional city fairs in the late 1400s-early 1500s. Known as Ortensia Greca, she became one of the most beautiful courtesans in the capital. Like many courtesans of her time, Angela played the lute, sang, wrote poetry, and set fashion trends. She was adept at entertaining princes, literati, cardinals, and men of prestige, as she frequented the aristocratic circles of the Vatican for many years. De Alborensis, an affluent Spaniard, in a grand gesture of his affection, bought her a house in Vicolo Cellini 31, just a stone's throw away from the central Via Giulia. The famous Abruzzese beauty was mentioned in *Ragionamento del Zoppino*, an important work of Italian Renaissance pornography published in the 1530s.

In the early 1520s, she ended up in the Papal Court, marrying Count Ercole Rangone, the private chamberlain of Pope Leo X.

Legend has it that one of her lovers, Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, the nephew of Pope Paul III, commissioned Titian to paint Angela Greca as Danae. The Gallery's guides always mention that Angela Greca, the beautiful and famous courtesan from Lanciano, posed for that masterpiece.



A NEW RENAISSANCE: FROM SHEEP TO YARN

By Anna Lebedeva

About a decade ago, a young entrepreneur from Avezzano, Valeria Gallese, embarked on a journey to bring back Abruzzo's forgotten tradition – the art of working with sheep wool. Today, she is celebrated as a pioneer of the revival of the Italian wool making.

In her little *bottega* tucked away in a medieval street of Santo Stefano di Sessanio, she welcomes tourists, the curious, and regulars who want to buy high quality yarn, scarves, hats, and other hand-crafted wool products. Trained in veterinary medicine, Gallese's passion for sheep wool was ignited during her studies when she delved into flock genetic management. "It was a calling for me. I didn't know how to crochet, or dye wool, I didn't know anything, I just saw the sheep with the wool on them that wasn't used in Abruzzo," she recalls, reflecting on her journey. "So, after university, I returned to the province of L'Aquila to understand why wool was considered a by-product of the farm despite its value and a long history." Here she met Ovidio Damiani, her future husband, a fourth-generation sheep farmer who helped her to immerse herself in the pastoral world.

Photo above: one of the flocks that supplies wool for Aquilana Lana Italiana

RESTORING DIGNITY

Valeria lives with her family in Barisciano, at the foot of the Gran Sasso mountains. In winter, she is busy selling wool online; in summer, when tourists arrive, she opens her *bottega* in Santo Stefano di Sessanio. Both villages have a long history of sheep farming and wool production. In front of Barisciano, in the plain between L'Aquila and Navelli, runs the Tratturo Magno, the highway of Abruzzo's transhumance, which the flocks have traversed to and from Puglia for centuries. From 1579, during the two-centuries-long reign of the Medici family of Florence, Santo Stefano di Sessanio thrived on the production and trade of wool. The flocks grazing on the nearby highland grasslands of Campo Imperatore provided the prized *carfagna* wool, known for its natural brown hue.

While in the past wool was a valuable product, in recent times it has been viewed more as waste. "Upon shearing their sheep, if the wool cannot find a buyer, shepherds were burdened with the expense of its disposal, adding to their financial strain," explains Gallese.

Undeterred by the challenges, Valeria embarked on her mission to breathe new life into the Abruzzese wool industry. In 2012, she turned 50 kilograms of raw wool from her husband's farm into yarn to test the market. Her Aquilana Lana Italiana business was born. "I set up a blog where I told my story, and within three months, I sold everything," she recalls. Through dedication and perseverance, Gallese's enterprise slowly flourished. Since then, she also opened a Facebook page and a group and has been able to double sales every year. Her efforts not only brought back Abruzzo's wool but also empowered local shepherds economically. "I restored an economic dignity for them, helped to balance the books," she explains. "I told them that their wool was worth a lot and could be transformed into a beautiful product. The more I pay the shepherds, the happier I feel and am proud for what I do." Gallese's efforts have not only rejuvenated the local wool industry but also challenged existing perceptions. She has elevated the status of Abruzzo's wool, commanding prices above the national average.



Photos: (from top) Valeria Gallese; her bottega in Santo Stefano di Sessanio

WOOL FROM ABRUZZO

In her quest to revive Abruzzo's wool trade, Valeria processes an impressive quantity of raw material now. "Last year, I collected 16,000 kg of raw wool," she reveals. "To understand, that's two truckloads." This staggering volume of wool not only underscores the scale of Gallese's operation but also highlights the growing demand for Aquilana wool, both domestically and interna-

tionally. As her enterprise continued to expand Valeria began working with other sheep farmers, from Molise and Apulia, bringing the total number of her suppliers to twelve.

The raw wool is sent to Northern Italy, to The Wool Company in Biella, for processing. "The wool supply chain begins with shearing, which takes place in our area between April and May," she explains. "Only the best fleeces are selected and sent to Biella, where the wool is washed, combed, spun, twisted, and wound into large skeins." Then Valeria, in her workshop in Santo Stefano di Sessanio, packages the wool by hand in smaller skeins and dyes them with natural colours. She utilises natural pigments such as Montepulciano d'Abruzzo wine, oak galls, and different types of wood barks.

TRAILBLAZER

Aquilana wool is loved not only in Italy but across the world, with buyers in North America, Japan, and many countries in Europe. Stocked with colourful skeins, hats, scarves, cardigans, shawls, crocheted

Photos: (below) Valeria models a shawl made from Aquilana wool; (right) all wool is coloured with natural pigments

small gifts and adorable woolly sheep magnets, Valeria's shop heaves with customers in summer months and sales roll in steadily via her Facebook [page](#), [group](#), and email. Several companies make mountain hats with Aquilana wool and spinning mills place orders to add it to their quality yarns. "Aquilana Lana Italiana has become the most talked about wool business at the national level and is recognised as the finest wool in Italy," says Valeria.

Through her pioneering spirit and passion, Valeria Gallese has not only revived a tradition but also inspired a new generation of entrepreneurs and artisans creating businesses in rural areas. "When I started there were only two companies transforming raw wool to yarn in the entire country," says Valeria. "Today, several more followed in my footsteps. For me, it is a beautiful thing, a great satisfaction."

You can find Valeria Gallese's bottega in Piazza Medicea in Santo Stefano di Sessanio. For opening hours contact her via the Facebook [page](#), email at lanaquilana@gmail.com or call at 0039 3452719648.

Photos courtesy of Aquilana Lana Italiana.



SANTO STEFANO DI SESSANIO: BEYOND THE VISTAS

Text and photos by Anna
Lebedeva

Set against the dramatic peaks of the Gran Sasso mountain range, Santo Stefano di Sessanio, one of Italy's most beautiful villages, is a busy tourist destination in summer months. Its pioneering "scattered hotel" project has saved the village's architectural heritage and made it famous across the world but, like many other mountain hamlets in Abruzzo, it struggles to draw in permanent residents.

The village of Santo Stefano di Sessanio has two personalities: in the summer months it bustles with tourists, its archways and cobbled streets alive with the echoes of languages from all over the world. When I visited it a few weeks ago, in early spring, it exuded peace and tranquillity. On the empty streets, a few cats – ever-present residents in all small mountain villages in Abruzzo – cast me murderous looks when disturbed by my steps, while the haunting strains of an opera aria floated from the open door of a house. As I walked further, navigating the maze of the village's medieval layout, the silence was broken by the sounds of drilling and hammering, as builders worked on restoring a building.

Santo Stefano di Sessanio

The newly restored tower, *Torre Medicea*, gleamed in the sunlight above me, creating a stark contrast with the dark, slowly crumbling stone buildings in the heart of the village. Despite ongoing renovations in Santo Stefano di Sessanio, a significant portion of the old centre remains abandoned. I couldn't shake the feeling of being in a vast, empty museum awaiting its opening season.

There are only 116 permanent residents in the village, nearly half of whom are over 65 years old. A few years ago, the Municipality of Santo Stefano di Sessanio to combat depopulation launched an ambitious project to attract new residents. This initiative offered a range of incentives, including monthly non-repayable contributions for three years, amounting to a maximum of €8000 per year, as well as low rent housing. Additionally, substantial one-time grants of up to €20,000 were made available for starting a new business. Despite these efforts, the scheme failed, highlighting the formidable challenges most rural mountain communities face in Abruzzo.



The village's elevated position in the mountains, accessed via narrow winding roads, served as a strategic advantage in the Middle Ages, providing natural defences against invasions, but has become somewhat of a double-edged sword in modern times. The remote location, picturesque setting, and tranquil charms have attracted tourists in droves but posed challenges for residents navigating daily life. Stunning mountain vistas can hardly compensate for the absence of schools, convenience stores, and other essential services.

THE PAST

Santo Stefano di Sessanio's founding dates back to the 11-12th century when barbarian raids drove inhabitants of an earlier Roman settlement, Sextantio, higher up to the mountains. "This has always been the land of shepherds as the rocky, poor soil was not good for cultivating crops, except some hardy legumes," explained Roberta Ianni, tour guide and the head of the Association *I Viaggiatori nel Parco*, which manages the Visitor Centre in Santo Stefano di Sessanio. "At the end of the 15th century the powerful Piccolomini family obtained these lands through a marriage and brought great wealth to the village."

In 1583, the Medici of Florence acquired the territory attracted by the thriving wool trade with its flocks of over 90,000 sheep and a chance to have an enclave within the Kingdom of Naples. Under the Medici, the village flourished with its prosperity tied to the production of *carfagna* wool – a coarse dark wool used for military uniforms and monks' habits. Both the Piccolomini and Medici left a distinctive mark on the village's architecture. "The village is made up of tightly built simple stone houses, but on these houses we can still see decorative elements which are unmistakably Tuscan Renaissance in style: windows, arched doorways, and loggias," says Ianni. "The details such as oversized carved door surrounds built in the 15th-16th centuries tell us about a thriving economy and wealth that allowed families to add decorations to their homes that were in fashion at that time."

Santo Stefano di Sessanio has endured numerous earthquakes with some damage. However, it was the crisis in pastoralism and the subsequent wave



Photos: (from top) Porta Medicea; the coat of arms of the Medici family above the gate

of emigration that led to the abandonment of many houses and caused the village's population to shrink to less than a tenth of its former size. Paradoxically, it was this abandonment that left its architectural heritage untouched and ultimately preserved it.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

In 1994, a young entrepreneur from Milan, Daniele Kihlgren, purchased a significant portion of the village starting a bold project – Sextantio Albergo Diffuso – an upmarket scattered hotel where meticulously restored old buildings served as guest accommodation without compromising the character and architecture of Santo Stefano di Sessanio. Kihlgren's ambitious project quickly captured the attention of the national and international press. This newfound spotlight attracted tourists and a wave of new investors, sparking significant economic growth in the area. Today, there are approximately 60 artisan, hospitality, food, and retail businesses registered in Santo Stefano di Sessanio. Roberta Ianni informed me that between June and October, up to 10,000 people visit the tourist information point in the village. When you factor in the numerous hikers stopping for coffee at the bars and the many restaurant patrons, you get a bustling, flourishing local economy. Santo Stefano di Sessanio's model has been replicated in Matera, Basilicata (Sextantio Grotte Civita), becoming a model for rural revival and a symbol of hope for many abandoned mountain villages in Italy (for more read Daniele Kihlgren's article on page 15).

Photos: (from top) on the streets of Santo Stefano di Sessanio; (below) the newer part of the village





I have heard some people criticize Kihlgren for transforming the village into an overcrowded tourist attraction yet failing to draw in new residents. Personally, I greatly admire his vision and believe that his critics are overlooking the true objective: preserving the village's integrity and safeguarding its architectural heritage from being brutalised by modern concrete. And he has accomplished this feat successfully. The responsibility of attracting full-time residents and young families falls upon the community, municipality, and politicians, and, sadly, it is a challenge that borders on the impossible.

WHAT TO DO AND SEE IN SANTO STEFANO DI SESSANIO

TORRE MEDICEA

Dating back to the 14th century, this cylindrical tower once soared to a height of 20 meters, its sturdy ashlar stone walls adorned with battlements and crossbow windows. Despite enduring the ravages of time, the tower collapsed during the devastating earthquake of 2009, most probably due to the weight of the heavy concrete slab added during World War II. It was beautifully restored in 2021 and is open for visits every day in summer and on weekends in low season. The visiting schedule is displayed on the gate and in the tourist information office (Piazza del Municipio, 2).

LA BUSCELLA

An extremely narrow alleyway, *La Buscella* is so tight that a person can barely squeeze through it. Known locally as *Vicolo dei Baci*, or Alleyway of Kisses, it is said that young couples in the past would hide here to kiss standing on opposite sides of the narrow lane. Despite its modest dimensions, *La Buscella* is still used by (slim) locals as a shortcut passage. Address: Via Degli Archi, 16 (beside the shop Bottega Artigianale La Buscella).

Photos (from top): Torre Medicea; an old door in the village; (below) a carved stone detail of a doorway





GUIDED TOURS

You can join or book a private tour (in English) of the village at the tourist office, via the [website](#) of **Viaggiatori nel Parco** or their Facebook [page](#))

ARTISAN SHOPS

Many beautiful artisan shops are hidden in the nooks and crannies of the old centre where you can buy local honey, pasta, home textiles, local wool (see our article about the artisan Valeria Gallese who has revived the wool trade in Abruzzo on page 5).

LENTILS OF SANTO STEFANO DI SESSANIO

For over 1000 years, farmers have been cultivating tiny lentils in the small fields around the village. *Lenticchie di Santo Stefano di Sessanio* are well known among European gourmands and some famous international chefs use them to create delectable dishes for the most sophisticated palates. Restaurants **La Bettola di Geppetto** (Via Principe Umberto), **Il Mediceo** (Piazza Medicea 4), and **Locanda Sotto gli Archi** (Via degli Archi) serve excellent soups made with the local lentils. If you want to buy a pack of dry *lenticchie di Santo Stefano di Sessanio* to take home, head to the little shop **Azienda Agricola V. Ciarrocca** (Piazza Medicea, 13). See a recipe for lentil soup on page 26.

DONKEY TREK

Yes, you can explore the village, its narrow streets, small squares, and the surrounding mule tracks with panoramic vistas on donkey back. A young couple started **Gira e Rigira** and it has become a great success story. Check out their other donkey treks in nearby picturesque villages on their [website](#).



Photos (from top left): a house number plate; an alleyway in the village; an artisan shop

SAVING THE OLD TO SHAPE THE FUTURE

By Daniele Kihlgren

I arrived in Abruzzo in 1994, and while riding my motorbike on mountain roads, I started noticing many stunning villages, some abandoned, others still partially inhabited. One day by chance, on my way to Rocca Calascio, I took a dirt road and from above I saw Santo Stefano di Sessanio. I thought it was by far the most beautiful village I had ever seen. What made it special was the integrity between the historic architecture and the surrounding landscape, both of which remained unchanged for centuries. It made me realise that the 'heritage' status of these small villages, known as *borghi storici minori*, differs from the classical heritage typically found in the historic centres of Italian cities. Instead, it stems from the preserved charm of vernacular, modest architecture, where houses may span multiple levels, sometimes descending three levels below, in harmony with the natural landscape. In many cases where these villages experienced a resurgence in tourism during the last century, this delicate balance was disrupted by poorly managed public funding and private house constructions, leading to irreversible damage, albeit with economic benefits for the local area, as seen in Scanno and Pescocostanzo in Abruzzo.

CONSERVATIVE RESTORATION

I am convinced that the historical, aesthetic, and emotional value of small mountain villages and their surroundings increases in direct correlation with the absence of modern construction, which often clashes with the original heritage. This belief prompted me to initiate the Sextantio project, aimed at preserving Santo Stefano di Sessanio and safeguarding its integrity. Conservative restoration which, combining the ancient, historic elements with modern comforts, has given life to a scattered hotel, *albergo diffuso*.



Daniele Kihlgren

Old humble houses are typically overlooked as 'heritage' in the conventional sense, leading to significant modifications over time. We preserved everything that could be preserved: traces of daily life, the black soot-covered walls inside the rooms, we used salvaged floors, old furniture. We hired an anthropologist who did research collecting stories from the elderly about the territory and how things were in the past. It was not easy to explain to architects that we wanted to protect these places as they were.

PUBLIC FUNDS AND THEIR DAMAGE

In Southern Italy, especially in mountain villages predating their Alpine counterparts, the disturbance of historical architecture and landscape harmony often stems from public construction projects that neglect to meet the needs of communities struggling with emigration. A case in point is Santo Stefano di Sessanio, where public-funded initiatives, starting with the *Cassa del Mezzogiorno* (for more see [here](#)), have been left abandoned, undermining the intrinsic connection between the historic architecture and the surrounding environment – a connection that holds profound emotional and cultural significance for these communities.

Small villages continue to see the rise of new construction unrelated to the public interest and the needs of their residents. Despite extensive media coverage, both nationally and internationally, highlighting Santo Stefano di Sessanio's integrity and its positive economic influence on the local area, there is discussion of constructing a new municipal building to replace an abandoned school built in the 1970s with public funds. This move seems unnecessary, given the declining population. A large part of the village is still abandoned and, I believe, old buildings should be restored without adulterating the village with modern architecture. I advocate for a decisive prohibition on municipal authorities' power to initiate new construction projects and propose stricter regulations to preserve the integrity of these villages. Protecting minor historic heritage and upholding the harmony between landscape and historic architecture should be at the forefront of political agendas.

MODEL FOR OTHER VILLAGES

The Sextantio Albergo Diffuso project's economic return for the village has been significant: from the end of the 1990s, when the project began, to the present day, the number of guest accommodations has increased from 1 to 23, and new restaurants and shops have opened. Now people have a reason to stay; the population exodus has stopped because now people can work in Santo Stefano di Sessanio.



A room in Sextantio Albergo Diffuso restored using conservative techniques (photo courtesy of Sextantio).

This successful model could potentially be replicated in the inland areas of Southern Italy, where numerous abandoned villages exist. The aim is to protect their identity and historical landscape. However, if the current lack of regulations remains unaddressed, these villages are likely to vanish despite their cultural and socioeconomic significance.

In conversation with Anna Lebedeva.

LEARN MORE

Watch *Our Stone*, a beautiful documentary about Daniele Kihlgren's attempts to bring Santo Stefano di Sessanio and other old Italian villages back to life, and to preserve their ancient charm even at the cost of losing money. Available to rent on [Amazon](#) and [Vimeo](#).

ESCHER IN ABRUZZO

By Antonio Bini

His works of art are universally known as some of the most influential of the twentieth century, yet few people are aware of the connection between Maurits Cornelius Escher and Abruzzo. During the late 1920s, the young artist wandered through Abruzzo with a notebook and camera, traveling on foot or by mule, accompanied by a friend or alone. Later, he transformed the collected images into world-famous masterpieces.

Reserved and solitary, the great Dutch graphic artist, found in Abruzzo creativity and "vigour in body and soul, wandering from one village to another... enjoying the unexpected, in stark contrast to life at home." He wrote, "I have a vivid memory of myself, sitting on the edge of that narrow mountain path, contemplating how to portray, in the most faithful manner, the vast and enticing vista before me."

The Dutch artist's connection to Abruzzo remained unknown to a wider audience, until the European project "Identity and Difference," promoted by the cultural association Culture Tracks, reconstructed his travels in the region and the places he visited, which inspired his works. Some mountain villages were not easily recognisable as subjects of his highly personal interpretations that show us the artist's unique vision of the values expressed by a landscape.

MOUNTAIN VILLAGES

Maurits Cornelius Escher was born in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, in 1898. His father hoped he would become an architect, but Maurits displayed strong talents for art. In 1922, he made a brief initial trip to Italy. In 1924, together with his wife Jetta Umiker, he settled in Rome. From there the young Escher ventured on explorations in the south of Italy, particularly in Abruzzo and Calabria, drawn to the



Maurits Cornelius Escher (left) with his friend Giuseppe Haas Triverio at Passo Godi, Scanno, in 1929

mountain village landscapes, which he reached by all possible means, from train to local buses, but also on foot or by mule.

In 1928 and 1929, travelling in Abruzzo, Escher visited Opi, Villalago, Castrovalva, Alfedena, Goriano Sicoli, Fara San Martino, and Scanno. He perceived the ancient villages' landscapes and architecture as fanciful creations that inspired many of his works. The lithograph *Street in Scanno*, for instance, depicts Vico Ciorla, which remains unchanged to this day, *The Bridge* shows Alfedena. (See other lithographs depicting corners of Abruzzo on the M.C. Escher Foundation's [website](#)).

A noteworthy episode during his stay in Abruzzo, in Castrovalva – a small village perched along a ridge overlooking the Sagittario Valley – shows the difficulties that foreign travellers could

encounter in sparsely populated areas at the time. In the spring of 1928, after a wearying journey along the steep road linking Anversa degli Abruzzi to Castrovalva – a route then navigable only by mule – Escher arrived in the evening and promptly retired to bed. At dawn, he was awakened by the carabinieri, summoned by a concerned woman who found the unfamiliar traveller's behaviour suspicious. In spring, the village, awaiting the return from Puglia of their men, all transhumant shepherds, was populated mainly by women, children, and a handful of elderly people, so seeing a male stranger caused concern. Escher found himself escorted to the barracks under suspicion of involvement in the assassination attempt on King Vittorio Emanuele III, which had taken place in Milan on April 12, 1928.

After vehement protests, Escher was eventually released. This incident was recounted by his friend and biographer, the physicist Bruno Ernst, who also gathered Escher's reflections from his recollections of the period spent sketching Castrovalva, a lithograph that would later be recognised as one of his finest landscape works. Escher recalled, "I spent almost an entire day stationed along this narrow, winding mule track, sketching incessantly. Above me, there was a school, and I could hear the clear voices of children singing." Sadly, the schools have long since closed their doors, and the once cheerful echoes of children's voices are now absent in this picturesque village, home to only fifteen residents, but it remains popular among tourists following in the footsteps of the Dutch artist.

Photos: (top) Vicolo Ciorla in Scanno remains unchanged; a print of Escher's lithograph depicting Vicolo Ciorla



FAME

Escher moved to Switzerland in June 1935, as he found Italy's growing fascist restrictions on individual freedoms unbearable. However, the Swiss mountains left him indifferent and provided no inspiration. Leaving Italy meant for him, "moving away from the direct and realistic illustration of the surrounding reality." He began to focus on illusionistic landscapes, inverted perspectives, and geometric constructions, merging his remarkable imagination with a deep passion for mathematics and astronomy. These deeply personal artistic endeavours propelled him to worldwide fame.

Although he never returned to Italy, the country and Abruzzo left a deep mark on Escher's art. In one of his most famous works, *Belvedere* (1958),

The village of Opi which was depicted in one of Escher's works (*Opi in Abruzzo*, 1929, reproduced [here](#))

he once again recalled Abruzzo, creating an imaginary belvedere open on three levels, set against a mountainous backdrop. The scholar Piero Moscone recognised the landscape as the Conca Peligna mountains seen from the side of Pettorano sul Gizio.

EXHIBITION

An exhibition dedicated to Escher running at Palazzo Bonaparte in Rome until May 5 commemorates 100 years since Escher arrived in Italy. It is the largest and most complete exhibition dedicated to him, featuring over 300 works, including lithographs inspired by Scanno and Opi. Tickets can be bought [online](#).

Antonio Bini is the author of several books on history and traditions of Abruzzo and a regular contributor to ABRUZZISSIMO Magazine.

Photos courtesy of the author.





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ABRUZZISSIMO
MAGAZINE

BRINGING THAI FLAVOURS TO VASTO

By Linda Dini Jenkins

They met near Juliet's famed city of Verona, but Somphit and Karl moved to Abruzzo six years ago and are taking Vasto by storm, one delicious portion at a time.

"I'm a typical Brit," says Karl Walker. "I love eating but am a terrible cook and my activities in the kitchen are extremely limited." Nevertheless, what they are creating together near Vasto's waterfront is remarkable, and another example of ex-pats bringing their passion and skill to introduce something unique to the Abruzzo experience.

Karl – a technical and graphic designer – was born near Birmingham in the centre of England and spent seven years in South Africa for work; he returned to the North of England before arriving in Italy 2010 to scope out another possible project.

Somphit Galloni was born in Thailand and started life in tourism and then property sales until she moved to Italy in 1986 with her Italian husband when she was just 21 years old. She has always had a passion for cooking and it's something that runs in her family – from a young age, she was in the kitchen learning from her grandmother and mother, and many of the recipes she uses have been passed down through generations of traditional family cooking. Her sister, mother, and son are all Cordon Bleu-trained chefs. Some of her most prized recipes came from her great-grandmother, and more than one large corporation has tried to buy a particular sauce from her, but she refuses to sell. "These recipes will die with me," she sternly proclaims.



Somphit Galloni and Karl Walker in their kitchen

VASTO BOUND

When they met, Somphit had been living in Milan and Karl was near Lake Garda in a small, magical place called Valeggio sul Mincio. Somphit had actually visited Abruzzo quite a few times on holiday and already had a number of friends here, but moving was something of a leap of faith for Karl. "It was near the sea, and I love the water, so it seemed right," he recalls.

They now live within view of the beautiful Adriatic – a major stress reliever for them. "It's so lovely to be able to see a sunrise every morning and walk along the sweeping sandy beach at Vasto Marina, all within an 11-minute drive," declares Karl.

Becoming integrated into the community was no problem. For Karl, an average morning involves meeting up with a few of the 'old boys' on the beach. Sometimes he'll help a fisherman friend launch his boat and haul it back, and he gets rewarded with some free fish, which Somphit can then turn into a culinary masterpiece.



Somphit's prize-winning Pad Thai

"We are both easily recognised and remembered, as we are both foreigners – but both of us have open personalities and hearts," says Somphit. Karl adds, "Yes, and we're quite loud and like to joke around and engage people."

According to Karl, Somphit speaks better Italian than many Italians, and he can get by. But neither of them arrived with a single word. They have been really welcomed and amazed by the hospitality and friendliness of the locals who genuinely want to know, "How are you?" Best of all, over time, everyone – from the barmaid or barman serving a coffee to the folks at supermarket checkouts right through to the mayor and his wife – has become a happy customer of their culinary venture, VasThai.

PASSION, LOVE, HOBBY, LIFE

While it was a no-brainer that they would open a Thai home-restaurant, both Karl and Somphit were cautious and even a bit nervous in the beginning about the thought of introducing another type of food in what is already a country famous for the high caliber of its own cuisine. But sharing the magic of Chef Somphit's uncompromising talents and passion was their singular goal.

"The name VasThai was my attempt to assure locals that it was an *integration* rather than an *invasion*," is how Karl explains why they combined Vasto and Thailand in one word. Much to their surprise, they were overwhelmed with positive responses. In fact, the typical comment was usually something like, "Finally – something other than *pasta*, *pizza*, and *pane!*" They are grateful for the huge variety of amazing, fresh, local ingredients that they find in the fertile land of Abruzzo.

Passion and perfection won out in the end. Chef Somphit is self-taught, but her resume is incredible: her best friend, Chef Kent, back in Thailand is the only official chef for the King and the royal family. She has been a judge on Thailand's Masterchef program and has hosted other television and radio shows. She was the official chef for Thailand at the EXPO in Milan some years ago and has catered events for

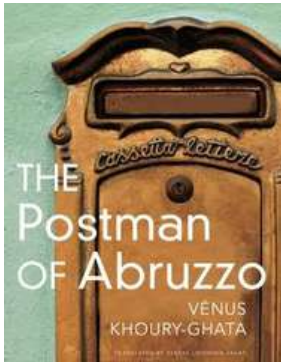
the Ambassador of Thailand at the consulate in Rome more than once. In short, she is a megastar in Thailand. But she stays true to her ethos of quality, authenticity, and tradition. Calling her a bit of a Gordon Ramsay in the kitchen, Karl says, "Over time I've tried to shave a few cents off here and there. But she won't hear of it – it's her way or no way."

PRIZE WINNER

Reluctantly, Chef Somphit entered an international competition in Abruzzo in 2020 – a three-day event featuring chefs from all over the world competing for best in class for their traditional dishes. Competitors came from all over: Pakistan, Morocco, Cameroon, Spain, Senegal and more. Unsurprisingly, Somphit won for her Pad Thai – the official and national dish of Thailand.

It is her signature dish, taking about eight hours to prepare and features her famous tamarind sauce. It is a must-try, whether you choose to reserve in advance to dine in their intimate room or take advantage of their very popular take-away trade ("restaurant quality food, served in a box.") Either way, you'll eat well and be part of the exploding opportunities we find in Abruzzo.

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 POSTMAN OF ABRUZZO

by Vénus Khoury-Ghata

This is an exemplary literary novella which takes readers on a somewhat fantastical journey to a tight-knit Albanian community somewhere in the mountains of Abruzzo. Whether the village of Malaterra is real or not is beside the point.

Our protagonist, Laure, is a Parisian widow looking to find answers about the past. A decade after the death of her husband Luc, an eminent geneticist, she travels to a remote village in the foothills of Abruzzo – a community steeped in poverty and superstition where Luc had spent long periods studying its close-knit Albanian population which had settled here 100 years earlier, having fled the Ottomans and Soviet communism. Her self-imposed journey is an attempt to understand a partner who was profoundly detached.

In Malaterra, she meets an intriguing cast of characters: Mourad, the baker, “who proposes marriage to every woman who enters his shop” and Ismael, the Muslim bookseller who derides his neighbours because, “they read coffee grounds and palms rather than the treasures displayed in his window.” But it is the postman, Yussuf, who is Laure’s guide to the stories and superstitions of the people of this valley. Yussuf, with his own tragic past, holds on to letters until he feels the recipients are ready to read them and who visits his neighbours every day, whether they have mail or not.

There is mystery here in this novel of exile, written in a highly poetic style, and whether Laure reaches a point of clarity about her marriage and her husband as she finds herself enmeshed in the language and traditions of a very different people, is up to the reader.



DIMORE STORICHE IN ABRUZZO. STORIA, IDENTITÀ E PATRIMONIO CULTURALE PRIVATO

Curated by *Associazione Dimore Storiche Italiane*, this book offers a glimpse into the lesser-known but rich heritage of Abruzzo, highlighting 41 privately owned residences that embody the region's history, traditions, and architectural splendour. Through detailed historical narratives, architectural insights, and anecdotes from the owners, readers are transported to a bygone era marked by the golden age between the 16th and 18th centuries when many of the palaces were built with the money from sheep farming, land ownership, and significant administrative and ecclesiastical positions. From the monumental entrance staircase of Palazzo de Nardis (on the book cover) to the magnificent rooms of Palazzo Pica Alfieri, each dwelling unveils a story of opulence and cultural significance.

Accompanied by stunning photographs, the book not only showcases the beauty of these residences but also serves as a tribute to the families who have shaped Abruzzo's history over the centuries. Among other residences included in the book are Palazzo D'Alessandro in Caporciano, Palazzo Vitto Massei in Pettorano sul Gizio, Palazzo Sipari in Pescasseroli, and Palazzo Ciarrocca in Santo Stefano di Sessanio, as well as Palazzo Tilli in Casoli.

Available directly from the [publisher](#) and [Amazon](#).

CIAMMAICHE: ON THE TRAIL OF THE TRADITIONAL SNAIL

By Anna Swann

Like many other things, eating snails (*lumache* in Italian) was invented by the ancient Romans. Lightly grilled with a little oil and vinegar, the terrestrial molluscs were a big hit among the rich elite during the Roman Empire. By the Middle Ages however, they lost their delicacy status and became food of the poor.

Nowadays snails are considered a French delicacy. In the elegant bistros of Paris, escargot is heralded as a pinnacle of haute cuisine, meticulously prepared with butter, garlic, and parsley to serve to the most discerning connoisseurs. But very few people know that snails have been part of Abruzzo's traditional cuisine for centuries. They still retain their status as a cherished peasant fare, celebrated in traditional restaurants and in some rural families. Here, snails are not smothered in decadent butter but simmered in a rich, fragrant tomato sauce infused with aromatic herbs — a recipe that has been passed down through generations.

In Abruzzo the snails are called *ciammaiche* and for a long time they were the food of choice for those who could not afford meat. Even today, glimpses of tradition persist in the rural landscapes of Abruzzo. After rain, in spring and autumn, you may spot a *nonna* stooped in the fields, collecting the tasty gastropods.

The path from field to table is one paved with patience and precision. The snails undergo a rigorous cleansing ritual, spending days purging in water to rid themselves of impurities. Then, they are meticulously washed with salt, then vinegar, to banish any lingering traces of slime. After that the molluscs are boiled with aromatic herbs, then more washing, more cleaning — the shells must be pristine. Only then can you start preparing the dish.

Very few restaurants in Abruzzo serve *ciammaiche* dishes (no wonder, considering how long it takes to prepare them!) sourcing their snails from certified farms. Heliciculture (*elicicoltura* in Italian), the art of cultivating edible land snails, has emerged as a burgeoning industry in the region. Some even go as far as to achieve organic certification, ensuring that every succulent bite is not only delicious but also environmentally conscious.



WHERE TO EAT SNAILS IN ABRUZZO

AGRITURISMO IL GRAPPOLO D'ORO

Founded in 2016 by Luca Mazzucca and his parents, Emilia Di Tommaso and Claudio, the *agriturismo* stands as a testament to tradition and a deep-rooted connection to the land. Luca sources his snails from certified heliciculture farms yet prepares them with the same meticulous ritual passed down through generations. Try his delicious *ciammaiche al sugo*, snails cooked with cherry tomatoes and peppers (in photo above). The dish is not always available. Keep an eye out for their announcements on [Facebook](#). **Address:** Address: Via Nasuti, 110/A, Lanciano (CH).

TAVERNA 58

Occasionally, this restaurant has a special menu dedicated to the humble land mollusc (check their [Facebook page](#) for announcements) that feature several dishes such as polenta with a spicy snail sauce (cooked in shells) and roasted *lumache* with herbs. Most of the time, their menu includes *le Ciammariche di vigna* (vineyard snails). **Address:** Corso Gabriele Manthone, 46, Pescara.

AGRICOLA TERRE D'ABRUZZO

If you want to try cooking *lumache* at home, you can buy them already purged and prepared to be cooked from the organic *Agricola Terre d'Abruzzo* farm in Notaresco. The snails are grass-fed and farmed in open fields. They also sell ready-made sauces in jars [online](#).

INVOLTINI DI CAVOLO

By Giuseppina Marino

My family is originally from Abruzzo, but I was born in Australia, where my mother emigrated to marry my father. I live in Adelaide now but remain closely connected to my Abruzzese roots.

In 2020, I embarked on a project to write down my mother's recipes to save them for future generations. This resulted in the e-book *100 DAYS: 100 RECIPES. Cooking with Mamma* published by Clarendon House Books in 2021, followed by the book *From Brodo to Torta. Nonna's Favourite Recipes*, self-published in 2022.

My mother Michelina was from the town of Montediorisio (CH) and quite inventive in the kitchen. Some recipes were ancient and handed down over generations and some evolved from her own experiments over decades. These cabbage rolls are in the latter category. She never called it *Involtini di cavolo*. That is the Italian translation. She always referred to it in her town's dialect as *capucc ripienn*. Sometimes she rolled up the cabbage leaves, as in this recipe, and other times she just layered the cabbage leaves like a *lasagna*.

Growing up in Italy, cabbage was a staple in Mamma's diet and she continued the tradition in Australia, growing it in her garden, cooking it and serving it to us, her family, on a regular basis.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 10 rolls

- 1 tsp olive oil
- 10 savoy cabbage, outer leaves
- 500 g beef mince (ground beef)
- 1 2/3 cups long grain rice
- ¼ red onion
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 cup shredded fresh mozzarella cheese
- 2 tbsp grated romano cheese
- 750 g sugo di pomodoro



PREPARATION

Boil the cabbage until tender. Remove from the pot and layer into a colander and allow to drain.

Parboil the rice for 5 minutes and strain.

Dice the onion and fry in olive oil for a few minutes until translucent. Add the beef with a pinch of salt and stir fry until cooked. Spoon a layer of sugo on the base of a 23 cm X 35 cm (9 X 13 inch) Pyrex baking dish.

Assemble the cabbage rolls by layering each leaf flat on a cutting board and place 3 tablespoons of rice and 1 tablespoon of beef in the center of each cabbage leaf. Add a sprinkle of mozzarella cheese and loosely roll up.

Place each cabbage roll in the baking dish, stem side down. The ten rolls will fit snugly together.

Ladle the rest of the sugo on top of the cabbage rolls. Sprinkle with romano cheese. Bake at 180° C (350 F) oven for about 30 minutes.

Test with a fork to see that cabbage is tender and meat cooked. If it isn't, cook another 5 - 10 minutes. Serve hot.

LENTIL SOUP FROM SANTO STEFANO DI SESSANIO

By Anna Swann

For centuries, a humble lentil soup made with just a few simple ingredients was a staple food for the poor farmers in the mountains around the village of Santo Stefano. The poor man's meat – as lentils were often called here – were cheap and easy to grow. The local lentils are small and do not require soaking overnight before cooking. While this soup can be made with other types of Italian *lenticchie*, the ones from Santo Stefano have a stronger, slightly nutty flavour that makes them extra special.

I learnt the recipe from *nonna* Aida in Santo Stefano some years ago. She has since passed away, but I still remember her sitting by the window with her reading glasses on, sorting through the lentils to make sure they were clean and telling me that she didn't know how to cook until she got married. "I had to learn quickly on the job," she laughed.

INGREDIENTS

Makes 4 portions

- 300g lentils of Santo Stefano
- 1 medium potato, chopped
- 1 medium celery stalk, chopped
- 1 medium carrot, peeled and chopped
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 3 medium garlic cloves, minced
- 1 bay leaf
- 3 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- Parsley, finely chopped
- Salt and pepper to taste



PREPARATION

In a pot, sauté celery, carrot, and onion with olive oil for about 5 minutes.

Stir in the garlic and sauté the mix for another minute. Add the lentils, bay leaf and potato.

Pour in about 1 litre of water (if you like your soup not too thick, add more). Cover and cook on low heat for 40-45 minutes.

Serve with a drizzle of good extra virgin olive oil, chopped parsley and some *peperoncino*.

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and bears**

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**A humble bird with a centuries-
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