

A JOYOUS FOOD TOUR IN THE AGRARIAN HILLS OF ITALY'S ABRUZZO REGION MAKES GUESTS FEEL LIKE FAMILY.

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INDULGE

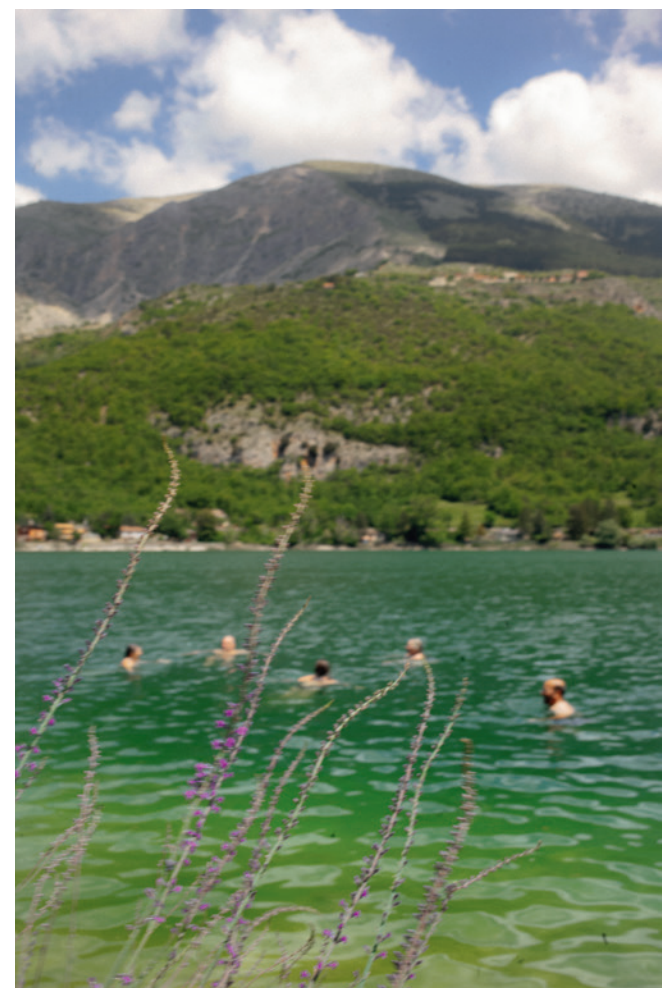
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HOMECOMING









On a spring morning just outside Villalago, in the verdant region of Abruzzo, central Italy, the sun beats down and a goat bleat warbles in the open air. One baa quickly gives way to another, before a chorus breaks out, accompanied by bells ricocheting off the Apennine Mountains in the distance. “You hear that?” asks fourth-generation shepherd and cheesemaker Angelo Rossicone (above), grinning and gesturing toward his animals in their straw-lined shed. “I call the goats by name and they respond to me individually.”

I’ve just been introduced to Angelo, his wife, Tina, and their son Lorenzo (above right) by my host, Byron Bay-based chef Daniela Maiorano, who was born and raised in Abruzzo by a family of restaurateurs. I’m here on her Spring Harvest and Walking Mountain Towns itinerary (danielamaiorano.com), one of a series of small-group food and wine tours she runs four or five times a year with her Australian partner, Bess Prescott. The charming couple is steering our group of 14 food-obsessed Italophiles on a six-night journey through home-cooked meals, hands-on workshops and off-the-map excursions to meet regional producers who greet us like long-lost family. Each of the

programs is distinguished by its season but all are united in showcasing the beauty of our host’s hometown of Sulmona and wider Abruzzo, which borders Lazio to the west and the Adriatic Sea to the east.

This morning on Angelo’s farm, I’m coming down off the high of our tour’s opening feast of maccheroni alla chitarra – served with saffron, ricotta and pork cheek – at Ristorante Clemente (ristoranteclemente.it), the Maiorano family restaurant and beating heart of Sulmona. Traversed by a medieval aqueduct and backdropped by snow-capped mountains, the town’s centre hums around the clock except at lunch, when the scene goes so quiet you could hear a single confetti – Sulmona’s signature almond candy, best enjoyed at Confetti Rapone (confettirapone.com) – fall to the ground.

Defined by jagged yet gentle topography, Abruzzo is a place where coastal breezes, stone villages, fertile slopes and harsh alpine conditions coexist. Italian writer Primo Levi once described this land as *forte e gentile* (strong and kind) and the phrase became shorthand for the character of Abruzzo’s residents. As I take in the scene around me – Angelo and the goats, Tina setting

up a cheese-tasting table nearby – it strikes me that Maiorano, with her tattooed tough-girl exterior and effortlessly warm hospitality, may be the slogan’s ultimate personification.

She’s brought us to the Rossicone farm after a trek through the nearby nature reserve of Lago di San Domenico e Lago Pio. We chatted as we climbed toward a perch overlooking the Gole del Sagittario, the steepness enough to keep heart rates up but not so tiring to stop me from sniffing wildflowers along the way. Our ascent ended in Villalago’s town centre, where we dipped into the old town hall that now houses the Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions. A small collection of farming tools, domestic supplies and photographs gives an impression of what rural life and farming culture in Abruzzo has been like through the decades.

But there’s only so much one can glean from objects frozen in place; the Rossicone farm gives us a real-time snapshot. We gather around a spread of bread, homemade ricotta, strawberry preserve and honey, all accompanied by moka pot coffee that Tina encourages us to cut with pungent goat’s milk. Soon after refueling, we’ll accompany Lorenzo on a portion of his daily pasture walk.



We're told it will be scenic but not all that physically taxing; Lorenzo intuitively – and correctly – that we're all mostly here for the cheese.

Remarkably, it's not yet lunchtime and we've already taken a grand tour of local mountain flavours. A breakfast that included tomato bruschetta and cold cuts was served on the panoramic terrace of Il Marchese del Grillo, a onetime noble home and our group's base throughout the week; each evening we retire to individual B&Bs or apartments in Sulmona but this is where we meet each morning. Later, we stop in Scanno for lunch at family-run agriturismo Valle Scannese (vallescannese.com), where regulars feasting on ricotta-filled ravioli puzzle over how we found the place (before clocking Maiorano, above). Tomorrow in the mountain town of Pacentro, Maiorano's friend Virginia Sciore will demonstrate the process of making ricotta but only after trying her mother, Stella's, *fiadoni* Abruzzesi (soft cheese-filled hand pies).

Stella and the elder Rossicones all clearly treat farm life as a vocation but I can't help wondering whether the new generation, represented by Virginia and

Lorenzo, has ever considered a different path. Both separately share with our group that they have explored urban living but have always been drawn back to "their" mountains. It's not hard to understand why. I've been trailing Maiorano, Prescott and friends for just 24 hours and can feel some healthy skepticism about city life bubbling up in me. This was billed as a small-group tour but I feel less like a tourist and more like a onetime Abruzzo resident who's been away a smidge too long, now welcomed back into the fold by old friends.

Angelo, of course, is one of these new old friends. He disappears into the goat pen, Maiorano not far behind. They reemerge with a wide-eyed kid in hand. "Eighteen hours old," exclaims Angelo and Maiorano asks what the newborn's name will be. When Angelo says he hasn't decided, she doesn't pause: "What about Angelino – Little Angelo?" she suggests, looking to the group for approval, which comes unanimously. Angelo blushes but happily obliges. Maiorano places a congratulatory hand on his shoulder as members of our group take turns nuzzling the newborn, who we all understand will grow up to be *forte e gentile*. ✎