



Sunday Telegraph (Sydney)

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EATIN' TRACK

ITALY

OCCUPYING ALMOST 11,000SQ KM FROM THE HEART OF THE APENNINE MOUNTAINS TO THE ADRIATIC SEA, ABRUZZO COULD FIT INTO TASMANIA SIX TIMES

Lush home of the healthy appetite

Delicious seasonal food is all you will find on the menu in a region where fresh produce is everything, writes **Chanel Parratt**.

"TELL me what you eat and I'll tell you who you are," said French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin.

In Abruzzo, central Italy, that could take some time.

Like many parts of Europe, Abruzzo carved an identity out of agriculture.

For the past 3000 years, shepherds have moved sheep from the folds of Abruzzo's lush mountain pastures to the coastal plains by the Adriatic Sea.

The 250km "transumanza"

(migration of the sheep) is now made by truck but evidence of the sheep-herding traditions are everywhere, especially in Abruzzese cuisine.

The food culture of Abruzzo is one borne out of survival — peasant food and meals the shepherds could carry with them. It relies on simplicity — a basic style of cooking centred around seasonal produce and the frugal preservation of meat and anything in excess supply.

My host on an Absolutely Abruzzo regional tour, Luciana

Masci, was born in Brisbane to Abruzzese parents. She says if you talk to an Abruzzese about slow food they don't know what you're talking about: "It has always been this way. Thirty years ago people would have said Abruzzo had missed the boat, they didn't industrialise and they didn't get rich, but I think now people see the value in doing things in a more sustainable way."

Anything fresh is eaten in accordance with the season and anything that's not is likely to have been preserved during a time of abundance, or left to mature like the hard pecorino (sheep's) cheese.

"When I was young I didn't appreciate where I came from. I changed my name to Lucy," she says.

"I'd go to school and have frittata sandwiches wrapped in foil, when all I wanted was what everybody else had.

"When I hit 19 I was like, 'No I'm getting this all wrong, I'm Luciana and the frittata sandwiches are delicious'."

For our small group,

travelling through Abruzzo offers a snapshot of authentic village life. From the seaside town of Vasto to the hilltop villages surrounding the Apennine Mountains and across the vineyards and silver olive groves of Pescara, there is variation here that we hadn't experienced in Italy before.

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With a history dating to 1300BC, Vasto has a mix of Benedictine, Spanish and Roman architectural influences.

We visit the fishing hamlet of Rocca San Giovanni, where curious wooden contraptions called trabocchi are used by locals to catch fish and prawns.

Dinner is a fresh catch of fish. Our chef does little more than lightly batter the scampi (shell on) and flash-fry the calamari with lemon, garlic and oil. It is the best I've ever had.

Moving inland, we're eager to unearth more Abruzzese food. About 80 per cent of Italy's aromatic black, white, winter and summer truffles come from Abruzzo.

We stop at the region's largest truffle merchant to taste truffle cheese, oil and salt and stock up on surprisingly affordable supplies before moving on to lunch.

At Agrituristica restaurant Il Vecchio Moro, at least 75 per cent of what we eat and drink must come from the estate.

Plate after plate of delicious Abruzzese antipasto brings context to the food traditions.

We taste sheep's pecorino and ricotta — the shepherds would sell the sheep's milk while herding flocks for the feudal lords and from that, the

peasants would make cheese.

When sheep came to the end of their useful life their meat was cut into cubes, threaded on to wooden skewers and grilled over a long oak or coal brazier.

Pork was unattainable for most of the population — if the farmers did keep pigs, the prime cuts would go to the lords and the peasants would create dishes with what was left.

With a nose-to-tail approach to food consumption, we try liver salami with grape syrup.

Commonly from the area of Vasto the salami is made from liver, lungs, heart and cheek.



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Orange peel, garlic, salt, dried chilli and grape syrup are added as a way to extend the life of the salami as well as disguise the smell of offal.

When meat wasn't affordable the Abruzzese ate cheese and egg balls (poor man's meatballs). Made from egg, sheep and goat's cheese, they are rolled in breadcrumbs, garlic and parsley, then fried and served with homemade tomato sauce.

Foraging forms another part of the traditions of Abruzzo. The wild poppy shoots, chicory and silverbeet on the table have roots in the past, like every

dish before.

The days pass quickly as we explore Abruzzo's medieval hilltop villages. Towers used to spot marauding hordes dot the

rolling landscape as we make our way to Pescara. Our accommodation, a converted 17th-century farmhouse, is in a grove of 4000 olive trees. The fields around us are a patchwork quilt of velvet green vine canopies and golden sunflowers. This is the holiday within the holiday, where we sit by the pool, read and learn all about olive oil.

We walk the magnolia-lined streets to the nearby town of

Loreto Aprutino for market day and practise our Italian with the

waiters over a cappuccino.

If the best meal is the one you make yourself, then an evening spent with Olga (the resident mother-in-law) beneath the vaulted brick ceilings of the farmhouse is it for Abruzzo.

It started with an afternoon spent picking organic vegetables, cutting sheets of pasta, roasting plump tomatoes and rolling grilled zucchini around fresh ricotta and basil.

The writer was a guest of CIT Holidays.

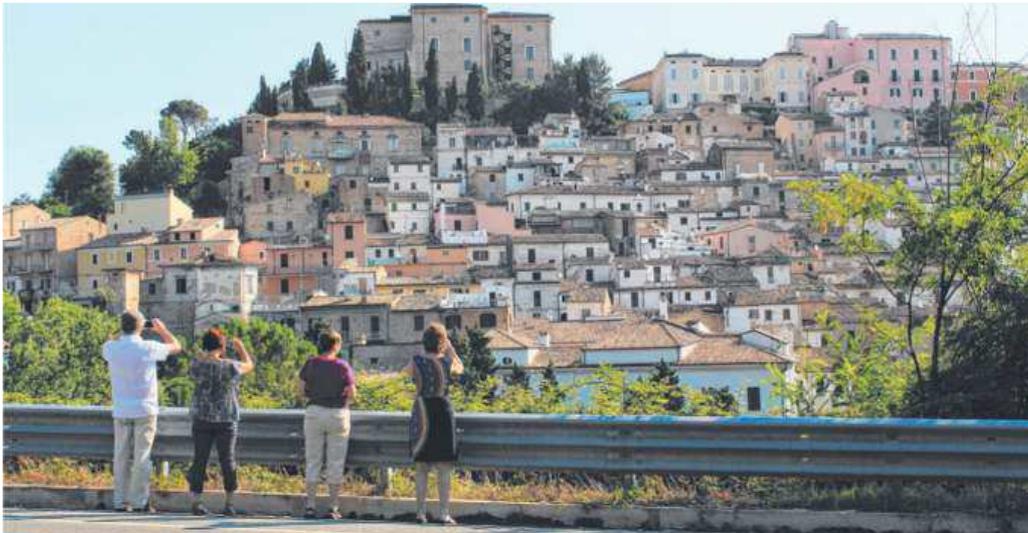
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ABRUZZO

GETTING THERE

CIT Holidays can arrange airfares, transfers, accommodation, car rental, rail and escorted and independent tours. For more information visit cit.com.au or call CIT Holidays on 1300 380 992.

STAYING THERE

Cost of Absolutely Abruzzo Tours, Back Roads of Abruzzo tour is \$A4750 twin share, single supplements are available. Tour departs Rome, 8 days/7 nights. Cost includes accommodation, all meals, drinks with meals, wine, olive oil and cheese tastings, fully escorted with the services of Italian and English speaking guides.



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EYE CANDY: The scenery is as good as the food in Abruzzo, home to the medieval town of Altino (left); the centre of the seaside town of Vasto (above), which dates back to 1300BC; and amazing views over national parkland (below).



MOUNTAINS TO SEA: The medieval castle of Roccascalegna overlooks the Rio Secco valley; and Vasto beach (below) is a popular spot with families.

