



Peperoncini and 'Nduja

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# DREAM OF ITALY®

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## EXPLORING CALABRIA Through Its Unique Foods

**C**alabria, the toe of Italy's boot, is one of the country's lesser traveled regions, but it offers something for everyone — 500 miles of gorgeous coastline along the Ionian and Tyrrhenian Seas; three national parks situated in the region's major mountain ranges (*Pollino*, *Sila* and *Aspromonte*); hundreds of cobblestone-paved medieval villages; and various museums, artisan shops, and festivals that honor its archeological, cultural, religious and artistic heritage.

This region, home to about two million residents, is a land that has been conquered, reconquered, and conquered again by Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Spaniards, French and others.

Calabria just wouldn't be Calabria without all of these influences, but perhaps nowhere is the amalgamation of cultures more obvious — or delicious — than in the food.



### Mamma Mia, The Food!

Something many don't realize is that an Arab touch is reflected in the abundance of dishes featuring artichokes (*carciofi*) and eggplants (*melanzane*), most notably *carciofi* or *melanzane ripieni* (stuffed), *parmigiana di*

*melanzane* (eggplant parmesan) and *polpette di melanzane* (meatless, eggplant balls) as well as several desserts featuring honey, almonds and figs.

*continued on page 2*



## Where to Stay the Night Before Your Flight Home

**T**he night before the plane trip home from Italy is often a downer. Almost all flights from Italy to the U.S. leave early in the morning or around noon, which often means a stay in an undistinguished airport hotel and a mediocre dinner in a touristy restaurant. But it doesn't have to be like that. For example, in *Rome*, *Milan* and *Venice*, the night before the plane trip home can serve as a pleasant exclamation point at the end of your Italian vacation.

You can spend your last night in Italy at a comfortable and hospitable establishment, do some last minute sightseeing or relaxing, have a good dinner and be able to reach the airport quickly and easily.

### Rome

The airport in *Fiumicino* outside of Rome is within easy reach of the center of Rome. A taxi takes about 40 minutes when there's no traffic but morning rush hour can make it much longer (flat fee of 48€). There is also a direct train (the *Leonardo da Vinci Express*) from Rome's *Termini* station that leaves every 15 minutes, takes 32 minutes and costs 14€ per person. But if you choose to stay closer to the airport, there are very pleasant alternatives to the crowded cluster of

*continued on page 6*

2 million people live in *Calabria*.

But let's be honest: there's far too much to discuss regarding Calabrian cuisine to be crammed into a short article, so let's hit some highlights through excerpts from my book, *52 Things to See & Do in Calabria*, starting with the star of all Calabrian foods: the *peperoncino*, a gift, some believe from the Spanish when they ruled the land in the 16th century.

### Spice It Up at A Peperoncino Festival

*Diamante* is a charming fishing village on the Tyrrhenian Sea known for its mural-lined streets. A visit any time of year is advisable, but if you plan your trip for its annual Peperoncino Festival in September, you're in for an especially spicy treat.

*Peperoncini* (literally "little peppers") are the chili peppers that add a kick to many Calabrian dishes. They are as much a symbol of the region as the Riace Bronzes (5th-century BC bronzes that we pulled from the sea and can now be viewed at *Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia* in *Reggio Calabria*), so don't be surprised when you see them featured on ceramics, jarred and preserved in oil or vinegar, or thrown onto tables with meals.

And they are more than just a pretty decoration. Did you know that hot peppers are not only rich in fiber and nutrients but are also able to reduce cholesterol levels, protect skin from UVB rays, burn fat, soothe headaches, arthritis, sinuses, inflammation, gastric pains and even fight cancer? Amazing little dudes, aren't they?

During the festival, which began

honoring this miracle food in 1992, all of Diamante joins the fun, with jewelers offering peperoncino-inspired pieces and medical experts answering chili pepper-related health questions. Restaurants put peppers in pasta, pastries, and more. For breakfast, you can have a *cornetto al peperoncino* (pastry filled with a creamy mix containing peppers) and for dessert, a *tartufo piccante* (smooth, rich ice cream graced with bright red bits of peperoncini).



Peperoncini

Activities held during this fiery *festa* are free and run from 8 pm until after midnight each night. Many, many stands offer EP (Everything Peperoncino) from food and drink to t-shirts and books. And no food

celebration would be complete without a healthy dose of competition, so make sure you attend (and maybe participate in) the always barn-burning pepper-eating contest... if you dare.

Speaking of spicy, note that Calabria is famous for its *soppressata*, a cured, flattened type of *salumi* (the generic term for cured pork products). This is one of the region's DOP (origin protected) products and not to be missed. Sausages made from *suino nero* (black pig) are particularly prized and are further discussed in *52 Things to See & Do in Calabria*. But there's another pork byproduct you absolutely should not miss when you're in Calabria — but only if you like things extra, extra hot.

For more information, visit [www.peperoncinofestival.org](http://www.peperoncinofestival.org)

### Handle the Heat of 'Nduja

Once a well-kept Calabrian secret, *'nduja* (n-DOO-yah) has gained a wider reputation in recent years thanks to Brits and Americans who have helped introduce the rest of the world to this spicy, spreadable pork sausage from the toe of the boot.

As with many historically poor areas, Calabria is noted for its pork products that waste nothing of the pig — Calabria's *salumi* are origin-protected, DOP. And *'nduja* is one of those waste-not-want-not things. The recipe is fairly simple: meat of the head (except for the cheek, which is cured into *guanciale*), other meat bits, fat, skin, salt, and lots and lots of *peperoncino*, which is then smoked.



'Nduja

Although *'nduja* is made throughout Calabria, the only version that comes with the protected origin (DOP) seal is from *Spilinga*. Even though the word "'nduja" sounds a little like French *andouille* and Piemonte's *salam d'la*

*doja*, they are quite different, and you haven't had *'nduja* until you've tasted it in Spilinga. A perfect time to do so is during the town's annual *Sagra della 'Nduja* in August, though obviously you can find it year-round throughout Calabria.

The most common way to enjoy *'nduja* is simply spread on some of the region's crusty bread, but it can also be used as a pasta sauce (alone or with tomatoes), in scrambled eggs or omelets, or as a pizza topping. As an *antipasto*, it's often served with a well-aged, strong-flavored cheese, such as

# 90% of Calabria is at or abo



*Pecorino* from sheep's milk.

Regardless, though, be ready for the heat because 'nduja packs an especially potent *piccante* punch that is even too strong for some Calabrians. Yes, it's *that* spicy. Even though the pig is undoubtedly king in Calabria, it's not all about meat around here. The Tyrrhenian Coast in Calabria is especially noted for its tuna (tonno) and swordfish — especially in *Scilla*.

For more information, visit [www.nduja.net](http://www.nduja.net)

## Take a Stab at Pesce Spada

It's not surprising that a region with 500 miles of coastline has some fabulous fish and seafood — and *pesce spada* (swordfish) from Scilla is among the finest. In Scilla from May to November, you can see the world's only remaining "*passarelle*," specially designed fishing boats for catching swordfish, at work.

The 2,000-year-old technique, which is still basically followed today but for modern improvements including a motor on the boat, went a little like this: the six fishermen on the *passarelle* divided duties. While four men rowed, the spotter would use a 72-foot sight pole for locating fish. In ancient times, he would chant in Greek rhythmically and continuously to guide the rowers to the prey.

Then, from a 100-foot bridge (the *passarella*, catwalk or runway), the

harpooner would spear the catch, doing what the locals call "hunting fish." This is because instead of waiting for a nibble on the line in the dark, with swordfish, fishermen must proceed more like hunters — stalking their prey in the daylight, waiting for them to come to the surface, and then striking. In the old days, the harpooner was rewarded with a chunk of flesh sliced from around the fatal wound.

Swordfishing has been going on so long here that the sea is divided into zones where each group can maneuver — delineations and rules that have been handed down for generations.

Swordfish in Scilla is prepared in several different ways, all delicious: grilled, fried, baked, in tomato sauce

with pasta, in a *panino* (sandwich) and *involtini* (rolled and stuffed) with breadcrumbs and cheese and served in a tomato and capers sauce.

Care for a taste test in Scilla to try them all? Be sure to find a restaurant or *trattoria* (small restaurant) that specializes in fish — such as *Lo Scoglio d'Ulisse* or *Civico 5* —

and have at it. Next on your list of "must-try" Calabria food items: the sweet red onion of *Tropea*. It may sound strange to say you have to try a particular onion, but trust me. If you're in Calabria, this is one you don't want to miss.

For more information, visit [www.scillaonline.net](http://www.scillaonline.net)



Scilla

## Sweeten the Deal with Red Onions

The coastal area between *Nicotera* and *Amantea* along the Tyrrhenian Sea makes for some of the most gorgeous scenery in all of Italy — and it also happens to produce some of the sweetest, most delicious onions you'll ever try: the red onions of Tropea.

Purplish in color and round or oblong in shape, the European Union has granted protected geographical indication (IGP) to the *Cipolla Rossa di Tropea*, which means only those grown in the rich soil and mild climate of Tropea can rightfully claim the name.

The Tropea red onion dates back to at  
*continued on page 4*

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# ve 650 feet above sea level.



“You’ll find **Tropea** onions in bunches all over Calabrian open-air markets, whether they are the smaller, whiter **cipollotto** versions, still with the green tops attached and sold in banded bunches, or the more robust, richer colored **cipolla da serbo intrecciata**, braided and hanging in market stalls.”

least the Phoenicians, who imported them over 2,000 years ago. Pliny the Elder claimed that the red onion could cure a variety of ills and physical ailments, and many still believe it can help prevent strokes and heart disease as well as promote sleep.

You’ll find Tropea onions in bunches all over Calabrian open-air markets, whether they are the smaller, whiter **cipollotto** versions, still with the green tops attached and sold in banded bunches, or the more robust, richer colored **cipolla da serbo intrecciata**, braided and hanging in market stalls.

What is the best way to enjoy the red onions of Tropea? It’s a matter of personal preference, but I love them thinly sliced in a salad with juicy, ripe tomatoes, dressed with olive oil and oregano. You can also try them grilled with other vegetables, meats, or even seafood. Red onion marmalade as well as a simple spread for bruschetta are also popular in Calabria.

If you really want to feel like a local, though, order them on your pizza paired with tuna, which is fished along the Tyrrhenian Coast and is truly



Tropea

special. Appropriately, this type of pizza is often simply called the “Tropea” in Calabrian restaurants.

I know. The flavor combo sounded strange to me too, but it’s now my hands-down pizza of choice (and my two-year-old daughter’s!). I always recommend it to visitors, and the look of surprise mixed with satisfaction on their faces when they bite into the deliciousness is priceless. Every single time. All this talk of food, we can’t forget dessert — and there’s nothing more Calabrian than the **tartufo** from Pizzo.

For more information, visit [www.consorziocipollatropeaigp.com](http://www.consorziocipollatropeaigp.com)

### Taste Tartufo in the City of Gelato

No, tartufo gelato is not made with truffles, those lovely, earth fungi so many foodies go crazy over. *Tartufo di*

*Pizzo*, however, does kind of look like one of those truffles, which helps explain the shared name.

This delectable ball of heaven was invented in 1952 when *Giuseppe “Don Pippo” De Maria* was faced

with the problem of not having enough cups to serve guests at a royal wedding in town.

He grabbed a handful of hazelnut (*nocciola*) gelato, added a layer of chocolate gelato, inserted melted chocolate in the ball, wrapped it up in paper, and refroze it. In doing so, he created a new gelato that could be served on a plate — no cups needed — and it was an instant hit. The exact recipe of the dessert is still a secret jealously guarded by De Maria’s descendants.

Today, tartufo di Pizzo (which now has protected geographical indication — IGP — status) is still served in De Maria’s *gelateria*, *Bar Dante*, in *Piazza Repubblica*, the town’s main square, as well as in various other establishments in Pizzo. Currently, over a dozen different *gelaterie artigianali* (artisanal gelato shops) operate in town, which has earned Pizzo the nickname *La Città*

# Calabria borders the Tyr

*del Gelato*, the City of Gelato.

These days you'll find tartufo variations with different flavor combinations of gelato, a filling of fruit or syrup, or a shell that is rolled in either cocoa or cinnamon. A tartufo gelato rolled in cocoa especially resembles the dirt-covered truffle. You may get it topped with whipped cream or even *affogato* (drowned) with a little *Amaro del Capo*, Calabria's famous herb-infused liqueur.



Tartufo di Pizzo

No matter the flavor you choose, you won't regret taking a chance on truffle gelato. Trust me. It alone is worth the trip to Pizzo, though there are certainly other convincing reasons to

visit, like the *Chiesetta di Piedigrotta*, a church in a cave carved from tufa rock, and Murat Castle, the site of the execution of Joachim Murat, Napoleon's brother-in-law and one-time ruler of southern Italy.

If you're there toward the end of July,

you can even catch the town's festival to celebrate its famous frozen treat. Yes, a town-wide celebration of gelato.

For more information, visit [www.pizzocalabro.it](http://www.pizzocalabro.it)



Spoons up!

—Michelle Fabio

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*Michelle's blog about life in Italy is Bleeding Espresso. Since becoming a mamma, she has also written about raising a daughter in rural southern Italy at Baby Espresso. For more information, visit*

*[www.michellefabio.com](http://www.michellefabio.com) and [www.bleedingespresso.com](http://www.bleedingespresso.com)*

## EXCERPT:

# Don't be bitter — just have an amaro!

*And now, finally to conclude your virtual dining experience in Calabria, may I suggest one of Italy's finest digestive liqueurs?*

As you may have read or experienced elsewhere, Italians have a special place in their hearts for the topic of digestion. It is openly discussed even among strangers—think sharing tales of one's bathroom habits at full voice in a doctor's waiting room. Awkward for some listeners but totally normal to many Italians.

Also, there are pseudo-commandments regarding digestion. Examples include but are most definitely not limited to the following:

- \* No swimming until at least three hours after eating.
- \* No *cappuccino* after mid-morning.
- \* No drinking beverages that are too cold, especially on a \*gasp\* hot day.

Don't worry, not all Italians abide by these, but one concept that is nearly universal—and actually has some scientific backing—is that of the digestive liqueur (*digestivo*) after eating. And really, who's going to argue with downing some tasty booze after a hearty meal in case it actually does help with digestion?

In Calabria, you'll find one of the finest contributions to Italian liqueurs: *Il Vecchio Amaro del Capo*. Made by the Caffo Distillery near *Capo Vaticano* from where the dark, herb-infused alcoholic beverage gets its name, this delightful digestive is actually quite sweet and delicate despite the name "*amaro*," which means bitter.

So what's in this heavenly hooch? Amaro del Capo is made by letting a combination of about twenty locally grown herbs and spices marinate in nearly boiling alcohol for several days. The herbs include mandarin, anise, orange, chamomile, juniper, licorice, and mint.

Is your mouth watering yet? It should be.

An amaro is particularly perfect to cap off a summer night's meal as it is meant to be sipped straight from the freezer or at least from a chilled glass. Don't worry though—it doesn't get too cold and thereby go against one of the above-listed

pseudo-commandments.

Does it help you digest your food? I think this calls for a scientific experiment.

You don't have to head to Capo Vaticano for *Il Vecchio Amaro del Capo* as it's found throughout the region and elsewhere in Italy, but if you're in the area, you might as well. Capo Vaticano just happens to be one of Calabria's prettiest seaside towns, too.

My goal in writing *52 Things to See & Do in Calabria* was to give the perspective of a local who has lived in the area for over a decade—to give readers a taste of Calabria, this gorgeous, oft-neglected region, in small, digestible bits. I like to imagine that

readers will peruse a few entries with a morning cappuccino or an after-dinner coffee, enjoying delicious morsels of Calabrian goodness with each sip. And perhaps I'll even see you on the shores of the Ionian Sea someday as well.

—M.F.



# rhenian and Ionian seas.



cookie-cutter hotels convenient to the terminal at *Leonardo da Vinci*.

The town of Fiumicino straddles the Fiumicino canal, an offshoot of the Tiber that flows into the Mediterranean and is home to fishing boats and pleasure craft. On a side street in the middle of town is a sweet little hotel, the Domus Lina. The rooms are bright and comfortable, the hosts are welcoming and there is a rooftop terrace with views over the port where breakfast is served. If you have a car, you can park on the street or they can arrange a shuttle for about 10€ per person to the airport.

## Domus Lina

Via della Spiaggia, 5

Fiumicino

(39) 338 8155052

[www.domuslinafiumicino.it](http://www.domuslinafiumicino.it)

Rates: A double room including breakfast starts at 150€ per night

There are numerous dining options within walking distance of Domus Lina. The Michelin-starred *Pascucci al Porticciolo* ([www.pascucciporticciolo.com](http://www.pascucciporticciolo.com)) specializes in high-end seafood with impeccable service. Yet I also love the sidewalk joint around the corner from the hotel, the very inexpensive Vinarskaia Inna, where you can get a perfectly cooked *fritto misto* as well as a delicious *porchetta* sandwich served up with a glass of crisp, cold local white wine at one of their sidewalk tables.

Or you can stay in *Fregene*, a favorite Roman beach town that is quiet and uncrowded, just a 10-minute drive north of the airport. The beach is lined with beach clubs (*stabilimenti balneari*) that have both bathing



Fiumicino

facilities, beach equipment and restaurants. Earlier this year, I stayed at a new bed and breakfast called *Itaca*, located a couple of blocks from the beach

with simple but comfortable furnishings and a lovely swimming pool, perfect for a quiet swim before dinner at one of the many waterfront restaurants or one of the many close-by *trattorie*.

## Itaca Fregene

Via Giulianova, 61

Fregene

(39) 348 9237335

[www.itacafregene.com](http://www.itacafregene.com)

Rates: A double with a simple breakfast starts at 150€ per night.

A little further afield but still under an hour from Fiumicino is the nearby provincial capital of *Frascati*—a busy but picturesque small city set on a hill looking over the plain with Rome in the distance. In the other direction are the Alban Hills with lovely hill towns and attractive lakes. Frascati's historic center features impressive churches and a market square with numerous opportunities to sample the specialty of the area—*porchetta*.

Just steps from the center, the Hotel Flora occupies a handsome *palazzo* with pretty gardens. Rooms are large and modern and there is parking on the premises.

## Hotel Flora

Viale Vittorio Veneto, 8

Frascati

(39) 06 9415110

[www.hotel-flora.it](http://www.hotel-flora.it)

Rates: A double including breakfast starts at 109€ per night.

We had a pleasant Roman meal, which included sumptuous *antipasti*, *spaghetti cacio e pepe* and roast lamb, on our last stay at a small, traditional trattoria in the center—*La Vecchia Frasca*. (Via Buttarelli, 12; 39-06-94017045; [www.lavecchiafrasca.com](http://www.lavecchiafrasca.com))

If you prefer to stay outside of town, there are a number of appealing hotels in the hill country surrounding Frascati, like the very grand Park Hotel Villa Grazioli. The hotel is a converted 16th-century villa with frescoed ceilings, set in a park with panoramic views, a swimming pool and lovely landscaped grounds.



Park Hotel Villa Grazioli

## Park Hotel Villa Grazioli

Via Umberto Pavoni, 19

Grottaferrata

(39) 06 945400

[www.villagrazioli.com](http://www.villagrazioli.com)

Rates: A double room with breakfast starts at 100€ per night, depending on the season.

## Venice

When flying out of Marco Polo Airport in Venice, if I am not staying in Venice proper, I like to stay in the stylish and prosperous city of *Treviso*. It is an easy half-hour drive to the airport from Treviso, which is an interesting destination in its own right. The city was heavily damaged by bombing during World War II and has been painstakingly restored and is now the worldwide headquarters of Benetton.

Located in the picturesque *centro storico*

# Italy has more hotel rooms than

not far from the lovely canal running through the center of town, *Il Focolare* is one of the few hotels in the historical center.

Comfortable and friendly, the location is convenient for strolling through town, shopping and dining. Parking is available a short distance away in a public lot.

#### **Il Focolare**

Piazza Giannino Ancilotto, 4  
Treviso

(39) 0422 56601

[www.ilfocolarehotel.com](http://www.ilfocolarehotel.com)

**Rates:** A double room with breakfast starts at 80€ per night.

If you prefer a hotel with more convenient parking, *Al Fogher* is a business hotel located a short distance from the center with parking on premises and a good restaurant.

#### **Hotel Al Fogher**

Viale della Repubblica, 10  
Treviso

(39) 0422 432950

[www.hotelalfogher.it](http://www.hotelalfogher.it)

**Rates:** A double room with breakfast starts at 66€ per night.

Ready for a great meal on your final night? I first found *Ristorante Basilisco* from a recommendation in Slow Food's *Osterie d'Italia* guide. This moderately priced restaurant, with a nice terrace for seasonal outdoor dining, features modern interpretations of classic Venetian cooking with an emphasis on seafood. (*Via Giuseppe Bernadino Bison, 34*; 39-0422-541822; [www.ristorantebasilisco.com](http://www.ristorantebasilisco.com))

Another great place to dine is *Il Basilico*



Ristorante Basilisco

*Tredici* featuring organic food and vegetarian friendly. The restaurant prides itself on using the best ingredients from local suppliers and features innovative takes on traditional recipes.

Live jazz is featured and you can eat outside in the piazza during warmer weather. Closed Monday. (*Piazza San Vito, 13*; 39-0422-549789; [www.basilico13.com](http://www.basilico13.com))

## *Malpensa Airport (Milan)*

There are dozens of hotels in the immediate area of Malpensa Airport, including a couple on the airport grounds, but I generally recommend staying in the small city of *Sesto Calende*, about 20 minutes north of the airport at the bottom of Lake Maggiore. I have a soft spot for the town and the Tre Re Hotel since I stayed there on the first night of my first trip to Italy (with my wife) in 1993.

The hotel is run by the *Silvera* sisters, *Raffaella* and *Silvia*, and it has been modernized and updated over the years. Located on the banks of the pretty Ticino River, it has an international clientele since it accommodates many pilots training at the nearby helicopter factory.

My wife and I have returned a number of times since 1993 and find the untouristy town a pleasure and the riverfront promenade very pleasant to stroll along, perhaps stopping for a gelato or an aperitif at one of the many bars. Dinner at the hotel is always good or there are many other places within steps of the hotel.



Ranco

The drive to the airport is well marked and there are a couple of gas stations for filling up your rental car just before you get to Malpensa.

#### **Hotel Tre Re**

Piazza Garibaldi, 25  
Sesto Calende

(39) 0331 924229

[www.hotel3re.it](http://www.hotel3re.it)

**Rates:** A double room with breakfast starts at 125€ per night.

For something a bit more luxurious and a bit further from the airport (about 45 minutes), *Il Sole di Ranco* in *Ranco* on the east side of Lake Maggiore is a lovely hotel, a converted 19th-century villa with a spectacular location overlooking the lake.

Featuring great service, stylish furnishings, expansive public space indoors and outdoors and an inviting swimming pool, the hotel also houses an expensive Michelin-starred gourmet

restaurant of the same name. In addition to the daily menu that features local seafood, the chef will prepare dishes on request for guests. The restaurant is open daily for lunch and dinner in the summer and closed on Friday in the winter.

#### **Il Sole di Ranco**

Piazza Venezia, 5  
Ranco

(39) 0331 976507

[www.ilsolodiranco.it](http://www.ilsolodiranco.it)

**Rates:** A double room with breakfast starts at 125€ per night.

—Jim Zurer

*Jim Zurer is a passionate Italy trip-planning specialist. He has traveled widely across the length and breadth of the Italian peninsula—from Friuli to Sicily to the Val d'Aosta and most places in-between.*

*For more information, visit [www.zurer.com/trip\\_planning](http://www.zurer.com/trip_planning)*

# any other country in Europe.



# In Abruzzo: Arrosticini on the Range

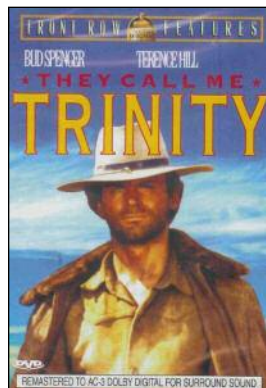
If you're a fan of spaghetti westerns, you might recognize the location of *Ristoro Mucciante*, a barbecue-delipicnic spot on *Campo Imperatore* in the region of *Abruzzo*. This is the area Italians call "Little Tibet" because of its similar mountainous terrain, but also because of the geography of spirit that the area invokes.

In 1970, Campo Imperatore was the site for a series of westerns, including one called *They Call Me Trinity* whose star, Bud Spencer, just died this past June. For those who are too young to remember, "spaghetti westerns" were a genre popular in the 1960s thanks to director *Sergio Leone's* film-making style. The term was coined by American film critics because most of these westerns were produced on limited budgets and directed by Italians. Think *A Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More* and *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*.

Today, what's left from this era is a log cabin rising out of nowhere, nearly 5,000 feet above sea level at the foot of the *Gran Sasso* mountain, and there are always scads of cars and motorcycles in the parking lot. And that parking lot? Filled with BBQ grills and coals ready for cooking the local favorite, *arrosticini* (lamb skewers) that you can buy inside. What's going on here?

This is the home of the freshest Abruzzese farm-to-table street food imaginable — and the locals make regular pilgrimages out here, hauling their salads, side dishes, tablecloths and kids for a picnic experience like no other. On sale besides the lamb skewers: a variety of sweet and hot pork sausages, gorgeous thick beef filets, three or four different kinds of local cheese (Pecorino is my favorite), homemade bread and an assortment of chips, cookies, sodas, beer, wine and

soft drinks. Just add the ambiance — and cook your own meat!



And because it's well situated between Castel del Monte and the resort at the top of Campo Imperatore, a lot of tourist traffic passes by this curious place as well. Why? For film buffs, this area is famous, having provided backdrops for films like *The American*, *The Name of the Rose*, and *Ladyhawke*. As for Campo Imperatore, its historical claim to fame is that from August 28 to September 12, 1943, the local hotel served as the prison of *Benito Mussolini* until he was liberated by the German armed forces.

Today, the Campo's *Rifugio Campo Imperatore* ([www.refugiocampoimperatore.com](http://www.refugiocampoimperatore.com)) is the main accommodation of its namesake ski resort and is a good starting point for hiking on the western slope of the Gran Sasso. There's even a notable observatory here which, since 2001, has been home to the international program that led to the discovery of some 61,000 asteroids.

Back to the *Ristoro Mucciante*, it is owned by brothers *Rodolfo*, *Roberto* and *Gianni*, who grew up in nearby



Rodolfo



Ristoro Mucciante

*Castel del Monte*, the grandsons of a butcher. They still raise some 500 sheep in the area and their next project is working to earn a "biologic" (organic) designation and complete the vertical integration by raising all the



Arrosticini

plants their sheep need to eat.

Rodolfo and his brothers do not do this full-time; in

fact, Rodolfo is an accountant by profession. But they are very happy to work with their parents, keeping this unique tradition alive. Their enthusiasm is contagious, and it's clear they do this as much for love as for profit.

"This is the best work in the world," says Rodolfo, with a grin. "When people ask me what they should see in Abruzzo I tell them Castel del Monte, *Calascio* and *Santo Stefan di Sessanio*. But first, see Ristoro Mucciante."

## Ristoro Mucciante

Localita Madonnina

Castel del Monte

(39) 0862 938357

Open daily from May 1 to October 31, 9:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m. Open on weekends during the rest of the year, weather permitting.

—Linda Dini Jenkins

Linda Dini Jenkins blogs at [www.travelthewriteway.com](http://www.travelthewriteway.com) and leads tours to Italy for people who hate tours.

1€ = \$1.12 at press time

# One-third of *Abruzzo* is national parkland.