

Colognora, a gem of a village



Colognora, a little hamlet sitting at a panoramic altitude of 587 meters, is one of many villages belonging to the Commune of Pescaglia. Located about 25 km (19 miles) northwest of Lucca, Pescaglia includes many villages that have been known since Roman times: Diecimo (the name comes from the distance to Lucca measured in Roman miles), Dezza, Ansana, Celle dei Puccini, Villa Roggio, Vetriano, Colognora, Gello, Fondagno, Piegajo, Trebbio, Convalle, Villabuona, Piazzanello, Pescaglia itself, and even higher up, Pascoso and San Rocco in Turrite. From this height, theoretically, one can climb Monte Mattana and cross the Apennines to reach the sea. Or, turning back to Trebbio, the road will bring us to Carlo Galgani's forge, last of a family dynasty of blacksmiths. Crossing the mountain at Convalle, we reach other villages – Loppeggia, Fiano, Torcigliano, Monsagrati, and San Martino in Freddana (on the road to Camaiore) – all still within the Commune of Pescaglia. Each village has a church at its center and is surrounded by mountains filled with chestnuts and fresh streams.

Aside from local legends and traditions (such as the linchetto (a forest sprite), pumpkin festival, valley of nativity scenes, blacksmith, water mills, etc.), all of these places have their own special features. For example, Celle is famous as the home of Maestro Giacomo Puccini's grandparents, and many concerts are held in front of the family museum. Vetriano is known for its traditional opera house, the smallest in the world (70 sqm and 82 seats).

In January this year Silvano (pictured above left) and I were invited by Angelo Frati (museum president, pictured above right) to an evening at the Chestnut Museum of Colognora. This was an occasion for sharing local history by the fireside, while eating *mondine* (roast chestnuts) and *cenci di neccio* (pastries made from chestnut flour), washing them down with abundant local red wine. It was our first visit to the museum, which displays many fascinating artifacts of local culture. As soon as we entered the room (where the long tables were ready for the guests) we noticed the huge fireplace. Cookware and domestic

items such as a wooden butter stamp caught my eye. Soon we would be watching a video made by Vincenzo Moneta (Lucca historian, photographer, and film-maker). But more about that latter. First, we would sit down to chat (*chiacchierare*) and eat.

This is the recipe for the delicious *cenci* made by a charming local woman, daughter of Emiliana, who was sitting next to me.

CENCI

Ingredients:

200gr. chestnut flour
100gr. wheat flour
1 grated orange peel
1 pinch of salt
2 or 3 teaspoons of sugar
1/2 package of mild yeast
milk, as needed



- Mix and then knead the above ingredients until you obtain a dough with the consistency needed to make the pastry.
- Roll this out using a pasta-making machine or a rolling pin.
- With a pastry wheel, cut these into diamonds or any other geometric shape (what matters is that they aren't too big), then fry them in abundant oil.
- Drain them and serve hot.

While Emiliana's daughter was telling me how to make this yummy snack, Silvano was absorbing some family history from the husband of Emiliana's granddaughter. Since the early 1900s, an important employer for many Lucchesi, especially women, was the Cantoni Coats Factory in Santissima Anunziata, near the city walls. To arrive at their jobs, the Colognoresi had get up before dawn, travel down the winding road to the valley floor (about 20 minutes by car even today), then continue another 20-25 km to reach the job. This gradually led to many of them moving away from Colognora and settling in small towns closer to the factory.



rider pushing along the ground with the feet as in regular walking or running while body weight supported by bicycle seat and hands on handlebars while ground pushing up on bottom of 2 rolling wheels. The front wheel and handlebar assembly was hinged to allow steering. The dandy horse was capable of more than doubling the average walking speed, to around 10 mph (16 km/h) on level ground. A plaque from Guinness Book of World Records states that the fastest mile on a Dandy horse is 5 min 29 sec and was achieved by Serafini Graziano (Italy), at Moreno Martini athletic track in Lucca, Italy, on 25 June 2016.

Another sort of bicycle on display here is that of Umberto Antichi, *arrotino* (blade sharpener). This bike served to turn the whetstone that he used to sharpen knives and scissors. In a YouTube video made in 2017, Antichi explained that he was the last of the family line to practice this trade. He would travel from



The main event for the evening was an ethnographic film made by Moneta some years ago, which showed village life as it must have been in medieval times. Two local men, elderly yet spry and dressed in rustic garb, cut grass and harvest wheat using scythes, then load up a donkey to carry the produce back to the village. After this, the bearded contadino tries to split stones using a wooden mallet, which made us to chuckle since it wasn't very easy, or successful. Emiliana Curadossi, alongside me, proudly identified herself as the protagonist's daughter, saying that her father did in fact adhere to the old ways of life. She said that in many ways life was healthier then.



his mountain home to Lucca and elsewhere, for many years sharpening blades at the San Concordio market, inside the walls of Lucca, or at other spots. Silvano recalled watching Umberto at work near Piazza San Michele, where he was a regular feature.

Another section of the museum is dedicated to *gemellagi* (twin projects), such as the one with *Les Amis de*

Colognora has a certain degree of celebrity because of Spike Lee's 2008 film, *Miracle at Sant'Anna*, based on the World War II novel by James McBride. Sant'Anna di Stazzema, on the other side of the Apuan Alps overlooking the sea, was the site of a violent reprisal by the Germans in 1944. The film was made at Gioviano (somewhat further north), Sant'Anna, Rome, New York, and the Bahamas. However, Colognora, near the Gothic Line where fierce battles occurred, was ideal as a traditional village with ancient stone pathways free of cars (the parking area is just below the village) or obvious signs of modern life. It's a very quiet place. A display case contains photos of Spike Lee with local residents and Buffalo Soldiers, and a copy of McBride's book.



There are also numerous curiosities from daily life, for example Serafini Graziano's Dandy horse, which is a primitive sort of bicycle. According to Wikipedia, this is a two-wheeled vehicle with both wheels in line propelled by the

Chataignier (Friends of the Chestnut) at Pfaffenheim (a French town in the Alsace region, hence the wooden shoes).

One day soon I plan to return to this village, where Alfredo Catalani was born in 1854. Known for his operas *Loreley* (1890) and *La Wally* (1892), Catalani never achieved the fame of his illustrious contemporary Giacomo Puccini, whose grandparents had a home in the village down the road. Catalani unfortunately died young: he was only 39. Puccini, born just four years after Catalani, lived to be 66. It would be interesting to find out whether these musicians inspired the construction of Vetriano's opera house in 1890. Maybe both did? Wish I had been there!

A child's verse comes to mind: *The world is so full of a number of things, I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.*

– by Norma Jean Bishop

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