

14. ABRUZZO

FORTE E GENTILE

By Sara Hauman & Jordan Mackay

If you yearn for a rustic, wild, and natural experience of Italy, Abruzzo is your place. This is the land of jagged mountain ridges, precarious hilltop villages, undisturbed fairy-tale forests where bears and wolves still roam, miles of pristine coastline, sandy beaches, hearty food, and pithy wine.

Lying just across Italy's narrow peninsula from the region of Lazio and its metropolis of Rome, Abruzzo is a distant world, slightly lost in time, cut off from the buzzing west coast by the towering Apennines. The distance from Abruzzo's Adriatic coast to Italy's capital city may be only a brief ninety miles. However, plan on almost three hours of driving to navigate the steep, winding roads of Italy's mountainous spine. Indeed, Abruzzo possesses no buzzing metropolis like Naples, Venice, or Milan to anchor its identity; instead, natural forces — hills, mountains, vineyards, and sea — imbue its character.

These same forces animate its people. Abruzzo's motto is "Forte e Gentile" — strong and kind — a description bestowed upon the region by the nineteenth-century writer and thinker Primo Levi, and it holds up today. You find durability, hardness, and resilience here, as you'd expect in people who have to deal with a devastating earthquake every few decades, such as the one that hit L'Aquila, the capital, in 2009, leveling villages and killing hundreds. Nevertheless, a spirit of country kindness abounds here. Visit a winery for an afternoon tasting, and you may find yourself staying for dinner, the night ... or the weekend!

Ranked smack in the middle of Italian regions by land mass, Abruzzo is one of the lowest in population, housing only around 1.3 million people. Like Liguria, it's a place where the mountains truly meet the sea, with only a thin band of foothills separating the beaches (sandy in the north, rocky in the south) from the craggy interior, which features the highest peaks of the Apennines, reaching over 9000 feet of elevation. Much of the region remains wild and rural, as a third of it is devoted to national parks, offering summertime hiking and winter skiing.

14. ABRUZZO

The food changes as you venture inland from the coast. At the beach, such dishes as you see in this chapter — breaded and lightly fried anchovies stuffed with mozzarella or scalded squid crudo marinated with piquant peppers, capers, and citrus — would be apt starters for a breezy seaside meal overlooking the crashing waves. As you ascend into the mountains, the cuisine becomes heartier. Seafood is exchanged for meat from animals that thrive on hardscrabble mountain farms — lamb, goat, and pork. Here, lamb skewers receive a classically Mediterranean treatment with pickled eggplant spiced with fennel seed and chili flakes.

Finally, the irresistible and iconic porchetta, a powerfully seasoned, herbal roast of rolled, skin-on pork belly. While porchetta is found across Italy these days, it originates and reaches its apotheosis in Central Italy and Abruzzo, where you need only follow your nose to find the porchetta truck on the weekends. Usually contained within the fold of a crunchy roll, its roasted bits of crackling skin, unctuous fat, and umami-drenched meat combine in every juicy bite. A street food, porchetta is one of the most delicious creations of Italy and a classic Abruzzese rejoinder to the idea that iconic dishes must contain truffles or Parmigiano Reggiano or prosciutto.

In all these dishes, you'll notice the array of green herbs — mint, parsley, rosemary — intense ingredients like fennel, garlic, anchovies, capers, chili, vinegar, and citrus. This is common for Abruzzo cooking, which is simple but richly flavored. White wines can star with all these dishes — any of the Massican blends (Annia, Gemina) would be perfect, as would be a cold bottle of Trebbiano d'Abruzzo or Pecorino. Reds would be good with the meats — but aim for a lighter, spicier red to echo the food's heady aromatics. Accompany this meal with some crusty bread, and don't worry about pulling out the fancy stemware. Abruzzo's food is like its people — forte e gentile.

14. **ABRUZZO**

ABOUT OUR AUTHORS

Chef Sara Hauman's career is sprinkled with culinary accolades: Eater Young Gun, Zagat 30 under 30, and Bravo Top Chef contestant. Having cooked in kitchens from Spain's famed Asador Etxebarri to San Francisco's Octavia, she now resides in Portland, OR.

Jordan Mackay is a James Beard award-winning writer covering wine, spirits, and food. He has written for the New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle, and Food & Wine magazine. Jordan has penned countless books including Secrets of the Sommeliers, The Atlas of Taste, Franklin Barbecue, Franklin Steak, and the recently released Maison Premiere Almanac.



14. **ABRUZZO**

OUR ABRUZZO DINNER PARTY MENU

Serves 6-8

1. Snacks: MOZZARELLA STUFFED ANCHOVIES
2. Appetizer: CRUDO DI CALAMARETTI
3. Primo: ARROSTICINI & PICKLED EGGPLANT
4. Main Course: PORCHETTA & SALSA VERDE



14. **ABRUZZO**

MOZZARELLA STUFFED ANCHOVIES

Serves 6-8 people (about 12-16 pieces)

Ingredients:

- 12-16 fresh anchovies, head and bones removed, tail intact
- ½ lb. low-moisture mozzarella
- Vegetable oil

Ingredients for the batter:

- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- ½ cup cornstarch
- 1 cup cold water
- 2 cups panko breadcrumbs
- 1 tsp. dried oregano
- 1 tsp. garlic powder
- ½ cup grated parmesan cheese
- 1 tsp. salt

Ingredients to serve:


- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Lemon wedges
- Tomato slices
- Lettuce leaves

14. **ABRUZZO**

MOZZARELLA STUFFED ANCHOVIES

(continued)

Preparation:

1. Lay the cleaned and water rinsed anchovies out flat, flesh side facing upwards.
 2. Cut a rectangular stick of mozzarella to fit snugly within the body cavity of the anchovy.
 3. Fold one side of the anchovy over to enclose the mozzarella.
 4. Heat a pot with at least 2" of vegetable oil to 350F.
 5. While the oil is heating, whisk together the flour, cornstarch, and cold water to the consistency of a thick pancake batter. Set aside.
 6. Combine the breadcrumbs, oregano, garlic powder, parmesan cheese, and salt. Mix thoroughly
 7. Gently dip the stuffed anchovies into the liquid batter, remove, and place directly into the breadcrumb mixture.
 8. Coat with breadcrumbs thoroughly, allowing the anchovies to sit submerged in the breadcrumbs for a minute to enrich the outer coating.
 9. Remove the anchovies and begin to fry in the oil.
 10. Fry the anchovies until golden brown, about 3-4 minutes.
 11. Remove the anchovies and place them onto a baking rack or paper towel to remove any excess oil.
 12. Season with salt and freshly cracked black pepper.
 13. Serve with lemon wedges, fresh lettuces, and tomatoes.
- 

14. **ABRUZZO**

CRUDO DI CALAMARETTI

Serves 6-8 people

Ingredients:

- 2 lbs. squid, cleaned and cut into ½" rings
- Juice of ½ lime
- Juice of ½ lemon
- Juice of ½ orange
- ½ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 2 Tbsp fermented chilis, chopped (crushed Calabrian chilis in a jar work well)
- 1 small shallot, minced
- 1 Tbsp capers
- Sea salt as needed

Ingredients for serving:

- Fresh mint, torn
 - Fresh parsley leaves
- 

14. **ABRUZZO**

CRUDO DI CALAMARETTI (continued)

Preparation:

1. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil.
2. Lay an absorbent tea towel over a sheet pan.
3. Once the water is boiling, add the cleaned squid to the salted water and cook for 1 minute.
4. Drain the squid from the water and place in a single layer on the tea towel. After the squid have drained, remove them immediately to the refrigerator to cool down.
5. In a bowl, combine the citrus juices, olive oil, fermented chilis, shallot, capers, and a pinch of salt.
6. When the squid has chilled completely, combine it with the olive oil and citrus mixture.
7. To serve, arrange the squid onto a plate and scatter plenty of torn mint and parsley over top.

This dish can be made up to 3 days in advance and stored in an air-tight container in the refrigerator.

14. **ABRUZZO**

ARROSTICINI & PICKLED EGGPLANT

Serves 6-8 people (about 12-16 skewers)

Equipment needed for this recipe:

- A charcoal or gas grill
- Skewers

Ingredients for the pickled eggplant:

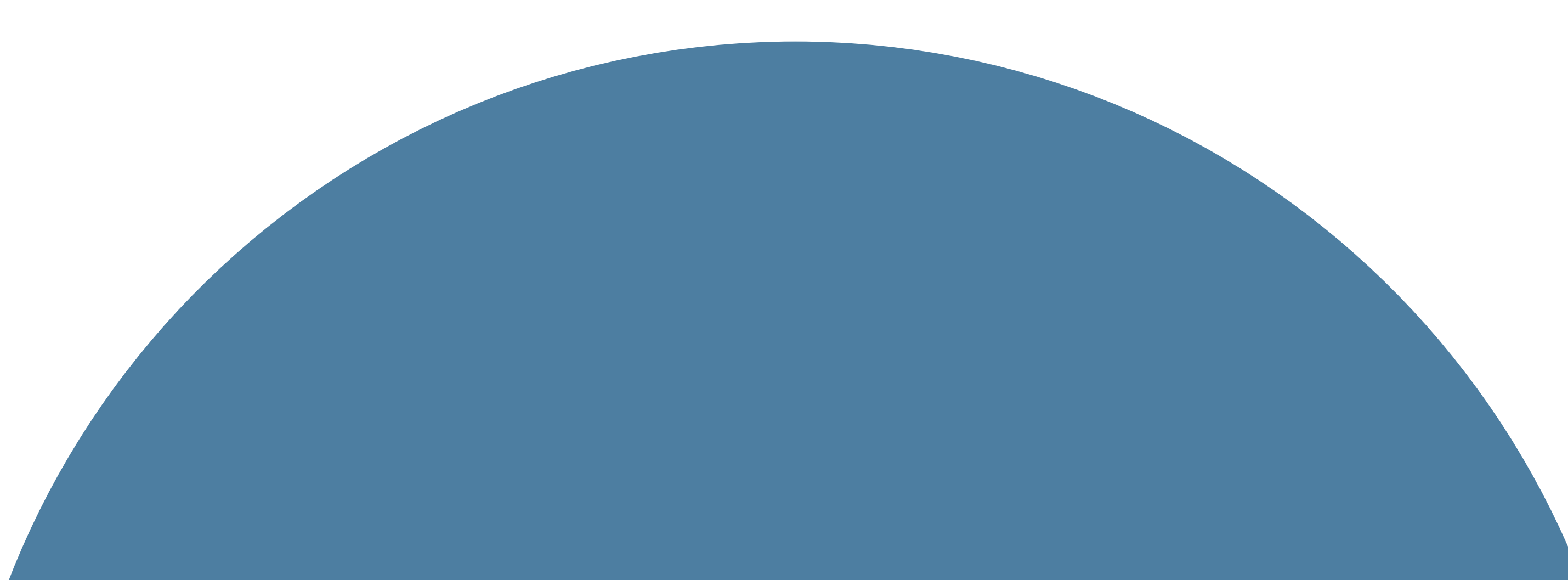
- 2 lbs. eggplant
- Sea salt as needed
- 1 cup white wine vinegar, divided
- 2 cups water
- 4 cloves garlic, sliced thinly
- 1 tsp. red chili flakes
- 2 Tbsp fresh parsley, chopped
- 2 Tbsp fresh mint, chopped
- 1 Tbsp fennel seed, toasted and crushed
- 2 cups extra virgin olive oil



14. **ABRUZZO**

ARROSTICINI & PICKLED EGGPLANT (continued)

Prepare the pickled eggplant:

1. Slice the unpeeled eggplant into sticks that are 2-3" long and about ¼" thick.
 2. Layer the strips in a colander, sprinkling each layer liberally with sea salt.
 3. Place the colander in the sink or a bowl and then put a heavy plate or bowl directly on top of the eggplant weighing it down.
 4. Allow the eggplant to drain for 1 hour. Then, squeeze the eggplant using your hands to remove any excess moisture.
 5. Add the water, ½ cup vinegar, and eggplant to a large pot. Cover and then bring the mixture to a boil.
 6. Once it has come to a boil, remove the pot from the heat, remove the lid, and allow the eggplant to cool to room temperature in the liquid.
 7. In a large bowl, add the remaining vinegar, garlic, herbs, spices, and olive oil.
 8. Once the eggplant has cooled, remove it from the liquid and squeeze all the moisture out with your hands.
 9. Transfer the eggplant to the olive oil mixture and combine thoroughly.
 10. Let the eggplant marinate for at least 24 hours before enjoying. These pickles can keep refrigerated for up to a month.
- 


14. **ABRUZZO**

ARROSTICINI & PICKLED EGGPLANT (continued)

Ingredients for the skewers:

- 2 lbs. boneless lamb shoulder roast
- 2 Tbsp good olive oil
- 2 Tbsp fresh rosemary, chopped
- Sea salt as needed
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 12-16 metal skewers or soaked bamboo skewers

Prepare the skewers:

1. Cut the lamb shoulder into ½" cubes. Discard any sinewy or stringy bits, but make sure to keep the fat intact.
 2. Toss the cubed lamb with olive oil, rosemary, a few pinches of salt, and freshly cracked pepper.
 3. Arrange the cubes onto the skewers, alternating lean pieces with fattier pieces.
 4. Place the skewers on the hot grill, turning as needed to prevent flare-ups.
 5. Cook the skewers for about 7-10 minutes or until lightly charred on the outside.
 6. Arrange the skewers on a serving platter and top with plenty of pickled eggplant.
- 

14. **ABRUZZO**

PORCHETTA & SALSA VERDE

Serves the whole family, and more!

Ingredients for the salsa verde:

Makes about 1 pint

- 2 cups fresh parsley
- 2 cups fresh mint
- 2 garlic cloves
- 2 Tbsp capers
- 1 cup extra virgin olive oil
- Zest and juice of 1 lemon
- Pinch of sea salt

Preparation:

1. Place all the ingredients into the blender and blend until smooth.

14. **ABRUZZO**

PORCHETTA & SALSA VERDE (continued)

Ingredients for the porchetta:

- 1 5-6 lb. pork belly, skin on
- ¼ cup fresh rosemary
- 1 Tbsp fresh sage
- ¼ cup fresh parsley
- 1 Tbsp fresh thyme
- 6 anchovy filets in oil
- 4 garlic cloves
- 1 tsp. black peppercorns, crushed
- 3 Tbsp fennel seed, crushed
- 1 tsp. red chili flake
- Zest of 1 lemon
- ¼ cup good olive oil
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- 3 Tbsp sea salt

14. ABRUZZO

PORCHETTA & SALSA VERDE (continued)

Prepare the porchetta:

1. Score the skin side of the pork belly into diamonds, barely cut into the layer of fat.
2. Add all of the herbs, anchovy, garlic, spices, citrus, and olive oil to a food processor. Process until a thick paste forms.
3. Rub the herb paste into the flesh side of the pork belly.
4. Roll the pork into a log in the horizontal direction and tie with butcher's twine.
5. Mix together the baking powder and sea salt, then rub this thoroughly over the outside of the pork belly, smoothing it into all the cracks and crevices.
6. Let the pork marinate in the refrigerator overnight or for up to three days.
7. Remove at least 2 hours prior to cooking.

Preparation:

1. Preheat your oven to 300F.
2. Place the pork on a sheet pan topped with a baking rack.
3. Cook on the middle rack of the oven for 1 ½ hours.
4. Rotate the pork and continue to cook for another 1 hour or until the pork reaches an internal temperature of at least 140F.
5. Increase the oven temperature to 500F and cook for another 15-20 minutes or until the skin of the pork is very crispy and golden brown.
6. Remove from the oven and let sit for at least 20-30 minutes before slicing.

To serve:

- Slice the porchetta into ¼-½" slices. Arrange on a serving plate and drizzle a generous amount of salsa verde over the top.
- 