

Valnerina, the valley of wonders

by Isabella Brega | Photos by Maurizio Fabbro

They know what they want in Valnerina. They work hard, nose to the grindstone, in silence. Just like the land they own, isolated yet vital, strong and authentic. The result of the hard work of the 15,000 inhabitants of these 300 square kilometres of land is an extraordinary treasure trove of top quality products, with DOP and IGP certificates: truffles, oil, lentils, buckwheat, cheese and cured meats. Along with monasteries converted into charme hotels, simple yet sincere farmhouse B&Bs, and fully equipped itineraries where sport fits in with nature. In the same way, the River Nera winds through this serpentine, contorted valley, pushing its way through verdant gorges, bubbling torrents and mountains cloaked in holm-oaks and conifers, revealing a diamond in the rough. The light pours down from the peaks in a dusty golden, opalescent ray, sinuously gleaming through the water, caressing the fronds of the tree-tops and whispering through the mountains, offering a constellation of towers and castles that watch you wherever you go. Here, you never feel alone. Medieval fortified towns greet you with their compact, frontal town plans, captured in a single glance. Stony clusters of houses, closed inside the strong outline of the walls, with rooves tumbling over the hillsides or standing in relief like a cameo on a ridge top. Crumbling defence towers offering their best profile; monasteries entrenched in the sombre atmosphere of genuflections, sermons and pure-spirited hermits.

This landscape, more tactile and olfactory than ascetic, is the backdrop for the canvasses by Giotto, Benozzo Gozzoli, Perugino and Pinturicchio. Landscapes of the soul, a condition of the spirit, a suspended state between earth and heaven following secret, ancient harmonies as you abandon all thought of before or after, leaving you with the here and the now. From Scheggino to Sellano, from Cascia to Norcia and Castelluccio, the Valnerina valley has little to do with the majesty and status of the Earldoms and Renaissance courts of Orvieto, Perugia or Spoleto, or the triumphant Franciscan monasteries of Assisi. This is a different Umbria, a quiet, forgotten part that has let history pass it by; not the sweet, peaceful Umbria of Saint Francis, but the loud, brash region of Jacopone da Todi. A land of unwilling emigration and a hard, wild terrain that unwinds from impervious gorges and ravines into unexpected plains. A land of towns built of ancient stone and daily life, such as Sant'Anatolia di Narco, Postignano or Vallo di Nera, awarded the Orange Flag by Touring Club Italiano. Towns that ignore the attraction of a central square in favour of glimpses and glances, where you can only find room to breathe after losing your breath up steep stairways and paths. Towns whose soul is located

on high, in the church overlooking squares that stand out from the medieval urban fabric and its domineering towers. Walls begging to be touched, faces and stories to encounter, eyes to understand, greasy, salty cooking smells drifting from windows, telling of intense, nutritious flavours inside taverns and shops. Churches and chapels, whose keys are entrusted to improvised, brusque custodians who have no time for nonsense. Solidly Romanesque, despite the delicate lacework of rose windows. Silent outside, but filled with consolation, silence, sharp shadows thick with incense, frescoes eaten away by time, yet intact in spirit.

Ora et labora: this is also the land of Saint Benedict, with his active ideals of monastic life, transforming the rustic Umbria of legends and fairy tales, of stony gorges and ravines, of the silence and extreme asceticism of Santa Maria della Stella or the Virgin of the Rick, into the majestic abbeys of San Pietro in Valle and Sant'Eutizio. The former, near Scheggino, and now partially converted into a hotel, is linked to the figure of its founder, Faroaldo II, the sixth Longobard Duke of Spoleto from 702 to 720, buried in the church within a majestic Roman sarcophagus surrounded by extraordinary, yet deteriorated, high-medieval frescoes. The elegant bell tower of San Pietro, similar to the municipal turrets, is matched by that of Sant'Eutizio, the birthplace of Cenobitic monasticism. Home to a monastic community, known for its school of surgery along with the monastery in nearby Preci, it once owned land all the way to the shores of the Adriatic. The church, on the other hand, hosts the more modest tomb of the holy hermit, whose tunic, carried through the fields in procession, is an infallible way to invoke the rain.

Ascetic, mystical, sacred, but also profane, gluttonous and guzzling; San Benedetto and Brancaleone: Norcia, the capital of Upper Valnerina surrounded by the Sibillini Mountains, is clustered around the imperious statue of its holy son, surrounded by the main square and the symbolic places of the town: the basilica, the town hall, the Castellina papal fortress (now a museum) and the Cathedral of Santa Maria Argentea. Corso Sertorio and Via Roma are crowded with boars' and stag heads, hanging salamis, sausages and hams in homage to the local tradition dating back to the Norcia travelling salesmen, who were as skilled in preparing pork flesh as they were in curing human flesh, while the intense flavour of the prized local black truffle, the food of the gods which is hunted from November to March, is used in the salami, cheese, oil, pasta, liqueur and even Vetusta Nursia chocolate, accompanied by the most recent local speciality, La Nursia beer produced by the friars at the San Benedetto monastery. It is no coincidence that a small cultural revolution in the agri-food sector aiming to protect consumers' health took place right here, sparked by the volcanic Bianconi family, who have been setting the example of tourism combining entrepreneurship with hospitality and professionalism for 164 years.

"Salus per cibum" promotes healthy and sustainable nutritional choices, with projects supporting typical local products using re-designed processing methods. If Norcia is redolent of truffles, Cascia, perched on a hilltop, where holiness increases with every stair you climb, is the colour of saffron and is scented with the roses of Saint Rita (1381-1457). A great saint and a great woman, forced to fight against the innate violence of the middle ages which saw her lose first an abusive husband and secondly two vindictive sons. She ultimately found peace in the calm of a convent which, along with its 20th century basilica with an altar by Giacomo Manzù, now attracts thousands of pilgrims devoted to the saint of impossible causes. The treasures of Valnerina, like its truffles, can be found by digging. In 1902, a farmer from Monteleone discovered an 6th century Etruscan tomb buried under his barn, with a wooden chariot with bronze plating, which was displayed in glory in the Metropolitan museum in New York, along with other Italian masterpieces. The local inhabitants of the tiny village still hope to see it return, unconsolated with a copy by the Giacomo Manzù school kept in the San Francesco complex.

The gold of the Carsican plains of Castelluccio, the IGP lentils, grown alongside beans, chickpeas, buckwheat, roveja peas and vetch grown at 1500 above sea level in the foothills of Mount Vettore, has the same humble, neglected appearance as the hams and truffles. With its small size and thin husk, it is typical of the rustic, peasant cuisine of the Sibillini mountains. An area where the Apennine and Sopravissana breeds are used to make pecorino and other herbed cheeses, and the townspeople write rhymes on the walls of a town that emerges from the morning mist like a tiny Mont Saint-Michel. In June the uplands, which Fosco Maraini compared to Tibet's stunning beauty, appear like a huge canvass for an artistic god, where Avelignesi horses canter through grasslands dotted with blue fleur-de-lys, lilies and violets, red poppies, yellow buttercups and white lentil flowers. This plateau populated by fairies and the legendary Sibyls, where each journey becomes a personal victory of strong legs, curiosity and light heartedness, offers some extraordinary sporting experiences. Like the rest of Valnerina, you can conquer it from on high with a hang glider or by rock-climbing, or down below with a raft, on horseback or by bicycle. Go mountain biking along the old Spoleto-Norcia railway line, climbing, trekking with horses or mules, potholing, rafting, canyoning or hiking, with a range of difficulty levels that has something for everyone. Norcia even has an excellent sports centre used by national teams and sports teams from all over the world, with swimming pools and 1,600 sqm of facilities including basketball, football, volleyball, indoor hockey and handball. These are the kids who liven up the Norcia summer nights in their brightly coloured kits, playing football around the severe statue of Saint Benedict. The same statue that is draped in blue scarves and hats whenever the national football team wins. Let's hope the miracle will be repeated this month...