

# Lace-makers OF ANGHIARI

Located in the Arezzo province in Tuscany, the town of Anghiari is looking to its past in order to secure its future – and the age-old art of lace-making may hold the key to ensuring its future existence. Story by **Jean Di Marino** and photography by **Susan Wright**.

**T**HE MEDIAEVAL WALLED town of Anghiari is off the beaten tourist track – an hour and a half by bus from the nearest central train station in Arezzo.

Its residents fear their home will go the way of the close to 3000 remote hamlets the Italian government says are at risk of extinction, populated only by old people, and deserted by the young.

But the Anghiarese are refusing to give up. They're turning to the traditions and crafts of a bygone age to attract tourists, spark employment, and ultimately, survive.

Carla Granchi and her friends Teresa and Elena are working to revive the art of lace-making, for example, because they believe it holds the key to their town's continued existence. They give lessons on the 'tombolo' as they call it, to around 10

others each week. They also demonstrate their skill at 'sagre' or festivals and medieval re-enactments, hoping the craft and the nostalgia it evokes for a simpler time will bring tourists to their town.

"I was very small when I began making lace," Carla says. "My mother, her cousins and my aunts were all great lace makers."

They sit in front of three-legged stools, each topped by an oval cushion. Their fingers fly as they flick linen threads, weighted down by dozens of wooden bobbins, called 'piombini' over and under pins attached to a design on the stool.

"It was a way of getting a little bit of money together without taking it away from a family budget that in those days was already slim. There were a lot of people who used to

make lace out of personal need," Carla explains.

Located between the Tiber and Arno rivers, Anghiari was never a place of plenty. The townspeople were mostly tenant farmers working the land of a few aristocratic families. Half of everything they grew was given to the owners. If the harvest was poor, the workers starved.

Still, the sense of community was strong in Anghiari. Its traditions were a way of lightening the load. The 'tombolo' too was an important social outlet for the overworked wives and daughters of the town.

"After preparing dinner and bathing the children, the women met outside their homes, in the middle of the street and worked together for an hour or two," Carla remembers.



But the 'tombolo' fell into disuse after the Second World War. Thousands of townspeople moved away to cities where there was more money and opportunity. The women found better paying work in factories. The population of Anghiari plunged, mirroring that of one in three medieval Italian 'borghi' or towns, the authorities say are now in danger.

A former mayor of Anghiari, 74 year old Franco Talozzi, remembers that time well. "The historic centre of Anghiari was abandoned. There was no life," he recalls.

Over a coffee in a bar off the main street, he explains that when he was elected in 1975, he dedicated his administration to restoring the town centre. "We gave people permission to work on their houses, put on water and build toilets."

"They wanted to take the school away, so we fought and rebuilt it. Now we have the Art Institute in the centre as well as a junior high school," he says proudly.

His tenure as mayor ended in 1992, but he continues to fight. "Our population is declining. We have fewer and fewer young people here."

The Anghiari have resurrected other traditions too, in a bid to spark tourism, bring jobs to the town and reverse this trend. Each year they hold a 'palio', commemorating a battle between troops of the Milanese army and Florentine Republic that took place in 1440. This



On 29 June, a festival is held in the historic centre of Anghiari to commemorate the Battle of Anghiari (1440). Women dress in medieval costumes and practice the tradition of the Merletto a tombolo (bobbin lace or pillow lace) in the streets, as they did centuries ago.

year's 'palio' was packed with visitors from around the region and as far afield as Canada and Japan.

Every five years they re-enact a pagan ritual called the 'Scampanata'. The town meets each morning in May in the town square. Those who are late are dragged out of bed, tried and then hoisted onto a carriage and pulled through the streets as others throw food and scraps.

In August, they stage an annual event they call 'Tovaglia a Quadri' or 'the checked table cloth'. This is an open-air dinner, entwined with a musical play. The villagers serve the dinner and eat, while also performing in the play. Organisers said this year's event was an 'outstanding success', with tickets in great demand.

Still this has set the stage for a battle between those who embrace tourism for the jobs it generates and those who fear it may rob Anghiari of something more precious - its identity.

In one camp, ironically, there's Piero Calli, the President of the Pro Loco. This is a grass roots tourist organisation whose job it is to organise and operate many of these events.

As we walk through Anghiari's narrow lanes, past ancient houses adorned with lines of washing and tiny gardens of potted plants, he shares his concerns. He fears the town may become a victim of its own success - with its properties snapped up by absentee tourist owners, who visit only once a year.

"Our city centre is beautiful because it's inhabited. It's the townspeople who clean in front of their houses and tend their gardens and flower pots," he says. "If we sell all the houses to tourists, whether American or Canadian or Australian - all

good people I'm sure - if they come to live here just once a year and the rest of the time the town is uninhabited, it won't be beautiful anymore."

Franco Talozzi beats the same drum. "In a historic centre, you have to see small children playing on the street, cats that meow, dogs that bark, as well as the old houses. That's what I mean by 'life'. Otherwise it's not a historic centre, it becomes a museum," he says. "In San Gimignano and Pienza, that's happened. They've become little museums."

In the other camp, are residents like Giuseppe Dini, co-author of a book called 'An Adventure in Tuscany' (2007), suggesting itineraries for tours of the region. He manages several homes owned by Canadians in the area.

"In 1960, we were 8800 people in Anghiari, now we are 5800," he explains in broken English. "This means there is enough room for another 3000 people."

Giuseppe believes this poses no danger to the town's charm. "It's impossible that Anghiari becomes like Florence or Siena," he asserts. "If you restore the country houses that we have abandoned around here, you have enough room for another 3000 people."

It's a vexed question where it seems everyone has an opinion but no-one has definitive answers. There is one thing however that all its energetic residents agree on - a town like Anghiari is a jewel and deserves extra care to ensure it stays that way.

"We love our town for what it is," the Pro Loco's Piero Calli says. "It doesn't have to turn itself inside out because more and more tourists are coming. It has to stay our place, our ancient beautiful Anghiari."



Merletto a tombolo is created using 100% linen thread with wooden bobbins, woven with pins in intricate designs. In Anghiari, all lace is woven from linen, rather than cotton which is used in other regions of Italy.



Where Italian playfulness  
meets respect for old school,  
the result is contemporarily refreshing.  
Welcome back to simple Italian food.

*Tony Shilpi*