

A Special Place

Living in America, Loving Molise

by Robin Ferruggia

Some people consider Molise to be the “*Baby of Italy*.” Some say it doesn’t even exist, while others call it, “*The Great Unknown*,” but there are many in America who know the region well and once called it, “*Home*.” Though often similarly overlooked, immigrants from Molise and their descendants now living in America have found ways to channel their love for Molise by creating fantastic organizations in honor of their shared history and heritage.

“Molise is a beautiful area, with its mountains and little villages,” said Mario Ferritto, president of **Club Molisani Charities**, an Italian-American non-profit social organization in Wickliffe, Ohio. “Everybody’s very friendly... You can talk to anybody, ask anybody anything. I have family back there. I miss them. I remember our old town... It’s a simpler life back there. I miss that.”

But, when Ferritto and others came to America, they brought some of their favorite things about Molise with them; and when Club Molise first formed in 2005—gathering in backyards for club meetings—the members were quick to incorporate some of their most beloved traditions together. “Thirteen guys started it [the Club]. Everyone was from the Molise area—the majority of our members are still from Molise, but we’ve opened it up to others—and bocce is the main thing,” said Ferritto. “Originally, a dozen people loved to play bocce, over 50 put money in to get the games going, and it hasn’t stopped since.”

As the group quickly grew, the founding members initially bought a club house with a bar, dining room, and one solitary bocce court. In 2010, a second establishment was purchased in Wickliffe that features a beautiful bar, banquet facility, and full bocce courts which the club makes great use of. Their exciting bocce tournaments are even filmed and available on YouTube.



Club Molisani Bocce Games

In addition to regular bocce games, Club Molisani—now around 500 members strong—also enjoy parties, outings, wine and bourbon tastings, and Italian dinners. “We’re still cooking what my mother used to 50 years ago,” Ferritto said. “Her homemade pizza was the best. It was very simple with very little on there—the color and flavor... whatever was handy—fresh tomatoes, basil, cheese...”



Landscaping at the Italian Cultural Garden

The Italian Cultural Garden was conceived and designed in the spirit of the Italian Renaissance with large walkways; statues of Dante, Virgil, and other famous Italians; a fountain modeled after one in the Villa Medici in Rome; and more. Adorned with roses, ginko trees and over a thousand daffodils, it was dedicated in 1930 as: “*a symbol of the contribution of Italian culture to American democracy*.” (<https://clevelandculturalgardens.org/gardens/italian-garden/>)

“We donate to them and did all their landscaping,” said Ferritto. “We’re trying to keep our heritage around. Everyone wants to give back.”



Another notable group working to preserve the rich traditions, values, and camaraderie of their unique regional heritage, is the **Abruzzo and Molise Heritage Society** located in Washington, D.C.

“As immigrants, or descendants of immigrants, from Abruzzo and Molise, we are very proud of their traditions and heritage,” said current president, Raymond LaVerghetta, whose grandparents emigrated from Vasto, Abruzzo in the early 1900s. “Our organization’s ties to Abruzzo and Molise distinguish it from most other Italian American organizations in the area because the latter do not typically have a linkage to a specific Italian region. We maintain ties with provincial and cultural officials of both Abruzzo and Molise, because it helps us to keep alive the relationship between these regions and immigrants from there, or descendants of these immigrants.”

Founded in 2000, by Lucio D’Andrea, (who was born in Molise)—along with several other *abruzzesi* and *molisani* members—the founding objective for the Abruzzo and Molise Heritage Society was: “*to preserve and promote the heritage of the regions of Abruzzo and Molise, as well as Italy itself*.”

As part of their efforts to continuously honor and fulfill this mission, the Heritage Society hosts several events a year, including regular meetings, guest speakers, cultural events, wine tastings, an annual Ferragosto picnic, and collaborations with other Italian-American organizations in the area by promoting and sponsoring their events. They welcome new members of any background—as long as they have a love for Italy and their Italian heritage—and also provide two scholarships a year for students studying the Italian language and culture; and publish their own bimonthly newsletter, *Notiziario*, which is made available online.



Abruzzo & Molise Heritage Society, Ferragosto 2019

Food is an equally important part of the regional heritage celebrated through the Heritage Society.

“Abruzzo is one of the largest pasta producing regions of Italy, so pasta is naturally important, and we’re proud of it—particularly *pasta alla chitarra*,” said LaVerghetta. “Abruzzo is known for its meat dishes as well, especially *arrosticini*. Seafood is plentiful there, and we are proud of the *brodetto* (fish stew), known throughout Italy. Abruzzo is also a wonderful wine producing region, known particularly for its Montepulciano grape.”



AMHS members enjoy a wine tasting

“Molise, is known for its pasta dishes as well, especially *cavatelli* and *fusilli*, which are original to the region. A well-known meat dish is *offal*—also highly regarded outside of its borders—and the region is also known for its incredible tradition of handmade folding knives.”

The region of Molise is indeed a special place in so many ways, and despite living in America, those who love it and remember it—like the devoted members of Club Molisani Charities and the Abruzzo and Molise Heritage Society—continue to keep the unique spirit of the region alive for everyone. ■

To learn more about these unique Italian American organizations, visit online at:
Club Molisani Charities: www.clubmolisanicharities.com
Abruzzo and Molise Heritage Society: www.abruzzomoliseheritagesociety.org