

REGIONS
OF
ITALY

Molise

By JIM SANO



Among Italians from the other 19 regions of Italy, it's fair to say Molise is considered a bit of a joke. Scores of Facebook groups poke fun at Italy's youngest and second smallest region after alpine Val d'Aosta. One such group, "Molise'n't: I don't believe in the existence of Molise", has 66,000 members. However, the low esteem in which the rest of Italy holds the region is no reflection on its fascinating traditions, stunning landscapes and wonderfully rustic gastronomy. All the kidding is because Molise is the youngest Italian region. It was established in 1963 when the region Abruzzi e Molise was split into two regions. The split did not become effective until 1970.

Molise is situated in south-central Italy bordered by Abruzzo to the north, Apulia to the east, Lazio to the west, and Campania to the south. The region is split into two provinces named after their respective capitals, Campobasso and Isernia. Campobasso also serves as the regional capital. 55 percent of the countryside of Molise is covered by mountains (the largest at 8,202 ft. is Monte Miletto) with most of the rest covered by hills that go down to the sea. It has 35 kilometers (22 miles) of sandy coastline to the northeast, lying on the Adriatic Sea. With a population of 308,493, Molise ranks 19th out of the 20 regions and with only 1714 square miles in area Molise ranks 19th out of 20 as well.

One of Italy's most rural regions, Molise is unique in that it showed virtually no change in population during the first century of its existence as an Italian state. From 1861 to 1961, its population increased approximately 1 percent mainly because the growth rate was offset by constant emigration mostly to other regions within Italy. Since the 1970's, the population of many rural towns has dropped considerably as young people have left the region for better economic opportunities in Italy's north.

Home to just 309,000, Molise is a great place to visit if you're looking to avoid the crowds. Molise's wildness and low profile have made this region a secret so well-kept that even seasoned travelers and most Italians have yet to visit. Tourists, as well as Italians, have neglected Molise but there are many sites nestled in the mountains that are worth visiting. Molise is home to beautiful abbeys, churches and castles as well as impressive ancient ruins far off the tourist track.

A Short History

Historically, Molise is the ancestral home of the Samnite civilization, a fierce warlike Italic tribe who fought (and sometimes defeated) the Roman legions over the course of several centuries. However, over time the Samnites fell victim to the Roman legions and were absorbed into Roman culture.



Sanctuary of Pietrabbondante

The area remains filled with archaeological remains memorializing the intense battle fought between them.

While the road to Roman colonization was costly to the local inhabitants of early Molise, the influence the Romans

had on the area was highly impactful. The Romans destroyed existing cities to create new city-colonies that featured theaters, spas, baths, amphitheaters and another important public spaces and buildings. The most important role the Romans played in advancing Molise and the Roman Empire, however, was the construction of new roads which would connect Rome to the Adriatic Coast. The productivity of Molise's expansion was stopped at the fall of the Roman Empire.

Molise got its name after the fall of Rome and during the period when local inhabitants, invading Lombards and adventuring Normans vied for the region. Molise was both the name of a castle as well as the name of a local warlord family. After the fall of the Roman Empire, there were a string of invasions and rulers in the region. As we see in many other regions of Italy, Molise became a land fought over for years by the Lombards, the Holy Roman Empire, the Normans, Swedish, French, Spanish, Austrians, and then Napoleon who made it part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicily's and ruled until Italian unification.

During his time as the leader of the region, Napoleon would abolish feudalism and reform the region

in a variety of ways. The economy of Molise thrived, but mainly near the coast. After World War I, fascism thrived in Molise due to the vast gap between the region's social classes. During World War II, the region was devastated by the Nazi army, who killed many of Molise's civilians and destroyed a large portion of the area. The reconstruction and rebuilding of the region was slow and the bulk of its repairs didn't occur until the '60s. Until 1963, Molise was part of the Abruzzi region. The term Abruzzi derives from the time when the

region was part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicily's. As stated earlier, in 1963 the province of Molise became an official region of Italy with the cities of Campobasso and Isernia acting as capitals for the two small provinces of Molise.

Cuisine and Wine

In Molise food is very genuine. Among the regional delicacies, the best known are olive oil and truffles, both white and black. The food of Molise has many similarities with its northern neighbor Abruzzi. However, Molise also shares some culinary traditions of Campania and Apulia blending both northern and southern Italian cooking traditions with its own local rustic ingredients.

In the mountainous interior, lamb, kid, mutton and ewe are all favorite meats and are the basis for Molisian specialties like Cacio e Uova, cooked in an earthenware pot and served with egg and sharp cheese.



Cacio e Uova

Pork is also popular in Molise for local prosciutto (including a smoked variety) and various types of salami. Molise shares a love for porchetta (roast suckling pig) with the other central Italian regions

and it often shows up during summer festivals. Regarding salami, the best known are sopressata, capocollo and ventricina, a sausage of lean pork, sweet pepper, red pepper and fennel.



Salami Ventricina

Calcioni di ricotta, a specialty of Campobasso, is made of fried pasta stuffed with ricotta, provolone, prosciutto and parsley and usually served with fried artichokes, cauliflower, brains, sweet-breads, potato croquette and scamorza cheese. Pezzata is made from boiled mutton traditionally cooked in a copper container along with potatoes, vegetables and spices. It requires long slow cooking to tenderize the meat, which also has a very intense flavor. Torcinelli is a simple dish for brave palettes. Torcinelli was created to use up all the normally discarded lamb scraps. Liver, tripe and intestines are cleaned and placed in the animal's gut. The torcinelli are cooked on the grill, but there are those who prefer them cooked in a stew. It's also found in the nearby region of Puglia. Baccala arracanato is cod fish cooked in a pan placed inside the fireplace, covered with ashes and then seasoned with breadcrumbs, pine nuts and walnuts, raisins, olives and cherry tomatoes.

Fusilli and cavatelli are traditionally served with vegetables and are often served with a rich tomato lamb or pork Ragu along with a generous amount of Molise's fiery diavolino red peppers. Other dishes are Cavatiegl e Patane, gnocchi served in a meat sauce of rabbit and pork, Pasta e fagioli, a pasta-and-white-bean soup cooked with pig's feet and pork rinds, Polenta d'iragn, a polenta-like dish made of wheat and potatoes, sauced with tomatoes and pecorino and Risotto alla marinara, a risotto with seafood. Additional regional specialties include Carciofi ripieni, artichokes stuffed with anchovies and capers, peeled sweet peppers stuffed with breadcrumbs, anchovies, parsley, basil and pepperoncino which are sautéed in a frying pan and cooked with chopped tomatoes, Cipollacci con pecorino, fried onions and pecorino cheese and Frittata con basilico e cipolle, an omelette with basil and onions

The ocean's bounty of fresh fish finds its way to local tables just like other regions but trout from the Biferno river is most notable for its flavor and is cooked with a simple sauce of aromatic herbs and olive oil. Zuppa di pesce, a fish stew, is a specialty of Termoli.

One interesting food fact is that a small area in Bojano is the only area outside of Campania that has official permission to produce buffalo mozzarella.

Like the other regions of Italy, sweets and desserts have an ancient tradition here and are linked to the history of the territory and to religious and family festivities. Most common Molisian desserts include various cakes such as Panettoncino di Mais, a sweet chocolate cake made with corn flour. Calciumi (also called caragnoli or cauciuni), are sweet ravioli filled with chestnuts, almonds, chocolate, vanilla, cooked wine musts and cinnamon and then fried, dipped in honey and served at Christmas.



Caragnoli

Scarpelle is leavened batter fried and served with plenty of sugar. In appearance, the scarpelle are the typical dessert of holidays in Molise, like other fried delicacies found in Southern Italy. Other desserts include Ciambelline, ring-shaped cakes made with olive oil and red wine and Ferratelle all'anice, anise cakes made in metal molds and stamped with special patterns. Ricotta pizza is a cake pan filled with a blend of ricotta cheese, sugar, flour, butter, marschينو liqueur and chocolate chips (like what we know as a ricotta pie).

Molise boasts some of Italy's most obscure wines, such as Biferno and Pientro di Iserna, which have red, white and rosé varieties. The wines of Molise have yet to reach their full potential, as wine is still made primarily for local consumption. However, Molise's combination of sun and hilly terrain create ideal conditions for excellent wines; it will not be long before modernization will make Molise a wine powerhouse.

In Conclusion

All through the roiling centuries and into the present day, the way of life in Molise has stayed remarkably consistent. It is an area of shepherds and subsistence farmers. A place justifiably proud of its rustic traditions and fiercely interested in their preservation. The tourist industry, which has become so prevalent throughout Italy, has only begun to make inroads into Molise. Sheep farming and herding are developing even more. In fact, traditions of sheepherding are growing in modern-day Molise. Today, Molise is a developed area that preserves its agrarian and rural background as it abides the 21st Century.