



PROVINCIA  
DI TERAMO

Assessorato al Turismo



# CASTELLI

CAPITAL OF CERAMICS



Abruzzo's Mountain tastes and treasures

# PROVINCIA DI TERAMO



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# CASTELLI

## CAPITAL OF CERAMICS

Castelli majolica is second only to the stunning view the area offers to its visitors.

Nature dominates the landscape with the majesty of Mount Camicia, one of the most beautiful and suggestive peaks of the Gran Sasso d'Italia Massif. For centuries its magnificence has been one of the main inspirations for master ceramists of the area. These are the secrets of a magic and alluring place where time seems to stand still, refusing to adapt to the pace of modern life.



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Ph. M. Anselmi

## THE HAMLET



Castelli's history is strictly entwined with the history of the ancient Valle Siciliana (Sicilian Valley). The origins of the village date back to the end of the ninth century, during the castellation period. In the Middle Ages, Castelli was a fief of the Counts of Pagliara, who ruled the whole valley for many years.

Conflicts between France and Spain to rule over Italy had consequences on Abruzzo's history as well. In fact, many different noble families alternated in ruling the village over the centuries.

At the beginning of the 15th century Castelli was governed by the Riccardi's family from Ortona and in 1454 by the Orsini's family. In 1526, Carlo V turned this fief into a marquisate and granted its dominion to Don Ferrante Alarçon y Mendoza. The coming of this new House encouraged contacts between the local craftsmen and the most important European courts.

Castelli can be considered as a real treasure chest holding extraordinary examples of art from Abruzzo. A journey to discover them could start from Piazza Roma to visit the Church of

**San Giovanni Battista**, which holds a fine wooden statute dating back to the 13th century representing Saint Anne with the child Mary and a splendid majolica altar piece from the mid 15th century. Outside the village the other prominent feature of Castelli is the rural Church of **San Donato** known as a "cona" and dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary in the 15th century. In 1963, Carlo Levi, whilst admiring the superb majolica ceiling of the church defined it as the "**Sistine Chapel of Italian majolica**". Near to the village and certainly worth a visit is the Church of **San Rocco**, built during the Renaissance, and the Ceramics Museum, located in the old **Franiscan Convent** for the time being.



The Church of San Rocco

Ceiling of the Church of San Donato



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CERAMICS

"The Sistine Chapel of Italian majolica" is a great masterpiece. It has a staggering **780 brightly coloured votive bricks** decorated with astronomical and geometrical symbols, coats of arms and floral motifs. This magnificent work was created by the ceramic masters from Castelli.

San Donato's magnificent tiled ceiling is a preciousness testifying the great relevance of Castelli pottery in the whole of Abruzzo.

Art, nature, history and notable characters set the background for these craftsmen's talent and industriousness. They managed to turn their passion and creativity into pure art, creating works of extraordinary refinement.

Castelli majolica is an age-old tradition handed down from father to son, from generation to generation. Its craftsmen's knowledge and values have been kept alive for centuries and they can be found in the many little local businesses where priceless works are still produced every day. The craftsmen's big commitment made Castelli majolica famous both nationwide and internationally. Their masterpieces can be admired in the most illustrious museums of the world such as the Metropolitan, the British, the

Hermitage and the Louvre. This supreme talent together with a great dedication for ceramics, made Castelli famous over the centuries so that it gained the well deserved name of "**home of the Abruzzo ceramics**".

To understand how this tradition gained such a huge popularity we have to go back to its beginning when a community of Benedictine Monks started settling in the village.

**San Salvatore Abbey** provides the first evidence of their presence and since the 11th century the monks introduced the local population to ceramics. They taught the locals how to produce it, using all the resources of their land. They had the clay, an essential raw material, which was supplied by the surrounding badlands. They

had the pure water, coming from the abundant springs that they used to pug the clay. They had the wood, picked in flourishing beech woods, that they needed to cook the mixture in the **ovens**.

What started as a domestic activity to make tools became a real art over the centuries. Ceramics changed forever this community's future turning an agricultural farming society into a dynamic one.

Another relevant moment in the history of Castelli ceramics is represented by the Orsini dominion (in the mid 15th century) and by the **Mendoza** at the begin-







A potter at work



Handmade ceramic decoration



ning of the 16th century. With the Orsini family the craftsmen workshops could count on a significant number of business and cultural relationships with Naples and Faenza as well. In the 1500s there was a big production of originals and high quality works, most of them attributed to the Pompei family. The famous "corredo" (set) made for the Orsini Colonna pharmacy was also one of their creations.

Under the control of Mendoza family, craftsmen from Castelli had the chance to be in contact with the most important European courts. Thanks to the production of great ceramists such as Grue, Gentili and Cappelletti, kings from all over Europe could appreciate Castelli masterpieces and started requesting works to be sent over to their royal courts. Today it is possible to admire Castelli ceramics in two interesting show rooms: in the **Museo delle Ceramiche** (Ceramics

Museum) and in the **Raccolta Internazionale d'Arte Ceramica Contemporanea** (International Collection of Contemporary Ceramic Art).

As a consequence of the earthquake in 2009 the museum is temporarily unfit to use and has been moved to the old Franciscan convent of Santa Maria di Costantinopoli. Inside it is possible to admire marvelous masterworks tracing the historical evolution of Castelli majolica. Among them some pieces of the "Orsini Colonna" stand out. In the Isti-

tuto Statale d'Arte "F.A. Grue" is hosted instead the "**Raccolta**" a collection of about 500 works donated by famous national and international artists. Finally, It is worth pointing out the **Presepe Monumentale** (A monumental Nativity scene). Located inside the Istituto d'Arte, it is made up of 65 statues sculpted between 1965 and 1975. This beautiful and innovative Nativity scene has also been exhibited in Rome, Bethlem, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

#### Info & Contacts

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A monumental  
Nativity scene

View of the Monte Camicia

Ph. M. Anselmi

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THE CASTELLI TO DISCOVER

Discovering Castelli also means to appreciate its “naturalistic soul”. The village is part of the Parco Nazionale del Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga (Gran Sasso and Laga Mountains National Park) and it is the perfect point to start out on a hike up the Gran Sasso d’Italia Massif. The highest peak of the Apennines can offer astounding emotions just as excursions to **Monte Camicia**, the mountain overlooking the village. Looking out from its “balconies” to enjoy the impressive view is highly recommended to whoever is willing to experience the enchanting feeling of unspoiled nature.

### Flavors and typical dishes

Besides products and dishes typical of the Teramo cuisine, Castelli’s gastronomy is distinguished by its good and original **“tacconelle con le voliche”**, a kind of pasta

made with vegetables in their natural habitat growing at 2000 meters. Its desserts such as **“mustaccioli”**, **“bocconotti”** and **“finocchietti”** are just as tasty.

### Events and Festivals

Castelli hosts many events all year long. On January 17th there is a big bonfire dedicated to **Sant’Antonio**. The fire is blessed together with animals and there is a big celebration with songs and dance. Sau-sages and potatoes are eaten together with good wine.

From the last week of July until the end of the following month the village’s streets host a **mostra mercato dell’artigianato** (trade fair of ceramic crafts). On August 15th there is the traditional **“lancio del piatto”**.

During this celebration plates are hurled down steep slopes by Castelli residents. In August there is also the **“Festival della Storia dell’Arte”**, a very interesting event about the history of art. December closes the events’ program with **“Castelli di Natale”** when tourists and onlookers can admire all kinds of pottery to decorate their Christmas trees.

Regarding gastronomy in August there are always some town food festivals in the area:

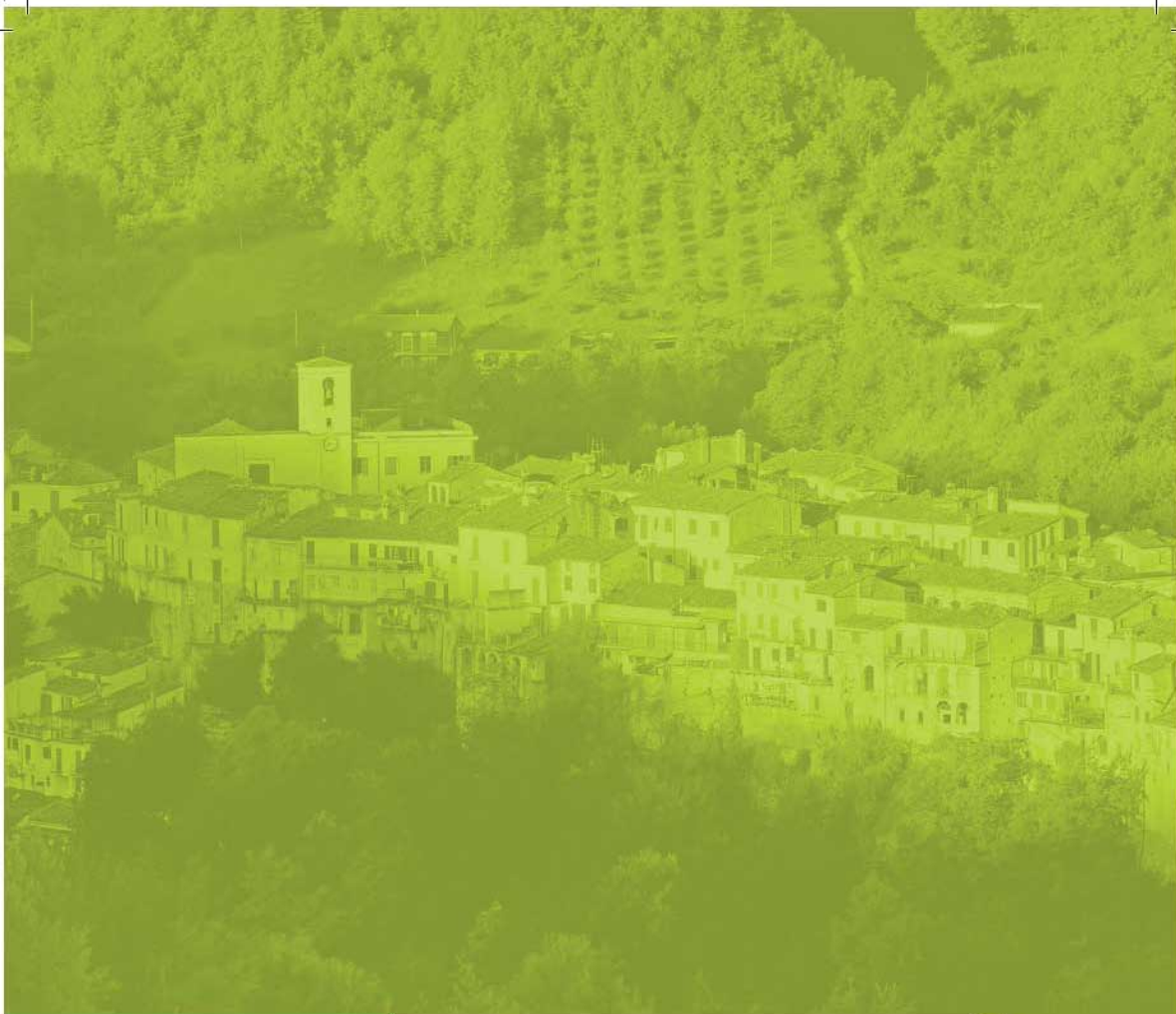
**“mortadella alla piastra”**

from Colledoro and **“arro-sticini”** (skewered pieces of mutton) from Befaro.

Bocconotti







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