



Marcello Ntarelli

INSIDE:

Wine-Focused Hotel in Rome 4

Farmhouse Chic in Tuscany 6

Hiking in Abruzzo 7

Rediscovering Vittoria Colonna 8



Vista Palazzo Lago di Como

CELEBRATING 15 YEARS OF GREAT TRAVEL ADVICE

# DREAM OF ITALY®

Volume 17, Issue 4

www.dreamofitaly.com

May 2018

## THE STRONG & KIND PEOPLE OF ABRUZZO

**T**he central Italian region of *Abruzzo* is called *la terra di mare e monti*, where you can travel

from the Adriatic Sea to the mountains in under an hour. Though only two hours from Rome, *Abruzzo* is one of Italy's last unexplored frontiers where you can hike through rugged mountains and verdant valleys only to stumble upon medieval villages and hidden hermitages carved into stone.

It is a region with a proud pastoral tradition that has seen hardship and poverty due to wars and an isolated geographic position, but whose generous people have emerged with an indomitable spirit of survival and

loyalty to their land and to each other, earning them the handle *forte e gentile* — strong and kind.



Paolino Sanelli

### Paolino Sanelli

High in the mountains of *Abruzzo*, overlooking the lush, Eden-like Orfento River Valley and the proud *Maiella* mountain, is the tiny hamlet of *Deontra*. *Deontra* emerges out of thin air, at the end of a road perfumed by canary yellow brush during spring and summer, its stone houses huddled together like the flocks of sheep that have passed through for centuries.

*continued on page 2*

### NEW HOTELS IN ITALY

## Flashy to Farmhouse Chic

**D**id you miss this year's invitation from George and Amal? Never fear. Views of Lake Como are yours, immediately, at *Vista Palazzo Lago di Como* — look out your suite's window and you'll see nothing but sailboats, water and mountains. This Lario Hotels Vista property is the first and only 5-star hotel in the center of *Como*, with 18 rooms carefully designed to both afford those views and to show off the 19th-century Venetian-style *palazzo* housing them.

The guests-only rooftop, which includes a library, bar and restaurant, has the most sweeping perspective, allowing lucky vacationers to see both natural beauty and their proximity to all that the region has to offer.

The family-owned *Lario* company has always been about "The Lake Como Experience," and expanding their hospitality to the 5-star level works because they pay attention to details in all their properties, from the stylish *Como* city *Albergo Terminus Hotel* to the lakeside *Hotel Villa Flori* to the chic *Posta Design Hotel*.

The Vista Palazzo suites have been

*continued on page 4*

# The population of *Abruzzo* is 1.2 million.

And when you enter the sleepy rural village, you may spot an old man ambling along with a cane, wearing a baseball cap and a smile that no amount of labor or hardship has succeeded in dimming. He is *Paolino* — shepherd, *contadino*, poet, dreamer.



Agriturismo Pietrantica

there was good cheer," Paolino writes.

Paolino has spent his entire life in Decontra, save for a brief stint working in an apple orchard north of London. Of his time in

England he'll tell you, "*Non mi e' piaciuto*" or "I didn't like it." "It used to rain every day...one never saw the sun... So I longed for those lovely mountains of the Maiella, which used to offer me so many fine days of splendid sunshine." In those mountains, Paolino protected his sheep from attacks by hungry wolves; survived an invasion by the Nazis; fell in love and raised a family; and spent countless nights gazing and dreaming under a blanket of stars.

These days, you can find Paolino – now 92 years old and affectionately known as *Nonno Paolino* — seated at the stone patio of *Agriturismo Pietrantica*, owned by his son *Camillo* and daughter-in-law, *Marisa*. And if you take the time to sit with Paolino and listen to his stories, you will be rewarded with tales of a life well-lived and of dreams that have all been of the Maiella.

To meet Nonno Paolino, find out more at: [www.agripietrantica.com](http://www.agripietrantica.com)

## Gina Sarra

*Gina Sarra* picked saffron for the first time at the tender age of three. It was a crisp October morning and the little girl was sleepy and shivering so her mother beseeched her to mimic the very crocuses they were picking.

"When you get cold, put your arms inside your sweater and hug yourself just like the flowers do." And from that moment, Gina's saffron story began.

"The Sarra family has always worked in saffron," says 79-year-old Gina in a booming voice as she pours saffron *tisana* and serves slices of freshly baked *ciambella* in her little kitchen. For the 98 small saffron producers from 13

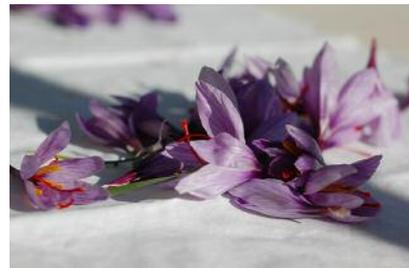


Gina Sarra

different villages in Abruzzo's *Navelli* plateau, the cultivation of saffron has been a way of life and a labor of love for centuries. In fact, in 1971, Gina's brother, *Silvio* formed a union to protect local saffron farmers from unfair market competition called the

*Cooperativa Altopiano di Navelli*.

At Gina's urging, *Silvio* introduced the world to Abruzzo's *oro rosso* — red gold — via



Saffron crocus

a popular television program, which over time led to numerous culinary accolades for *Navelli's* prized saffron, including the holy grail for food producers — DOP certification, the highest distinction that a food in Italy can be afforded.

Gina is a natural storyteller who, despite having lived in the little village of *Civitaretenga* her entire life, clearly knows how to work a crowd. After all, she's had her share of practice. She is regularly visited by chefs and food *cognoscenti* from around the globe. "*Gina e' internazionale* (Gina is international)," a neighbor chides. Her phone rings off the hook with calls from

# Abruzzo is considered the gree

visitors who seek her as much for her stock of fragrant Navelli saffron as for her infinite knowledge about the spice.

“In October, the flowers are collected - strictly by hand, one by one — early in the morning before the sun opens them,” explains Gina. “From one hectare of cultivated land we obtain — if all goes well — one kilo of dried saffron. In that kilo are 250,000 flowers and over 500 hours of work.”

Navelli saffron’s hefty price tag of approximately 25€ per gram reflects the manual labor involved in its cultivation and production as well as the Cooperativa’s guarantee of quality and authenticity.

But Gina hasn’t slowed down. Saffron — despite all its toil — is who she is. It is rumored among her neighbors that Gina keeps a tattered sheet of paper on which she proudly recorded her personal best records both for *raccogliere* — picking the crocuses — 1,623 flowers picked in 12 minutes, 18 seconds — and for the number of crocuses *sfiorati* — stripped of the pistils that will ultimately become saffron threads — 1,000 in one hour, 4 minutes, 23 seconds.

Is it true? She may never tell, but with a twinkle in her eye and over a final sip of saffron tea, she fondly recalls, “When I was a child and was tired after a long day’s work, my grandmother would tell me, “*Dai*, keep going and I’ll buy you dried figs. But I’m still waiting for those figs!”

To meet Gina, find out more at:  
[www.zafferanoaltopianonavelli.it](http://www.zafferanoaltopianonavelli.it)

## Francesca DiNisio

The sun begins to dim on an unusually balmy October day in the gently sloping hills that frame the town of *Bucchianico*. *Francesca DiNisio*, the young owner of *CantinArte*, an olive oil and wine company in Abruzzo, pauses for a moment to wipe a bead of sweat from her brow and take in the endless rows of silvery green olive trees.

These were her grandparents’ trees and they now belong to her. Her reverie is broken by a child’s voice calling out to her. “*Mamma, sono stanca* (I’m tired),” says her four-year-old daughter and Francesca chuckles to herself as she often does when she

wonders whether her two small children will one day appreciate the lands they will inherit.

For Francesca, the olive harvest has always held an aura of romanticism, despite the long days and intense labor involved. Her grandparents’ 60-year love story began among those very olive trees. “My grandmother’s family owned a farm and my grandfather and his brothers went to pick the olives. There were many girls

bringing water, wine and *taralli* to the workers, but my grandfather spotted my grandmother from across the *uliveto* and it was love at first sight.”

As a small child, despite her protestations, Francesca was banished to the sidelines, but as she got older, she was assigned tasks such as

removing the leaves from the nets spread out under the trees and eventually climbing nimbly up the ladders to pick the olives.

By the time Francesca was in her teens, it was clear she was a natural and before long, she was running the operation. “My grandmother taught me to see the beauty in taking care of plants like they are children,” says Francesca as she gazes at the olive trees that surround her with adoration and awe.

“My grandfather used to say, you can live without wine, but without good oil, never!” laughs Francesca. But she immediately grows serious and says, “But it’s true, olive oil flows in our

*continued on page 7*



Francesca DiNisio

## DREAM OF ITALY®

**Kathleen A. McCabe**  
Editor in Chief and Publisher

**Executive Editor:** Bethanne Patrick  
**Associate Editor:** Elaine Murphy  
**Design:** Kim Leaird  
[www.leaird-designs.com](http://www.leaird-designs.com)

*Dream of Italy*, the subscription travel newsletter covering Italian travel and culture, is published 10 times a year. Delivery by mail is \$87 in the U.S., Canada and abroad. A digital subscription (downloadable PDFs) costs \$77 per year. Subscriptions include online access to more than 140 back issues and regular e-mail updates.

### Three ways to subscribe:

1. Send a check to *Dream of Italy*, P.O. Box 2025, Denver, CO 80201
2. Call 202-297-3708
3. Subscribe online at [www.dreamofitaly.com](http://www.dreamofitaly.com) (Visa, Mastercard and American Express accepted)

### Editorial feedback is welcome.

E-mail: [kathy@dreamofitaly.com](mailto:kathy@dreamofitaly.com)

### Advertising opportunities are available.

E-mail: [kathy@dreamofitaly.com](mailto:kathy@dreamofitaly.com)

Copyright © 2018 *Dream of Italy*, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Reproduction in whole or part without permission is prohibited. Every effort is made to provide information that is accurate and reliable; however, *Dream of Italy* cannot be responsible for errors that may occur. ISSN 1550-1353 [www.dreamofitaly.com](http://www.dreamofitaly.com)

# nest region in Europe.

furnished with Italian craftsmanship, from marquetry floors to Dedar fabrics to local marble, shown off well in the bathrooms that also feature soaking tubs, separate showers, and windows overlooking — what else? — the lake.

Guests will be pampered by *Etro* products and *Rivolta* robes. Besides the rooftop social space, the hotel will offer in-room spa treatments and meals prepared by a private chef. Since many of the local hotels close from November through March, the Vista Palazzo is a great choice for travelers who know that Lake Como has no “off” season.

With the lake so close, visitors will want to leave their rooms eventually, and the Vista Palazzo has plenty of options for outings, from a private tour of the lake on a deluxe

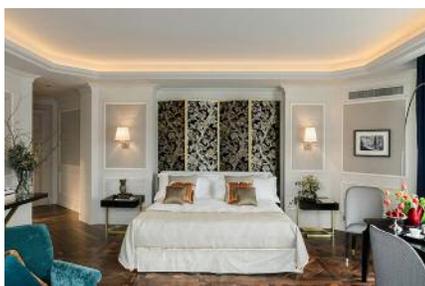
*Riva* speedboat, to a customized seaplane trip, to a drive into Milan for some of Italy’s most luxurious shopping.

If none of those suit, a personal concierge will help plan an itinerary just for you, whether you’re interested in outdoor activities or sightseeing. This hotel, like its siblings, is all about the lake experience, and all of its offerings are backed by over six decades of Lario Hotels expertise.

**Vista Palazzo Lago di Como**

Piazza Cavour, 24  
Como  
(39) 031 5375241  
www.vistalagodicomo.com

**Rates:** Starting at 720€ for a deluxe room, breakfast very much included.



Vista Palazzo

**ROME + WINE =**  
*Perfect Together*

The *Hotel de Ricci* in Rome: Location, location, location. Seated so close to Vatican City you only have to turn a corner to get there, this tiny (only eight suites) gem is surrounded by antique shops and wine bars.

Speaking of wine bars, the Hotel de Ricci takes advantage of the knowledge local sommeliers have. Actually, they’ve hired those local sommeliers. The entire staff is made up of professional sommeliers who help

guests have a total Italian wine experience, starting with a welcoming glass, continuing with customized tastings, and including, if guests wish, tours of nearby vineyards.

The daily tastings derive from the hotel’s temperature-controlled cellar made up of over 1,500 wines from around the world, many of which can be enjoyed through the latest enological innovation of “Coravin,” which allows wine to be extracted from a bottle without the cork being pulled. Each suite has a “personal wine cellar” of four whites and four reds, which can be set according to taste, or found with serendipity.

While the Hotel de Ricci pays a lot of attention to wine, the staff also pays a lot of attention to guests’ comfort: Each of the suites (two each of Junior, Suite, Suite with Balcony, Deluxe) has an eclectic, retro mix of furnishings, to put visitors in mind of a golden era for Rome, its Hollywood years.

One of the most charming ways to be put in that mindset is with a visit to the hotel’s hidden “Charade Bar,” accessible only to guests and a select



Hotel de Ricci

few. The barkeeps inhabit a stage where they delight in “performing” cocktail mixing; there’s also a

private cigar room with humidor. Along with the scheduled wine tastings promoted on the hotel’s website, there are musical guests several times each week.

Dining options are available for all three meals—in-room only for breakfast, while lunch and dinner can be enjoyed in your suite, in one of the lounges, or even outside on the relaxed patio. The small but carefully curated menu has three courses, appetizers to dessert, with something for every taste and dietary need.

**Hotel de Ricci**

Via della Barchetta, 14  
Rome  
(39) 066 874775  
www.hotelder Ricci.com

**Rates:** From 375 to 575€ per night, depending on suite, in-room breakfast included.



**A CASTLE IN**  
*Puglia*

You want something unspoiled, an Italy undiscovered by hordes of tourists. You want something storied and historic. You want something tailored to you and your needs, but you also want the latest in comfort and convenience. *Puglia* has a new luxury destination, the *Castello di Ugento*, that

*Lago di Como* is the third-largest



might be just what you're looking for this year.

Owned and operated by the *d'Amore* family, whose ancestral marquis first took possession of the Norman stronghold in 1643, the *castello* still has many examples of the family crest, a pelican feeding her chicks — a stylized pen-nib rendition of that pelican is now the hotel's logo. In 2013, the d'Amores began a floor-to-ceiling renovation of their property that restored everything, from its ancient stone walls and Roman frescoes to its 17th-century gilded rooms, to full glory.

The nine guest rooms and suites nestled within the *castello*, however, are pure new-millennium luxury. Each has been decorated by a top name in Italian design, from *Poltrona Frau* to *Minotti*.

The rooms on the ground floor provide access to a stunning walled garden, while the second-floor *Piano Nobile* rooms showcase the *Ugento* skyline. Along with luxurious Italian linens, all rooms and suites are stocked with bath amenities made with the famed Pugliese olive oil from some of Italy's oldest producing trees.

Across the courtyard is not only the hotel's restaurant, but the newly opened Puglia Culinary Centre, in partnership with the Culinary Institute of America, where students spend September to April learning the secrets of the region's "nonnas" and the pastas they create from Puglia's wheat.

The Castello's restaurant, *Il Tempo Nuovo*, is the domain of *House Chef*

*Odette Fado*, who creates dishes focused on the abundant local seafood and lamb. Much of the restaurant's produce comes from the walled garden.



Castello di Ugento

Guests can take cooking classes at the Centre, or book a private tour of *Lecce* with entrance to a few of its most beautiful *palazzi*. In fact, guests can enjoy almost any type of experience they like, including hiking and bicycling, culinary tourism, or driving to *Otranto* or *Matera*. With the Adriatic on one side and the Ionian on the other, Ugento provides many opportunities for swimming, sunbathing and boating.

#### Castello di Ugento

Via Castello, 13  
Ugento  
(39) 333 9142242  
[www.castellodiugento.com](http://www.castellodiugento.com)

Rates: Start at 375€ per night, with breakfast and dinner included.

## PLANETA IN Palermo

Palermo's *Planeta Estate* expands the Planeta family's hospitality range, which already includes five wineries around Sicily and a five-star resort at *Menfi, La Foresteria*. The new hotel is actually the *Planeta palazzo*, overlooking *Piazza Ignazio Florio*, dating from the early 20th century.

Located on *Via Principe di Belmonte*, the only pedestrian mall in the port city, Planeta Estate allows guests to stroll through the most elegant streets of

Palermo, like *Via Libertà* and *Via Ruggero Settimo*. Palermo is, after all, the 2018 Italian Capital of Culture, and visitors will want to stroll through its storied streets to see everything from the royal palace and cathedral to the *Teatro Massimo*, the third largest opera house in Europe.

The seven apartments and suites created in the hotel have a comfy vibe, with squishy sofas, fresh linens, and complete kitchens that allow preparation of anything from a simple coffee to a full meal. These are true "homes away from home" that reflect the family's taste and thoughtfulness. Although you can prepare your own meals around the clock, the *Bar Giada* does offer breakfast and drinks throughout the day.



Planeta Estate

Each room has a complimentary bottle of Planeta wine placed in it, and guests may decide to supplement that bottle—the Planetas have

been making wine since the 17th century in *Sambuca di Sicilia*. Today their output even includes wine produced in Sicily's *Etna* region, renowned for its reds (the sandy soil prohibits growth of phylloxera, so the vines stay healthy).

#### Planeta Estate

Via Principe Belmonte, 68  
Palermo  
(39) 0925 1955460  
[www.planetaestate.it](http://www.planetaestate.it)

Rates: 104 to 250€, depending on the season. Breakfast included.



1€ = \$1.18 at press time

# st lake in the country of Italy.

## FARMHOUSE

### Chic

Billed as “A stylish bed and breakfast in a Tuscan hamlet,” *Villa San Michele* delivers amply on that tag line.

*Stefania* and Roger, an Italian-British couple, traveled extensively before settling in Tuscany in 2016 and choosing to renovate a villa in the tiny *Vico d’Elsa*, almost a fairy-tale location.



Villa San Michele

#### Villa San Michele

Via della Villa, 22  
Fraz. Vico d’Elsa  
Barberino Val D’Elsa  
(39) 333 2498804  
www.villasanmichelebnb.com  
Rates: 140 to 165€ per night, including continental breakfast.

overlooks the olive trees that produce Villa San Michele’s own oil. The garden’s lower level includes a swimming pool, outdoor shower and chaises lounges.

quirky sensibility marrying contemporary fittings with vintage upholstered pieces.

The effect is boutique hotel without feeling as if you’re actually living in a boutique; you could return and stay in a different room or suite each time and have a different experience.

Two of the top-floor apartments can be connected for up to five guests at a time. In the suites, breakfast can be served in-room; otherwise, a buffet is set up in the library downstairs.

## ELEGANT IN *Florence’s Oltrarno*

The *Ottantotto Firenze Hotel* is also known as “L’Eighty-eight,” a sophisticated nod to clientele from outside of Italy. With just seven rooms on four floors (never fear, there’s an elevator, but there’s also a lovely staircase), the hoteliers have paid special attention to making each accommodation unique in this *Oltrarno*-neighborhood residence.

Elegant, unfussy and ready for seasoned travelers who don’t need to have their hands held on return visits to Florence—yet also just a ten-minute walk to the *Duomo* if those travelers yearn for the city’s greatest hits.

A welcome surprise: Even in the most “intimate” (read: smallest) rooms, the showers are quite roomy, with capacious doors. One even has “chromotherapy” available. In some of the larger rooms, headboards are set into old stone fireplace hearths, and in all of the rooms and suites there’s a

While the *Ottantotto* does not serve lunch or dinner, the trendy yet local *Oltrarno* neighborhood offers plenty of *trattorie*, wine bars, and other dining options close by, and the cozy feel of the non-touristy streets may make *Ottantotto* guests happy they didn’t choose a bigger hotel with its own restaurant.



Ottantotto Firenze

If that isn’t enough to make you feel at home, consider the fact that *Ottantotto* has domotic technology, meaning you can enter the hotel any time on your own via numeric code—no need to worry about late check-in. Enter, have a

seat in the library (with honesty bar) or in the wisteria-lined garden, and relax into a Florentine existence you might have if you became an expatriate.

#### Ottantotto Firenze

Via dei Serragli, 88  
Florence  
(39) 055 0683669  
www.ottantottofirenze.it  
Rates: Around 165€ per night for “classic” rooms; breakfast can be included for a fee.

—Bethanne Patrick

Their five-room inn, set in a 17th-century farmhouse, offers views of the countryside extending to *San Gimignano*—yet it’s just a short 25 miles to Florence for those who crave some city time.

But one of the most environmentally sound parts of the San Michele experience cannot be bought or tinkered with, and that is the incredible quiet guests will sink into as surely as they do their comfy beds. Yes, those soundproofed rooms help, but the b-and-b’s deep calm cannot be replicated closer to a larger town or city, especially when you’re outside remembering what it’s like to know stillness.

The main villa is the guest area (*Stefania* and Roger live in the converted haybarn), with one room on the ground floor and four on the European “first floor.” A large, inviting lounge gives way to a breakfast area, where everyone can fill up on the most important meal of the day before heading out to explore the region.

The two-level garden entices with jasmine and a wisteria *pergola*, and



# Italian hotels are stepping



family's veins. None of us could survive without it. Even if it is difficult to get up early on the mornings of the harvest, to bend down with your back breaking to position the nets, to keep raking those olives from their branches until the evening — we do it willingly because we want that olive oil — no, we NEED it."

In this way, the seeds for Francesca's career were planted. Her love of country life and fierce entrepreneurial spirit propelled her to launch CantinArte, a company she founded 10 years ago that produces organic olive oil and wines in Abruzzo from lands that have been in her family for generations. "The incredible oil that is pressed from our olives is a gift from nature and we are blessed to share it with others."

To meet Francesca, find out more at: [www.cantinarte.com](http://www.cantinarte.com)

## Marcello Natarelli

Marcello Natarelli is a man on a mission — he has made it his life's work to prove to the world that Abruzzo is a destination that deserves to be explored. In 2014, Marcello combined his web marketing expertise with his passion for his region's innumerable natural wonders to launch *Majellando*, now the largest tourism outfit in Abruzzo. Majellando specializes in

nature tourism, offering guided hikes and excursions in Abruzzo's three national parks as well as other immersive experiences, including biking, canyoning and sailing.

Marcello is often asked why travelers should choose Abruzzo as a trekking destination given the many well-trodden options in Northern Italy. His response comes easily. "Abruzzo is an authentic land. Much of its territory, especially the mountains, has remained linked to its ancient pastoral traditions. Those mountains have been preserved over the centuries by the very men who relied on them to survive. Most of the mountain trails retrace the shepherds' ancient paths. It is magic to breathe in their history."

Marcello's earliest memories of trekking in the mountains are with his great-grandfather, who would gingerly place the little boy in his donkey's saddle basket at 5 a.m. on scorching August days in the hopes of completing the farm work before the intense late summer sun forced them back home.

These days, Marcello's favorite hikes include the path that leads to the *Hermitage of San Giovanni all'Orfento*, a trek suited for more experienced hikers that "takes you to a magical place that I recommend everyone experience at least once in their lives," says Marcello with reverence.

Majellando also offers a variety of walks along routes suitable for all hikers, including to the dramatic

fortress of *Rocca Calascio*. Two of Marcello's other favorite places to explore are the waterfalls of *La Valle di Cusano* and a tucked-away cistern in the *Orta River*, both stunning settings

to cool your heels in the summertime.

However, for himself, Marcello admits, "I love going to the mountains alone. My favorite paths are the 'hidden' ones. Perhaps one day I'll organize a trekking excursion called 'Majellando's Hidden Trails.'"



Marcello Natarelli



Marcello biking

and children that convey the stories and traditions of the mountains. Marcello also wishes to educate local people about the beauty of their territory so they can join his efforts as an ambassador for Abruzzo.

"I always say that to speak of beautiful things, we must live beautiful things. I am fortunate to live every day in the places that I love deeply and I believe this shows in the work that I dedicate to my land every day."

To join one of Marcello's hikes, find out more at: [www.majellando.it](http://www.majellando.it)

—Michelle DiBenedetto-Capobianco

Michelle DiBenedetto-Capobianco is the founder of *Majella Home Cooking & Abruzzo Tours*. A former corporate-lawyer-turned-private-chef in New York, Michelle organizes immersive, small-group tours of Abruzzo. For more information, visit [www.majellahomecooking.com](http://www.majellahomecooking.com).

# up to compete with Airbnb.

# Rediscovering the Life of Vittoria Colonna

On the island of *Ischia*, a castle sits high on the rugged cliffs overlooking the Bay of Naples. In 1525, 35-year-old *Vittoria Colonna*, the *Marchesa of Pescara*, awaited news of her husband who was away at war. On one November day, a messenger arrived with the devastating news that *Ferrante d'Avalos*, the Spanish nobleman she'd married 16 years earlier, lay gravely wounded.

Before she could reach him, he died, leaving Vittoria a widow consumed by grief. "She was in mourning for seven years," says *Ramie Targoff*, author of an exciting new biography: *Renaissance Woman: The Life of Vittoria Colonna* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2018).

Vittoria's sadness overwhelmed her but it also drove her to write more than 130 sonnets about her loss. Now Targoff, a professor of English and co-chair of Italian Studies at Brandeis University, has produced a fascinating biography about one of the most important women of the Italian Renaissance, who was nearly lost to history.

"Not only was she the first woman ever to publish a book of poems in Italy," Targoff explains of Vittoria's 1538 collection, "but she was also a member of one of the most powerful households, the Colonna family."

Her vast influence spanned all aspects of Renaissance life. An astute political negotiator, she was friendly with several popes. She supported the arts and befriended *Michelangelo*. A devout Catholic, her inquisitive mind

nevertheless led her to "become involved in Lutheran Reform circles," Targoff says, which posthumously brought her under the scrutiny of the Inquisition.

"I often say she was like the Forrest Gump of the Renaissance except she wasn't just sort of there when it happened," Targoff says. "She was an active participant."

'Ask Vittoria.'

Still, her most tangible contribution to the Renaissance is her poetry. Targoff writes, she "transformed her sorrows into verse," and in doing so, "she broke entirely new ground for women's poetry."

Before that point, few women poets were published, and even fewer wrote

Petrarchan sonnet cycles, a form usually used by male writers. Vittoria addressed her sonnets to her husband and to her grief, one of which begins, "I write only to vent my inward pain."

As much as she poured her heart out on the page, Vittoria eventually moved on. "She goes through this transformation from a love

poet to a religious poet," Targoff says. Michelangelo bore witness to her transformation. The two exchanged letters and gifts, criticized each other's work, and even discussed the Lutheran Reformation at length.

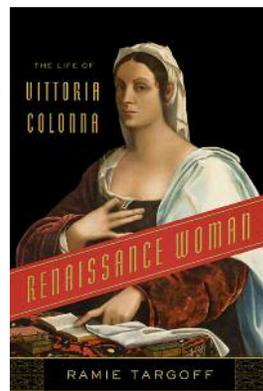
Targoff's book is a wonderful exploration of the ways Vittoria helped to shape the Renaissance through her poetry and friendships. To uncover Vittoria's extraordinary life took a lot of work. Over four years, Targoff visited the places Vittoria lived, dug into various family archives, and even got into the archive of the Inquisition at the Vatican — a "Kafkaesque experience," says Targoff.

"Vittoria Colonna is a historical figure who is both a product of her time," says Targoff, "but also exceptional in her time."

—Lisa Chambers



Title page of Colonna's 1538 collection



Targoff's book



Drawing of Colonna by Michelangelo

Targoff's book begins with Vittoria's widowhood because that's when her influence began. Steeped in grief, she moved into a nunnery after her husband's death and hoped to become a nun, but Pope Clement, likely for political reasons Targoff argues, forbade her from taking the veil.

"He needed her because she was the most sane member of her family," says the author. "We have letters that show she was actively negotiating between the pope, the Holy Roman Emperor and her brother, *Ascanio Colonna*."

As head of the Colonna family, Ascanio was at worst "crazy," Targoff says, and at best "unreliable." In fact, just six months after Vittoria asked to become a nun, the pope and Ascanio were actively at war with each other, which led to the sack of Rome in 1527. Through it all, says Targoff, "We have these letters from diplomats saying,

## Colonna died in Rome at the age of 54.