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THIS IS WHY PEOPLE IN SARDINIA ARE LIVING LONGER THAN YOU

Exploring the mythological longevity of one of the world's most famous Blue Zones.

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I'M SEATED ON THE PATIO OF A NURSING HOME IN GENONI, SARDINIA WITH A GROUP OF MEN WHO ARE NEARING 100 YEARS OLD.

At 96, Francesco is the most animated. He – like his father, and his grandfather before him – farmed wheat and beans his entire life, rising at 4 a.m. in the summer and walking over an hour to his land.

“We worked all day, with only a piece of bread in our pockets, maybe a bit of lardo,” he says in his unhurried but adamant Italian. “There was no complaining: we had our friends, our parents. We had no envy.”

Francesco wears a light blue polo shirt with a tear in one armpit and glasses with attached shades flipped up like an open hatchback. He has one crooked finger and a closely cropped snow-white beard. Despite his age and years of physical labor, he walks confidently with a strong stature. Only his toenails give him away: shrinking beneath the straps of his sandals, they seem to be the only part of his body ready to give up.

Next to Francesco, Antonio sits in a wheelchair. He is 95 and more soft-spoken than his friend, and quieter than his son, Paolo, who has brought me here. Together, the men are trying to explain why Sardinians live longer than people in almost every other part of the world. If I were a betting woman, I'd put money on both of these men reaching – then whizzing past – 100.

A kidney-shaped area on the east coast of the island encompasses Sardinia's **Blue Zone** (<https://web.archive.org/web/20171016170159/https://bluezones.com/>), as popularized by author Dan Buettner in his book of the same name. Buettner identified five places around the globe where people not only live longest but are happiest and healthiest. His team discovered Sardinia first: home to the world's longest-living men, with nearly 10 times the centenarians per capita as the United States.

Myths and hypotheses abound about the Sardinian secret to a long life. Most attribute it to the revered Mediterranean diet of beans, vegetables, grains, and little meat. Others say it's because people are active, especially farmers and shepherds, who walk eight or more miles per day. Some think it has to do with a rare gene found only in the area, and still others point to the villages' multi-generational families and tight communities that keep the elderly supported and engaged well into their later years. One consistent thread reverberates through every narrative: Sardinians lead lives rooted in tradition, their culture historically isolated from the rest of the world. As a founder of the artisanal spirit and jam company **Bresca Dorada** (<https://web.archive.org/web/20171016170159/http://www.brescadorada.it/>), Paolo's life's work is to keep Sardinian culinary practices alive.

It's also worth noting that 50 years ago, this nursing home – which the Italians gently call a *casa di riposo* – wouldn't have existed. Francesco and Antonio would have lived out their 90s at home with family instead of here, where they are surrounded by photos of the pope and kindly nuns in habits, looking out over a field of fruit trees. But with younger generations moving to the cities for lack of agricultural work in Sardinia, families as these men know them are dissolving.

Paolo pays 1,500 euros a month to keep his father in the nursing home, he tells me later, shaking his head. “Molto, molto, molto.”



Many people I meet in Sardinia know someone who has lived past 100. Silvio, my Airbnb host, volunteers as an ambulance driver with a man whose father is 103. Paolo's partner, Serenella, has a colleague of the same age. Jon, an American expat who exports artisanal Sardinian products at **Trigu Italia** (<https://web.archive.org/web/20171016170159/http://triguitalia.com/>), just lost his mother-in-law at 102. Each of them expresses an almost mystical respect for this longevity, emphasizing the centenarians' enduring lucidity. Inevitably, these conversations always come back to lifestyle; I lose count of the number of times I hear the words *naturale* and *semplice*.

The word "foodie" is redundant here. Everyone in Sardinia is obsessed with food – Sardinian food, specifically. When Francesco walks me through a typical day of eating in his youth, it sounds like a Michael Pollan fantasy: fresh goat cheese and yogurt, bread, plenty of fruit, polenta, boiled zucchini, raw eggs, and tomatoes dried in the sun. Sugar was expensive, so no one ate sweets. As many as 10 family members gathered around the dinner table – three generations – every night. "Little meat, little wine," Francesco says, and adds as a proof point: "My memory is so clear, I can remember when I was five."

Roberto is the proprietor of La Cambusa, a Cagliari shop devoted to Sardinian salumi, cheese, pasta, and other specialized pantry products. In the back of his bodega, he serves me thin slices of goat prosciutto with crumbly pecorino and sweet, tiny tomatoes as he tries to explain what it means to eat well. A native of the island, Roberto proselytizes about the superiority of goats' milk over cows', thanks to their lean bodies and varied diets, which lead to more easily digestible milk. It's not just preferable to eat seasonally, it's imperative. "To eat a peach out of season..." He scratches his arm, suggesting some rashy, allergic reaction. "It's bad for you. No, you eat it when it comes."

Roberto believes, like many of his neighbors, that there's something particular in the air here. The *maestrale* is what Italians call the strong wind that blows from the northwest through Sardinia. It is said to purify the

air and water, ridding both of pollution and bringing good health to those who breathe and drink.

Silvio and his wife Mariuccia, my hosts, moved from Milan to Sardinia for their two young sons, who suffered from various medical issues. As a cure, the doctors prescribed sea air. That was more than 30 years ago.



PIERO AT THE STOVE.

We leave the nursing home in Paolo's car. As he weaves through the narrow streets of Genoni, Paolo points out his family's house through the window. He knows everyone in town, he says, which today he estimates at about 750. The town's school is empty and deserted, not because the children are on summer vacation but because there aren't enough children to fill it. Today, the one kid born every year in Genoni goes to school in the next town over.

Sardinia is big and fertile enough to be self-sufficient – and then some. One local tells me the island used to be the “breadbasket of Rome.” But since much of the land is left uncultivated, people in small towns can't find work. (Paolo blames the government for not directing funds toward agriculture.) Younger generations move to the cities and, like most of us in this industrialized, globalized world, buy everything at the supermarket.

Right now Sardinia is in a drought, and it doesn't help that the European heat wave the newspapers call “Lucifer” has descended on the land. Temperatures, like ages, exceed 100, and many elderly people believe this is the hottest summer ever. As a result, a haze clouds the mountains and seems to have settled in the air around us. We stop for lunch in Laconi, a small town just north of Genoni. We eat melon draped with prosciutto and bowls of *culurgiones* and *malloreddus* pastas, and we are one of three tables occupied out of about 50.

As we're leaving, a woman named Rita insists on pouring us a sip of her grappa from an unmarked bottle.

Rita knows all about the Blue Zone. There, she says, people ate little and only what they produced. They were separated by the Gennargentu mountains from the rest of the island, and they cultivated new generations who loved the land and what nature gave them. I wonder why she is using the past tense, but I don't ask. After we taste the grappa and begin to leave, Rita takes my hand and holds it for many long seconds, and she thanks Paolo for making some of the best spirits in Sardinia, the natural way.

She doesn't charge us for the grappa. Nor do any of the vendors at Cagliari's massive San Benedetto market, who serve up raw mussels and fluorescent shrimp seemingly for the pleasure of telling us their stories and watching us enjoy the food. Roberto asks only a small, arbitrary sum for our tasting. I insist on paying; they all insist twice as aggressively on giving. Pride runs deep on this island. Sardinians understand exactly how special this sustained lifestyle is, and they implore us to understand it, too.

There is a story that has become part of Sardinian folklore, Paolo tells me. Here's how it goes: Long ago, the Romans arrived at the base of the island's mountains with their dogs to bring the land under their rule. Sardinians threw rocks down from the summit and drove them away, but the Roman dogs remained and, today, are celebrated as loyal defenders of the Sardinians. The historical accuracy sounds fuzzy (Romans ruled Sardinia for hundreds of years), but I like to think about the dogs and how they might have sniffed the sea air and been welcomed into these warm families, and how they knew instantly that this was all worth protecting.

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On my last night in Sardinia, the *maestrale* comes. I am cooking with Piero, a fisherman who runs an agriturismo in Teulada, and he's repeating the words that now sound like a mantra: "Food must be simple." Outside on his patio I eat steamed mussels with parsley and fresh tuna and tomato pasta, and the wind begins to whirl; paper napkins threaten to fly away.

At the end of our meal I ask Piero for his take on the Sardinian lifestyle. He is certain that plenty of Cannonau, the native red wine grape, is to thank for longevity, as it contains many times the antioxidants of other grapes. He pours himself a glass of wine that is not Cannonau, raises it in a toast, and laughs.

"This is the problem today," he says, and points to my iPhone. To sit and enjoy your red wine, to breathe in the air, to touch the earth, to feel time pass, untethered to the digital fury of the world – these are his secrets to a long and happy life, he says.

When I wake the next morning, Sardinia's landscape has snapped into sharp focus. Yesterday's haze has melted from the mountains. The blues of the sky and sea have deepened to indigo, and the air feels cooler, less humid. Maybe it's the *maestrale*, I think, or maybe just the power of suggestion.