

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Cisternino's Pasta Passion

A Mid-August Festival of Food, Music, and Tradition

Sagra delle Orecchiette

Where: Cisternino

When: Second weekend of August.

Average Festival Temperatures: High 31°C (87°F). Low 23°C (74°F).

Cisternino: A Timeless Jewel in the Heart of Puglia

Perched at 394 meters (1,292 feet) above sea level, Cisternino is one of Italy's "Most Beautiful Villages," where history, architecture, and traditions have stood the test of time. Overlooking the Valle d'Itria, this enchanting hilltop town blends ancient roots, medieval influences, and Baroque elegance, creating a setting where the past and present coexist in perfect harmony.

Cisternino's history dates back to the Messapians, an ancient Italic people who inhabited Puglia long before the arrival of the Romans. The town's strategic hilltop location made it a desirable settlement for subsequent rulers, including the Normans and Swabians, who shaped much of its medieval character. Under

Swabian rule, Emperor Frederick II reinforced Cisternino's defenses, integrating it into his network of strongholds across southern Italy. The town's medieval labyrinthine streets, whitewashed houses, and fortified gates still reflect these historical influences today.

By the Renaissance and Baroque periods, Cisternino had strengthened into a prosperous agricultural center, known for its olive oil, vineyards, and artisanal craftsmanship. Wealthy families and religious orders contributed to the town's architectural expansion, constructing elegant churches and noble palaces that continue to define its historic center. Among them, the Chiesa Madre di San Nicola, with its Romanesque and Baroque elements, stands as a testament to Cisternino's artistic and spiritual heritage.

Today, Cisternino remains a vibrant town with a population of around 11,000 residents, many of whom continue to uphold centuries-old traditions. The town is renowned for its fornelli pronti, a unique culinary tradition where local butchers grill meats to order in small, open-air eateries, a practice that turns Cisternino's historic streets into a living dining experience every evening.

Sagra delle Orecchiette: A Celebration of Puglia's Most Beloved Pasta

The rhythmic tap-tap-tap of wooden rolling pins against marble echoes through Cisternino's medieval alleys. Dozens of practiced hands dance across tables, transforming simple flour and water into edible art. This is the Sagra delle Orecchiette, where for one magical August weekend, this whitewashed town becomes the epicenter of pasta-making artistry. Typically held during the second weekend of August, the festival unfolds across three lively days, with events beginning Friday evening and continuing until Sunday night.

These "little ears" of pasta, shaped by the swift, practiced thumb-press of local women, carry centuries of culinary wisdom. Each dimpled piece tells a story of Pugliese kitchens, where generations of nonne have perfected this craft. The pasta's subtle roughness isn't a flaw, it's genius, designed to embrace rich sauces like bitter cime di rapa or slow-cooked Sunday ragù with an almost magnetic devotion. Festival-goers can witness this artistry firsthand in the cooking

workshops held on Saturday morning, where expert pasta-makers reveal the secrets behind shaping the perfect orecchiette.

Street corners transform into impromptu cooking theaters, where pasta artisans create orecchiette with hypnotic speed, their fingers moving as fast as the staccato rhythm of Pizzica dancers, whose performances electrify the piazzas every evening. Communal tables stretch through torch-lit streets, inviting strangers to become friends over steaming plates of orecchiette al pomodoro, crisp taralli, and glasses of full-bodied local wines.

Wandering the festival's maze-like paths reveals treasures at every turn. Local vendors display mountains of freshly made orecchiette, their golden hues glistening like precious gems in the late summer light. Bottles of fragrant olive oil, jars of handcrafted preserves, and blocks of aged pecorino tempt passersby, while the air thickens with the perfume of simmering sauces and freshly baked bread. On Sunday afternoon, history comes to life with the medieval court procession, where costumed performers and flag-throwers bring a sense of pageantry to the festivities.

Festival Events

Friday Evening

The festival traditionally kicks off with an opening ceremony in the town's main square, featuring speeches by local officials and a performance by a folk music ensemble.

Saturday

Morning: Visitors can participate in cooking workshops, where local chefs and nonnas (grandmothers) demonstrate the art of making orecchiette by hand, it is a beautiful sight!

Afternoon: The streets come alive with a medieval court procession, complete with participants in period costumes, flag throwers, and traditional musicians.

Evening: The main piazza hosts a concert featuring traditional Pizzica music, encouraging attendees to dance and immerse themselves in the local culture.

Sunday

Morning: A local artisan market is set up, showcasing handcrafted goods, local produce, and souvenirs.

Afternoon: The festival often features a jousting tournament, reenacting historical competitions with skilled riders.

Evening: The festival concludes with a grand feast, where attendees can savor various orecchiette dishes paired with local wines, accompanied by live music performances.

A plethora of orecchiette variations, from traditional to inventive local chef creations, are available at the festival's many food stalls.

Cisternino Walking Tour

#1. Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II

Begin your journey in Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II. This elegant square unfolds like a medieval theater, its limestone-paved expanse framed by noble palazzi whose weathered facades tell stories of centuries past. The commanding Torre dell'Orologio (Clock Tower), added in 1850, rises above the square with its distinctive green copper dome and original mechanical workings still keeping time for the town.

At dawn, watch as morning light gradually illuminates the square's graceful arched porticos, where vendors once sheltered their goods. Today, these spaces house charming cafés where locals gather for their morning caffè and cornetto.

#2. Chiesa Matrice di San Nicola di Bari

Following the gently sloping Via San Quirico, you'll reach this architectural masterpiece dating to 1420. The church's façade presents a harmonious blend of styles: Romanesque solidity in its base, Gothic aspirations in its rose window, and Baroque flourishes in later additions. The asymmetrical placement of its portal speaks to medieval building techniques, while the weathered stone carries the patina of six centuries.

Step inside to discover a forest of ancient columns, their capitals each uniquely carved. The most remarkable are four granite columns, their polished surfaces

betraying their Roman origins, possibly from a temple that once stood nearby. Look up to admire the church's unique wooden ceiling, its deep browns contrasting with the luminous white stone walls. The 16th-century statue of San Nicola, carved from a single piece of walnut, shows remarkable detail in the saint's facial expression and flowing robes. The baroque altar, completed in 1767, dazzles with intricate gold leaf work and lapis lazuli inlays.

#3. Torre Normanno-Sveva

Climb the medieval streets to reach this 11th-century sentinel, its massive limestone blocks still bearing mason's marks from Norman craftsmen. The tower's strategic position, 498 meters (1633 feet) above sea level, created a vital link in a network of coastal warning systems. When Saracen ships were spotted, signals would be relayed from tower to tower, allowing inland towns precious time to prepare.

The tower's military architecture reveals its dual heritage: Norman ingenuity in its base construction and Swabian military refinements in its upper sections, added during Frederick II's reign (1220-1250). Climb the recently restored spiral staircase to reach the observation platform, where each direction offers a different vista.

#4. Porta Grande (Arco di San Nicola)

Once the main entrance to Cisternino's fortified old town, Porta Grande is a striking stone archway that still retains its defensive character. Above it sits a sculpture of San Nicola, a symbol of divine protection for the town. Walking through this gate feels like stepping back in time, as it leads into the oldest and most atmospheric part of Cisternino.

#5. Centro Storico (Historic Center & Whitewashed Alleys)

This is Cisternino's soul, a labyrinth of narrow streets, sunlit courtyards, and secret passageways. The town's whitewashed houses, many dating back to the Middle Ages, are adorned with flower-filled balconies and wrought-iron lanterns. Unlike other towns, Cisternino lacks grand monuments, but that's precisely its charm, the town itself is the attraction.

#6. Chiesa di San Quirico e Giulitta

Dedicated to the early Christian martyrs San Quirico and Giulitta, this Baroque church stands out for its lavish interiors and intricate stuccoes. The church houses an ancient crypt, believed to be one of the oldest in the region, possibly dating back to the 8th century.



Festa di San Quirico e Giulitta

#7. Belvedere di Cisternino (Viewpoint)

Cisternino's most breathtaking scenic viewpoint, the Belvedere, offers a sweeping panorama of the Valle d'Itria. The rolling landscape is dotted with trulli houses, traditional white stone dwellings with conical roofs unique to this region, along with olive groves and vineyards, creating a timeless Puglian postcard view.

#8. Fornello Pronto District (Cisternino's Famous Butcher-Restaurants)

End your walking tour where history meets food, Cisternino's famous fornelli pronti (butcher-restaurants). This tradition dates back generations: visitors select their cut of meat directly from a butcher, which is then grilled over open flames and served at communal tables. The experience is unpretentious, delicious, and deeply rooted in local culture.

Cisternino Festivals and Sagre Throughout the Year

Festa di San Biagio

February 3

The Festa di San Biagio in Cisternino is one of the town's most cherished religious celebrations, dedicated to Saint Blaise, the protector against throat ailments. The

day begins with a solemn Mass at the church of San Biagio, followed by the traditional benedizione della gola (blessing of the throat), where priests cross two candles over the faithful's necks while invoking the saint's protection. A statue of San Biagio is carried through the streets in a devotional procession, accompanied by local confraternities and bands. The celebration also includes music, fireworks, and community gatherings.

Pasquarèdde (Easter Monday Festival)

Easter Monday (date varies annually)

On Easter Monday, locals gather at the Sanctuary of the Madonna d'Ibernia to celebrate Pasquarèdde. Participants bring traditional sweets, such as "u churrüchele," symbolizing prosperity and fertility. The festival honors the Madonna of Ibernia, associated with life and abundance.

Gnummeredd Festival (Sausage Festival)

June (specific date varies)

This festival celebrates gnummeredd, traditional sausages made from lamb or goat entrails. Visitors can savor these local delicacies, reflecting Cisternino's rich culinary heritage.

Festa di San Quirico e Giulitta (Feast of Saints Quirico and Giulitta)

First weekend of August

Dedicated to Cisternino's patron saints, this festival features illuminations (special light installations over the streets in the town center), religious processions, musical performances, and fireworks. The town comes alive with cultural events, including band concerts and craft markets, celebrating the legacy of Saints Quirico and Giulitta.

Sagra della Castagna (Chestnut Festival)

Mid-October

As autumn sets in, Cisternino hosts the Chestnut Festival, celebrating the seasonal harvest. Attendees can enjoy roasted chestnuts, local pastries, and mulled wine, all set against the backdrop of the town's picturesque streets.

Day Trips: Nearby Sites, Cities, and Towns

Marina di Ostuni. 22 kilometers (13 miles) from Cisternino. Twenty-two kilometers from Cisternino, where the white city descends to meet the Adriatic, lies Marina di Ostuni. Along this stretch of the celebrated "Blue Flag Coast," nature has painted a masterpiece of crystal-clear waters and golden sands. Here, the Parco Naturale Regionale Dune Costiere unfolds like a living tapestry, ancient olive groves bow to sea breezes, while coastal dunes shelter rare orchids and provide sanctuary for migratory birds.

Gioia del Colle. 40 kilometers (24 miles) from Cisternino, Gioia del Colle rises from the Murge plateau, its medieval streets echoing with tales of emperors and artisans. The magnificent Castello Normanno-Svevo, beloved by Frederick II, commands the town's highest point, its honey-colored stones glowing at sunset. Below its walls, master cheese makers practice their ancient craft, creating clouds of mozzarella and burrata that have made the town's name synonymous with dairy excellence.

Logistics

Train: Cisternino has a train station, but it is not in the town center, it is about 10 kilometers (7 miles) away in the valley, requiring a bus or taxi to reach the historic center. One hour from Bari via train.

Bus: Ferrovie del Sud Est (FSE): Operates regional buses connecting Cisternino to Martina Franca, Ostuni, and Fasano.

Car: From Bari 1 hour via SS16 Adriatica and SP3. From Brindisi 45 minutes via SS379 and SP17.

Parking: Several convenient parking options await visitors just outside the old town. The most recommended choice is Parcheggio Via San Quirico, which offers easy access to the historic center while providing ample space for vehicles.

Restaurant Recommendations

Osteria Bell'Italia. Address: Via Duca D'Aosta, 29

The restaurant prides itself on using seasonal ingredients and fresh fish sourced directly from local ports. The elegant yet simple interior reflects the travels and experiences of the owners, Luano and Erika, who warmly welcome each guest.

Trattoria Bère Vecchie. Address: Via Regina Elena, 8

The menu features local specialties like "bombette" (pork rolls filled with various ingredients) and handmade orecchiette pasta. The friendly atmosphere and commitment to organic ingredients make it a must-visit spot.

Al Vecchio Fornello. Address: Via Basiliani, 18

Al Vecchio Fornello offers a unique dining experience where guests can select their preferred cuts of meat from the adjoining butcher shop, which are then grilled to perfection.

Accommodation

Staying overnight for a sagra is not necessary, but if you want to stay in town, I recommend two nights.

Borgo Canonica. Address: Contrada Minetta 20

Set amidst olive groves, this 3.5-star establishment offers a serene environment with traditional trulli accommodations. Guests can enjoy a seasonal outdoor swimming pool, free private parking, and an on-site restaurant.

Hotel Lo Smeraldo. Address: Contrada Don Peppe Sole 7

In the hills of the Itria Valley, this 3-star hotel features an outdoor pool, restaurant, and panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. The hotel offers comfortable rooms with modern amenities.

Relais Masseria Villa Cenci. Address: SS 581

This 4-star hotel is set in a historic masseria (farmhouse) and offers elegant rooms, an outdoor pool, and extensive gardens. Guests can experience authentic Puglian hospitality in a tranquil setting.