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WIGWAM NEWS

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COLLI EUGANEI Wigwam Local Community

La Comunità Locale Wigwam Colli Euganei

THE WISDOM OF THE EARTH THAT CULTIVATES SAFFRON IN MONSELICE

South of the Euganean Hills, the So.Ge.Agr. project is enhancing the commitment of a woman who, together with her family, has embarked on a new kind of agriculture

Bright purple, blazing red: let me introduce myself – I am saffron! The moment you arrive at *"La Saggezza della Terra"*, you understand that nothing here is improvised: every row, every bulb, every flower tells a deliberate choice. Today, we will connect this reality with the SO.GE.Agr. project.

At the foot of the Euganean Hills, in the Municipality of Monselice, this farm founded in 2012 thanks to the vision of **Cinzia** and **Davide Giraldin**, has roots that run deep – in the unwavering passion of Grandma Teresa and Dad Sante for a land that is not just work, but emotional heritage and responsibility. On this family foundation, Cinzia has built an essential and courageous agricultural project, personally following the entire production cycle and betting – long before it became a trend in the area – on a refined and rare crop: saffron.

Everything begins with an experiment, almost a silent challenge: a few bulbs of *Crocus sativus*, the curiosity to see whether Monselice's climate could welcome this precious flower, and the patience to wait.

The first buds appearing between October and November confirm the intuition. From there comes the choice: to devote part of the land to the

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most fascinating spice in the world, maintaining a careful balance between cereal tradition and crop innovation. In this experience, saffron is not merely a product, but a hands-on lesson in precision and care: between 150 and 180 flowers are needed to obtain one gram of pure stigmas, which lose up to 90% of their moisture during drying – concentrating aromas, color, and value. It is entirely manual work, requiring sharp eyes, a light touch, and timing followed to the letter.

It is in this context that the harvest day took place, organized within the So.Ge.Agr. project and involving students from IPSOA (State Vocational Institute for Hospitality and Food and Beverage Services) Pietro d'Abano in the Province of Padua, together with students from the Master's Degree in *Italian Food and Wine* – Food and Wine, History, Sociology and Anthropology track – at the University of Padua: a meeting of professional expertise, academic research, and authentic agriculture.

We asked **Professor Elisabetta Novello** – Associate Professor of Economic History at the University of Padua, Department of Historical, Geographic and Antiquity Sciences – to explain the relationship between the course and this day "in the field".

Elisabetta Novello: *"The So.Ge.Agr. project offers many interesting opportunities for encounters between the agricultural-farming world and educational institutions. The students of the Food and Wine, History, Sociology and Anthropology track of the Master's Degree in Italian Food and Wine – of which I am a lecturer – were thrilled to visit a small, female-run farm and to step into a saffron field, even accepting to 'get their shoes muddy'.*

The welcoming environment and the genuine warmth of those who hosted them allowed them to freely express their curiosity and ask every kind of question without hesitation. The meeting with the younger students of the Hospitality Institute in Abano, who prepared for them an excellent saffron risotto, further enriched the experience. With the Food and Wine students – and soon with those of the Oral History and Environmental History courses – we want not only researchers to meet producers, but also for the students themselves to develop a direct connection with the realities of the agricultural world and with the people who, across generations, contribute to keeping it alive and productive, despite the many challenges imposed by market dynamics."

Leading the students along the rows is Cinzia herself: calm voice, solid expertise, and the ability to explain a complex process with simplicity, without ever losing her passion. She demonstrates how to harvest the flower at the right moment, how to delicately separate the stigmas, and how every gesture affects the quality of the final product.

Above all, she explains what it means for a woman to choose a niche crop, to invest in quality, and to welcome schools and universities into the farm – turning a saffron field into an open-air laboratory of education, entrepreneurship, and rural future.

We then asked a few questions to Paola Franceschin, owner of Azienda Agricola Franceschin – project leader of So.Ge.Agr. *What was the main challenge of this day at "La Saggezza della Terra"?*

Answer: *The challenge was bringing students from a hospitality school into a small farm that produces real local excellence, like Cinzia's. Not in a classroom, not in front of a slide, but among the rows, between saffron flowers. We wanted them to see up close where a product comes from – one they often encounter only as a precious kitchen ingredient.*

How did the students react when they saw the saffron cultivation?

Answer: *They were enthusiastic. For many, it was the first time entering a saffron field, touching the flowers, picking them directly from the plant. They understood that behind just a few stigmas lies an enormous amount of care, precision, and timing. An experience like this stays with them: when they work in the kitchen or in service tomorrow, they will know that every ingredient has a history.*

Why do you think it is so important for hospitality professionals to know the local territory?

Answer: *Because you cannot speak about quality unless you know the origins of what you serve. A chef, a maître, a sommelier must be able to tell the story of products, farms, and the choices behind them. Knowing that saffron comes from a farm like Cinzia's – working ethically, sustainably, and with deep respect for the territory – adds value to the dish and creates a more authentic connection with those who taste it.*

This visit is part of a broader So.Ge.Agr. program. Can you tell us more?

Answer: *Yes, it is the second farm visit planned by the So.Ge.Agr. project. Our goal is twofold: to promote local products and to create en-*

counters between the people who produce them and those who will use them or talk about them. We often see market stalls, but we rarely come into contact with the stories, faces, and hands behind those products. These visits are our attempt to bridge that gap.

In one sentence, what does a day like this leave behind?

Answer: *The awareness that a small saffron field can become an open-air classroom where education, local identity, and the future of agriculture intertwine – with women and young people at the center.*

Also present was **Sandra Cherubin**, owner of Azienda Agricola Cherubin, another project partner.

Sandra, why did you choose to focus on biodiversity and the Foza sheep breed, alongside beekeeping?

Answer: *For us, preserving biodiversity is not a slogan – it's a working method. Bees help us measure environmental health and pollinate the plants in our meadows; Foza sheep – native to Veneto, originally from the Asiago Plateau and registered in the herd book – are at the heart of our conservation project: a breed selected over centuries for its long wool suitable for weaving. Today it is endangered; by breeding it and caring for the wool supply chain, we want to protect the species' quality and restore value to traditional practices. Being part of So.Ge.Agr. also pushes us to collaborate and visit other farms: exchanging experiences is essential to develop a multifunctional and sustainable agriculture."*

Cinzia Giraldin of the farm La Saggezza della Terra

Daniele, at 22 you are thinking about continuing the family business: what motivates you, and how would you encourage other young people to get involved?

Answer: *We have always had animals at home – including dairy cows – so continuing feels natural. I want to help repopulate the Foza breed and prove that it is possible to combine tradition and innovation: careful pasture management, short supply chains, using digital tools to tell our story, open days and joint visits with other farms in the project. To my peers, I would say: come see it up close. Seeing and touching is what makes you realize that there is a future here – not just hard work.*

The hands-on and operational part of the saffron tasting was entrusted to young, but skilled and well-prepared students. I approach the teacher coordinating them for a few more details.

Professor, could you introduce yourself and explain how your school became involved in this initiative dedicated to saffron?

Answer: *I am* ***Riccardo Ma-***

***lanchin**, culinary arts instructor – kitchen sector – at IPSEOA "Pietro d'Abano", in the Province of Padua. We are here today at the invitation of the University of Padua, which asked our students to develop a culinary proposal capable of enhancing saffron. We chose saffron risotto for the final tasting: a dish that only appears simple, yet brings out the best of this extraordinary product.*

Which class is here today, and how did you prepare for this?

Answer: *Participating is class 5ª BC, gastronomy track, boys and girls aged 18–19 who are currently working on the theme of promoting the territory, which is also central to their final State Exam. Before arriving, we worked in the classroom: the history and characteristics of saffron, the types of rice best suited to the preparation, the differences between the classic saffron risotto and the Milanese version, which also includes beef marrow.*

What advice would you give to a student considering enrolling in your school?

Answer: *I honestly say that a real predisposition is needed. Hospitality work requires commitment, presence, sacrifice, often challenging schedules, and a strong hands-on component: this sector is currently struggling with a shortage of staff partly for these reasons. But for those who have passion, it offers enormous satisfaction. In a country like Italy – highly touristic and with a cuisine known and loved worldwide – proper training in this field also means opening up many opportunities, both nationally and abroad.*

Also present was the Mayor of Monselice, Giorgia Bedin. We asked her: *Monselice and saffron, how do they connect?*

Giorgia Bedin: *Monselice and saffron are connected through concrete collaboration between public and private sectors. In recent years, a strong synergy has been created with Cinzia's company – "La Saggezza della Terra" – and with local associations and producers, achieving very positive results. Creating networks is essential: saffron becomes not only a quality pro-*

The students of the IPSEOA "Pietro d'Abano" Institute in Abano Terme

duct, but also a symbol of our identity, a means of promoting local specialties, enhancing the territory, and strengthening Monselice's tourist appeal.

We conclude this first part of an eventful day by collecting the reflections that – more than anything else – capture the deeper meaning of this encounter: a territory that recognizes itself in its farms, farms that engage with institutions, and the So.Ge.Agr. project that becomes a bridge between these worlds.

A shared, practical, and forward-looking vision emerges: building a network in which agriculture, education, and community no longer move on parallel paths but support one another.

And while the saffron field slowly empties, the day continues in the kitchen: in the second part, the IPSOA and University of Padua students will take center stage in a training journey that brings together short supply chains, local markets, and a final tasting – transforming fieldwork into an experience of flavor and shared knowledge. Stay with us! ■

Paola Franceschin, owner of Franceschin Farm and leader of the So.Ge.Agr. project, meet the students

Azienda Agricola
La saggezza della terra

Zafferano Italiano

Saffron

The plant is an iridaceous species belonging to the Crocus genus (Crocus sativus), cultivated in Asia Minor and in many countries around the Mediterranean basin. The trifid stigma produces the spice known as "saffron," which is used in cooking, certain medicinal and herbal preparations, and in the cosmetic industry.

The mature plant consists of a bulb-tuber about 5 cm in diameter. The bulb contains approximately 20 undifferentiated buds from which all the plant's organs develop. Typically, however, only three main buds give rise to the flowers and leaves, while the smaller buds produce only secondary bulbs. During vegetative growth, shoots develop from the bulb's main buds — one shoot per bud — so each bulb will usually produce about 2 or 3 shoots. The shoots emerge from the soil wrapped in a white, hard protective cuticle, which allows the plant to pierce the soil crust.

The shoot contains the leaves and nearly fully developed flowers. Once it emerges from the soil, it opens, allowing the leaves to elongate and the flower to bloom fully. The saffron flower is a perianth composed of six intensely violet petals. The male part consists of three yellow anthers that hold the pollen. The female part is made up of the ovary, style, and stigmas. From the ovary, located at the base of the bulb, a long yellow style emerges, running through the entire shoot and reaching the base of the flower, where it divides into three long, deep red stigmas. The leaves of Crocus sativus are very narrow and elongated, generally reaching a length of 30–35 cm while never exceeding 5 mm in width. Crocus sativus is a sterile triploid plant, the result of intensive artificial selection from a species native to the island of Crete, Crocus cartwrightianus. This selection was carried out by cultivators seeking to improve stigma production.

Its genetic structure makes it incapable of producing fertile seeds; for this reason, its propagation is possible only through cloning of the mother bulb, and its cultivation is entirely dependent on human assistance.

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