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Total distance (loop trail): about 3 kilometers.
 Gradient uphill: 150 m.
 Walking time (including stops and return): about 2 hours.
 Best period: April to November.

"Wooden bread and wine of clouds", this local saying refers to the predicament of the old Tuscan mountain peasant: Chestnut flour bread and water (wine from clouds, i.e. water). A meager life, as compared to that of the prosperous peasant of the plains of Romagna. Still a life worth living, thanks to the tree that granted its sweet fruit when dried and ground into flour, the staple food for Winter. Even the smallest of chestnuts were picked. Even a grain of wheat produces flour, old people used to say to children; and a chestnut, however small, it is still larger than a grain of wheat. But the generosity of the chestnut went beyond. Its leaves were used as fodder for the animals, the discarded chestnuts fattened the piglet. Timber, very resistant to the damp, was used to build houses, furniture, staircases, farming implements, and also hampers and baskets with young twigs and boxes with its bark. This makes sense to the phrase: "A chestnut Culture", since the lives of people crucially depended on the chestnut tree. It is true that today this no longer applies, but when in October the people turn to collecting chestnuts, one realizes how much this culture is embedded into the local mentality and affecting behavior.

Welcome to Castagno d'Andrea

NATURE TRAIL

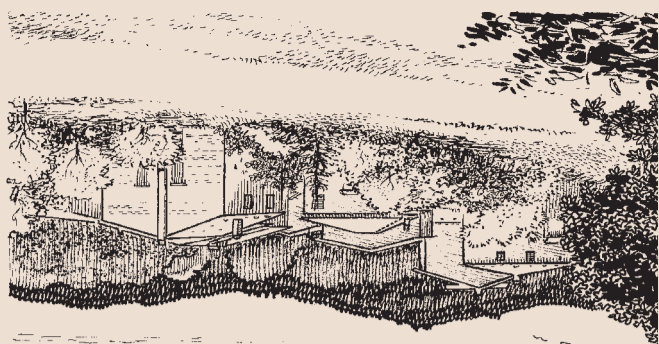
NATURE TRAIL

Castagno d'Andrea

The civilization of the chestnut



Parco Nazionale
 Foreste Casentinesi
 Monte Falterona
 e Campigna

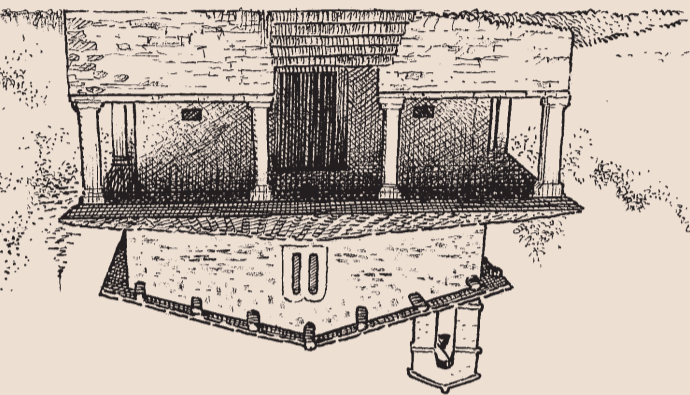


After walking along the old main road of the village we arrive at a hamlet called "La Fonte" (The Spring), or also "Le Prata di sopra". This small group of houses and little alleys, shows what the dwellings of the ancient municipality of Castagno looked like when by decree of the Grand Duke it was merged with San Godenzo. The houses built with sandstone were peculiar to the Apennines and had roofs covered with thin sandstone slabs as naturally came flaked from the layers of the mountain. The whole village was mined and blown up by Germans in August 1944, being situated next to the Gothic Line whose principal defence line ran along the ridge from the Muraglione pass to the Falterona mountain. This hamlet was spared, and fared better than the rest of the village, only because some of the mines didn't go off. This is why the peculiar character, gone lost elsewhere in Castagno, are better preserved here. Obviously there are no longer slate roofs today, and some of the alleyways are paved with stone slabs coming from the Alps. But the air which we breathe here is still the same as ever, austere and quiet.

HALTING POINT 2

The Spring

the original settlement of millenary origin! is told in Villani's Chronicle: destroyed it completely, as it great landslide of 1335 which already gone through very were drafted, Castagno had annual famines, wars and with terrible punishments, community the wrath of God, such as to attract onto the the entire "Heavenly Court", God and with His saints, therefore with more bearing: it was turning onto an act of arrogance against



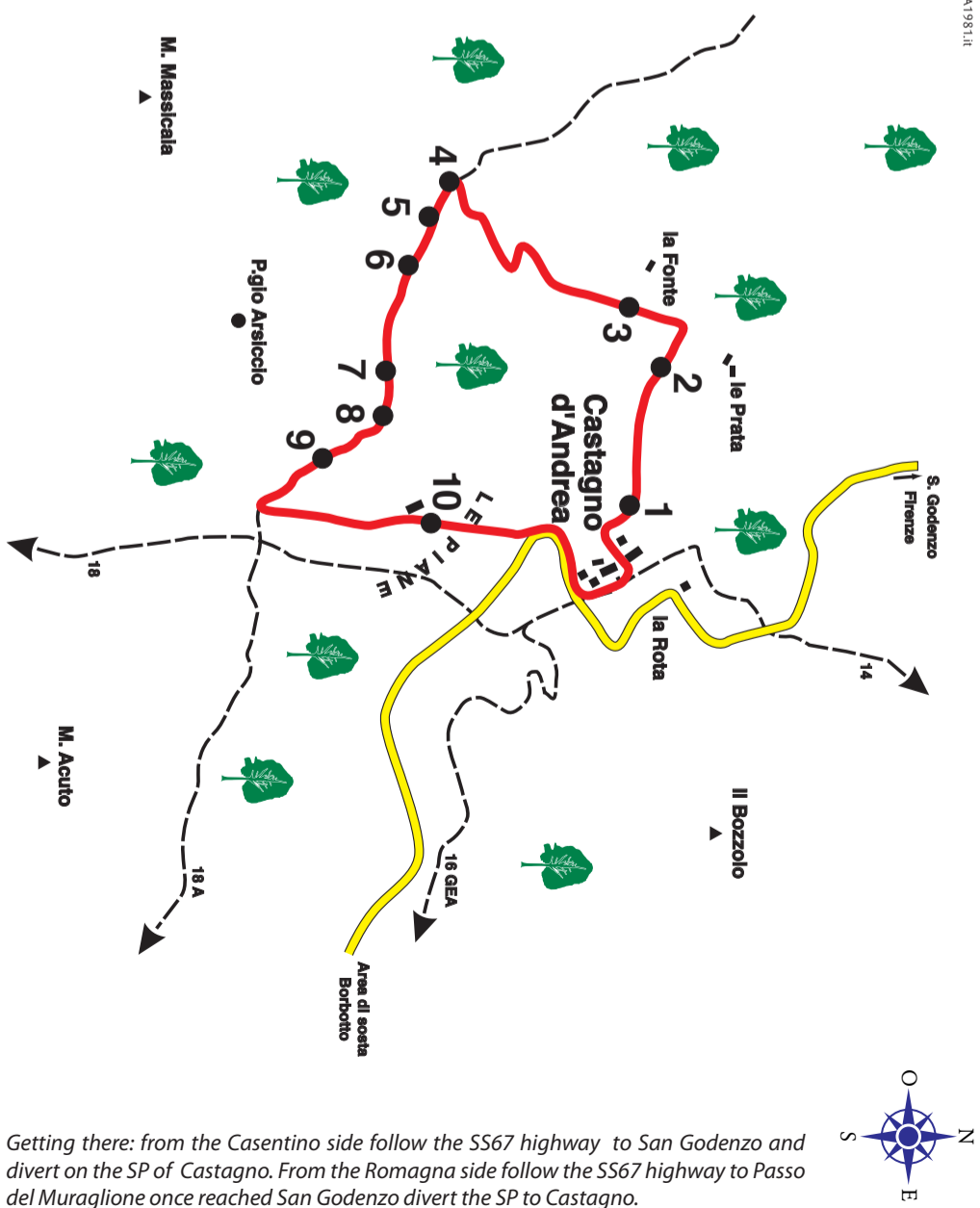
In Castagno d'Andrea, as in other places of the Apennines, the rules of communal life which men had accepted were established first of all before God and the Heavenly Court, and also to the Saints protectors of places, in this case St Martin, to whom the local Parish Church is entitled, and to St Spaziano, whom an oratory situated where we now are was entitled, unfortunately now lost. Only after referring to the power of God, reference is made to political power. Then the breaching of a Statute law was not solely an action contrary to the interests of the community, but also the breaching of a pact with God and with His saints, therefore with more bearing: it was turning onto an act of arrogance against

HALTING POINT 1

St Spaziano's place

NATURE TRAIL

Castagno d'Andrea



Getting there: from the Casentino side follow the SS67 highway to San Godenzo and divert on the SP of Castagno. From the Romagna side follow the SS67 highway to Passo del Muraglione once reached San Godenzo divert the SP to Castagno.



HALTING POINT 3

The masseto

Here from the start we begin to perceive clearly what will be the character of the entire footpath: great interred boulders of sandstone rock protruding from the ground. These are in fact blocks belonging to a blanket of rock debris that lies at the foot of the mountains surrounding the valley south of Castagno d'Andrea. After the last ice age, when these mountains were virtually devoid of vegetation, the boulders that have accumulated at their feet kept breaking away. With the growth of the forest the phenomenon has been gradually decreasing and now the fall of blocks occurs practically only in the event of rather intense earthquakes (such as that of 1919). The geological formation that constitutes this ridge (the "Mount Falterona Sandstones") is intensely fractured and this often makes it look much more like a huge pile of loose blocks than an orderly series of layers. From the lithological point of view, the sandstones of Mount Falterona often made of coarse granules consist of quartz and feldspar, cemented by little clay material; carbonates are absent. By altering and disintegrating, these sandstones give rise to an acid soil, ideal for the cultivation of the chestnut. The waters running off these mountains are extremely poor in salts, and this in part explains in the spread of goiter in times past.



HALTING POINT 5

Diseases and deformities of the chestnut

As in all fruit-tree groves, the chestnut grove too suffers from diseases and malformations connected with the cultivation. The latest arrival, arrived in Italy after the last war, has been the cancer of the chestnut, caused by a **fungus *Criphonectria (Endothia) parasitica*** coming from the far East via the USA, where over the past years has destroyed all chestnut cultivations. In the Apennines, after an epidemic that that caused a great mortality and the collapse of chestnut production, the disease now manifests itself without lethal effects. At this stage of the trail we can see some young trees hit by the fungus: the younger trees are in fact the most sensitive, which makes grafting very difficult. Here before us we can observe an evident deformation: a considerable swelling of the trunk next to the grafting in an adult tree; Locally such deformations, rather common, are called "brigne", however they have usually a limited effect on the health and the production of the tree. Another disease of the chestnut is the "Ink disease", this too caused by a fungus: ***Phytophthora cambivora***. This parasite attacks the roots and can in a short time kill the tree. The only effective remedy being radical pruning, which induce the tree to strengthen its roots apparatus enabling the regrowth of the removed branches.



chestnut's "brigna"

HALTING POINT 4

The Chestnut Grove

We are now well into the chestnut grove, or marroneta: trees, of various sizes, are spaced from each other for light and air. All are grafted, and the fruit they produce is not chestnut, wild fruit, but the domesticated brown (marrone), precisely the "Brown Florentine" variety. (The name of the domestic larger chestnut is "marrone", which simply means "brown" like the colour). The distinction between chestnut and "brown" (castagna and marrone) is appearance based: the first has a more rounded and drop-like, while the "marrone/brown" is much broader in the transverse and bigger on average, with a lighter color than the chestnut. The seed of the chestnut also presents very deep grooves that make practically impossible the complete elimination of the thin inner skin, unlike that of the "marrone" in which the operation is easier. The taste is different: the marrone is much sweeter and completely devoid of bitter or tannic aftertaste. The chestnut groves are all privately owned, in this area. They were almost abandoned until the early 80s, but have since undergone a recovery, and got stronger, thanks to the rise of market prices. Since '97 the EEC granted the protected geographical denomination, with the name "Marrone del Mugello PGI", after assessing that the fruit deserved the recognition for its excellent organoleptic and nutritional properties.



Castagna selvatica

Marrone

HALTING POINT 6

Remains of a sheepfold

The stazzo, or stabbio, is an enclosure where sheep are kept at night. In Castagno this structure is generally called "mandria". Here before us are the remains of a circular enclosure, a dry stone wall which was the base of a small "stazzo". In the middle of it a Chestnut tree has spontaneously grown. The structure has remained abandoned for a long time, but it is a trace of the past which enables us to discover another aspect of mountain life: sheep and goat breeding. In Castagno d'Andrea this activity was very important: still after the last war, only few families didn't breed at least a few sheep for milk. Those who reared large flocks were obliged to drive them on a Winter transhumance in the plains of Maremma, the Mugello or the Romagna, whereas in Summer, those who had sufficient pastures kept his flocks on his own property. Those who only owned a few animals kept them in the area all year round, feeding the sheep with hay in Winter. In Summer flocks were driven to graze in the chestnut groves: in so doing, the ground was cleaned in view of the harvest, and the ground was manured with the sheep dung. At night the flocks were left outside, secured inside the above said "stazzi", to protect them from wolves, always present. Still after the last war in Castagno there were around 5.000 sheep, one may easily understand, only by looking at photographs of the 1930's that over the last two centuries there has never been so much woodland as today.



HALTING POINT 7

Great patriarchs

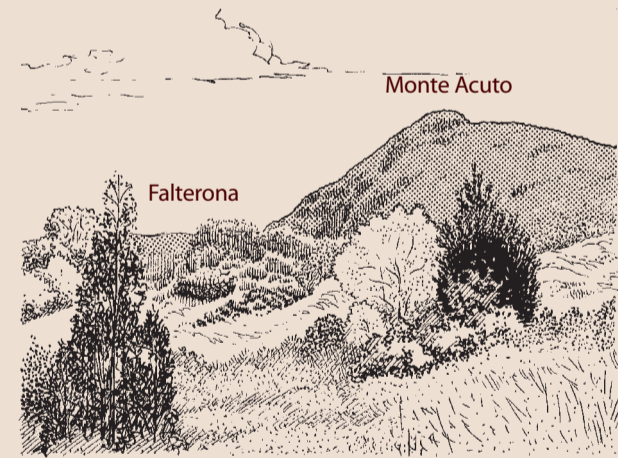
In front of us is a grove of large chestnut trees that can give us a clear idea of what an adult chestnut tree may become like. The chestnut is a long-living tree, which can exceed 500 years in age, with heights that in exceptional cases may reach and exceed 30 m and a diameter of up to 6-8 m. It is a living giant, a giant of our forests. On the trunk, usually straight, a crown of mighty branches grows to create a broad green canopy of foliage, which often entirely covers the ground of the chestnut grove. This tree has been cultivated since antiquity, so it is difficult to determine its area of origin, which still seems to be an area of the eastern Mediterranean. Very large and old trees, from the point of view of wildlife, they form real condos: in fact they are home to a large group of birds and mammals that would find it hard to live in different environments. Here the green woodpecker is often heard singing, and old dead or sick branches have holes made by his beak. And it is possible, however, the presence of the larger red woodpecker and of the nuthatch. In the cavity of the trunk the owl may nest, or bats may shelter, while the foliage often host jays, squirrels and even birds of prey, like the buzzard or the goshawk.



HALTING POINT 9

The "razzai"

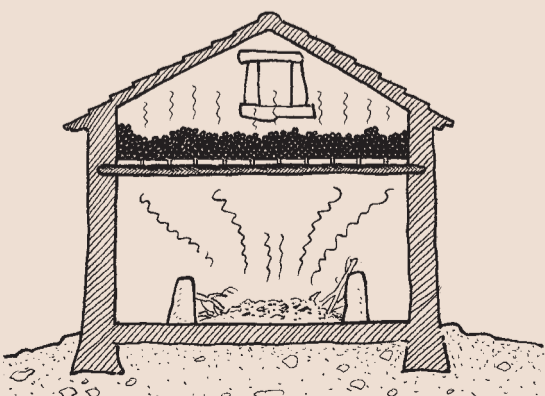
This name usually indicates places where the bedrock emerges uncovered by soils, where vegetation struggles to take root. From the geomorphological point of view, this happens at the end of the debris of Falterona Sandstones, on which we have until now walked, and where emerges the Varicolori Shale, located at the base of sandstone, which extends from Barberino di Mugello up to Umbria. This geological formation marks the base of an important overlap, that of the Tuscany Sequence on the Romagna Sequence. The colour of these shale shows that they deposited on the bottom of the ocean, at a depth of over 5.000 meters. These cause marked erosion, plants find it very difficult to take root for the lack of nutrients, and trees, which are nevertheless present, never grow beyond the level of shrubs for their inability to find nutrients in the soil. Basically they grow into natural bonsai trees. From this position we enjoy a great view, especially towards north-west, towards the Muraglione Pass and the Mugello valley, but also towards the massif of Falterona. This is one of the best panoramic spots in the area!



HALTING POINT 8

The chestnut drying house

We are presently facing a typical structure of the ancient culture of the "marrone", the "squeegee". It consists of a small stone building, which has a small door on the front for access and a window, while in the interior there a grid construction of wood that separates a ground from a top floor. In the ground floor a slow fire is kept lit, to warm up the environment and the "marroni" are placed on the upper floor through the window. The operation lasts thirty days, and leads to the drying the "marroni" during which period the fire must burn continuously, slowly, without flushing, which may damage the process. The dried "marroni" may be eaten raw or boiled, or be ground to produce sweet chestnut flour. Chestnut flour was the local staple food, in the form of sweet polenta, especially in the Apennine mountain during winter. The protein was insured by the pig, which was also fattened with the scraps of chestnuts. The squeegee was therefore one of the key instruments of this thrifty economy on the edge of mere survival, since it insured the possibility of transforming chestnut into flour, making food storage easier, making consumption sure during the long winters, when movements were impossible and finding other foods very hard indeed.



HALTING POINT 10

Sheep droves

We have reentered the chestnut groves, now the trail is marked by two evident lateral rows of upright stone slabs: this means that this was a drove used for the transhumance of flocks, in this case to the Maremma. The function of the stones along the trail was to prevent the sheep from scattering around the chestnut grove, grazing and stealing resources from the owner of the land. Following precise well defined trails the flocks passed the mountains and reached the plains of the Maremma. Transhumance started by the end of September, the time of departure being determined in agreement with the time in which pregnant sheep delivered upon arrival, thus insuring the availability of milk and lambs with which to pay the right of pasture. Usually the women of the families who owned land remained at home in Castagno for the chestnut harvest. Sometimes shepherds took their women along, but their life was decidedly hard. Despite of that Transhumance was an important experience, it enabled to see distant places, new people and other ways of life. The return took place in late spring, when in Castagno the Winter had been replaced by the fair season, with abundance of grazing for the sheep. Transhumance in Castagno was discontinued at the end of the 1950s. Today sheep rearing is practically non-existent: shepherds are very few and all elderly, and thus this stretch of drove has become the silent witness to an age definitely over.

