

The Bleat Goes On

Seeing the world through the eyes of a shepherd

Author Laura Kiniry **Illustration** Peter Oumanski



ALTAMURA, ITALY – Walking through the southern Italian countryside of Alta Murgia National Park, Graziantonio pauses to survey the sky, which has unleashed a spattering of rain. The 71-year-old shepherd pops up an umbrella and continues his slow trek, with nothing in sight but a few rocky outcrops, his trio of dogs and a flock of 300 goats and sheep.

Graziantonio has been working the hills outside Altamura since he was eight years old. To occupy himself, he makes up songs and thinks about his son, now deceased. It's a solitary existence, but it's become less so since last year, when a local man named Tonio Creanza started bringing groups of travelers to meet him.

Creanza is the founder of Messors, an organization that leads workshops in regional culture. By experiencing the life of the shepherd, Creanza believes, people will gain a deeper understanding of many of the foods they consume. "Sheep eat the grass, which flavors their milk, which is then converted into cheese," he says. "Food, agriculture, landscape. You can't separate one from the

others.”

Today, there are eight people shadowing Graziantonio as he goes about his business. “Isn’t this wild fennel?” says a woman from Vancouver, bending down to examine a patch of feathery leaves. “I use this for making tea.” A few goats wait for the woman to finish her meditation on the uses of fennel, then move in to eat it up.

Later, Graziantonio joins the travelers for *cialledda*, a traditional lunch of cucumber, tomato, onions and water-soaked chunks of Altamuran bread. “I know my generation is the last to shepherd,” the old man says. “Young people today aren’t so interested in roaming the fields.” Then, slowly, he takes his leave. Tomorrow will be another long day.