

Italy's 100 club to reveal its secrets

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Some of the secrets of an Italian village that has long fascinated scientists because of its high number of active centenarians are set to be revealed this weekend.

Scientists have spent the last six months looking into why residents of Acciaroli and nearby tiny communities enjoy such extraordinary longevity—while also seeming to be largely immune from dementia, heart disease and other chronic conditions associated with ageing in most of the Western world.

Scientists from Rome's Sapienza University and the San Diego School of Medicine will unveil their findings at a conference in the village on Sunday.

Acciaroli is part of the Cilento coast, a largely industry-free area of outstanding natural beauty that now has national park protected status.

It was in the Cilento that the late US nutritionist Ancel Keys first established convincing evidence of the health benefits of a Mediterranean diet based on olive oil and rich in fresh fruit, vegetables and fish.

Sixty years later, it is not hard to find supporting evidence for Keys' core thesis in Acciaroli itself.

More than one in 10—81 at the mayor's last count—of the village's population of 700 has passed the century mark.

Among them is Antonio Vassalo, 100. "We only eat healthy stuff," he confirmed to AFP on a visit this week.

Antonio's wife Amina Fedollo, a sprightly 93-year-old, develops the point. "We eat a lot of fish, fresh produce from the countryside that we grow ourselves.

"We have our own rabbits, our chickens. Only local products. And [olive oil](#): we consume what we produce."

Alan S. Maisel, the San Diego cardiologist heading up the project, says the explanation for the longevity and sprightliness could lie in any number of factors—from the villagers' high consumption of the pungent herb rosemary to the active lifestyles imposed by their home's steep streets, which means everyone has to do a little bit of tough walking every day.

Sexual activity rampant

"Is there something in their genes that may, along with something that they do make them live longer and healthy?" he said.

"They eat rosemary almost every day, and they grow it—maybe this does something that helps. We know that rosemary improves brain function."

"They are also all physically active. Whether it is fishing, walking or gardening, everyone does something every day."

One find that surprised the scientists on the project concerned the subjects' capillary blood vessels, which tend to degenerate in older people. But the Cilento seniors had decidedly youthful capillaries of the sort found in much younger people, even those in their 20s.

The study focused on 80 elderly people including 25 centenarians.

Sapienza University's Salvatore Di Somma said the goal was to identify what Acciaroli has to offer the rest of the world.

"What we would like to create is a sort of clinical scoresheet, a tool that says that someone who wants to live well for a long time should have a certain type of diet, a certain level of physical activity, a certain type of social life and a certain way of thinking."

Maisel said Acciaroli was unusual in that the numbers of very old people were split evenly between men and women.

"Usually a significantly higher number of women live longer than men," he said, adding that some important lifestyle factors could be every bit as important as the anti-inflammatory properties of rosemary.

"It may have something to do with the fact the older men do nothing but sit around all day outside cafes and are less stressed," he said.

And there could be another very important ingredient in the recipe for a long and happy life.

"Sexual activity among the elderly appears to be rampant," Maisel said. "Maybe living long has something to do with that, it's probably the good air and the joie de vivre."

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