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Longevity Expert Dr. Ivo Pirisi on Life Beyond the Blue Zone Buzz

Gia Marie Amella Wed, 02/21/2024 - 08:00

14–17 minutes



Dr. Ivo Pirisi, founder of the Longevity Academy

Inside a lecture hall at the Civic Archaeological Museum in Cabras, Sardinia, Dr. Ivo Pirisi leads a rousing talk on tourism and longevity — these days a buzzword that has us all wondering what the term really means. The museum's on the edge of a lagoon in the Sinis Peninsula along Sardinia's central-western coast, still a sparsely populated area peppered with paradisiacal beaches, fields of artichoke and grazing sheep, Spanish watchtowers and vestiges of the island's prehistoric past.

A former researcher at the University of Cagliari with a penchant for cooking, Pirisi happily traded in his lab coat for an apron to become a de facto guardian of Sardinian foodways. He was born in Escolca — where today the population hovers under 500, nearly half of what it was when Pirisi was in grade school — near the [Barbagia](#), dubbed the world's first blue zone in 2004 with the most longevous population on the planet.

Now based in the village of Nurachi a few steps from Cabras, Pirisi is the founder of Longevity Academy, which creates immersive experiences that bring together food and agro-pastoral practices, the latest scientific studies on longevity and the Mediterranean diet, and heaping portions of ancestral wisdom. A weekend in Pirisi's presence means diving into 5,000 years of history: the Nuragics' diet (they ate lots of grains), pastoral transhumance, post-war industrialization, his own mania for making bread from his mother yeast, and breaking bread at a bountiful table.

Fiercely proud of his *sardità*, Pirisi's a stickler for authenticity, but casts a wary eye on gimmicky and fast-buck tourism as more travelers trek over from the mainland. And with good reason: He's lived enough to have seen the old ways disappear because of rapid modernization and rural depopulation. "We've lost important pieces of [our] culture, knowledge, wisdom and language," he says. "If you don't understand who you are, you lose your sense of identity."

On a crisp winter afternoon, I take a seat in the garden of Pirisi's sprawling home that he rehabbed with his wife Rita — a Sardinian language instructor — and their spry two-year-old Antonello. Three generations of family have gathered around the table for lamb stew, [porceddu](#), roasted suckling pig, and *su pani cocoi*, a four-ingredient bread adorned with decorative incisions

and a longstanding tradition in Escolca. Sardinian and Italian flow easily as glasses of tangy Vernaccia are poured and passed round. The whole scene sets just the right tone for hearing Pirisi's ruminations on Sardinian ways and the connections between past and present.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Ivo Pirisi on what came before all the longevity buzz



*The Spanish San Giovanni tower on the Sinis peninsula /
Photo: Modio Media*

Gia Marie Amella: First off, what's the personal trajectory you took that led to you create the Longevity Academy?

Ivo Pirisi: I found myself organizing culinary tours between 2005-2007. They became more structured and increasingly more complex to the point where I began offering training to chefs interested in Sardinian culinary traditions. Crucially, this

coincided with a historic moment, when Sardinia was designated a blue zone.

It was definitely positive because a certain part of the world was interested in Sardinia not only as an exotic region to explore, but as a cultural model from which to draw inspiration. Many years of experimentation and failed attempts followed. At a certain point, I felt the need to have an operational base, or as they say in English, “to settle down.” So we decided to buy this traditional raw-earth house in this corner of Sardinia, the least touristy part of the island, to have a privileged place where we could talk about topics that fascinate us most.

GMA: How does your science background serve as a basis for the various activities you engage in — the “longevity journeys,” as you call them?

IP: Clearly, the great theme of longevity can’t be understood if you don’t take into consideration a whole series of elements such as the environment, the social system, human interaction, food, contaminants, nutrition specifically. In short, [longevity] is a multifaceted, complex topic. Without scientific evidence it’s absolutely impossible to extricate oneself from the jungle of information available. That’s why our tours are designed around scientific publications which maybe deal with “blue zones” and with longevity more generally. Some of these elements are analyzed, but very often they’re transformed into an actual experience in a way that [aids in better metabolizing] scientific concepts. It’s my grandparents’ stories that [make up] material for study that then gets interpreted by scientists. So it’s a topic, a world, that is very close to me specifically for cultural reasons.

GMA: Do you think that there’s a tendency to view Sardinia as a one-dimensional culture instead of a

complex and diverse?

IP: The whole of Sardinia generally gets simplified and stereotyped as a culture with certain shared dominant traits. One of the most intoxicating things about Sardinia is that it's made up of microcosms that are vastly different from each other, the result of historical isolation. This isolation isn't due to insularity, but to the mountains. So the mountain created islands within the island. Longevity has to do with these factors. What fascinates me about Sardinia is this great diversity. And I'm especially interested in the process by which these areas became diversified. I'm somewhat passionate about anthropology and geography, you could say.

GMA: What are some of the shared characteristics among areas where people tend to live longer, some living beyond the age of 100?

IP: There are definitely some common traits that have been pinpointed. The importance of family, maintaining a moderate lifestyle, being part of a social network that gives one a sense of purpose, that makes one feel useful. A strong character and self-respect. Loving and feeling loved. Physical activity.

However, these are traits also found in villages located just a few kilometers away from [Sardinian] villages inside the so-called blue zone. Taken alone, they aren't enough to explain longevity. They're an anchor, a simplification, because rural areas all over the world share these elements. Why? Because the family becomes the lair within which a person takes refuge, because the reality of rural life compels you to be [physically] active. Let's talk about contexts: Nicoya in Costa Rica. The Greek island Ikaria. Okinawa, Japan (all three are officially recognized as blue zones). They have completely different cultural systems where

the differences somehow characterize these places rather than the similarities. This is my point of view.



A woman in Orroli. Longevity in Sardinia is directly related to the island's "protection and esteem" of its elderly population,

Dr. Pirisi says

GMA: How is a strong community the foundation of well-being, particularly in more isolated areas of Sardinia?

IP: What gave us the ability to evolve and survive was to close ourselves into communities that acted like a single cell. There are historical reasons why. We weren't born genetically sociable. We needed to protect ourselves from the outside and to be able to survive in total isolation. Due to geographical issues and the absence of communication networks, these communities evolved almost independently without external genetic flows. The only way to survive was by developing a strong sense of community. Relationships were governed by unwritten laws and a very strong cohesion at the center of which are — why not? — elderly people. Thanks to their memory, it's possible to interpret migratory routes of livestock. Thanks to their experience, the herd is able to survive. Thanks to their knowledge, one can forage herbs for cures. They were a resource, protected and esteemed, sitting at the very center of the family system. All of this clearly relates to longevity.

GMA: What traditions do you hold onto from your native village Escolca and what traditions have you uncovered here on the Sinis Peninsula?

IP: I've brought a lot with me from my place of origin which is known for cereal cultivation and that means a great culture of bread. So, for me, bread is everything. Bread is life. It's art. It's communication. Our grandparents really injected this idea into our veins. We have a great tradition of olive oil and raising livestock. This is the culture I come from and what I try to safeguard.

In this part of Sardinia, there's a great geographical openness. Curiously, the people are a bit conservative. In fact, this is one of the reasons why I ended up here. Nurachi is a few kilometers from Oristano, an important city. For example, pig farming, still in vogue in my village, has been lost here. Keeping barnyard animals such as rabbits and chickens has disappeared. Fortunately, some traditions have been preserved. For example, mullet fishing in the lagoon, the tradition of smoking bottarga, which is a very important industry, and everything related to Vernaccia, a native grape variety grown in this part of Sardinia. So there are some traditions that have been contaminated and erased by the city's presence, but others that have been maintained thanks to the somewhat conservative mentality. I'm here now, curious, trying to learn and metabolize.

GMA: How does the Sardinian diet measure up against those of other blue zones and how have eating habits evolved over time?

IP: From my perspective, the current mainstream talks about diet in such a way that there is an overlap with other cultures, with the other blue zones, a diet based mainly on consuming vegetables and fruit with small quantities of animal proteins. We could give a thousand examples but this is already [misguided as a concept]. It's misleading to think that today's centenarians, likely born in the 1920s, followed a consistent dietary pattern. It makes no sense to talk about age, about dietary patterns, to make people mistakenly believe that you can potentially live for a hundred years by eating only vegetables. Also because longevity in Sardinia is more associated with a shepherd's lifestyle who during their youth ate mostly meat, animal proteins or derivatives such as cheese.

I've talked to scores of elderly people who led that kind of life

and very often they craved a minestrone or piece of bread because only meat and cheese was available. That doesn't mean that they ate meat daily for every meal. Indeed, they possibly skipped some meals. This introduces other factors, such as caloric restriction, which is more of a diet based on deprivation rather than on food preferences. It's a very complex topic that merits further study and interpretation.

GMA: Is some wine consumption considered essential for a healthy diet?

IP: There are many aspects concerning Sardinia's blue zone that are a "stretch," let's say. Wine is certainly one of them because it is a fact that all centenarians drank a bit of wine, just as all centenarians also did a thousand other things. Administered in certain quantities, resveratrol, a powerful antioxidant found abundantly in the Cannonau grape, was shown to increase the life expectancy in worms by 23%, in the fruit fly by 27%, and in yeasts by 34%. These findings sparked a groundswell of interest: "Alright, we've discovered the fountain of youth!"

Provocatively, a decade later, another research group found that ingesting those same quantities [of resveratrol] through food intake was on par with drinking 170 liters of wine a day. It's nonsense! I know centenarians who drank a drop of wine, just as I know centenarians who didn't drink. There is an avalanche of scientific publications that demonstrate that wine is toxic. If you drink a lot of it, it's very toxic. If you drink a little of it, it's a little toxic. On the other hand, no one has ever measured the social effects of drinking [wine]. In our culture, our parents taught us to drink a drop of wine and to never lose control. I happened to travel with American students and was struck by how they couldn't handle drinking. This is something that we've been taught since we were children, control. Here, drinking wine is a

cultural practice, especially among men. Wine is a means through which encounters are generated, how positive energy is generated; it improves one's mood which inevitably has an impact on your health. It's obviously not possible to measure what I feel in my own skin.

GMA: Going back to the importance of social networks and how they're essential to well-being, what kind of rapport do you have with *nurachesi*, the Nurachi locals?

IP: People here approach you and offer you something because they want to surprise you, to understand something about you. Relationships are genuine here. In other parts of Sardinia where tourism has managed to generate wealth, this type of authenticity has disappeared — one of the many reasons why I chose to move to the Sinis. This is something precious, but you have to be very careful. We shouldn't invest in tourism in a maniacal way because tourism ultimately leads to the locals trying to satisfy the guest's expectations while forgetting their own identity.

Another reason I came here is that there's nothing. In a certain sense, this nothingness has infinite value. This nothingness could represent everything.

GMA: A guiding thought you live by?

IP: Since I realized that I was weak, all things considered, my life has changed. Acceptance gives me a serenity with which I can digest everything.

Longevity: the next layers

Ivo Pirisi recently explored hometown food traditions in *Living Longer, Living Well: Secrets of the Mediterranean*, which

recently premiered on PBS South Florida. For rebroadcasts and future airings on PBS affiliates throughout the United States, consult your local [PBS station's website](#).

Read more about Pirisi and Longevity Academy [here](#), and check out more [immersive tours led by Pirisi and his collaborating partners here](#).

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