High up in the Apennine Mountains of Italy, at the foot of Mount Cervati, set like a rose quartz jewel, lies the ancient village of Monte San Giacomo. Around it are 13 other villages, all of them with roots reaching back into Neolithic times, all of them stretching up into the mountains around the Valley of Diana, a lush, rich, fertile plain. This is my ancestral home, the place where my grandmother was born, and hers before her. This is where my ancestors are buried, where their spirits still live strong and can be deeply felt and communed with.

The women here carry heavy loads on their heads, they run up the mountainsides herding goats well into their seventies and eighties, and lovingly tend their olive trees and gardens. Men shepherd flocks of sheep, lead horses through the narrow cobblestone passageways loaded with firewood, and congregate at the local café every afternoon at three o’clock. It often seems that time has stood still here,
that the village is magically suspended in a timeless space. But then you notice that the kids all hold cell phones to the sides of their heads and wear the latest fashions. The young men race their Alfa Romeos up the road that winds into the village from the valley below and everyone is hip to the latest hip hop recording. It is a culture in perennial transition, the old residing comfortably with the new.

A walk around the wild edges of the village or up into the mountains delivers another view of the timelessness of this place. Wild herbs grow abundantly everywhere, as they have for millennia. Every little square of untended earth delivers up a magnificent patch of nettles. The hillsides are covered with wild marjoram. The roadsides are matted with chickweed. Borage flowers from cracks and crevices. And everywhere, it seems, are huge bushes of rosemary, laden with dark green needle-like leaves and decorated profusely with delicate sea-blue flowers.

*Rosmarinus officinalis* is a dearly loved culinary herb throughout the Mediterranean region and deeply respected for its medicinal as well as magical properties. One of the most often used spices in Italian cuisine, rosemary’s pungent flavor complements fatty meats particularly well, and many Italian recipes call for rosemary in marinades and as an accent for Mediterranean vegetables, breads, focaccia, soups and pasta.

The Romans planted rosemary in hedges and the ancient Greeks wove it into crowns to adorn the heads of young women. Ancient legends say that it was a rosemary bush that sheltered the Blessed Mother Mary on her journey into Egypt. Hence, from then on, it was called Rose of Mary or rosemary.

Old herbals refer to rosemary as a cure-all. Modern science tells us that it is a supreme cardiac tonic, an energizer for the circulatory system, which will successfully lower blood pressure.

Rosemary is also highly regarded as an antidepressant, a nervine and a restorative tonic for the nervous system. Uplifting and revitalizing, rosemary is a well known brain tonic, clearing the mind and improving memory. Drinking two cups of infusion or taking 30 drops of tincture in water twice daily is commonly advised when dealing with any of the above, as well as fatigue, exhaustion and stress.

Loaded with antioxidants, rosemary can also be called upon to help prevent cancer and to forestall the signs of aging. It is also successfully used to help fight infections caused by bacteria and fungi. Rosemary inhibits food-spoiling organisms as efficiently as commercial food preservatives BHA and BHT. In fact, before refrigeration, people would routinely rub rosemary into meat to retard spoilage.

The ancient village of Monte San Giacomo, in the Apennine Mountains of Italy, is the author’s ancestral home. There, huge bushes of rosemary are everywhere, inspiring a multitude of culinary, health and other uses.
Rosemary is also antispasmodic, carminative and promotes the flow of bile, making it a great digestive tonic. Sipping a warm cup of rosemary tea or taking 30 drops of tincture in water eases stomach discomfort and helps relieve gas.

Rosemary’s analgesic action, found in the infused oil or liniment, brings blood flow to an area, helps ease tense muscles and inflamed joints, and relieves arthritic/rheumatic conditions.

Fresh rosemary tinctured in rubbing alcohol is a stimulating liniment known as Queen of Hungary water. First made in the 13th century, this liniment cured the paralysis of Queen Elizabeth of Hungary. It is said that she used it continuously and her simple formula for making it is preserved in Vienna. Rubbed vigorously, rosemary liniment is also effective for relieving gout in the hands and feet. Rosemary baths, compresses and poultices are similarly therapeutic.

To make an invigorating treatment for hair and scalp, use infused oil of fresh rosemary. Rosemary oil promotes healthy hair follicles, brings renewed vitality, helps moisturize hair, prevents premature loss and keeps the scalp dandruff-free.

Italians aren’t the only people who love and use rosemary. The Chinese use it, often combined with ginger, to treat headache, indigestion and insomnia. Other Europeans traditionally used rosemary as a smoking herb, often combined with coltsfoot, to treat asthma, bronchial ailments and sore throat.

Rosemary is known as an herb of protection and I enjoy wrapping it into smudge sticks. Burn a bit in the evening before bed to ward off bad dreams. Burned or carried, rosemary will enhance the sacredness of any occasion. In some parts of the world rosemary is carried during a funeral procession and thrown into the casket before burial as a blessing for the departed.

A symbol of lover’s fidelity for thousands of years, rosemary is still placed into bridal bouquets and offered to wedding guests. Rosemary flower essence is used to cultivate wisdom in love, and loyalty. “There’s Rosemary for you, that’s for remembrance!” Pray you, love, remember.” ~ William Shakespeare (Ophelia in Hamlet)

Caution: Pregnant women should steer clear of medicinal use of rosemary, and its essential oil. Studies done in Italy indicate rosemary may excite the uterus. In amounts usually used in cooking it poses no threat. Rosemary essential oil is potentially toxic if ingested.
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