

LEGENDS & HISTORY



LEFT: *Buttero*

ITALIAN CONNECTION

The celebrated *butteri* of Italy trace their history back 2,500 years.

By Shilo Urban

BEAUTIFUL BAY-COLORED HORSES CANTER IN THE GOLDEN LIGHT OF TUSCANY. Riders with rough hands and proud faces work together in a dreamlike haze of dust, serious but with a sense of ease well-captured by the camera. Gray long-horned cattle lumber into rugged corrals. There's a steely quality to the images, like the cowboys themselves—the celebrated *butteri* horsemen of Italy, who trace their history back 2,500 years to the pre-Roman era of the Etruscans.

Get an intimate glimpse inside their world at *Italy's Legendary Cowboys of the Maremma*, a photography exhibit by Gabrielle Saveri on display through May 5 at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. “The iconic American cowboy has international and intercontinental antecedents and

ancestors,” says Michael Grauer, the museum’s Curator of Cowboy Collections and Western Art. “There have been cattle herders in Asia, Africa, and Europe long before the first vaqueros in the Americas in the 1530s. The *butteri* of Italy are part of that great ‘cowboy tapestry’ worldwide.”

Saveri is a photographer, writer, and artist based in Napa Valley, California. She first became interested in the *butteri* in the 1990s while working as a journalist in Rome. “I have always loved horses and I’ve ridden throughout the years,” she says. “Being Italian American, the moment I heard about these mysterious cowboys, I dreamed of going to ride with them, but I didn’t know how to find them.”

Almost two decades later, a chance encounter with another photographer provided the connection Saveri needed to track them down.

A few months later, she was riding alongside the *butteri* in their homeland of Maremma, a coastal region between Florence and Rome that stretches across southern Tuscany. The working cowboys move cattle and train horses in a landscape of rocky paths and rolling plains. Groves of pine trees rise above yellow wheat fields and grasses grow tall in summer meadows. Hay bales nestle under square Italian towers and open-air stables are roofed with curved Mediterranean tiles.

Fewer than 30 *butteri* are thought to exist today. Though widely admired across Italy, their way of life is threatened from multiple angles, including new European Union beef regulations and soaring grain prices caused by the war in Ukraine. Women have recently been allowed to join the group of cattle breeders and expert equestrians, whose traditions date back