


TRAVEL

5 Things They Do Better in Bologna (the "Right" Way)

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Growing up eating Italian food in the United States prepared me poorly for a visit to Bologna. I underestimated what a wonderland of cured meats I would find, each sliced thin and draped onto a plate like a starlet over a chaise lounge. I neglected to grasp that pasta would be a religion, and I would need to be baptized in broth and tomato sauce to understand.

I went to Italy in search of noodles and new flavors. I wandered the markets, ate my weight in mortadella, learned to fold and dress my tortellini, and got a degree from gelato school. While I grew up with the loose vocabulary and bastardized dishes of Italian-American food, nobody in Bologna let me leave without knowing how they do it better in Bologna — where they do it the "right" way.

1. They know what tortellini is.

It is not stuffed with cheese, nor is it the size of a ping-pong ball. The only thing allowed to be called tortellini here are the dime-sized, meat-stuffed dumplings afloat in a broth, usually made from capons. Larger versions or ones that deviate from the specific filling might be tortelli or tortelloni, but never tortellini.

There is, everyone assured me, only one thing that tortellini can be, but the exact ratios of prosciutto, mortadella, and pork are still contentious. "I've seen friendships ended over disagreements about it," says tour guide [Elena Ramazza](#).

2. They make ragù, not Bolognese sauce.

The easiest way to pick out a tourist restaurant in Bologna is to look for "spaghetti Bolognese" on the menu. I saw it only in the kind of places surrounding the main square that shoved menus into the hands of passersby. The true traditional sauce here is ragù, which is found nearly everywhere, and the proper pasta is the ribbon-like tagliatelle (more on that in a moment).

Sure, the ragù here, a long-cooked, tomato-based beef and pork sauce, isn't much different from what the English-speaking world calls Bolognese sauce, but just saying "spaghetti Bolognese" in the presence of someone from Bologna seems to provoke ire, so stay friendly and say ragù.

3. They cut their pasta to the right size.

That tagliatelle that gets swirled with said ragù? It has to be the proper size. The Palazzo della Mercanzia (palace of commerce) carefully guards the official documents which measure, to the millimeter, the size each noodle should be. "It's a specific size for ragù," says Ramazza. "Maybe a millimeter less and it's good for fish. A millimeter thicker and it's only good for mushrooms ... and Tuscany."

4. They keep their meat hyperlocal.

Emilia-Romagna, where Bologna is, has the most "designated products of origin" and "protected geographical indications" of any region in Italy (44). Among the well-known items that are certified as made to specific, codified standards in an exact geographic area here are Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, balsamic vinegar of Modena, and a whole slew of meats, including mortadella.

Tour guide [Coral Sisk of Curious Appetite](#) explains that the type of salumi boards people are used to ordering elsewhere only recently became popular here, because people eat only the type of meat that's made right where they are, be it prosciutto in the hills of Parma, culatello in the nearby lowlands, or mortadella right in Bologna. In part, that's because the best mortadella doesn't get sold outside the city — not even to neighboring towns.

5. They make the purest, best gelato — and it's not ice cream.

Just outside of Bologna, I went to gelato school. At a gelato museum run by the Carpigiani company, I got an artifact-filled lesson on the origins of frozen desserts starting from the 12th Century BCE up to the invention of gelato and beyond to modern technology — like the machines the company makes.

It also offers a gelato masterclass, where I earned my gelato-making diploma, with a focus on all the ways gelato is superior to ice cream. While some were factual (less air whipped in, frozen at a higher temperature) others seemed a little dubious. (Gelato, they assert, is artisanal, while ice cream is industrial. The irony of this being taught by a gelato machinery company seems lost on them.) Whatever your feelings about the relative merits of frozen desserts, when in the gelato Mecca that is Bologna, stop for gelato often. And don't call it ice cream.

Have you ever been to Bologna?