

The unexpected Italian capital of fine food and fast cars

By Jennifer Ceaser

December 12, 2017 | 12:26am | Updated



The lovely Piazza Grande in Modena, an under-the-radar gem in the food-filled, culturally rich Emilia-Romagna province.

Giovanni Tagini

Overshadowed by powerhouse destinations like Rome and Florence, Modena flies under most travelers' radars. But given that this northern city is the birthplace of many Italian icons — from balsamic vinegar to Ferrari cars to famed tenor Luciano Pavarotti — there's no shortage of cultural and culinary riches to discover.

Thanks to its star turn in the most recent season of comedian Aziz Ansari's Netflix show, "[Master of None](#)," Modena is beginning to see some recognition. With picturesque cobblestone streets and many culinary delights, the UNESCO World Heritage site is ripe for discovery. Here's some of the best Modena — and its home region, Emilia-Romagna — has to offer.

Irresistible eats



Lemon tart at Osteria Francescana.
Osteria Francescana

There's a long waiting list to taste Chef Massimo Bottura's modern riff on traditional regional cuisine at the three-Michelin-starred [Osteria Francescana](#), ranked number two on the [World's 50 Best Restaurants list](#). Just a dozen tables are set among three hushed, elegant dining rooms, each boasting contemporary artworks — Ólafur Elíasson, Damian Hirst and Matthew Barney, to name a few — from Bottura's personal collection. Seasonal tasting menus start at

\$260 for nine courses, not including wine. You'll have to book four months in advance. Securing a table, which can be done on [the restaurant's Web site](#), requires a \$295 deposit/cancellation fee.

For a wallet-friendly meal, head to [Boutique del Tortellino](#) for a takeaway cup of homemade tortellini, stuffed with pork and parmesan cheese and swimming in a rich, meaty broth (\$8.25). Owner Luca dall'Olio makes several varieties fresh each morning; in fact, this was the place where Ansari's character, Dev, [learned to make pasta](#). Luca also hosts the occasional three-course dinner with wine and coffee at the shop's single table (around \$70); dall'Olio recommends stopping by to make a reservation in person (Via Scarpa, 9).

Since 1931, locals have flocked to the art deco [Albinelli Market](#) to pick up fresh local produce, meats, cheeses and baked goods. Until recently, its 70 stalls were only open until early afternoon, but now several buzzy new spots serve up fine fare late into the evening on Fridays and Saturdays. Try a slice of spelt-crust pizza with offbeat toppings like purple potatoes at Mozzabella, or pop by for a glass of fizzy Lambrusco wine and a traditional rosette (baked rose-shaped pasta) dish at Sa Ghe'?. (It means "what's up?" in Italian.)

Farm to table



Up your balsamic game.

Acetaia Villa Bianca

Find out what goes into Modena's prized balsamic vinegar at [Acetaia Villa Bianca](#), a beautiful countryside estate where the venerable condiment has been produced by hand for six generations. Led by the property's current scion, dapper Emilio Biancardi, the tour takes visitors through the vineyards, whose Trebbiano grapes are used in the production of the vinegar, and into the barrel room, where the precious liquid is aged. Finish with tastings of wonderfully rich 12- and 25-year-old samples in the family's grand drawing room.

To see how the region's noble Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese is made, [Bio Hombre](#) hits the spot. Visit the idyllic farm, about 20 minutes by taxi from central Modena, to observe its biodynamic cheesemaking process. Follow it from cows at pasture to the ripening warehouse, where thousands of wheels of cheese are stacked from floor to ceiling. Afterwards, sample the various cheeses: fresco (aged 12 to 14 months), classic stagionato (22 to 24 months) and the intensely flavorful stravecchio (more than 30 months).

Drive and explore



Ogle sleek Ferraris at the carmaker's museum in Modena.

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You had to be a Maserati owner — or have the deep pockets to shell out for one of the \$150,000 vehicles on the spot — in order to visit the **carmaker's factory**. That changed in September, when the factory opened its doors to public tours for the very affordable price of about \$35. The 1½-hour guided walk includes the assembly line, where cars have been lovingly pieced together by hand since 1937.

It finishes in the showroom, notable for the 10-ton fiberglass loop designed by architect Ron Arad, where several classic and current Maserati models are displayed.

With its shiny yellow roof and curving glass façade, the **Enzo Ferrari Museum** is an architectural homage to the sleek Italian sports car brand. Displayed inside like priceless works of art is a rotating collection of iconic Ferraris, from vintage roadsters to contemporary models owned

by the likes of Eric Clapton, which he lent to the museum for the current “Driving with the Stars” show. Next door is a far humbler brick building: the restored 19th-century house where founder Enzo Ferrari was born in 1898.



Learn to spot the Maserati trident on any car's grill.

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Book in advance for a tour (weekends only; email info@visitmodena.org) of the Baroque Ducal Palace, now home to part of a co-ed military academy. The exterior of the sprawling 17th-century building is impressive, but inside you'll get a peek at how the dukes of Modena once lived — in vast rooms featuring original frescoes, gold stucco walls and ornate gilded ceilings.

Stay the night

Modena is lacking in luxury and boutique hotels — one sure sign of its relatively few foreigners — but the four-star **Best Western Premier Milano Palace** is perfectly serviceable, with a small spa and a location just outside the historic city center (from \$150).

The author was a guest of the Emilia-Romagna tourism board.