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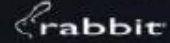
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Emilia-Romagna: The Italy of slow food and fast cars



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Tortellini is Bologna's signature pasta. The traditional way to serve it is as a hearty soup in a light broth and topped with grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. ROBIN ROBINSON/TORONTO SUN

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The smoky-sweet aroma of chestnuts roasting at an outdoor market. Giant wheels of farm-made cheese. Vats of plump olives and sun-dried tomatoes. Heaps of just-picked porcini mushrooms, speckled borlotti beans and fresh figs. Ancient towns dominated by grand castles and cathedrals. Rolling green hills packed tight with rows of grapevines and olive trees. Fertile plains planted with golden wheat. Ribbons of blacktop undulating through a sun-kissed countryside. This is Emilia-Romagna — the Italy of slow food and fast cars.

While many Canadians might not be able to pinpoint the northern region on a map, most will have savoured its specialties — tortellini, ravioli, aged balsamic, prosciutto, Parmigiano-Reggiano, to name a few — or salivated over its iconic automobiles — Ferrari, Lamborghini, Maserati.

There are few regions of Italy more famous for traditionally made foods than Emilia-Romagna. And on a recent visit, I can't help but think it's almost absurd that a place so protective of its food traditions can also give rise to the cutting-edge design behind the world's most beautiful sports cars. But there you have it, a destination that seamlessly blends ancient ways with modernity.

And whether visitors drive race-cars or minivans — or even ride trains — local chefs hope they'll take a culinary journey through their region.

Earlier this year, the Chefs of Emilia-Romagna Culinary Association (aka Chef To Chef) took that message to the Milan Expo, where 145 participating countries had pavilions focused on the theme of Feeding the Planet: Energy for Life.

In honour of the Expo, the chefs — whose aim is to promote the quality cuisine of their region — organized three food trails through the heart of Emilia-Romagna, which culminated in a grand tasting event in Milan.

The trails — one by sea, one over mountains and a third along the Via Emilia — were designed to showcase the best local food and drink with samplings, wine tastings, cooking demonstrations, gala dinners and other events along the way.

Chef To Chef president Massimo Spigaroli — executive-chef of Antica Corte Pallavicina, a restaurant in Polesine Parmense — says the group plans to make the trails an annual event.

I travelled part of the Via Emilia route — Italian State Road 9, which follows the footprint of an ancient Roman road. It starts in Rimini on the Adriatic Coast, veers northwest through the heart of the region and eventually leads Piacenza.

En route we stopped to make tortellini, learned about authentic balsamic vinegar, Parmigiano-Reggiano and traditionally cured meats. We also dined at some fabulous restaurants and saw vintage Maseratis and Ferraris at museums.

Here are a few highlights:

REGIONAL CLASSICS

— Parmigiano-Reggiano — the real government-certified stuff, not the mass-produced product sold in our supermarkets — is used widely by Emilia-Romagna cooks. There are similar style cheeses but only cheese made in certain provinces of the region can legitimately be called Parmigiano-Reggiano.

There are many farms around Emilia-Romagna where visitors can watch the “king of cheese” being made and learn about the rigorous standards (ingredients, methods, aging time, etc.) that must be met for certification as genuine Parmigiano-Reggiano.

Hombre Organic Farm near Modena has a bonus attraction — a small museum full of vintage Maseratis and other antique automobiles.

The private collection of the Panini family, it includes the world’s most complete collection of Maseratis from 1926 onwards — including the 1958 Maserati 420M Eldorado driven by legendary race-car driver Stirling Moss. In addition there are 30 vintage motorcycles, antique bicycles and military vehicles. See hombre.it and panimotormuseum.it.

— This is also Ferrari land, where dozens more flashy Italian sports cars are on show at not one but two Ferrari museums — the Enzo Ferrari Museum in Modena and the Maranello Ferrari Museum. We drop by the former, to see the workshop/home where Ferrari was born, tour the sleek pavilion filled with even sleeker cars, and watch a film that tells the story of the man behind the legendary luxury automobiles and race-cars. Plan your visit around lunch-time as the cafe serves excellent food and wine. See museomodena.ferrari.com.

— Modena is the centre of balsamic vinegar production so a visit to Acetaia Giusti — the area’s oldest and most famous producer — is in order. While there, we learn about how real balsamico is made and barrel-aged under the eaves in the attic. We also have a chance to taste and compare vinegars aged for 12 to 25-plus years in barrels made of different types of wood (juniper, cherry, oak or mixed woods). See giusti.it.

— A two-week Prosciutto Festival every September is an indication of just how seriously Parma takes its famous dry-cured ham. But regardless of when you visit there are always opportunities to taste prosciutto and the lesser known culatello.

A generous portion of both, along with other cured meats, was served as a starter to our fabulous lunch at the sun-filled Antica Corete Pallavicina Relais, a beautiful restaurant, hotel and farm along the Po River.

Culatello differs from prosciutto in several ways, including its curing method. The meat is seasoned, stuffed into a pig's bladder, tied and hung in a farm building along the Po, where mists from the river keep the hams cool in the summer and encourage mould to grow on the outside of the ham. While the mould never touches the meat, it does lend a certain something to its flavour.

Antica Corete is famous for its culatello made from its own black pigs. It even has hams aging in its cellar for famous fans of the delicacy, including Prince Charles and Albert II, Prince of Monaco. See anticacortepallavicinarelais.com.

— When we arrived in Piacenza, a renaissance festival was taking place at Palazzo Farnese, an enormous but unfinished palace whose ramparts once encircled the entire city. It was amusing to mingle with locals and watch as members of local historical groups — dressed in costume — acted out scenes of daily life in 16th-century Piacenza — everything from carding wool to demonstrating antique weapons and flag throwing.

Like so much of Italy, this city is virtually an open air museum with so many historic buildings, it's hard to know where to look first. But visitors shouldn't miss Palazzo Gotico, Piazza Cavalli, many monumental churches including Sant'Antonio, the Cathedral, and some beautiful restored theatres. See comune.piacenza.it/welcome.

— Milan, in neighbouring Lombardy region, was our final stop before flying home. One of the best things about travel is the unexpected things you learn along the way and Milan was no exception. While there, I learned that Leonardo da Vinci was not only one of the world's greatest artists, he was also a winemaker.

In the 1490s, the Duke of Milan commissioned Da Vinci to paint The Last Supper for the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie located near the Duke's Casa degli Atellani. Da Vinci received a small vineyard in the gardens of Casa degli Atellani as payment for painting the large mural, which centuries later is one of world's most famous works of art.

Da Vinci later bequeathed the vineyard to two of his loyal servants, and grapes were grown there right up until the vineyard was destroyed near the end of the Second World War.

Now Casa degli Atellani and Da Vinci's Vineyard have been restored and opened to the public. And scientists at Milan's University of Agricultural Sciences have recultivated Da Vinci's grapes from a preserved sample.

The grand opening of the restored house and vineyard was timed to coincide with the Expo and chosen by Chef To Chef as the atmospheric setting for their gala evening, where dozens of chefs and vintners showcased their best — a fitting and delicious end to our journey.

NEED TO KNOW

— For travel info and ideas, contact the Emilia-Romagna Region Tourist Board at emiliaromagnaturismo.com/en.

— For more on the Chefs of Emilia-Romagna Culinary Association (aka Chef To Chef), visit cheftochef.eu.