



Novice travelers can have Venice, Rome and Tuscany to themselves this summer. Savvy Italy lovers know to head to lesser known Emilia Romagna, the country's fertile northern region hemmed in by the Po River, the Adriatic Sea and the Apennine mountains.

Whether your passion is cars, vineyards, rich history or food, Emilia Romagna has it all. Here are three unexpected ways to treat yourself in Emilia Romagna:



Ferrari Museum displays both classic and one-of-a-kind Ferrari cars. (MICHAEL HILLER/Special Contributor)

Ferrari fantasies

You can't explore the region's farms, vineyards and tiny towns without a car, so why not buy (or at least fantasize about buying) a [Ferrari](#)? Head to Modena, hometown of opera singer [Luciano Pavarotti](#), world-famous chef [Massimo Bottura](#) and carmaker Enzo Ferrari, whose automotive [museum](#) offers public tours of all things Ferrari, from early prototypes to limited edition cars. Admission is 5 euros and up. musei.ferrari.com.



Balsamic vinegar has been aged at least twelve years in wooden barrels and pours like thick syrup. (MICHAEL HILLER/Special Contributor)

All about the balsamic

Next, head to nearby Spilamberto, a small town on the outskirts of Modena. That's where the slow process of making Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale -- traditional balsamic vinegar -- is a centuries-old custom.

But if balsamic vinegar has you thinking \$3 bottles of supermarket salad dressing, a trip to the town's Balsamic Vinegar Museum (admission 2 euros, tastings 4 euros; museodelbalsamicotradizionale.org/ita) will set your mind right. There you'll learn that true traditional balsamic vinegar is an artisan product that takes a minimum of 12 years to produce. You'll taste for yourself that it bears little resemblance to the grocery store jugs labeled "balsamic vinegar," which are an entirely different product made in large factories in just a few days.



Tour the Balsamic Vinegar Museum, where vinegars age for years. (MICHAEL HILLER/Special Contributor)

To make the artisanal vinegar, juice from local grapes is boiled and concentrated, then aged in tiny batches in a series of increasingly smaller wood barrels in family attics for at least 12 years. It takes one ton of grapes to make a single liter of 12-year-old balsamic vinegar.

A 3-ounce bottle of the good stuff -- dark, glossy, sweet and tangy -- often sells for more than \$100. Families start a batch when a child is born, then give it to them as a gift on their wedding day.

Franco Satrioni, whose Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale has won top prize from the consortium that certifies quality, scoffs at the idea of using balsamic vinegar as anything other than a condiment, and certainly not in a salad dressing.

"A few drops on fruit or fresh pasta or good Parmigiana is how you enjoy this," he says.



Pasta is traditionally drizzled with balsamic vinegar in Italy. (MICHAEL HILLER/Special Contributor)

Teaching kitchens

If Italy were a house, Emilia Romagna would be its kitchen. You can learn to cook authentic Italian dishes at a number of schools throughout Italy, but none is steeped in culinary history like [Casa Artusi](#).

Located in [Forlimpopoli](#), a town so small you could toss a football from one end to the other, Casa Artusi inhabits a 15th century building that houses a teaching kitchen, restaurant and public library with 45,000 books. The complex also houses a priceless collection of cooking memorabilia and 100-year-old cookbooks from Pellegrino Artusi, the town's favorite son and the author of what is widely considered the first broad collection of Italian recipes.

"Artusi believed food was the most authentic expression of a place, so he traveled the country and wrote down detailed recipes for everything he ate," says Susy Patrio Silvia, Casa Artusi's managing director, who, alongside chef Carla Brigliadori, is busily rolling ropes of flour-and-egg pasta between her hands to make strozzapreti pasta.

"Just as Artusi wrote in his 1891 cookbook," adds Brigliadori, "You must use the best ingredients and these will make you shine"

"Our cooking schools are not designed to teach you to become a chef," Silvia says. "We are devoted to the home cook who wants to learn authentic Italian cooking."

Casa Artusi offers a varied menu of hands-on workshops that can be taught in English and range from a few hours long to several days. Classes frequently include visits to green markets, lessons from local nonnas (grandmothers) and, of course, delicious meals.

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