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ITALY

A matter of time



Rev up your knowledge with a tour through Emilia Romagna's balsamic vinegar traditions

By MICHAEL HILLER
Special Contributor

MODENA, Italy — Novice travelers can head to 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:

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 about \$6 and up musei.ferrari.com.)

Balsamic knowledge

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

But if balsamic vinegar has you thinking of \$3 bottles of supermarket salad dressing, a trip to the town's Balsamic Vinegar Museum (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.

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 or cellars for at least 12 years. It takes 1 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 as a gift on their wedding day.

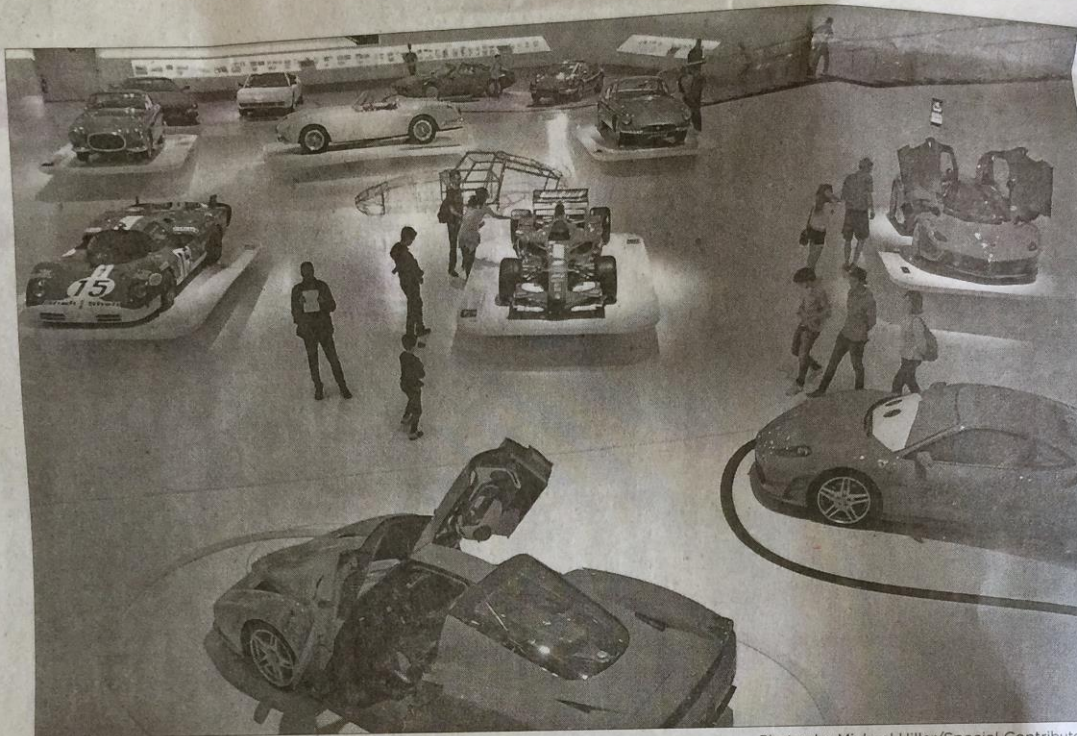
Franco Satriani, whose Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale has won top prize from the consortium that certifies quality scoffs at the idea of using balsamic vinegar as anything other than a condiment, and certainly not in a salad dressing.

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

Michael Hiller/Special Contributor

This balsamic vinegar has been aged at least 12 years in wooden barrels and pours like thick syrup. A 3-ounce bottle of the good stuff — dark, glossy, sweet and tangy — often sells for more than \$100.

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Photos by Michael Hiller/Special Contributor

The Ferrari Museum, which is open to the public, lets you dream of driving everything from early prototypes to limited-edition cars.

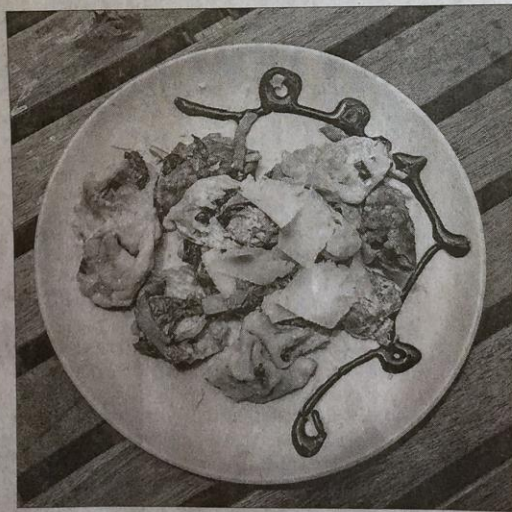
Taste your way through Emilia Romagna

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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.



Pasta is traditionally drizzled with balsamic vinegar in Italy. Also, try a few drops on fresh fruit.

"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 Patrito Silvia, Casa Artusi's managing director. She stands alongside chef Carla Brigliadori and 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.

Michael Hiller is a Dallas freelance writer who blogs at escapehatchdallas.com.