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Bologna, Italy: Where To Visit, What To Eat

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Bologna, Italy. ELVA RAMIREZ

If there's a center of the food universe, it's probably in Bologna, Italy.

The city, in Northern Italy, boasts a long cultural and culinary history. But one destination in particular is establishing itself as a magnet for travelers.



Eataly FICO in Bologna, Italy. EATALY FICO

Last November, Eataly FICO, which is billed as the world's first food theme park, debuted in Bologna. The agri-theme park, which features restaurants, shops, seminars and museum-worthy installations on Italy's food productions and heritage, is quickly becoming the lead destination in the region. Between Nov. 2017 and Aug. 2018, over two million visitors streamed through Eataly's doors, bringing in over €36.2 million.

Among the attractions: daylong demonstrations on the fine art of making handmade pasta, a vineyard growing Italian varietals, cheese-making classes and a section stocked with Italian liqueurs and spirits and an exponential amount of Negroni variations.

While Eataly offers a comprehensive overview about the entirety of Italian food production, there's a wealth of information just outside its perimeters.

In the center of Bologna's colorful and winding streets, you'll find the [Prendiparte Tower](#), a building which dates back to at least 1358. The slim tower, which is one of the few remaining medieval towers to survive in Bologna, is now a very unique one-room bed & breakfast. After a careful restoration, all twelve floors of the tower are available to the public, and those who manage the trek up, via a winding staircase, are awarded with a unique rooftop view.

For something a little less rigorous, get lost in any of the city's many food shops.



Candies for sale in Bologna, Italy. ELVA RAMIREZ



Tortellini in a store in Bologna, Italy. ELVA RAMIREZ

Bologna is , after all, where Bolognese meat sauce (also called ragu) and tortellini were invented, according to tour guide Naima Scognamiglio. "In the past, farmers didn't want to waste leftover food, especially the meat," she explains. "So they invented a flat pasta to wrap around the meat." Fillings can range from chicken, pork and mortadella or combinations of various meats.

There is a local legend that the pasta's original inventor wanted to create a food to honor a certain goddess. "In Bologna, we call tortellini the Venus navel," Scognamiglio says.



Sauces for sale in Bologna. ELVA RAMIREZ

As to the famed Italian sauces, every family has their own ragu recipe and there's just a few hard rules. "Don't put Bolognese sauce on spaghetti," Scognamiglio says. That's because dry pastas, like spaghetti, will not absorb the sauce. Rich meat sauces are best paired with pastas made using eggs, such as tagliatelle.

Another frequent American misconception about Italian food? There isn't actually a thing called fettucine Alfredo; Italians are quick to identify that dish as Italian-American, not traditional. While creamy Parmesan sauces exist, they are usually served over vegetables, not pasta. Also, don't ask for meatballs with your spaghetti. Meats are considered a second course, and are served on their own, or with potatoes.

That said, for all their rules about how to eat pasta, the Italians have a funny way of indulging in late night, post-drinks fare. They put French fries on slices of pizza, for a creation that's neither fully Italian nor fully American. "It's junk food," Scognamiglio says with a laugh. "It's good when you're alone."

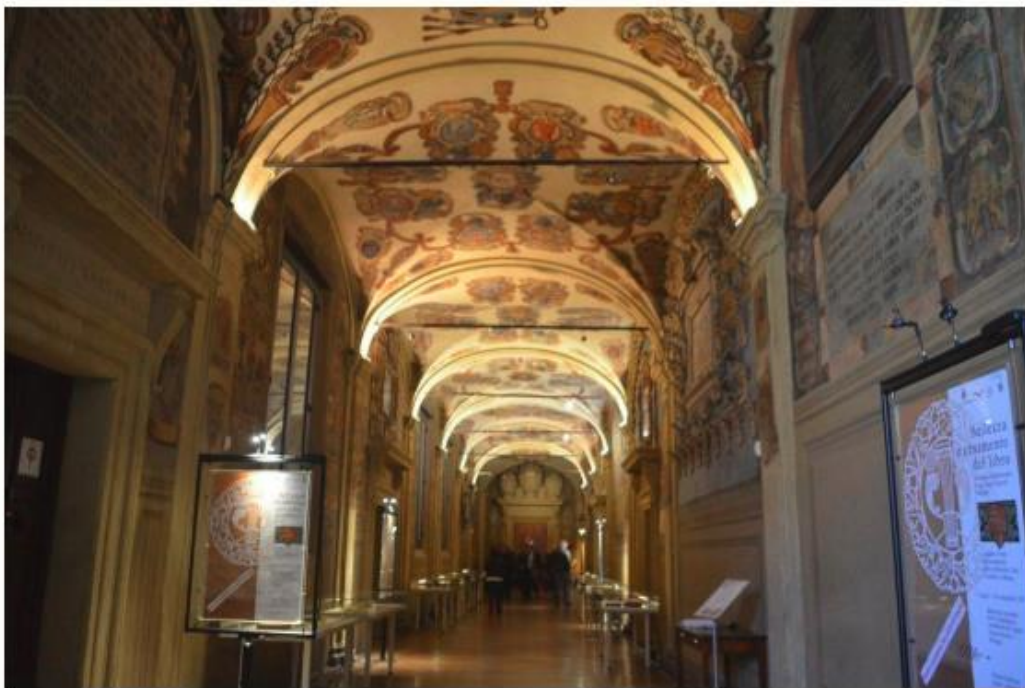


Cured meats for sale in Bologna, Italy. ELVA RAMIREZ

Mortadella is another proudly Bolognese tradition, dating back to Roman and Etruscan times.

Relics dating to the second century B.C. show that early Bolognese settlers raised pigs, which they turned into cured meats. While the origin of the name "mortadella" isn't known, Scognamiglio says that it's suspected that the name is linked to "mortar", which was likely used to mash the meat.

When mortadella made its way to the United States, it morphed into via production, and perhaps mis-translation, into the American luncheon meat known today as bologna.



Hallway with coats of arms, University of Bologna. ELVA RAMIREZ

In the middle of town, you'll find the University of Bologna, which was founded in 1088 and is the oldest university in continuous operation.

An impressive arched hallway displays over 7,000 coats of arms from the city's original ruling families.

Incidentally, the composer Gioachino Rossini, who went on to write "The Barber of Seville" and "William Tell" was a student of the university in 1808. The original score for the "Barber of Seville" is on display at the city's [The International Museum and Library of Music](#).

When it's time to get food, it's hard to go wrong in Bologna. For a hearty dinner, check out the [Cantina Bentivoglio](#), a traditional restaurant famous for its live jazz and home-style dishes.



Cantina Bentivoglio, Bologna. ELVA RAMIREZ

I am a former Wall Street Journal reporter and video producer, and the founder of Ambianceuse.com, a website dedicated to luxury travel, food and spirits. Follow me on Instagram at @HelloAmbianceuse.

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