



Clockwise from far left: travelling around the verdant region of Emilia Romagna, it is hard to resist the allure of freshly made *grissini* breadsticks, *culatello* ham, and Parmesan-adorned egg pasta, before witnessing how the cheese is made

Far left: the Parmigiano Reggiano oval stamp can only be applied to cheeses from a specific region, made under strict conditions and aged for at least a year



Emilia Romagna: a gourmet tour

Parmesan, Parma ham, and balsamic vinegar from Modena – three of Italy’s most iconic, and delicious, treats await Carla Capalbo as she tours Emilia Romagna

IT’S DINNER TIME and I’ve stopped at Masticabrodo, a roadside trattoria in the countryside outside Parma. A large, smiling woman begins to list the day’s freshly made pastas. Would I like to start with a bowl of *tortellini in brodo* (little cushions of egg pasta in homemade meat broth), or would I prefer tagliatelle noodles with wild porcini mushrooms, or a portion of baked lasagne? And while I’m waiting, how about a couple of slices of prosciutto to accompany my *aperitivo*? ‘We can decide about the main course later. You have to eat to be happy,’ she adds.

As steaming mounds of yolk-yellow pasta are served at the next table, my resolve to eat lightly crumbles. That’s the trouble with Emilia Romagna. The food in this region is really delicious. And it’s rich. North of the Apennines we’re a long way from the Mediterranean diet of vegetables, fish and olive oil that features in the *cucina povera* of Italy’s south. This is a world of sumptuous pork products, buttery sauces, complex vinegars and noble cheeses.

The area is well served by airports, with Parma and Bologna airports offering easy access and served by low-cost airlines. And yet, if Parma is on

the radar of millions of people worldwide, it’s not because most have visited its handsome *palazzi* or Romanesque churches. Or been to concerts in the jewel-box Regio theatre that hosted the first performances of Giuseppe Verdi’s greatest operas, from *La Traviata* to *Aida*. Parma’s international fame comes courtesy of two of Italy’s most iconic foods: Parmesan cheese and Parma ham.

Volcanic upset

I’m driving east through central Emilia Romagna, along the flat Po River valley, from Piacenza to Modena, to visit some of its top food producers, and to offer solidarity to a region unexpectedly struck by an earthquake in May 2012. In some areas, the tremors were felt but did no damage; others were hit more seriously. Twenty-six people were killed and buildings and goods also suffered.

‘Unlike many other parts of Italy, this had never been considered a high-risk earthquake zone,’ says Iginio Morini, of the **Parmigiano Reggiano** cheese consorzio (www.parmigiano-reggiano.it). ‘It took us by surprise. Our consorzio lost almost 400,000 wheels of Parmesan, each weighing up to 38kg, when they were shaken down from their ageing shelves and damaged.’ For a cheese to earn the seals of approval as Parmigiano Reggiano PDO (Protected

Photographs: Carla Capalbo

Designation of Origin), it needs to be aged intact for at least 12 months but many are matured for 18 months or longer, so the loss of these cheeses will be felt over time.

With Morini I visit **Caseificio San Lucio**, a cooperative dairy located in the low hills south of Parma, to see the day’s Parmesan being made. Here, between the Po river and the Apennine Mountains, cheeses like this were made by Benedictine monks in the 13th century. Today, all is tightly controlled. PDO rules stipulate everything, from how the cheeses should be salted and stored to what the cows can eat.

Watching the milk being transformed into huge rounds of cheese in gleaming copper cauldrons is always a thrill. ‘Our dairies make use of modern technology, but the main work of cheesemaking is still done by hand, using the expertise of skilled dairymen,’ explains Morini.

Parmigiano Reggiano is a raw-milk cheese, and the unpasteurised milk’s beneficial bacteria play an important role in breaking down proteins and determining flavour. During the cheesemaking process, the milk is heated to about 55°C; within 48 hours of being made, Parmesan’s natural high acidity creates an environment in which only safe, lactic bacteria can survive.

‘Our consorzio lost almost 400,000 wheels of Parmesan when they were shaken from their ageing shelves’

Iginio Morini



Clockwise from left: Parmesan is regularly tested while it ages; *culatello* producer Antica Corte Pallavicina doubles as a boutique *relais*; Rosa dell'Angelo's new prosciutto bar



Where to eat

Brisighella

Trattoria Di Strada Casale In the heart of the Romagna wine region, a rustic trattoria with fine quality ingredients and wines. Tel: +39 546 88 054

Modena

Michelin three-star chef Massimo Bottura has opened a fun trattoria, **Franceschetta 58**, to complement his cutting-edge **Osteria Francescana**, ranked fifth in The World's 50 Best Restaurants www.franceschetta58.it, www.osteriafrancescana.it

Parma

Cocchi is a classic old-style restaurant. Go for the home-made pastas and welcoming Italian atmosphere. www.hoteldaniel.biz

La Greppia Great traditional Emilian food is to be had, including hand-rolled pasta, in this wonderful restaurant. Tel: +39 521 23 36 86

Piacenza

Antica Osteria del Teatro Award-winning chef, Filippo Chiappini Dattilo, serves quality food simply in affordable lunch deals in this lovely town. Brilliant wine list. www.anticaosteriadeltatro.it

We tasted Parmesan of varying ages, breaking pieces between the fingers to feel the consistency and release the perfumes. At 16 months, the pale cheese is elastic, with a fresh, milky flavour. At 25 months, it has more structure, a granular consistency and a nutty scent; it's longer in the finish, and has fine acidity to balance the earthier taste. At 38 months, tiny white spots appear in the cheese's deeper colour. The texture is grainy and the flavours complex, showing nutty, spicy, meaty notes to the nose and a hint of nutmeg in the finish. 'These naturally formed white crystals are an amino acid, tyrosine, that has been broken down by the cheese's enzymes, making it easily digestible. That's why we recommend aged Parmesan for elderly people and babies,' says Morini.

Guarantee of quality

Prosciutto di Parma is the other sacred cow of Italian gastronomy. The sweetest Parma ham comes from this same area, around Langhirano, where hill breezes dry the raw, salted hams naturally. The two products are symbiotic: the cheese's whey is fed to the pigs being fattened for the hams. Italian pigs are primarily bred for their hind legs so the other cuts go to make a range of *salumi* – salt-cured meats – or are sold as fresh meat at bargain prices.

Prosciutto di Parma is a PDO product too, with certificates of provenance and quality assurance. 'The large hind legs of 9 to 10 month-old pigs weigh 17kg when butchered; in the 12 months it takes to produce the prosciutto *crudo*, the meat will lose some 28% of its weight,' explains Maurizio Tosini of **Prosciuttificio Rosa dell'Angelo** (www.rosaangelo.it). Just two ingredients go into these raw hams: pork and sea salt. The artistry is all in the slow salting

and drying so that the hams stay moist and subtly flavoured. The ageing rooms, with their even rows of hanging hams, are spectacular to see.

Rosa dell'Angelo has recently launched a stylish prosciutto bar within the factory where you can sample different hams with *torta fritta*, soft cushions of fried dough, and a selection of local wines. The best to accompany *prosciutto*? 'Some favour sparkling red Lambrusco, but we prefer local whites from these hills like Malvasia Secco,' says Tosini. To explore other lesser known local specialties, wine lovers should visit the Enoteca Regionale di Emilia Romagna in picturesque Dozza, where colourful murals adorn the buildings. Based in the medieval fortress, the Enoteca offers a range of the region's wines (www.enotecaemiliaromagna.it).

For those seeking more rarified *salumi*, the countryside around Zibello is where you'll find the 'king' of cured pork, *culatello*. This legendary cut – the largest muscle group of the pig's rump but quite a bit smaller than a whole hind leg – is aged by the banks of the Po river, where damp fogs and ancient cellars keep the *culatelli* moist as they mature. At **Antica Corte Pallavicina**, chef Massimo Spigaroli butchers and hangs his *culatelli* beneath a patrician villa that doubles as a beautiful *relais* and Michelin-starred restaurant. Giuseppe Verdi was a fan: it's a stone's throw from the house where he was born.

The art and craft of balsamic

Travelling east towards Bologna, I enter the area famous for balsamic vinegar. Far from being something you slosh over salads, traditional-style *aceto balsamico* is considered an elixir, a *digestivo* – even an aphrodisiac. There are two separate zones for making this exquisite product, Reggio Emilia and Modena. While both have PDO status for their *Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale*, Reggio Emilia's output of the traditional vinegar is smaller than Modena's: 22,000 100ml bottles versus 80,000.

Each consorzio has its own distinct bottle shape, not unlike the size and style of perfume bottles. (Modena's was fashioned by Giorgetto Giugiaro, best known for his car designs, including the Lexus.) That's apt. Only when you put a drop of the dark brown nectar on the tip of your tongue do you realise why it's in a league of its own: the concentration of flavours and the perfect balance between acidity and grapey sweetness make it unique. Of course that hasn't stopped its imitators from exploiting its provenance and name: ➤



Above: Filippo Chiappini Dattilo in Piacenza offers a great value lunch deal – and an excellent wine list

Left: traditional balsamic vinegar spends years ageing in barrels, as here at Acetaia San Giacomo, before being released in special bottles such as the one pictured below, used by the Emilian producers



Photographs: Carla Capalbo. Map: Maggie Nelson

Where to stay

Torrechiara

Agriturismo La Maddonna This modest country farm makes a fine base for visiting Parmesan and prosciutto producers. www.la-madonna.it

Polesine Parmense, near Zibello

Antica Corte Pallavicina Relais This is the 'temple' of culatello, and one of the most refined places to stay in the Emilian countryside near Parma. Great restaurant too. www.acpallavicina.com

Brisighella

Villa Liverzano A stylish boutique hotel in one of Romagna's most innovative wineries, with great scenery. www.liverzano.it

Agriturismo Campiome Stay with a winemaking family making characterful organic wines and olive oil in a rural home near Faenza. www.campiome.it

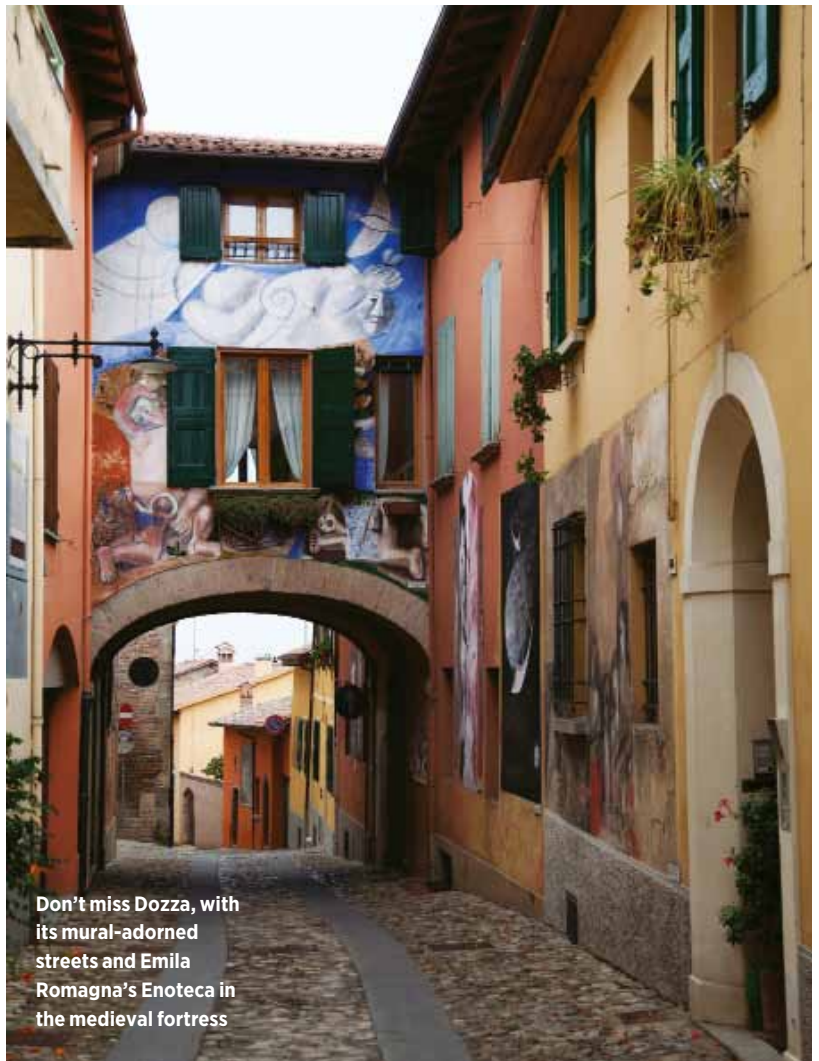
'The vinegar is used to fill barrels of at least five types of wood. Chestnut adds tannins, cherry offers sweetness'

90m litres of commercial 'balsamic vinegar' are produced in Italy and beyond. But one sniff of this 'traditional' grand cru will banish all thoughts of its cheap caramel-enriched pretenders.

The method varies slightly, but the basic principles of this extraordinary foodstuff are the same. Andrea Bezzecchi, of **Acetaia San Giacomo** at Novellara (www.acetaiasangiaco.com), produces his vinegar in the Reggio Emilia consorzio. When I visited in September, he had been up much of the night watching over the grape must as it cooked. 'Our vinegar is made from the must of Lambrusco and Trebbiano grapes reduced slowly over a wood fire,' he says. 'I like to maintain high acidity in my vinegar, so I don't overcook the must before placing it in barriques as it starts to ferment, converting its sugar into alcohol.'

This base vinegar is then used to fill batteries of smaller barrels of at least five different woods. Chestnut adds tannins, cherry offers sweetness, while juniper contributes resinous tones to the flavour. 'The topping up of the ever-smaller barrels is akin to a solera method of winemaking, and the final vinegar will be a marriage of many vintages and wood types,' he says. The vinegar takes from 12 to 25 years or more to attain the desired levels of complexity, and is only bottled after it has passed a taste inspection from the consorzio.

The precious barrels are kept in attics where their temperatures rise and fall with the seasons; understandably, they're considered family heirlooms. A few miles away, Erika Barbieri of **Acetaia del Cristo** (www.acetaiadelcristo.it), in the Modena consorzio, described the shock of seeing



Don't miss Dozza, with its mural-adorned streets and Emilia Romagna's Enoteca in the medieval fortress

Producers of wine and olive oil to visit

La Stoppa Elena Pantaleoni produces fine organic wines in the hills near Piacenza. www.lastoppa.it

Monte delle Vigne In the hills near Parma, this modern cellar produces reds and whites from primarily local varieties. www.montedellevigne.it

Fattorie Vallona Maurizio Vallona champions fine whites from Pignoletto and other local varieties near Modena and Bologna. www.fattorievallona.it

Alberto Paltrinieri makes inspiring Lambrusco di Sorbara, north of Modena. cantinapaltrinieri.it

Villa Papiano Agronomist Francesco Bordini produces wines of character near Modigliana. www.villapapiano.it

Olive oil

Brisighella is also known for its olive oil: stop in at the mill, **Frantoio Ossani**, to get some on your way up to the town. www.frantoiooliveossani.it

the earthquake destroy part of her family's vinegar stock. 'Many of our barrels were toppled, and the vinegar leaked out onto the floor,' she says. 'After the first tremors, the worst was not knowing if more would come. We took the risk anyway to go in and shore up what we could, and luckily our oldest barn held firm.' These tiny bottles of *aceto balsamico* may be costly, but they reward with vinegars that can accent dishes savoury and sweet, and lift your cooking to new heights. **D**

Carla Capalbo's latest book, Collio: Fine Wines and Foods from Italy's North-East, won the André Simon award for Best Wine Book