

TRAVEL

A non-foodie in the Food Valley: I went on a delicious mission to Italy for a crash course in culinary appreciation

For Italians, the cities and countryside in the Emilia-Romagna region are an almost-sacred culinary heartland.

By **Tim Johnson** Special to the Star
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Before the pandemic, I never really understood “foodie” culture. As a travel writer, I enjoyed cooking classes when they were on the itinerary, but the lessons were lost on me once the final dish was plated. I was more fascinated by the personalities of chefs than the actual ingredients.

But when travel locked down, something stirred in me: Watching Food Network shows well into the night (“Guy’s Grocery Games” was my guiltiest favourite) inspired my own stabs at the recipes, to little success. An attempt at making honey sriracha led to melting a spatula – and the smell of burnt plastic for days.

I resolved that the next time I had the opportunity to sharpen my kitchen skills, I would make it count. So last fall, when I arrived in Emilia-Romagna, I was on a delicious mission to eat and drink my way across this Northern Italian region, the so-called [Food Valley](#) next to Tuscany.

While the latter gets most of the attention from North American travellers, for Italians the cities and countryside along Via Aemilia, the ancient road, are an almost-sacred culinary heartland, the cradle of some of the most famous foods on the Italic Peninsula: prosciutto di Parma, mortadella, balsamic vinegar and, perhaps the jewel in the crown, Parmigiano Reggiano.

Landing in Bologna and picked up at the airport by a car service, I quickly find myself in hot water. The problem? I mention spaghetti Bolognese to my driver. “There’s no such thing!” says Luigi, weaving through traffic and shaking his fist at the sky. “That meat sauce, it’s not at all like the ragu we make here. And it must be paired with a broad noodle like tagliatelle. Never spaghetti!”

He drops me in Modena, a handsome, small city of about 200,000, known around the world for its cars; Ferrari, Lamborghini, Pagani and Maserati all produce their automobiles nearby.

Tucked into the Po Valley, Modena is a graceful place, with colonnaded walkways surrounding the Piazza Grande, a 12th-century square dominated by the city’s cathedral and its Ghirlandina bell tower. And it’s home to [Osteria Francescana](#), chef Massimo Bottura’s three-Michelin-starred spot, which has twice topped [the ranking](#) of the World’s 50 Best Restaurants.

I don't manage to eat there. In fact, when I pop my head in the door and ask to have a quick look around, I'm told, in the nicest way possible: no. So I find a tiny little café and tuck into a ragu alla Bolognese, and immediately agree with Luigi.

The sauce is meatier. The tagliatelle is big and broad enough to handle it, standing up to the boldness of the sauce with its own strength, all of it combining into a hearty, delicious — and wholly unfamiliar — meal.

Over the next few days, I tour Emilia-Romagna's regional specialties. In a country estate called [Acetaia Villa San Donnino](#), I see the painstaking effort and literal decades it takes to make a good, traditional balsamic vinegar, an ingredient invented in Ancient Roman times.

Leading me through rooms filled with hundreds of barrels and absolutely permeated by the pungent smell of aging vinegar, a guide named Francesca explains that they press grapes (Trebiano and Lambrusco), boil and reduce the juice, and then age it all for up to 25 years in a series of barrels known as "batteries." The result is thick and savoury, perfect to pair with everything from figs to feta.

Next, it's time for some of the finest cheese in the world. Travelling a little further down Via Aemilia, just outside Parma, I walk through the process to turn local cow's milk into Parmigiano Reggiano.

I tour a factory known by the rather industrial name of [CPL-Consorzio Produttori Latte](#), watching as burly men extract curds from whey, using the former for great wheels of cheese, to be aged at least two years. "Right before your eyes, a miracle is happening," says my guide, Sarah. "This is the birth of Parmigiano Reggiano."

Now, properly educated in the local delicacies, I'm (almost) ready for the trip's toughest part: the actual cooking. Walking from Bologna's main square, I arrive at [Il Salotto di Penelope](#), about 20 minutes away from the main attractions, where I'm greeted by Barbara Zaccagni, the owner of the small cooking school.

First, we make the dough, a simple combination of eggs and flour. Then, we knead. “Never use machines! Only your hands – and the rolling pin,” says Zaccagni, firmly. It’s a surprisingly physical activity, requiring a good deal of arm strength to roll out the little hockey pucks of dough into thin, round sheets. Mine always seems too dry or too wet, with too much flour, or not enough. Then I take it too far, the dough growing so thin I tear holes in it.

Zaccagni patiently fixes my mistakes. We then mix ricotta, parsley and Parmigiano Reggiano for the filling, fold it into the dough, and – “pinch, pinch, turn” – create little tortelloni pockets. We drop them into boiling water to firm them up, then into a pan with just butter, sage and some pasta water, and our dish is complete.

Delicious. It’s the best thing I’ve ever made. No burned spatula, and no Guy Fieri in sight. Just a steaming bowl of pasta in an ancient city, and the rest of the night to enjoy it.

Writer Tim Johnson travelled as a guest of [Emilia Romagna Turismo](#), which did not review or approve this article.

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