

PIACENZA REGGIO EMILIA PARMA

When in Emilia Romagna

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AUDIO EDITION
INTERACTIVE GLOSSARY

FERRARA BOLOGNA MODENA RIMINI



How to have the best possible food in Emilia Romagna



When In Rome Guidebooks

How to Use This Book

Do you love food? Are you interested in traditional foods? Are you curious and adventurous enough to try foods you can't get at home? In other words, when you visit a country, do you "do as the Romans do"? If so, this book is for you. It is an attempt to fight against the tide of homogeneity that seems to be infecting dining around the world. While it is lovely to be able to eat spaghetti without traveling to Italy, when you are in Emilia Romagna it is silly to eat anything other than the traditional dishes of the area. My purpose is to offer those who travel to Emilia Romagna in search of authentic Italian food a way to know what to look for, where, and in some instances, why. I lived in Italy for many years, made friends of a host of wonderful Italian cooks and fussy diners who opened my eyes to the incredible quality and vast variety of the local foods. If you begin to understand the way Italians approach food, you too will know what every Italian knows about the restaurant around the corner.

This book is different from a standard guidebook. You won't find recommendations of where to stay. You won't even find lists of restaurants. What you will find are tools to help you locate the best places to dine, shop and savor the exquisite traditional foods of Emilia Romagna. I believe that with this book, and others in this series, you'll never need to consult another travel guide again! You'll be able to judge every restaurant on its own merits and determine whether it deserves your time, your money and most importantly your taste buds.

Avanti a godere!

- Carol Plantamura



TABLE OF CONTENTS



CHAPTER ONE.	A Secret Land of Astonishing Food	1
CHAPTER TWO.	Balsamic Vinegar, A Venerate Elixir	6
CHAPTER THREE.	World Famous <i>Parmigiano Reggiano</i> Cheese.	10
CHAPTER FOUR.	Amazing, Aromatic <i>Salumi</i>	13
CHAPTER FIVE.	Heavenly Starches.	25
CHAPTER SIX.	Bounty from the Po River	29
CHAPTER SEVEN.	Pungent Truffles and Mushrooms	31
CHAPTER EIGHT.	Sweet Fat	33
CHAPTER NINE.	Perfect Wine for a Rich Cuisine	35
CHAPTER TEN.	Pasta Dishes	37
CHAPTER ELEVEN.	Sweets and Desserts	43
CHAPTER TWELVE.	Between Meals in Emilia Romagna	46
CHAPTER THIRTEEN.	Calorie-Burning Activities	55
APPENDIX I.	Food and Wine Checklist.	i
APPENDIX II.	Pronouncing Glossary	v



Balsamic Vinegar, a Venerated Elixir

The city of Modena in Emilia Romagna produces one of Italy's most precious commodities: *aceto balsamico* (balsamic vinegar). Balsamic vinegar is made with as much care as wine and is just as strictly regulated. Because of its intensity, a tiny bit of good balsamic vinegar goes a long way. You can sprinkle it on meat as a salt substitute. *Petto di pollo Modenese* (roasted chicken breast rolled with sage, prosciutto and fontina cheese) gets its flavorful sauce from a balsamic vinegar reduction.

SIDE BAR: When I first went to Italy, balsamic vinegar was basically unavailable outside of Modena. About forty years ago, a friend of mine in Rome, who was married to a *Ferrarese*, brought us a very small bottle of balsamic vinegar. When we served it to Roman friends, they were astounded by its taste.

An Emilia Romagnan friend introduced me to balsamic vinegar and instructed me to buy balsamic labeled *Consorzio Produzione* meaning produced by the consortium of balsamic vinegar makers in Modena. The vinegars made in

Modena and in nearby Reggio Emilia are the supreme balsamic vinegars. If a flask-shaped bottle has the consortium seal and is labeled with the words *aceto balsamico tradizionale di Modena* (traditional balsamic vinegar of Modena), you can be confident that you are buying something of the highest quality.

Until about 25 years ago, artisanal balsamic vinegars were never sold. They were shared as gifts for friends and family. Even today, the dowry of a wealthy bride in Modena or Reggio Emilia often contains a tiny cask of balsamic vinegar, aged for more than a century with such deep, rich flavor that it's exclusively sipped on special occasions.



SIDE BAR: When I lived in Ferrara, I would often visit my friend Pina. Pina had a relatively large bottle of artisan-made balsamic vinegar, which a friend in Reggio Emilia had given to her husband. Pina would mete out a little bit - literally, a teeny, tiny spoonful - which I'd sip right off the spoon. It was like nothing else.

Every autumn in Modena and the surrounding Reggio provinces, the *trebbiano* grapes are harvested. The grapes are set out in closed boxes in the sun for several days to dry slightly and to allow the sugars to intensify. Traditionally, after pressing the grapes, the juice is aged in twelve different

casks of oak, chestnut, mulberry or juniper, where it absorbs the qualities of each cask. After as many as seventy years of blending, aging and moving from cask to cask, the juice has become a dense, rich dark brown with a taste, which is a mixture of tart and sweet.

Artisan-made vinegars all taste slightly different even though the makers may live only blocks apart and create their vinegars from the same grape harvest. People talk of the taste of balsamic vinegar the same way they talk about wine: “the flavor is sweet-tart, layered with cherry and caramel undertones” and so on.

You can always find commercially-made balsamic vinegar in Modena and the surrounding towns. If you want to tour one of these balsamic vinegar factories, contact *Consorzio Produttori di Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena*, c/o Camera di Commercio, Via Granaceto 134, 41100 in Modena - tel. 011-39-59-208298.

Now, the artisanal balsamic vinegar is hard to find. If you want to go on a treasure hunt for it, I would begin by talking first to a pharmacist. Since the vinegar was originally used as a medicinal balm, (hence the name), even today you can sometimes find it in a pharmacy. If the pharmacist doesn't have any, ask the maitre d' of a very good restaurant or the staff of a very good *salumeria*, (a delicatessen where cured pork products are sold), or a good cheese store. Be inventive. And finally, someone might tell you that his brother's wife's uncle makes it. It is worth the effort. Be prepared to spend dearly, though. A tiny two ounce bottle can set you

back \$50 or more depending upon its age. You may be in for the treat of your life.

