



You know you're in a city that takes eating seriously when it has museums devoted to ice cream, salami and cheese. Sharon Stephenson savours the culinary and cultural delights of Italy's food-obsessed town of Bologna

Photographs: Sharon Stephenson

# Italian FEAST

**I**t's hard not to be offended when an absurdly handsome Italian man with treacherous brown eyes and a PhD in flirting looks at you and says "La Grassa" (the fat one).

Admittedly, I've spent the past few days consuming more carbohydrates than is strictly necessary. But then I am in Bologna, Italy's undisputed food capital, where the locals appear to be in training for the gluttony Olympics.

Surely, though, that doesn't give a complete stranger the right to call me fat?

When I finally manage to leap over the language barrier, I discover that the waiter isn't being rude but that La Grassa is, in fact, Bologna's nickname. It's a well-earned moniker because the capital of the Emilia-Romagna region, a flat, pastoral

swathe wedged between Florence and Venice, is awash with calories.

"Bologna is Italy's most food-obsessed city, which is saying something," says my guide, Valentina. "If you don't eat well here, you won't eat well anywhere."

And although Valentina is paid to say that, it's true.

This old medieval region waddled its way into gastronomic history as the birthplace of balsamic vinegar, Parmigiano-Reggiano, Lambrusco, stuffed tortellini and mortadella, the pork sausage that Americans like to call baloney. But it's probably most famous for 'ragu alla bolognese', fat strips of tagliatelle doused in meaty sauce and a golden mountain of Parmesan (call it spag bol, or ask where spaghetti is, and you'll be run out of town).

So preoccupied with food are the locals that a pork chop's throw from Piazza Maggiore, the city's elegant main square, are museums dedicated to salami, ham, cheese, vinegar and ice cream.

"The single most important thing not to be in Bologna is on a diet," says Valentina, gleefully tucking into a plate of creamy tiramisù.

Which is all very well when you possess sleek Italian genes; for the thousandth time since arriving in Bologna, I curse the DNA that short-changed me in the height department but was overly generous in the hip and buttock regions. But travel is as much about expanding the waistband as it is the mind and I figure a few extra kilos is a small price to pay for some of the best food experiences of my life.



This is what 280 steps up Prendiparte Tower gets you: sweeping views across Bologna. Right and below: Delis are dotted along Bologna's cobbled streets.



## MOVIE GLAMOUR

Everyone knows Italy's big hitters: Rome's soaring cathedrals, Venice's watery arteries, the art-soaked treasures of Florence. But unlike its bigger, brasher siblings, Bologna has never been on the must-see circuit.

The result is it feels wonderfully off the radar, less like a Renaissance theme park and more like a well-kept secret. It also means that if you prefer sightseeing without others blocking the view, then you're in luck because this city of around 375,000 is mercifully free of the tourist hordes who clog other European cities.

Those clever enough to detour off the E45 Autostrada (motorway) – or, in our case, fly in on Emirates' Auckland-Bologna route – are rewarded with one of the best

preserved medieval cities in Europe, a collection of ochre-stained houses, palaces and so many churches I wonder if the locals do anything but pray (and eat).

Back-lit by sunshine, it's like landing on the set of a 50s movie, where well-dressed couples sip cappuccinos at outdoor tables, women in vertiginous heels whizz past on scooters, and getting lost in the tangle of cobbled alleyways is standard operating procedure. I'm not surprised when Valentina tells me Bologna often ranks top out of 107 Italian cities for quality of life.

A special feature is the 50km of covered walkways that criss-cross the centro storico (historic city centre), allowing visitors to amble in shade during summer and be sheltered from the rain in winter. Don't forget to look up as you walk







## What the locals know

■ Modena is the home of Bologna's favourite son, tenor Luciano Pavarotti. His modest residence (above) is now a museum where you can check out the late singer's piano, strewn with photos of everyone from Princess Diana to Nelson Mandela, his XXXL Hawaiian shirts and that glorious voice, which shows why he was one of the world's biggest recording stars (in every sense).

■ Bologna's most famous statue is the 16th century Fountain of Neptune (below), aka The Giant, which anchors one corner of Piazza del Nettuno. The muscular Neptune's naked 'manhood' was once deemed so shocking it was proposed he should wear a vine leaf.

■ Stop beneath the old porticos on Strada Maggiore and you'll see three arrows stuck in the rafters. Legend has it that centuries ago, the Lord of Bologna sought revenge on his cheating wife. He hired three assassins to kill her but she distracted them by appearing naked so they missed their target, instead firing three arrows into the portico ceiling.



under these porticos, as many of them are works of art.

I have to rub my eyes when I round a corner and see Due Torri, Bologna's twin towers. Not because medieval brick towers are unusual in these parts – once upon a time Bologna boasted more than 200 of the structures, although today only 21 remain – but because both of them are on a pretty severe lean. For a moment, I wonder if I've somehow woken up in Pisa, 170km to the west.

"These towers lean more than the one in Pisa," says Valentina proudly.

I huff and puff my way up 280 steps to



Left: One of the many covered walkways, which make strolling the city a pleasure, no matter what the weather.

Above: Trying on a Ferrari for size at the Modena HQ of the luxury car maker.

Below: The original Ducati bike is one of many exhibits in the Ducati Museum in Modena. Below left: The Due Torri.



the top of the Prendiparte Tower, which dates back to the 7th century. But it's well worth it for the jaw-dropping views over the city. The charming owner, Matteo Giovanardi, explains that the 65m high tower has been home to, variously, aristocrats, monks and prisoners. These days, it's used for events and exhibitions and three floors have been converted into luxury accommodation where wannabe princesses can lay their weary heads.

Bologna might be steeped in a rich historical broth, but a large student population keeps the city anchored firmly in the present. Bologna University is the oldest in the world, dating back to 1088, and visitors are able to wander around the campus and enjoy a drink at one of the many bars that line the student quarter.

A short drive away is Modena, the birthplace of tenor Luciano Pavarotti, luxury car founder Enzo Ferrari, the Ducati motorbike brothers and headquarters of some of the fastest and most covetable vehicles on the planet, including Ferrari, Lamborghini and Maserati. But I'm more interested in slow food than fast cars, and Modena is also the home of balsamico tradizionale di Modena, authentic balsamic vinegar. One taste of what the locals call Liquid



Black Gold and you'll realise why it can vary in price from a few dollars to upwards of \$60.

We visit Malpighi, a small, family-run balsamic vinegar producer where the fermentation process, in which the vinegar is aged in a series of wooden barrels for a minimum of 12 years, has changed little since men in togas first started experimenting with leftover grapes.

So seriously do they take their balsamic here that the final product must be approved by a regulatory board and it's so velvety-rich and sweet it can be poured straight onto ice cream which, apparently, is how the locals like it.

### PASTA MASTERY

There's also time to detour to Cultura Italiana Bologna Cucina, a cooking school where chef Davide Berchiatti is keen to unlock the secrets of northern Italian cuisine. I've been on my share of cooking courses over the years, learning to deal with live crabs in Singapore, hand pulling noodles in China and perfecting my flatbread technique in Oman. But I've never bothered to recreate the recipes once I got home. Berchiatti, however,

convinces me this time it will be different (he's right, as it turns out).

No Bolognese cooking class worth its Maldon sea salt would ignore tortelloni, plump pockets of fresh filled pasta twisted into shapes inspired by Venus' belly-button.

The major difference between Northern and Southern Italians' pasta is eggs (Southerners prefer their carbs without) and Berchiatti shows us how to coax flour and eggs into dough, which we then roll into thin sheets, before filling them with ricotta and spinach and shaping them into parcels.

Over the next few hours we also make Parmesan-heavy zucchini flans and turn cream, gelatin, sugar and vanilla into a delicious pannacotta.

Then it's time to ditch the aprons and stuff ourselves silly with the fruits of our labour. All washed down with buckets of the local Lambrusco wine, of course.

The next time someone looks at me and says 'La Grassa' I'll know they're definitely not referring to Bologna's nickname.

Sharon Stephenson was a guest of Emirates and Bologna Welcome, [www.bolognawelcome.com](http://www.bolognawelcome.com).



After a morning at the cooking school with chef Davide Berchiatti, participants get to eat the fruits of their labours.

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