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Slow food, fast cars

Modena, Italy, is home to some of the world's most familiar names.

By Larissa and Michael Milne
FOR THE INQUIRER

MODENA, Italy — As we ascended the winding stairs into the garret of Acetaia Giuseppe Giusti, a familiar musky grape aroma wafted over us, one that had we had previously associated with ancient wine cellars carved out of chalky loam. However, it was not wine we were going to taste, but another product of grapes, authentic Balsamico di Modena, the globally renowned vinegar that, in some cases, is so precious it is served via eyedropper.

Modena is a city of contrasts. Two prominent buildings pierce the azure Italian sky; the 12th-century white-marble-clad cathedral and the racy, yellow curved roof of the Enzo Ferrari museum. New and old, fast and slow go hand in hand here. Modena may be the birthplace of Ferrari, the worldwide symbol of fast automobiles, but it is also the heart — or perhaps stomach — of Emilia-Romagna. Regional names such as *Parma*, *Modena*, *Bologna*,

See **MODENA** on N4

Some highlights of Modena: The lobby of the Enzo Ferrari Museum, above. Below left, a tasting of Parma ham at Salumificio Conti. Below right, casks of balsamic vinegar aging at Acetaia Giuseppe.

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Where even Italians go for good food

MODENA from N1

and *Reggio* sound as though they were lifted off a trattoria menu.

The food is so good even Italians flock to the area — only three hours north of Rome via train — and that's saying something. Modena was the hometown of operatic star Luciano Pavarotti — a big man with an even bigger talent — and the local flavors likely contributed to both.

For a "cheesy" start, visit a Parmigiano-Reggiano maker on the outskirts of town. Quattro Madonne may be a factory in name, but the product hardly falls into the category of "mass-produced." Its' reminiscent of a spotless laboratory crossed with a Michelin-starred kitchen, as silent workers in crisp lab coats preside over giant copper cauldrons amid gleaming white tiles.

Despite its complex flavor, there are only four ingredients in Parmigiano-Reggiano: whole milk, skim milk, rennet, and salt. Visitors watch as the freshest local milk and rennet are heated in the cauldrons; the resulting curds are then strained out and placed in molds that give the rind its characteristic imprint of authentic Parmagiano-Reggiano cheese. The fledgling wheels are brined in a salt solution for several weeks before moving to the aging room, where they are stacked on shelves 20 feet high to mellow for one to six years.

The tour concludes with a tasting of four Parmigianas of differing ages that bear no resemblance to the tasteless American powder shaken out of a canister. Our guide Francesca explains how the cheese becomes firmer, darker, and more flavorful with aging. Younger cheeses are grated on pasta; the "elder statesmen" are broken into chunks with a fork and served either as an appetizer or with fruit for dessert, ideally drizzled with aged balsamic vinegar.

Just up the road from Modena, in the rolling hills west of Parma, microclimates create the perfect setting for producing naturally aged Prosciutto di Parma ham. In the modern era, when cured meats containing chemical preservatives are to be avoided, Parma ham rises above the fray. It has been produced and cured in these hills for two millennia using a natural method with only two ingredients: Italian-bred pigs and sea salt.

The family behind Salumificio Conti has been farming in Langhirano since 1814 and began commercial ham production in 1968. Today, Mariangela Conti and her three daughters run the show. Michela Conti led us past hams that were hand-salted, set out for three weeks, then hung on wooden frames to age for a year. On sunny days, the women crank open the windows so the fresh mountain air from the Appenines assists with the aging process. Only those hams that meet the strictest quality requirements earn the "fire crown" brand labeling them authentic Prosciutto di Parma. At the end of the tour, a tasting of thin velvety slices of the gustatory treat will make you rethink ordinary BLTs and ham sandwiches.

Italians might make their foods slowly, but their cars are fast. Modena is the birthplace of Enzo Ferrari, whose bright-red, road-hugging vehicles seem synonymous with the words *race car*. At the Museo Enzo Ferrari in Modena, visitors walk in the famed carmaker's footsteps at his workshop and boyhood home. In true "live-fast" style, Ferrari inherited the house at age 20 but sold it soon afterward to buy a sports car.

The former workshop is dedicated to Ferrari's racing legend, and it houses the first road car Ferrari ever built, a 1947 125 S, along with more than 30 high-performance engines. Adjacent to the workshop, a newer building's striking yellow roof curves skyward, mimicking the hood of a 1950s racing Ferrari. Inside, more than 20 Ferraris are displayed under glittery lights as though they were jewels in a crown, although these Italian creations are more expensive than most diamonds. A soaring Pavarotti sound track creates a sense of autos as art and gets you in the mood for the next stop of the day.

Even for nonopera buffs, visiting the Luciano Pavarotti House Museum is a fascinating experience — sort of like Graceland with an Italian twist. The house where he lived for the final years of his life is on a bucolic one-lane road outside his childhood hometown of Modena.

The shelves of Pavarotti's walk-in bedroom closet are stacked with the signature handkerchiefs he clutched during performances, first used in his early years to overcome nervousness about singing in front of crowds. Although he typically performed in white tie and tails, offstage, the tenor loved color. On display are many of the vivid paintings he completed as a hobby, along with the festive Hawaiian shirts he favored at leisure. The gourmet kitchen attests to his love of food, and the two commercial-grade dishwashers attest to his love of entertaining.

Meanwhile, back in the attic at Giuseppe Giusti, we were about to taste the value of patience. Most Americans think of balsamic vinegar as a dark, tart addition to salad dressings, but that's only part of the story. The concept of slow food is taken to new heights when it comes to Balsamico di Modena, which is more of a culinary focus than a condiment.

Crafted from crushed Lambrusco and Trebbiano grapes, the "aceto" is cooked, fermented, then aged for 12 to 25 years in wooden barrels. Unlike with wine, the casks are left open to the air to allow for evaporation and are stored in attics rather than cellars so seasonal temperature changes contribute to the aging process. Each year, these increasingly concentrated vinegars are decanted to smaller and smaller casks of various woods that impart distinct flavors, giving the final aged product a deep, rich taste.

Acetaia Giusti, founded in 1598, is the oldest producer of balsamic vinegar in Modena, hence the world. After 17 generations, it is still in the same family. A tour takes visitors through a small museum and the attic where the balsamico ages. A heady, sweet-tart aroma lingers under the eaves where casks rest, topped with small linen doilies that serve the dual purpose of allowing evaporation while keeping out sweet-seeking flies.

A tasting of various balsamicos follows the tour, the highlight being the extravecchio (aged 25 years). A tiny spoonful of the viscous, espresso-colored liquid demonstrates what all the fuss is about: a swarm of sweet and tangy flavors explodes on the tongue in just one drop. At $120 for a 100 ml bottle, it's an indulgence reserved for special occasions in Modenese homes.

We opted for a $12 blend that was tasty enough for our novice palates. Coupled with a chunk of Parmigiana-Reggiano and a few slices of Parma ham, it made for a delicious picnic back at our apartment: a quick meal that was actually years in the making. Perhaps not as fast as a Ferrari, but we have no doubt Maestro Pavarotti would have approved.

Gleaming examples of Enzo Ferrari's automotive masterpieces are on display on the floor of his original workshop. MICHAEL MILNE

The 12th-century Cathedral of Modena with its leaning tower.

The Luciano Pavarotti House Museum is where the tenor lived in his final years.

IF YOU GO

The shuttle service Discover Ferrari & Pavarotti Land offers to whisk visitors to more than a dozen sights related to food, wine, history, and cars, with a stop thrown in at Pavarotti's home. More information at www.FerrariPavarottiLand.it.

- ▶ Salumificio Conti prosciutto www.ContiProsciutti.it
- ▶ Giuseppe Giusti balsamic vinegar www.Giusti.it
- ▶ Luciano Pavarotti House Museum www.LucianoPavarottiFooundation.com
- ▶ Enzo Ferrari Museum www.MuseoModena.Ferrari.com
- ▶ Quattro Maddone dell'Emilia Dairy www.Caseificio4Madonne.it

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