



osteria  
*La Maestà*

# Parma, Ti Amo

For true food lovers, the home of Parmigiano Reggiano is a travel must



BY JACQUELINE ROSS LIEBERMAN

**f**lorence, Venice, Rome — these are wonderful places to visit. But you're just as likely to surround yourself with fellow Americans in these cities as you are to learn from the natives and as likely to step into a McDonald's as a family-owned trattoria.

Not so in Parma, where English is less commonly heard (although most of the locals learned it in school), plenty of boutique hotels offer unique lodging and the atmosphere in each restaurant, shop, street and concert hall is distinctly Italian. In the city's center, fashionably dressed women and men breeze by on old-fashioned bicycles, and conversations tinkling with laughter trickle from sidewalk cafes into the ears of pedestrians. Few tourists invade these lively streets — even during the summer months when places like Rome and Venice are practically under siege by visitors.

In the city center near Piazza Garibaldi (Garibaldi Square), you won't find a Starbucks, but you will find a Lino's, part of a chain of Italian coffee bars. The tiny cafe (little more than a sleek bar, a few stools and a TV playing American music videos) offers coffee specialties ranging from traditional espresso to rich, creamy frozen





*Special knife used to cut and break Parmigiano Reggiano*

milkshake-like cappuccinos with shots of green syrup oozing down their sides. One not-to-be-missed treat is the bicerin, made from a layer each of warm melted chocolate, hot espresso and cold cream. The café is one of the few places outside of Turin to enjoy this decadent concoction.

The coffee bar, sandwiched in among a string of boutiques, cafes, cheese shops, produce markets and salumerias along a cobbled pedestrian-only street, is just one example of how Parma, the birthplace and home of Parmigiano Reggiano and prosciutto di Parma, offers visitors a delightful mix of Italian modernity and historic traditions.

Since the days when Roman soldiers marched through town, taking prosciutto di Parma with them to every corner of the empire, this little city has been known by many as the culinary center of the Western world. In addition to its famous (and often imitated) cheese and ham, foods traditionally produced in Parma and the surrounding area are some of the most beloved in the world — foods such as Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena and the first commercially made dried pasta, still produced and packed in familiar blue boxes by Parma's Barilla family today. Parma is even revitalizing its ancient olive oil traditions; thanks to a government-sponsored program, a variety of olive trees used thousands of years ago is once again sinking its roots into Parma's soil.

It could be said that most of Parma's traditions have deep roots. In case you doubt the importance of traditional salumi, step inside the town's tall pink-marbled baptistery; below the inner dome, the curved walls of the one-room tower are covered with beautiful frescos over half a millennium old depicting religious and everyday life. Look carefully at a calendar there and you'll see a frieze of a man hanging salume to represent the month of January, the time of year when that same

food was made again and again throughout the years.

The cuisine of Parma rivals that of more famous European cities, as chefs here use time-honored foods to recreate traditional dishes, as well as new twists on local favorites. Forty-year-old Trattoria Ai 2 Platani (The Two Plane Trees) serves local specialties that Parma's grandmothers have made for generations, wonderful dishes such as fresh ricotta- and Swiss chard-filled egg pasta pillows and tagliatelle — rich, bright-yellow, made-to-order egg noodles — tossed in velvety butter with a touch of pungent fresh sage and a sprinkling of grated Parmigiano Reggiano.

Meanwhile, at nearby Al Tramezzo, chef Alberto Rossetti isn't satisfied to leave well enough alone. He takes his traditional tagliatelle and serves it in the usual butter with Parmigiano Reggiano, adding sweet chopped shrimp as well as crunchy fried prosciutto di Parma and leeks. The result is both familiar and spectacular — four-star comfort food.

Prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano Reggiano are never far from the table. Both are rich in umami, the meaty or savory flavor that is one of the five basic flavors recognized by the human tongue, turning everything they touch into something delicious. Serving them in large quantities is almost, but not quite, overdoing it, and indulgence is what chefs here do best. Often the first course at any establishment is a plate of the beloved ham — very thinly sliced, sometimes with juicy cantaloupe or fresh figs — or a chunk of Parmigiano

Reggiano, perhaps drizzled with dark, syrupy Balsamic Vinegar of Modena. Waiters treat each bottle as if it were liquid gold.

Locals often enjoy their food with a bottle of Malvasia — a dry, aromatic white wine — or Lambrusco, which is an off-dry, light, young, bright purple and very fizzy wine that's usually served cold. Lambrusco is immensely food-friendly — especially when it comes to the rich dishes that are popular here. But Lambrusco seems like more of a beverage than a wine to most aficionados — something one might imagine drinking from a plastic cup at the beach — which may explain why this locally made vino has been much maligned in the past. The people of Parma, however, love it, and have loved it for at least two thousand years. Slowly, the world is taking note as producers, such as Parma's own Ariola, are changing that perception with very drinkable and sometimes



award-winning Lambruscos suitable for exportation.

Ragus — slow-cooked meat-and-tomato sauces — are another local tradition. During the warmer months, many vegetables are grown locally, including sweet zucchini and flavorful tomatoes, which are often served grilled and tossed in olive oil with a touch of salt. As the region is also known for its violets, the tiny purple flower makes an appearance in just about everything from chocolates to cosmetics, and crunchy candied violets are often offered at the end of a meal.

Dinner, contrary to popular belief and due to busier and busier workdays, has eclipsed lunch as the big meal of the day in Italy, but many in Parma still slow down for aperitifs in the early evening. Gran Caffè Orientale, in the heart of Piazza Garibaldi just below the city's great sundial, is an ideal spot for sipping and people-watching before supper.

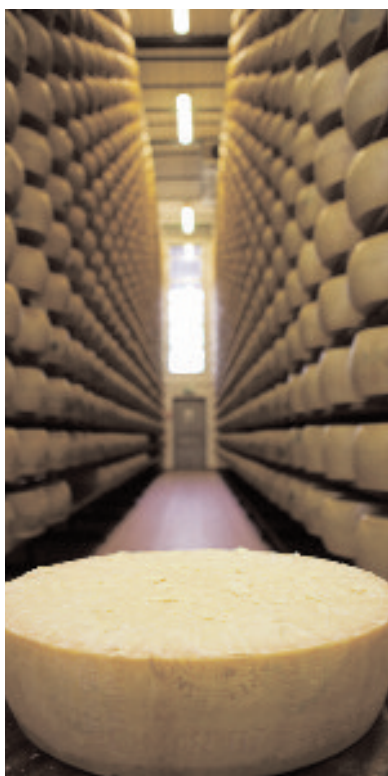
When it's not time to eat, a tour of Parma's city center is a must. Don't miss the cathedral, which is famous for the painting on its dome, the Assumption of Mary painted by 16th century artist Correggio. The painting is a marvel of perspective — visitors standing below tilt their heads to view a swirling mass of humanity ascending to heaven among the swollen clouds, floating toward a brilliant yellow sky as Mary — who floats among them, arms outstretched — looks up to one man in the center rising above them all. The painting's importance and beauty rival some of Italy's most impressive Renaissance art, and you won't even have to wait in line for a view.

## the cheese that bridges history

What Parma's most famous foods have in common — in addition to their amazing flavors and aromas — is their age-old rituals. Benedictine monks perfected the original "Parmesan" cheese, Parmigiano Reggiano, about 800 years

ago. Today, with a few modern improvements, it is made pretty much the same way. Both the cheese and the cow's milk it is made from are produced only in this area and the daily ritual of creating new wheels takes place at 420 small, mostly family-owned production facilities.

C.P.L. Parma, a cheesemaking facility in the Parma countryside, gets its milk from a cooperative of small dairy farms. It employs just five people and makes about 30 wheels of cheese a day, making it one of the larger cheesemakers in the area.



## FESTIVALS AND FOODIE VACATIONS

Parma offers something extra to travelers who visit during one of these festivals.

### Festivals:

**IL CARNEVALE DI BUSSETO:** Since 1879, Parma has celebrated this festival over four consecutive Sundays during the month before Lent with parades, costumes and plenty of great food. Don't miss Angolo del Ghiottone, or Glutton's Corner, in Piazza Verdi, where treats include salumi and traditional sweets, such as cakes made with almonds and candied fruit. Visit [www.carnevaledibusseto.it](http://www.carnevaledibusseto.it).

**FESTIVAL DEL PROSCIUTTO DI PARMA:** Held each year during the last weekend in August and the first three weekends in September, this celebration coincides with the time of year prosciutto di Parma producers literally "open the windows" of the facilities to allow the mountain breezes to help cure and flavor the hams. In addition to the cultural and family-friendly events that take place during these weeks, members of the public are invited to take tours of a dozen prosciuttifici to see firsthand how the famous hams are made.

Visit [www.festivaldelprosciuttodiparma.com](http://www.festivaldelprosciuttodiparma.com).

**FESTIVAL VERDI:** Parma is proud of its status as the hometown of one of the world's greatest composers, Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901). Each October the city's renowned opera house, Teatro Regio, holds a monthlong series of opera and concert performances celebrating his works. Visit [www.teatroregioparma.org](http://www.teatroregioparma.org).

For a complete list of events in and around Parma, visit [www.turismo.comune.parma.it](http://www.turismo.comune.parma.it).

### Vacations:

Parma is a gourmand's paradise, especially when you let one of these cooking schools take care of your accommodations, meals and activities for you.

**THE WORLD ACADEMY OF BARILLA:** Parma's Barilla family was the first to make and sell dried pasta to the public over 130 years ago, revolutionizing the way the world cooks and eats. Today, the company also offers gourmet vacations filled with history, tradition and luxury. Several packages are available, including one that lets you visit Parmigiano Reggiano and prosciutto di Parma producers, travel to Modena to learn about Balsamico, discover some of the area's top restaurants, take hands-on cooking classes and more. Can't commit? The Academy also offers custom tours, classes and tastings to fit your schedule. Visit [www.academiabarilla.com](http://www.academiabarilla.com).

**MARIA LUGIA COOKING SCHOOL:** This branch of Epiculinary — a travel tour company with locations in several countries — is named for the famed duchess of Parma. In a few days with them, you can learn to cook traditional dishes, see how Parmigiano Reggiano is made, visit a local museum and take a guided tour of the city. Visit [www.epiculinary.com](http://www.epiculinary.com).

As cows are milked twice a day, the evening's milk is brought in and poured into tubs. In the morning, most of the fat is skimmed from the top and sent elsewhere to make butter, which may explain why the rich, creamy local butter is so much more popular in this part of Italy than olive oil. Once the skimmed milk is combined with the morning's full-fat milk, it's time to make the cheese.

C.P.L.'s master cheesemaker, Bruno Monaca, never takes a day off. The milk can't be saved and used another day, and it's never pasteurized, so every morning he watches as huge copper cauldrons are filled with 1,100 liters each of the creamy white liquid, along with a little fermented whey and a tiny amount of rennet. With huge paddles turning, these immense bowls resemble Kitchen Aid mixers for giants. Steam rises from the grates below and the air takes on the tang of buttermilk. A man wearing a white apron and a black baseball cap dips an old-fashioned thermometer into the mix, which begins to look very much like soupy cottage cheese. The solid part, of course, is the curd. Some of the liquid, or whey, leftover will later be used to create ricotta.

Each cauldron produces enough curd to make two wheels of cheese each day. If that seems like a lot of milk for just a couple of wheels, consider this: It takes four gallons of milk to make two pounds of Parmigiano Reggiano.

The curd ball formed in each cauldron is sliced in half, placed in round forms and hauled to a quiet room lined with

shelves where their curved, pale shapes sit like bread dough waiting to rise. Unlike factory-made cheese, these wheels will each tell stories of who made them on what date and even in which cauldron, because throughout the process they're marked with edible ink and embossed with codes. Those that make the cut will eventually receive the brand of the Consorzio del Formaggio Parmigiano-Reggiano, a group that keeps careful watch over the cheese's production.

After a few days in their forms, the new wheels are hard enough to be removed and placed, naked, in a briny bath, where they will spend a few weeks floating, bobbing and occasionally getting flipped while absorbing salt that helps flavor and preserve them. From there they join hundreds of others in an aging room, where they will line the tall shelves for at least 12 months.

Afterward, experts use a hammer-like instrument to test each wheel for defects. It's an unusual skill that requires listening for hollow spots and bubbles that indicate imperfections. Only ninety percent of the wheels will be considered perfect. Many will go on to be aged 24 months or more, and a very rare few will age 60 months.

When buying Parmigiano Reggiano, keep in mind that a relatively young wheel of 12 months will be smoother and more pliable than an older cheese, as well as milder. A 24-month-old wheel, on the other hand, is dryer and crumblier and will contain crystallized amino acids, giving it a

### *The Piazza Garibaldi at night*



more granular appearance and a little crunch with each bite. The flavor is stronger, sharper and more intense and the aroma more fragrant. The aging process also causes the cheese to break down more quickly, which is why an older Parmigiano Reggiano melts in your mouth as well as into a sauce or risotto.

In Parma, cheese lovers at specialty shops know to ask for their favorite seasonal cheese. Wheels made during the winter, when the cows are fed more dried grasses, often take on fruity notes, especially pineapple. A cheese made in spring will reflect the shoots, herbs and flowers the cows munched on, resulting in delicate flavors and aromas. Autumn Parmigiano Reggiano tends to have a more balanced, sweeter flavor, as the rains cause wildflowers to bloom once again.

Italy's favorite Parmigiano Reggiano is made during the summer, when fresh grasses are drier and more concentrated. These wheels contain many complex flavors and, because of the warmer weather, they also tend to sweat out more butterfat, so they're drier and crumblier and grate especially well. Because these are so highly prized in Italy, it's nearly impossible to find a summer wheel in the United States.

### the king of salumi

Parmigiano Reggiano may be at least a little responsible for that irresistible ham that the region is also known for, prosciutto di Parma. Whey leftover from the cheesemaking process is fed to special locally raised pigs, along with cereal and grains, which helps make the flavor of the prosciutto produced here unique.

Prosciutto di Parma is part of an ancient tradition going back before Christ. Today, many people around the world still consider the velvety, sweet and slightly salty ham the gold standard for prosciutto. In Parma, its status as "the king of salumi" is evident — most people keep a slicer in their kitchen and it is routinely served at nearly every restaurant, whether wrapped in warm, yeasty fried dough, baked on pizzas, chopped and mixed into pasta or simply layered on a plate.

Prosciutto di Parma is made within 12 villages around Parma. In this hilly countryside, signs for prosciuttifici dot the sides of the road much like signs for wineries in Napa Valley. Of the 167 facilities certified to make prosciutto di Parma, most are family-owned. On summer days when the city itself is hot and humid, here the air is dry and cool breezes come down from the nearby mountain range. It's this lack of humidity that helps the hams cure properly.

Inside Leporati, one family-owned producer, the air smells sweetly of prosciutto and ocean, a result of the large quantities of sea salt used. One by one, the hams, which come from unusually large pigs, are inspected before the facility's master salter rubs just enough salt over each one to preserve it.

From here, the hams will be hung in a refrigerated room to begin the aging process. Later, they move on to a cool "cellar" where the windows open to allow mountain breezes to flow over them. The process mimics the much older tradition, when pigs were slaughtered in the winter and preserved for summer months.

At one point, the cut sides begin to dry out, so they must be covered with lard to stay soft. At Leporati, two women do this at an astonishing pace, standing at a table in a cool room,

### CHEESE TO GO

Parmigiano Reggiano — properly vacuum-packed — is a wonderful souvenir to bring home from Parma and one your friends will be glad you brought, assuming you'll share it. Although packages of the cheese won't need refrigeration until opened, it's best to keep them in a cool place.

Once you get home and unwrap your cheese, let it stand on the counter for about an hour so excess surface moisture can evaporate. Then wrap it in a paper towel, place it inside a sealed plastic bag and put it in the fridge. Your Parmigiano Reggiano will last for months stored this way, if you don't eat it first.

The fun isn't over when you get down to the hard outer rind. Even this is edible and delicious, especially when added to soups and stews, where it softens and can be stirred in to add irresistible flavor.



listening to the radio, scooping white fat from a bowl with their fingertips and deftly smoothing it over ham after ham.

When all is said and done, the prosciutti will have aged at least a year and lost about 30 percent of their water content, resulting in meat that is still moist but with an intense flavor. Each ham is assessed by an outside inspector, and about two percent are rejected. Those that make the cut are fire-branded with the official mark of the Consorzio del Prosciutto di Parma, a five-point ducal crown. You'll see this crown on any whole or pre-sliced prosciutto di Parma. The symbol has come to represent the pride Parma takes in these hams, and it ensures that what you're eating is the real deal.

### balsamico — a family tradition

A good side trip from Parma is Modena, where you'll find the only true producers of Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di



Modena D.O.P., or Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena. The making of the rich, caramelized sweet-and-tangy syrup is a tradition in the region, and not something taken lightly by the families who have made it for generations.

At Pedroni, a family-owned, family-run farm and Balsamic-vinegar production facility in Modena, Giuseppe Pedroni is part of the sixth generation of his family to grow several varieties of grapes and make them into aged Balsamico and other traditional products, including ordinary Balsamic vinegar (a mix of Traditional Balsamic Vinegar and

wine vinegar) and grappa. The Pedroni family has lived and worked here since 1862.

For Balsamico, the freshly pressed grape juice is not directly made into wine. Instead, each fall when the grapes are harvested, their juice is combined in a stainless steel vat and gently cooked for about two days. This process reduces the liquid by half and caramelizes the sugars, giving Balsamico its distinctive flavors and brown color. Travelers wishing to witness this process should visit during September or October. Months later, the cooking shed still smells pleas-

## go-with-the-grain salad

SERVES 6

- 1 cup barley, brown rice, wheat berries or bulgur
- 8 oz prosciutto di Parma, thinly sliced
- 6 cherry tomatoes, quartered
- 3/4 cup diced red bell pepper
- 1/2 cup chopped green onions (scallions) including some of the green portion
- 1/3 cup chopped fresh basil
- 1 1/2 cups Parmigiano Reggiano cheese in thin shavings or coarsely grated, divided
- 2 Tbsp olive oil
- 4 tsp lemon juice
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1/4 tsp ground black pepper
- Basil sprigs (optional)

1. Cook barley or other whole grain according to package directions until tender; place in a large bowl and allow to cool.
  2. While the barley or other grains are cooking, cut enough prosciutto di Parma in 1-inch wide strips to make 1/2 cup; reserve the remaining slices.
  3. In a large bowl, combine ham strips, tomatoes, bell pepper, green onions, basil, 1/2 cup Parmigiano Reggiano, olive oil, lemon juice, salt and pepper.
  4. Add barley or other grain; toss to combine.
- To serve: Spoon salad in the center of each of 6 plates, dividing equally. Arrange reserved prosciutto di Parma slices in a fan shape atop the salad. Scatter the remaining 1 cup Parmigiano Reggiano shavings over the salad. Garnish with a basil sprig, if desired.

antly of burnt sugar and the sweet, sticky concoction.

Inside a storage house, where antique casks made of varying dark-hued woods are lined up and down the room, the air smells so strongly of vinegar that it permeates clothing. Some visitors grow dizzy from the odor, which, while not unpleasant, is certainly overwhelming. Inside the barrels, the juice is aging — fermenting, evaporating, becoming thicker and more complex. Throughout the years, the vinegar is moved — a little at a time — through a battery of at least five successively smaller and smaller casks. The process is a

bit like making sourdough bread — some of the original batch is present in every bottle created from the battery. A bottle of vinegar aged 12 years may actually contain particles of vinegar first made over 100 years ago.

In order to be classified as Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale, a vinegar must be aged at least 12 years. Finer Balsamicos — called extra vecchio — are aged at least 25 years. By this point, they're so thick they no longer run when drizzled over a chunk of Parmigiano Reggiano — they cling, their dark droplets frozen in place along the sides of the cheese. The vinegar-making families are known to keep a special battery of casks for themselves, some of which contain Balsamico aged 60 years or more. Like many here, Giuseppe Pedroni's family created a special battery of casks for him when he was born. In the old days, these worked like a dowry for men when they married. "With this tradition, the balsamic vinegar arrived from my grandfather to me," he explains.

The longer a Balsamico is aged, the more sought-after (and therefore expensive) it becomes. For those on a budget, a more recent invention — Balsameda, or Balsamico marmalade — offers the wonderful flavors of aged Balsamico in jelly form at a price just a fraction of the syrup's.

Balsamico is a wonderful drizzled over Parmigiano Reggiano, grilled meats, vegetables and even omelets. In Modena, the vinegar makes its way into nearly every dish. Visitors can find this out for themselves as, in addition to a shop, Pedroni's facility includes a restaurant where travelers can enjoy traditional handmade foods.

Balsamico also makes its way into the innovative and often complicated dishes at L'erba Del Re, a Michelin star restaurant in Modena's city center, where business men in expensive suits drink grappa below brightly colored paintings. Here, chef Luca Marchini drizzles it over everything from fried ricotta-filled gnocchi with morels to braised beef cheeks with spinach and shallots in Lambrusco. It even makes its way onto an indulgent dessert of cherry cake topped with fried bread that's filled with chocolate milk foam. The treat evokes the chef's true childish streak under all the restaurant's seriousness — it's as if someone filled warm doughnut holes with chocolate milk bubbles.

Back in Parma, the chef at Ai Due Platani uses a Balsamico aged 12 years to make sweet, tangy marinated cipolline onions. **CC**

