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Life / Travel

## Travel Italy: Artisan cheeses and gourmet delights

Parmesan cheese and luscious meats make for spectacular cuisine in Emilia-Romagna

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BECCA HENSLEY

Abundant with regional products, hams, cheeses, wines and breads, salumerias are a common sight in Parma, Modena and other cities in the Emilia-Romagna Region.

By: **Becca Hensley** Freelance Travel writer, Published on Tue Feb 19 2013

**PARMA, ITALY**—At his Osteria Francescana in Modena, Massimo Botura, Italy's most famous chef, watches me feast on a plate of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese.

Nibbling chunks of this aged, artisan cheese isn't unusual in the central Italian region of Emilia-Romagna. After all, this rich, pungent cheese has been crafted here for nearly a thousand years. Following traditions first laid out by Benedictine monks, the cheesemaking has been passed from generation to generation.

A protected food product, Parmigiano-Reggiano can be made legally only amid this hilly landscape, abundant with vineyards, rich farmlands and cud-chewing cows.

And, like other gourmet gems from the area — salty prosciutto di Parma, pistachio-speckled mortadella, and thick-as-syrup traditional balsamic vinegar — Parmigiano Reggiano evokes history, terroir and the life-embracing soulfulness of the people.

If I were to guess, most Modenese, and other Emilia-Romagnians, eat a few ounces of the cheese every day.

"It's full of vitamins and easy to digest," says a grandmother shopping in a salumeria (meat and cheese store) in Parma with her cheese-gnawing grandchild in tow.

The protein-loaded cheese requires 145 gallons of fresh milk to make an 85-pound wheel of cheese and ages for at least 24 months and sometimes for as many as 50. Wheels of it can sell for 500 euros or more.

For the people of this region, Parmigiano Reggiano is an everyday food that's mostly eaten alone. Locals sprinkle it over pasta, pair it with fresh fruit, sprinkle it with traditional balsamic vinegar and stir it into sauces. Parmigiano-Reggiano is not your

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grand daddy's Parmesan cheese. One taste of the real thing and you'll never go back to the Kraft imposter.

I've nabbed a table at Osteria Francescana as a finale to several days touring and eating my way through the region. Here, like a disciple, I come to discover how Botura, a three-Michelin star chef, reinterprets classic Italian cooking. Bottura, who has worked in some of the world's best known restaurants, grew up in Modena. Closely rooted in his upbringing, his creative recipes prove that the Italian food the world adores an evolve.

"This is the food my Nona would have made had she known the meaning of the world umami at the time," he says about his cooking. (Japanese gourmands use the term "umami" to describe the taste associated with rich foods such as foie gras, mushrooms, tomatoes and scallops.)

Working closely with ingredients sourced from local farms, with a loyalty for foodstuff that hails from Emilia-Romagna, Chef Botura carves out an ever-evolving menu. "I began working deliberately with Parmigiano-Reggiano two decades ago," he says.

He isn't speaking about the cheese as a condiment to spoon over pasta. He delves into the very being of the cheese to transform it in unexpected ways. I'm eating a creation called: "Five Ages of Parmigiano Reggiano in Different Textures and Temperatures."

The dish embodies the very lifeblood of the region in bite-sized assemblages of the cheese. There's a gelato, a mousse, a lacy-crisped wafer, a-light-as-air smidgen of foam and a cream.

As he watches me eat, Bottura lets me know that in this signature dish, he has used Parmigiano Reggiano cheese varying in age from 24-40 months, as each age of the cheese boasts a distinctive flavor.

Botura's menu isn't all about Parmigiano Reggiano cheese; he's quick to use traditional balsamic vinegar of Modena or Mortadella in sophisticated ways.

That's really the beauty of visiting Emilia-Romagna. For food lovers, the region is a gourmet's paradise.

**Becca Hensley** is a freelance writer based in Austin, Texas.

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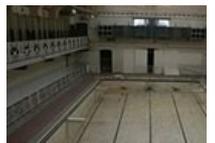
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