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2003

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DELICIOUS PARMA

A sensory paradise in Italy's northern countryside—
home of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

By BECCA HENSLEY

CONSORZIO

2003

TUTELA

D.O.P.



At salumerias like these, Italians buy ham, cheese and other groceries

At his three-star Michelin restaurant, Osteria Francescana in Modena, Italy, chef Massimo Bottura watches me feast upon a plate of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. Nibbling chunks of this artisan cheese isn't unusual in the central Italian region of Emilia-Romagna. After all, this rich, pungent cheese has been crafted like fine art here for nearly a thousand years. Following traditions first laid out by Benedictine monks, the strictly defined rituals of cheesemaking have been passed from generation to generation. A protected food product, Parmigiano-Reggiano can be made legally in Europe only within 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 and the life-embracing soulfulness of the people here.

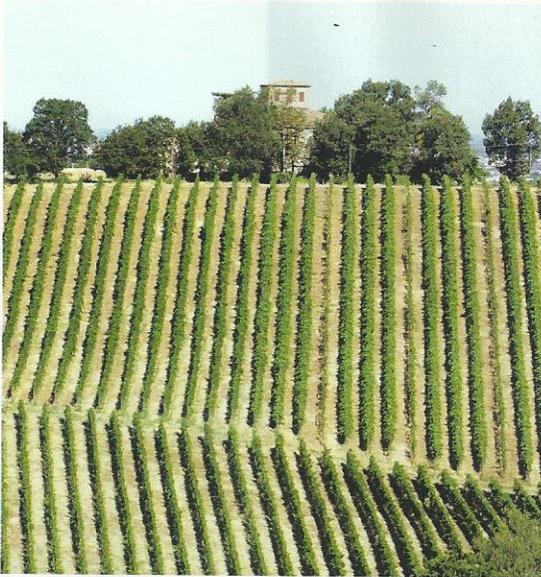
If I were to guess, most Modenese eat a few ounces of it every day. "It's full of vitamins and easy to digest," says a grandmother shopping in a salumeria (meat and cheese store) in Parma with her cheese-gnawing grandkid in tow, confirming my suspicions. This in spite of the fact that the protein-loaded cheese requires so much fresh milk to make (145 gallons per 85-pound wheel of cheese) and is so labor-intensive (it ages for 24 months or more) that wheels of it can sell for 500 euros—about \$640—or more.

IF YOU GO

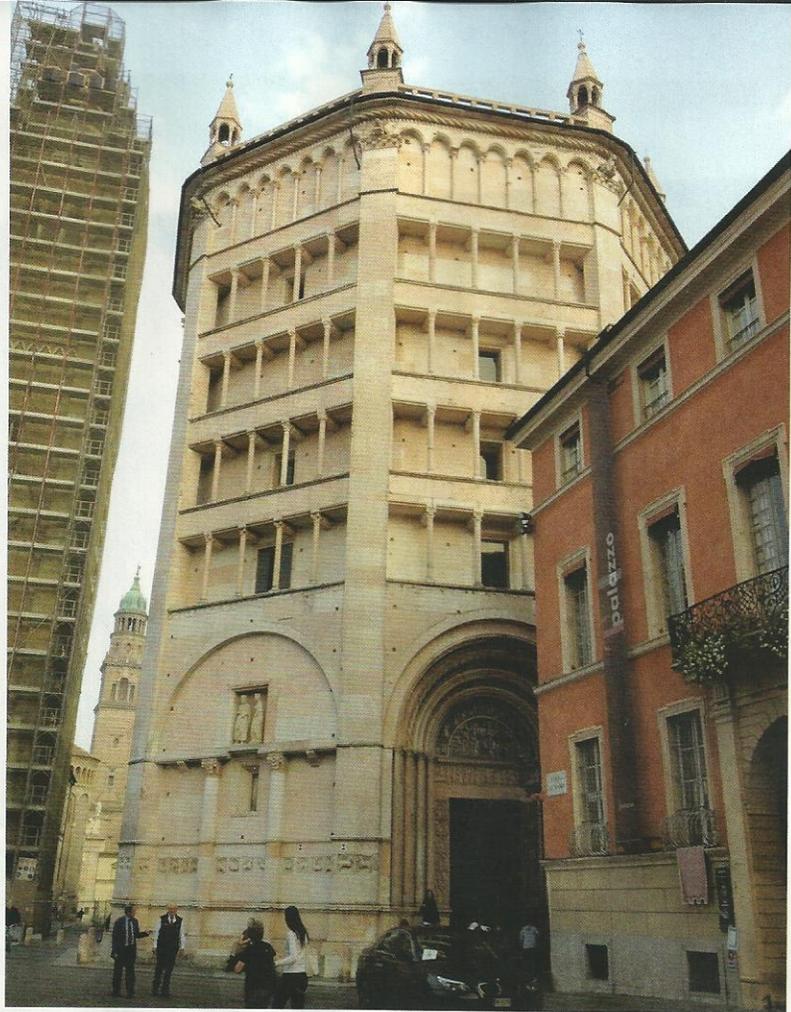
STAY: Hotel Canal Grande, canalgrandehotel.it

EAT: Ristorante La Greppia, ristorantelagreppia.com

DON'T MISS: La Marca winemaker, lamarca.prosecco.com



LEFT: A vineyard in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy;
RIGHT: A piazza in Parma.



Still, for the people of this region, Parmigiano-Reggiano is an everyday food that's mostly eaten alone. Nevertheless, locals do sprinkle it over pasta, pair it with fresh fruit, drizzle it with traditional balsamic vinegar and stir it into sauces. (Note: If you haven't savored its umami awakening, caramel-like goodness, know this: Parmigiano-Reggiano is not your granddaddy's Parmesan cheese. One taste of the real thing and you'll never go back to the Kraft imposter.)

So, what am I doing gobbling up a plate of Parmigiano-Reggiano with Italy's most famous chef? Actually, I've nabbed a table at Osteria Francescana as a finale to several days of touring and eating my way through the region. Here, like a disciple, I come to discover how he reinterprets classic Italian cooking.

A creative with a yen for poetry and a pedigree that includes work in the kitchens of some of the world's best-known restaurants (El Bulli, for one), Bottura grew up in Modena. Closely rooted in his upbringing, his innovative recipes prove that the Italian food the world adores does not

have to remain static. It can evolve, as long as the Italian accent remains intact. "This is the food my nonna would have made had she known the meaning of the word umami at the time," he says about his cooking.

Reinterpreting recipes from yore, referencing history and children's tales, embracing the products and food traditions of the region, Bottura resists going overboard with the smoke-and-mirror show that can be molecular gastronomy. Instead, his food can be easily recognized for what it is.

Working closely with ingredients sourced from local farms and with a loyalty for foodstuff that hails from Emilia-Romagna, Bottura carves out an ever-evolving menu. What he's watching me eat isn't a commonplace snack of cheese bits and crackers. Rather, it's an elaborate spectacle called "five ages of Parmigiano-Reggiano in different textures and temperatures." As harmonious as a practiced symphony, this dish embodies the very lifeblood of the region and shows the true mettle of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. Here, on one small plate, a tower of

overlapping cheese dishes stand alone in bite-sized assemblages. There's a gelato, a mousse, a lacy crisped wafer, a light-as-air smidgen of foam and a cream. I find each to be like its own song: some trill, others rumble as a low bass, others seem to meld with the rest—almost as a threshold to the next bite. The temperatures vary, too, from ice-cold to room temperature to warm. Bottura has used Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese varying in age from 24–40 months, each boasting a distinctive flavor.

But like the yield of the region, Bottura's menu isn't all about Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese—he's quick to use traditional balsamic vinegar of Modena or mortadella, for example, in sophisticated renditions. And that's really the beauty of visiting Emilia-Romagna in the first place. For food lovers, the region's a gourmet paradise—arguably the world's most fulsome culinary capital. To visit here is to gorge in glorious ways. The challenge is to know when to stop; if not, remember to pack your fat pants in the likely case you overindulge. ★