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TRAVEL

Living la dolce vita — the foodie edition

Katy McGuinness

March 17 2019, 12:01am,
The Sunday Times



Cesenatico's beautiful canal port was designed by Leonardo da Vinci in 1502. Today, the town is frequented by well-heeled Italian tourists

ALAMY

THE TIMES/SUNDAY TIMES

www.thetimes.co.uk

domenica, 17 marzo 2019

irculation
790.000

Visitatori unici
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Italy's Emilia-Romagna region, on the so-called Adriatic Riviera, is known as the larder of Italy for good reason. Even the locals seem to be spitting images of world-renowned Italian chefs. Everywhere I go in Modena, for example, I see Massimo Bottura, chef-patron of Osteria Francescana — or someone who looks exactly like him.

Every middle-aged man in the city appears to have adopted the signature look of its most celebrated son: wiry frame, short-cropped greying hair and chunky glasses.

Bottura is a superstar chef, philanthropist, and food waste and social inclusion activist. He has put Modena on the culinary map by reinventing classic Italian food at his three-Michelin-star eatery, which occupies the number-one spot on the world's 50 best restaurants list.

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Bottura has put Modena on the global culinary map
REX FEATURES

It would be a shame for any self-respecting foodie visiting Modena to miss out on the Osteria Francescana experience. If your pockets are deep, try the Festina Lente (“make haste slowly”) 10-course tasting menu, which costs €250 per person plus €140 for matching wines. It features some of Bottura’s most celebrated and curiously named dishes, including “An eel swimming up the Po river” and “The crunchy part of the lasagne” .

Booking a table at Bottura’s Osteria Francescana (osteriafrancescana.it) is hard, but not impossible. Online reservations open on the first day of each month and have to be made at least three months in advance.

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If you miss out, there's a waiting list for every lunch and dinner service, so you could plan to be in the area and hope against hope that someone loses their appetite.

If your budget does not stretch to such extravagance, Osteria Francescana's sister restaurant, Franceschetta 58, is more low-key but just as stylish – and reservations are easier to secure (mains from €17; franceschetta.it).

Franceschetta 58 is a far better restaurant than Trattoria Aldina, next to Modena's excellent Albinelli market. The trattoria crops up in all the guidebooks, but it seems to be resting on its laurels. This spring, Massimo Bottura will open another new eatery, Casa Maria Luigia, which means you could have a weekend break in Modena and eat only in the master's restaurants.

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Bologna is steeped in history
ALAMY

Emilia-Romagna, in northeast Italy, has about the same population as Ireland and its cities are synonymous with much-loved foodstuffs. For example, there's Modena (balsamic vinegar); Parma (wafer-thin ham and parmigiano reggiano, the "authentic" parmesan cheese); and the capital, Bologna (bolognese sauce and bologna sausage or baloney).

Bologna is one of the wealthiest cities in Italy, and it is famed for its medieval and Renaissance architecture, characterised by colonnade walkways that keep the locals dry on the soggiest of days. The large student population lends Bologna a vibrant edge, with late-night cafes dotted around Piazza Maggiore, the city's medieval heart. The Signorvino wine bar, shop and restaurant on the piazza is as popular with locals as it is with tourists (wines from €4.90, signorvino.com).

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My two must-visit restaurants in Bologna do not include the Rick Stein-recommended Ristorante Ciacco (dull, stilted and expensive); Drogheria della Rosa (another guidebook stalwart where it feels as though the staff are going through the motions); or Massimiliano Poggi (a cab ride outside the city and way too fussy). Instead, diners should make haste for All'Osteria Bottega, and order the exquisite salumi and “tortellini in brodo” (tortellini in broth), the city’s defining dish (mains from €16; No 51 Via Santa Caterina).

At Trattoria di Via Serra, a 30-minute walk from Piazza Maggiore, you will find a sophisticated clientele enjoying simple, delicious food made with organic ingredients sourced from small artisan producers based in the surrounding mountains (mains from €15; trattoriadiviaserra.it). For both restaurants it is advisable to book ahead.



Fields in Rimini

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domenica, 17 marzo 2019

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Bologna's train network is excellent, so it is a great base from which to explore the beautiful cities of Padua, Mantua and Parma (Italy's capital of culture for 2020), have lunch with wine, and never have to worry about driving home afterwards. While you're at it, pick up local cheeses, cured meats and other deliciousness from small shops along the way.

Do not bother with Fico Eataly World, a food theme park beyond Bologna's city walls. It has 1km of shops dedicated to the food of the region, but feels like an overpriced hypermarket, devoid of soul.

After a few days of epic eating, head east in Emilia-Romagna for some coastal R'n'R: rest and Rimini.

Rimini is the hometown of film maker Federico Fellini, and there are tributes to the director in mural form all over the city to mark the 100th anniversary of his birth in 2020. The murals depict scenes from his films, and some are better than others.

Rimini's 15km-long main beach is a busy strip, so take a step back to the lovely old walled town where you will find traces of the Malatesta family that once ruled these parts (their heraldic symbol is the elephant).

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The Fountain of Neptune, Bologna
ALAMY

In the Tempio Malatestiano, designed by architect Leon Battista Alberti — Renaissance on the outside, gothic within — you will find a fresco painted by Piero della Francesca and a crucifix by Giotto di Bondone, the Florentine artist (free; diocesi.rimini.it).

The Surgeon's House at Piazza Ferrari, in the centre of the old town, is a preserved Roman house sometimes called "little Pompeii" (€7; domusrimini.com).

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The old town has some lovely shops, cafes and piazzas plus a flower market in the old fish hall, and a fine selection of bars and restaurants. Look out for pasta dishes featuring “strozzapreti” (“priest strangler”), an elongated form of hand-rolled cavatelli made without egg. Legend has it the pasta was devised in the 1600s to “choke” gluttonous and hated clerics.



A Roman bridge over Rimini's Marecchia river
ALAMY

For something more glamorous, follow Beyoncé's lead and make a reservation at La Marianna, which specialises in seafood (mains from €12; trattorialamarianna.it).

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Angolo Divino in the fisherman's quarter is a good choice for those seeking vegetarian and gluten-free options (mains from €9; osteriaangolodivino.it).

From Rimini, there are excursions to San Marino, the oldest republic in the world, where horror fans can find vampire and torture museums. There are also plenty of duty-free perfume shops for those of a more sensitive disposition.

Far more charming is Santarcangelo — a €20-taxi ride from Rimini — with its cute little shops, and lively bars and cafes (the town's large pedestrianised area is popular with young families). Santarcangelo hosts an experimental theatre festival in July, and there's a nice walk up to the clock tower.

Hire a bike and cycle to the Collina dei Poeti vineyard, which produces just 20,000 bottles a year using only the sangiovese grape (collinadeipoeti.it).

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Ravenna is called the city of mosaics
ALAMY

Just 15km south of Rimini is the more upmarket Riccione, where the thermal baths have Roman origins (€55; riccioneterme.it). Cesenatico, 21km north of Rimini, is more upmarket still, its port canal designed by Leonardo da Vinci in 1502. In the evening, Cesenatico's restaurants put out their tables on either side of the canal and most of their customers are wealthy Italian tourists.

In Cattolica, a seaside town known as the "queen of the Adriatic", you will find the Regina Museum with more than 8,000 exhibits (free; cattolica.info).

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Finally, head to Ravenna, a Unesco world heritage destination nicknamed the “city of mosaics” and the location of the tomb of Dante. It’s an affluent city with a thriving theatre and opera culture. On a sunny afternoon, the Piazza del Popolo is where everyone – from elderly women to schoolchildren – gathers for ice cream, coffees and drinks. No wonder Ravenna is considered one of the best places to live in Italy.

Katy McGuinness was a guest of Topflight, Ireland’s Italian specialist. Its Bologna and Rimini tailor-made holiday (with two nights in Bologna; seven in Rimini) costs from €1,059 per person, including return flights from Dublin, departing in May (01 240 1700; topflight.ie).

LOWDOWN ON ITALY’S LARDER

WHERE TO STAY

Rimini

Hotel de France – three-star accommodation on the waterfront; some rooms have balconies and sea views (doubles from €57; hoteldefrance.it)

Modena

Vittorio Veneto 25 is within easy walking distance of Modena’s cafes and eateries. It is a room-only hotel, but there is a Nespresso machine (doubles from €160; vittorioveneto25.it)

Bologna

Rustic-chic Opera Residence aparthotel (doubles from €170; petronioresidence.it)

- For more info on Rimini, see emiliaromagnaturismo.it