

U O O D P A R M A



SYNONYMOUS WITH FINE FOOD (*PROSCIUTTO DI PARMA*, ANYONE?), THIS BOUNTIFUL PROVINCE IN THE HEART OF EMILIA-ROMAGNA ALSO PACKS A PUNCH WHEN IT COMES TO ART AND ARCHITECTURE, AS WITNESSED BY THIS YEAR'S SELECTION OF THE CITY OF PARMA AS ITALY'S CAPITAL OF CULTURE.

BY CLAUDIA FLISI PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURYN ISHAK

Fields behind Antica Corte Pallavicina, a medieval castle turned restaurant, inn, and farming estate near the banks of the Po River.

PARMA

THE MUSEO DEL CULATELLO ON AN ESTATE NEAR PARMA, IN the northern Italian region of Emilia-Romagna. It was not the sort of museum I had expected from Italy's Capital of Culture for 2020. There were no religious paintings or Renaissance sculptures; instead, photographs and diagrams described how the black pig of Parma produces the most coveted of prosciutti: *culatello di Zibello*, a fine-cured ham made from the choicest muscle of the pig's rump.

Then again, food is culture. We are what we eat, and in a place like Parma, where eating is an art form, food has arguably achieved its ultimate artistic expression. Parma was named a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy in 2015, making it the first Italian city to receive this recognition. That's saying a lot in a country where good food is literally everywhere. (I am a bicultural Italian who has lived, studied, worked, and traveled all over the peninsula for decades, and I continue to be struck by how hard it is to get a bad meal in Italy).

Parma was honored as this year's Italian Capital of Culture in part for being the hub of a province, also called Parma, that has the highest concentration of both PDO (protected designation of origin) and PGI (protected geographical indication) food products in Europe. It's home as well to such culinary legends as the Barilla pasta company and the Alma cooking school. But while food is culture, culture is more than food, and Parma's attributes extend well beyond the dinner table. Within its compact city center are fine examples of Roman, Romanesque, Renaissance, and baroque architecture, as well as striking modern buildings like the Auditorium Paganini, a former sugar factory transformed by Renzo Piano into an acoustically superb concert hall. Renaissance artists Antonio da Correggio and Francesco Mazzola (a.k.a. *il Parmigianino*) were native sons. Toscanini was born here in town, and Verdi was born in the village of Le Roncole, about half an hour's drive away, so *i veri*

Left: Hams curing in the centuries-old *culatello* cellars at Antica Corte Pallavicina. Opposite, from left: A sitting area at Antica Corte Pallavicina; cheese maker Andrea Ramelli at Parma 2064, a Parmigiano-Reggiano factory in Fidenza.

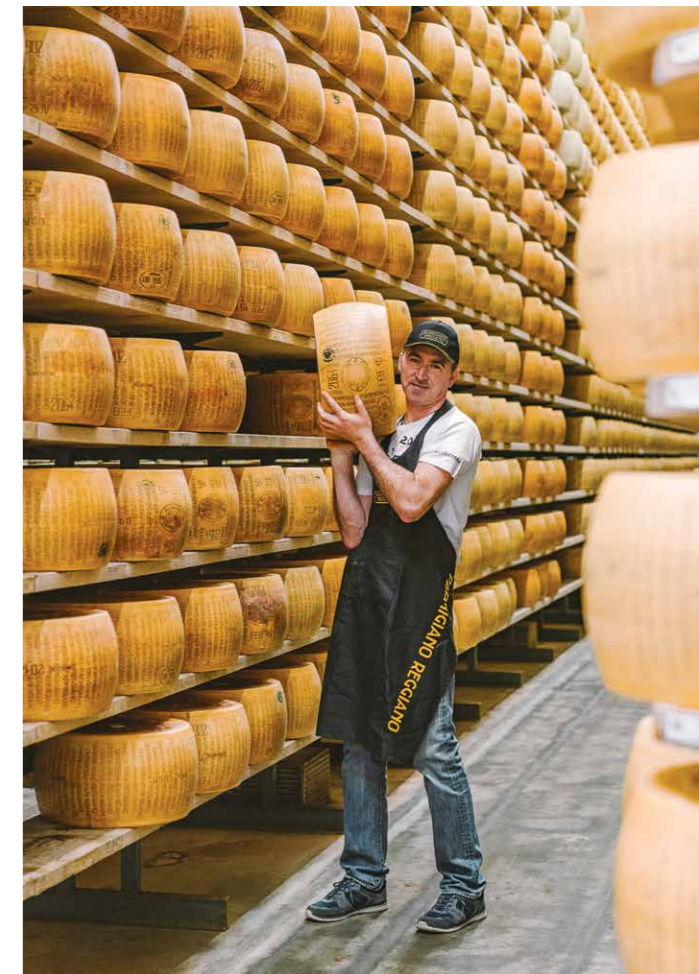


Parmigiani (those truly born in the city) have no trouble claiming him as a local boy made good.

Another cultural icon is Maria Luigia d'Asburgo—neither an artist nor a musician, but probably Parma's most beloved ruler. The daughter of Francis I of Austria and Napoleon Bonaparte's second wife, she was made the Duchess of Parma after her husband's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo and remained so until her death in 1847. In those three decades she contributed actively to the cultural life of her adopted city, sponsoring the construction of Parma's main opera house, the Teatro Regio, as well as libraries, art galleries, and museums. Locals still speak of her with reverence, and perfume shops carry a fragrance—the essence of the Parma violet—that she commissioned during her long reign. *Acqua di Parma*, the international fragrance company founded here more than a century ago, adopted Maria Luigia's coat of arms as its logo in acknowledgement of her role in jump-starting Parma's perfume industry.

This year, the graceful city of 193,000 and its surrounding countryside are abuzz with exhibits, shows, art installations, video-mapping spectacles, and more in support of the theme chosen for Parma's tenure as cultural capital—*la cultura batte il tempo*. This has a double meaning in Italian: culture *marks* time, and culture *defeats* time. The museum dedicated to *culatello* is a perfect example of both. It is located in a 15th-century castle once owned by the noblest family of the area, then fallen into disrepair, partly flooded by the Po River, and purchased by the Spigaroli family of restaurateurs in 1990 with the desire to restore it to its former glory. Today, the Antica Corte Pallavicina encompasses a Michelin-starred restaurant, a *relais* with a handful of antiques-strewn guest rooms, a tavern, *culatello* cellars, and farmland that provides the meat, fruits, vegetables, and grains used by acclaimed chef Massimo Spigaroli and his staff.

The Museo del *Culatello* is a recent addition. One room is dedicated to the Parma pig itself, a black-skinned breed favored by Spigaroli for its historic significance. Exhibits in another room describe the surrounding territory and its relationship with the Po River. A third area takes you (tastefully, if graphically) through the slaughter



process and the role of the *masalén* (butcher) in extracting the coveted morsels used for *culatello di Zibello*, which is made by only a handful of producers in the surrounding flatlands of Bassa Parmense. Vegetarians may not be enamored of this delicacy, but the pig and its byproducts (*prosciutto*, *culatello*, *pancetta*, *coppa*, *salame*) are core to the Parmesan economy, so the butcher is treated with reverence. I also walked through centuries-old cellars where hundreds of hand-wrapped hams were hung for seasoning. I could smell the meat and the must, feel the cold air and humidity. The artisanal nature of this foodstuff was palpable.

My last stop at Antica Corte Pallavicina was the *Hosteria del Maiale*, a cozy brick-walled tavern with wooden tables and friendly service. I ordered a platter of local cold cuts that arrived on a *tagliere*, or wooden cutting board: *culatello*, *coppa*, *guanciale* (pig cheek), fine-grained Felino salami. The meats came with pickled veggies, freshly baked bread, and, oh yes, chunks of Parmigiano-Reggiano, because in this part of the world, no table is complete without the king of cheese.



THE DETAILS

Getting There

From Milan's Malpensa Airport, which receives nonstop flights from Bangkok, Hong Kong, and Singapore, it takes almost two hours by car to reach Parma, and about 40 minutes longer by train via Milano Centrale Station. From downtown Milan, the journey is considerably shorter.

Where to Eat

A 15-minute drive from Parma's city center, **Trattoria Ai Due Platani** (39-521/645-626; fb.com/aidueplatani) in Coloreto rewards with such Emilian specialties as pumpkin tortelli and veal fillet with a tuna sauce. Also worth a detour is the Michelin-starred restaurant at **Antica Corte Pallavicina** (39-524/936-539; anticacorte.pallavicinarelais.com), where chef Massimo Spigaroli offers a seasonal tasting menu. In Parma proper, standouts include **La Greppia** (39-521/233-686; lagreppiaparma.it), **La Forchetta** (39-521/208-812; fb.com/laforchetta.parma), and **Ristorante Cocchi** (39-521/981-990; ristorantecocchi.it), the latter an institution dating back to 1925.

Where to Stay

There are plenty of charming B&Bs to choose from in Parma, including centrally located **Al Battistero d'Oro** (39/338-490-4697; albatistero.doro.com; doubles from US\$130), which occupies an 18th-century palazzo. For views over Piazza Duomo, book a suite at nearby **Palazzo Dalla Rosa Prati** (39-521/386-429; palazzodallarosapрати.it; suites from US\$180). On the Po River in Polesine Parmense, **Antica Corte Pallavicina** (39-524/936-539; anticacortepallavicinarelais.com; doubles from US\$195) has 11 guest rooms in a beautifully restored medieval castle.



WALKING THROUGH CENTURIES-OLD
CELLARS HUNG WITH HUNDREDS
OF HAND-WRAPPED HAMS, I COULD
SMELL THE MEAT AND THE MUST,
FEEL THE GOLD AIR AND HUMIDITY.

Parmigiano-Reggiano so dominates local cooking that many believe the city's official color—a sunny yellow—was inspired by the cheese. But in fact *giallo Parma* is based on the predominant hue used for buildings in the historic center in the 17th century. Back then, it was known as *chiaro d'ovo* (“egg white”), a subtle whisper of what would become today's Parma yellow. It imbues the old cityscape with a soft golden glow.

Regardless of the color's origin, no visit to Parma is complete without a stop at a Parmigiano-Reggiano factory. I chose Parma 2064, about 25 kilometers northwest of downtown Parma. The facility is set beside a sprawling modern outlet mall called Fidenza Village, and the juxtaposition of 21st-century shopping and a cheese-making heritage that dates back to the 12th century is both disorienting and entirely fitting to a place that honors its past even as it focuses firmly on the future.

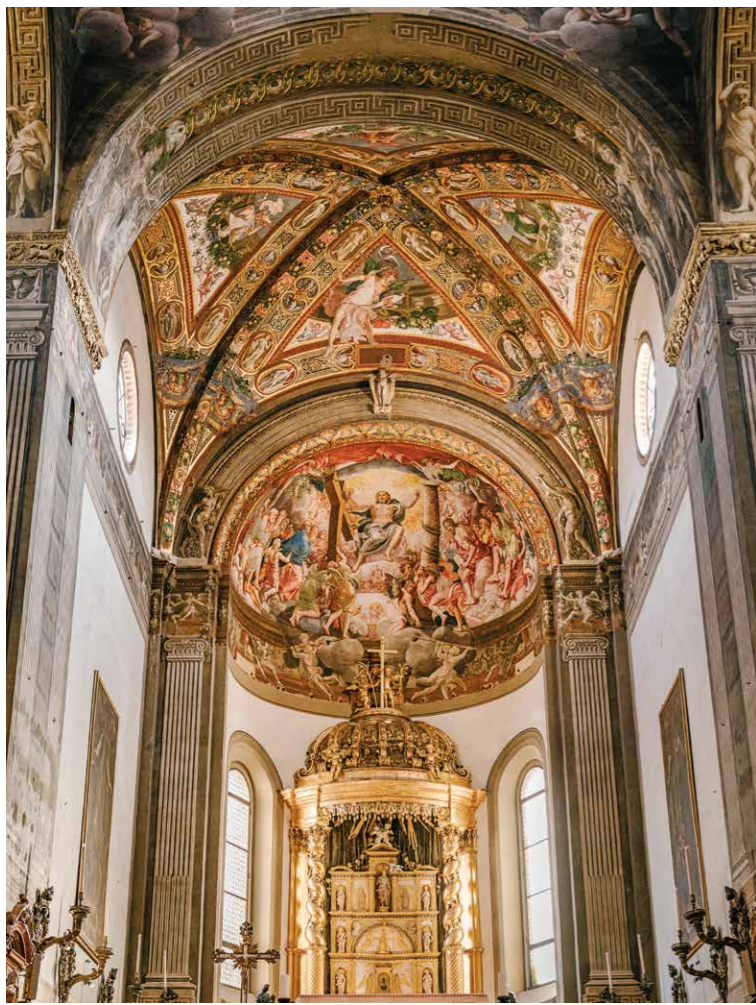
To see the cheese being made, I donned a gauzy tunic, hat, and shoe covers, and had to shuffle along attentively because of the wet concrete floors in the production area. Affable cheese maker Andrea Ramelli was my guide, patiently explaining that the process for making Parmesan cheese hasn't changed since the 12th century, though the equipment certainly has. I watched as whole fresh morning milk was pumped into copper-lined tanks and mixed with rennet to curdle, while husky workers with strong arms hefted 45-kilo wheels into molds. After a year in storage, the wheels are tested by an inspector from the Consorzio Parmigiano-Reggiano, who taps them with a wooden hammer. Ramelli allowed me to tap a few wheels to prove that even a rank amateur can hear the difference between a “good” wheel and a defective one. He was right. The really good ones have a more solid and uniform sound. These are labeled and aged beyond the basic 12-month period, for two or three years or more. The result is a rich, seasoned taste.

Parma's particular climate and topography have a lot to do with the taste of its cured meats and cheeses. Most of the province lies in a valley between the Po River and the Apennine Mountains, where the soil has an elevated salt content. (It is not by chance that the name of the local spa town of Salsomaggiore translates as “a lot of salt”). That salt means high humidity and a climate that can generate fog at any time of year, including during my January visit. But these same conditions are ideal for the maturation of culatello, Parmigiano, and a host of other delicacies.

To explore more of the province's native bounty, I headed to Trattoria Ai Due Platani (Trattoria of the Two Sycamores). Located in Coloreto, a suburb of Parma, the restaurant has been around for more than 80 years but only came into its own in 2005, when it passed into the hands of veteran restaurateurs Giancarlo Tavani and Mattia Serventi and a noted chef, Gianpietro Stancari. Today, a hopeful diner has to book two months in advance, and the trattoria's 80 seats are sold out practically the day they become available.

I could understand why from the first dish: an amuse-bouche of creamed local potatoes with egg yolk and shaved black truffle. It was amazing to behold and to devour; my only hesitation was whether to eat it with a fork or a spoon. (Answer: spoon.) Next was a tagliere of cold cuts, the usual Parma suspects but taken to a higher level: Spigaroli-family culatello, coppa Piacentina, pancetta from Medesano, salame from Fornovo di Taro. But the pièce de résistance was a *bis di tortelli con zucca e erbetta con burro fuso e Parmigiano*—two kinds of tortelli

Left: The Teatro Farnese. Opposite, from top: The Parma River as it flows north through town; bis di tortelli with pumpkin and herbs at Trattoria Ai Due Platani.



The 13th-century Battistero in Piazza Duomo. Opposite, clockwise from top left: The apse at Duomo di Parma; Giancarlo Tavani and chef Gianpietro Stancari at Trattoria Ai Due Platani; cold cuts at a local osteria; in the backstreets of Parma's city center.

filled with either pumpkin or herbs and garnished with melted butter and the ubiquitous Parmigiano. Both were subtle and creamy. The secret, according to the chef, is that the pasta is always made the same day so it cooks quickly and doesn't dry out; the fillings remain moist because of the fast cooking.

I should have walked the seven kilometers back to town but I wanted to investigate another unique attraction: the largest bamboo labyrinth in the world, conceived by Italian art publisher Franco Maria Ricci. The Labirinto della Masone sprawls over eight hectares and consists of more than 200,000 plants. It opened in 2015 in the small community of Fontanellato and is purportedly the result of a bet made between Ricci and his friend, the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, almost four decades earlier. Blind alleys and deceptive junctions make it easy to get lost amid the maze's verdant beauty.

In need of a spiritual uplift, I caught a bus back to the Piazza Duomo, the religious center of Parma. This is where the city's principal cathedral and stunning pink-marbled baptistery are located, forming an architectural jewel of medieval Europe.

The exterior of the Duomo di Parma is sober and Romanesque, but the cathedral's lavish gilt-and-arched interior is designed to make the spirit soar. The fresco adorning the vault of its dome—the *Assumption of the Virgin* by Correggio—represents one of the first uses of *trompe d'oeil* and foreshortening. These techniques were later adopted by baroque illusionist painters and became more prevalent, but in 1530, they were revolutionary. My guide, Elisabetta Ivaldi, advised me to hold onto something when I looked up because the effect could be vertiginous. She was right.

The 13th-century Battistero (Baptistery) next door is less disorienting but more breathtaking. An octagonal structure of orderly pink stone, it represents one of the first examples in Europe of the transition from Romanesque to Gothic styles. The inside is a paean to the importance of the number eight in Christianity: an eight-sided baptismal fountain, eight facades, 16 arches, 16 niches with artwork, all stunning. (Eight symbolizes the Resurrection: when the seven days of the week are completed, the eighth day begins the life cycle again).

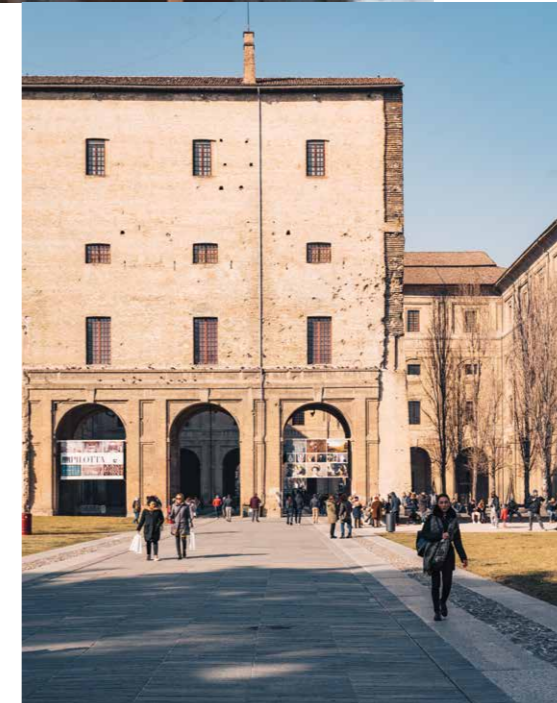
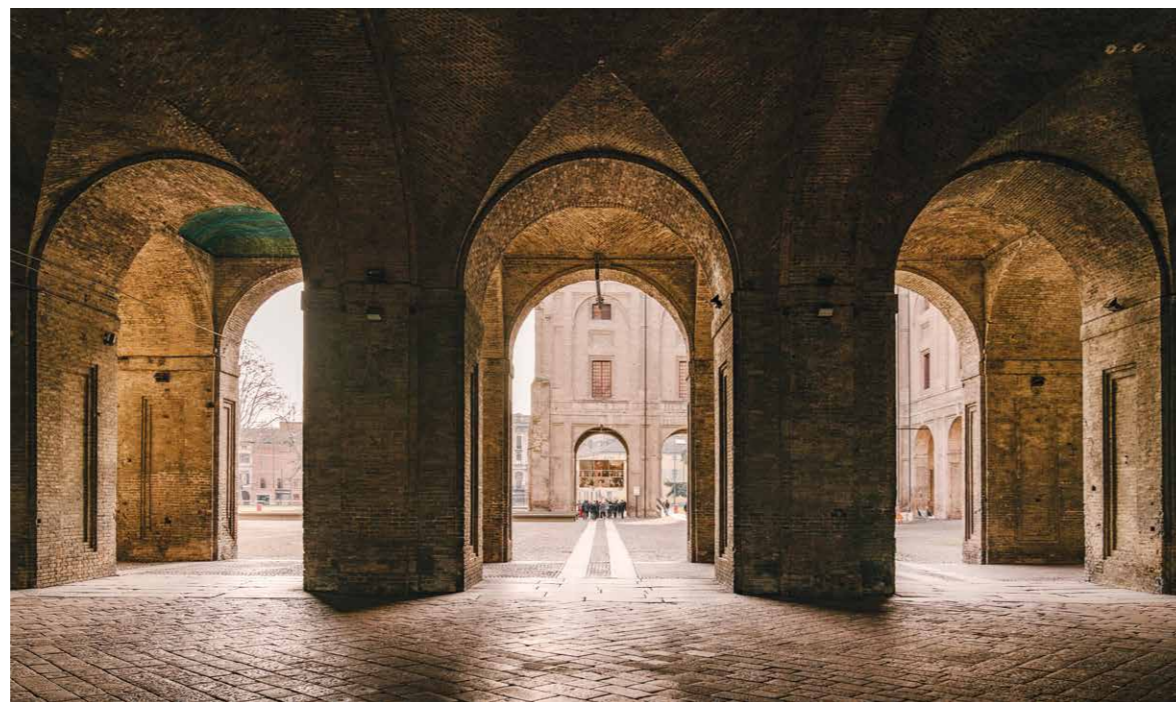
Some consider the Battistero to be the most beautiful structure in the city. Yet it faces stiff competition from the Palazzo della Pilotta, a complex of imposing marble buildings from different time periods that was founded in the 15th century as an administrative center for the then-Duke of Parma, a member of the influential Farnese family. Today it hosts the city's national gallery, an archaeologi-

cal museum, Italy's oldest printing museum, and a major research library. But it's the venerable Teatro Farnese that commands attention. At its opening in 1628, this baroque-style wooden theater seated 4,500 spectators and hosted tournaments with floating ships and naval battles. Eventually these productions became too expensive even for noble families and the theater fell into decline. Bombed during World War II and rebuilt in the 1950s, it stands today as one of only three Italian Renaissance theaters still in existence.

While a visit to Teatro Farnese or any of the attractions of the Palazzo della Pilotta is rewarding, there is beauty in simply walking the grounds amid the expanses of green grass, inviting benches, arched porticos, and cobbled courtyards. The sound of my shoes echoing on these ancient stones was a reconfirmation that culture can defeat time. And since food is culture, a good meal is also timeless, especially in Parma. ●



Clockwise from right: A view through an arched portico at Palazzo della Pilotta; Massimo Spigaroli, chef and owner of Antica Corte Pallavicina; the cozy interiors of Hosteria del Maiale; the approach to the Palazzo della Pilotta complex.



THE DETAILS

What to Do

Join the sightseers flocking to Parma's **Piazza Duomo** (piazza-duomo-parma.com) to view its immense Romanesque cathedral and octagonal medieval baptistery. From there, a five-minute walk toward the Parma River brings you to the galleries and museums of the vast **Palazzo della Pilotta** (pilotta.beniculturali.it), which also houses the Teatro Farnese, a jewel of baroque architecture. The **Labirinto della Masone** (labirintodifrancomariaricci.it) in Fontanellato is another must-see attraction, as much for its bamboo maze as for owner Franco Maria Ricci's remarkable private art collection; there's also an on-site restaurant run by the ubiquitous Spigaroli brothers. Fans of Parmigiano-Reggiano will want to visit a factory like **Parma 2064** (2064.it) to learn how the legendary cheese is made.

Parma's Capital of Culture designation this year brings with it a full calendar of performances, exhibitions, culinary events, and other happenings; visit Parma2020.it for details (alas, the website is only in Italian). If you're visiting in autumn, be sure to take in the **Festival Verdi Parma** (Sep. 24–Oct. 18; teatroregioparma.it/festival-verdi-2020), now in its 20th year. Organized by the Teatro Regio and other venues, the program will feature four of Verdi's operas, including a rarely performed French version of *Macbeth*.