

Is Italy's food Mecca a feast or a fiasco?



photos by Claudia Flisi

Disneyland for foodies or disaster for financiers? Both could be an accurate description of FICO, Italy's largest food attraction, which opened on November 15, 2017, just outside Bologna, Italy.

The Disneyland connection is clear, starting from the name: FICO stands for Fabbrica laliana Contadina (Italian factory farm). It is a play on words, because *fico* in Italian means “fig” and in slang means “cool”. The full name is FICO Eataly World, as international food lovers know “Eataly” better than they know idiomatic Italian. Eataly is the farm-to-table purveyor of Italian edibles that opened in Turin in 2007, and currently spans 40 locations around the world. FICO is like Eataly on steroids: more space, more merchandising, more money. The founder of both is Oscar Farinetti, heretofore a marketing *wunderkind*. Not coincidentally, he professed his admiration for Disneyland in a speech before the park’s official opening.



FICO claims to be the “largest agri-food park in the world”, whatever *that* means. Sprawling over 100,000 square meters, with botanical gardens, 200 different species of farm animals, 40 restaurants at the outset (some have since closed), 40 farming operations, six multimedia “experiences”, six classrooms, 100 shops, a miniature golf course, a thousand-seat

conference center, a nursery, a bookstore, and a bike path through the complex (with free three-wheeled bicycles provided), it definitely feels like a recreated Hollywood version of what a foodie might love about Italy rather than an authentic farm experience.

But the balance sheet of Bologna's Disney-esque foodieville is a far cry from the record-breaking results of Hollywood's Disney. The latter has sizzled on the stock market in the last year; the former decided not to list itself at all because of its dismal performance. First year aspirations for FICO were initially for six million visitors. That dropped quickly to three million and the final count for 2018 was 2.8 million. The average spend per visitor was barely 17 euro (19 dollars) against a projected 20 euro (\$22.35) per person. Revenue totaled 48 million euro against a forecast of 85 million. In 2018, Eataly itself was in the red for more than 17 million euro (19 million + dollars). News about 2019 has not yet been announced, and some Italian financial publications sniff that Farinetti is less than forthcoming about his situation both for FICO and for Eataly.

In late 2019 FICO announced plans for a 200-room hotel and an indoor amusement park with 13 child-focused attractions. The idea is to persuade families to come and to remain for more than a day, upping tourist flow and spend. There is also speculation that a Chinese firm wants to build a park similar to FICO near Nanking.

(Some of the sniffing and speculation is clouded by political optics. Farinetti is an unabashed progressive and Bologna is a left-leaning city so right-of-center Italian media have had their claws out for him since the get-go).

The park does not charge an entrance fee, but visitors need to remember to bring their wallets. The park's location is outside of Bologna center, so one has to take public transportation (€16 round-trip but slow) or drive (fast and easy but parking is pricey). Planning and paying for selected *edutainment* experiences ahead of time online saves money but eliminates the adventure of wandering through foodieville spontaneously.



One can sign up for a one-hour orientation tour of the park guided by a Biodiversity Ambassador (€ 15). There are sign-ups for courses and workshops covering dozens of subjects. Options change so it's important to check FICO's website ahead of time for topics such as pasta making;

creation of sweets; making cheese; the life of bees; food photography; home gardening; brewing Italian beer. Most last an hour and cost € 20 per person, but some are longer and more expensive, such as a three-hour course in pasta-making for € 60. Some classes and tours have been designed specifically for children, who represent the most steady stream of visitors during the week. The first year of FICO, there was even a one-hour Zumba class to help visitors assuage their guilt about all that food.

The six multimedia experiences can be purchased separately or together as a package. The themes are: man and fire; man and earth; man from soil to bottle; man and sea; man and animals; man and future. They include informative panels of information, interactive games and quizzes, video clips, short films, and sensorial adventures like planting a real seed in a hydroponic farm and tracking its growth weeks later by computer with video.



The entrance to the park encompasses a display of 12,000 apples. Why

not figs (as a tie-in with "fico")? Because, explains Farinetti, there are 1200 varieties of apple in Europe, and 1,000 of these are found in Italy. The country's bravura in the kitchen begins at the farm, and that is a concept he hopes every visitor to FICO will take away. "Most people talk about food by focusing on chefs," he notes, "while we want to put the emphasis on the beginning, with the farmers."

The food stands may remind guests of Eataly, only bigger and more elaborate. A Slow Food philosophy permeates the atmosphere: think Salone del Gusto held in Turin every two years (<http://www.salonedelgusto.com/en/>). One big difference is that Slow Food showcases small suppliers who don't have the funds to market themselves, while FICO's stands are international brands with large marketing budgets, such as Venchi, Lavazza, Piretti.

Among FICO's freebies are visits to its menagerie of dairy cows, beef cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, donkeys, horses, rabbits, and geese. Two hundred different species of animals have been divided by category (cows, pigs, etc.), then those of the same species have been put together in enclosures and had to learn to get along. A guide confided that while the pigs were chill and the cows mellow, it took a long time for the various species of sheep to accommodate each other.

This 20,000 square-meter section is a crowd-pleaser for children, though well-traveled visitors will observe the limited space allocated for these animals. The horses and cattle especially are extremely confined, and my guide hastened to assure me that they are brought out to larger quarters on a daily basis.



Positioned near the animal stalls are displays of old farm equipment and information about them. The objective is for visitors to remember the past as well as plan for the future. Other displays remind guests that crops should be consumed at specific times of the year, and that food waste affects everyone. The lessons never end at FICO. Neither does the food. The long-term financial wherewithal is another story.



INFORMATION

A visit to FICO should start with www.eatalyworld.it/en.

The park is open daily from 10 am to 11 pm (midnight on Saturdays), with ample parking and a shuttle bus that runs regularly between the Bologna train station and the park, and between Bologna's Marconi Airport and the park. www.eatalyworld.it/en/how-to-get-here

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