



FORBES

FORBES LIFE

RESTLESS PALATE

Savoring Parma

Soul food, Italian style.

BY ROWAN JACOBSEN

Every now and then while traveling, there comes a moment when the slog of delayed flights and jet lag fades away and you snap to attention, feeling the vibrations of a particular place and culture, and you remember why you travel in the first place. I had such a moment at the Gran Caffè Orientale in Parma, Italy, where 62-year-old Romano Cavagna, with a granite face straight off a Roman bust, stood calmly slicing prosciutto. He wielded a gleaming Berkel slicer like a virtuoso, cranking out plate after plate of ultrathin, perfect charcuterie. That is his entire job, and he's been doing it for 50 years. In a ham-mad town like Parma, that's what life is like. It would be unthinkable to start a meal any other way.

Cavagna set a plate of artfully curled prosciutto on our table. It was rosy, translucent and incredibly delicate. I lifted a piece to my mouth. It smelled like melon and macadamia nuts. I looked around me, at Parma's central piazza, on a road laid out by the Romans in A.D. 187. Prosciutto was already here when the road builders arrived. As Cavagna pushed through the crowd with another plate of ham, I felt myself lock into the patterns of existence that had shaped this place for ages.

Parma is a handsome, wealthy town yet still, at its roots, agricultural. It lies in the Po River valley of Emilia-Romagna, the region north of Tuscany long considered Italy's food capital. This low, well-watered river plain, with its amber waves of grain, has inspired transcendent pasta and dairy traditions. Parma itself is the region's crown jewel, a city with an abundance of resources and very little to prove. Just as there is old money and new money, there is old food and new food, and Parma is an old-food town. What other city has lent its name to two items on every gourmand's short list: Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and Prosciutto di Parma, Italy's most famous ham? By law, both foods can be made only in the surrounding countryside.

You haven't lived until you've stood in a cold, damp Parmigiano-Reggiano aging room with 25,000 80-pound wheels of cheese stacked 40 feet high on wooden boards, watching a robot slowly move between the walls of cheese, turning each one and rubbing its surface to prevent mold from forming on the outer rind. Even more unforgettable, to me, was seeing the humans wrestle the huge new cheeses out of the massive copper vats of whey





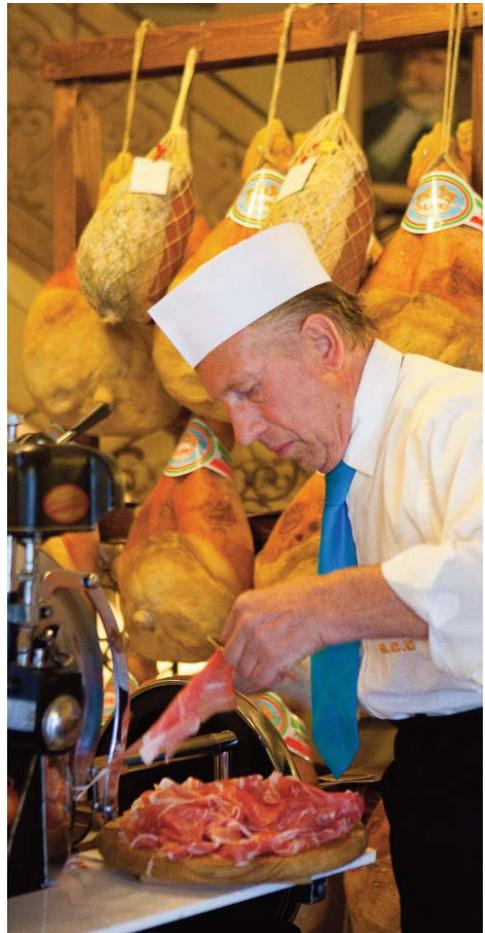
Parma's proprietary cheese, Parmigiano-Reggiano, revered for its nutty, fruity flavor.





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Top left, the birth of Parma's signature cheese; above, Romano Cavagna presides over the Berkel prosciutto slicer at the Gran Caffè Orientale in the city's Piazza Garibaldi (left).

using nothing but cheesecloth. They almost seemed like midwives, ushering these new beings into the world. The leftover whey gets fed to the pigs, becoming partially responsible for the sweet flavor of prosciutto—the cheese and ham are entwined.

Considering the beguiling and complex flavors of a good Parmigiano-Reggiano, I was amazed to learn how simple the ingredients are: just milk, salt, a touch of rennet to start the curdling process and a dollop of whey from the previous day's cheese, which carries the microorganisms that give the cheeses their distinctive nutty, fruity flavor. This chain, each cheese bound to the next,

links back into deep history.

After the sweet nursery aromas of the cheese dairy I wasn't entirely prepared when I drove across the valley to the hills of Langhirano—where the welcome sign reads Terra del Prosciutto ("Land of Ham")—walked into a prosciutto curing house called Ghirardi Onesto and inhaled the porkiest air imaginable. I tried not to pass out. Prosciutto di Parma is made of nothing but the haunch of a pig and a little sea salt, and there were thousands of back legs hanging here. Once I'd acclimated myself, however, I noticed the artistry of the maestros at work, salting the hams by hand and testing their quality with

horse-bone needles. I quickly gained a new appreciation for their genius.

The secret of Prosciutto di Parma is time. Instead of being cooked, like a typical American ham, the raw leg undergoes an epic curing process. After being hand-rubbed with Sicilian sea salt, it is hung to air-dry. When I visited, the building windows were open to let in the Marino, a dry sea breeze wafting over the Apennine Mountains. The salt and dry air draw moisture out of the meat, so that no harmful microbes can survive in it. More importantly, they concentrate flavor and tenderize the muscle tissue, which is where that famously silky prosciutto





texture comes from. Prosciutto di Parma must age for a year before it can be sold (and 400 days before it can be exported to the U.S.). By then the curing process has broken apart about a third of the ham's molecules into smaller compounds that also happen to be the same molecules responsible for the aromas of apple, melon, pineapple, butter, coconut and caramel. Culinary magic!

The Parmesans themselves prefer both Prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano-Reggiano at an age of two to three years. By then some of the proteins in the cheese and meat have broken apart into their constituent amino acids. We all have special taste buds that detect these amino acids and send a big, fat pulse of pleasure to our brain whenever they do. This intensely savory "fifth taste" is known as umami, a Japanese term meaning "the essence of deliciousness," and while Japan can boast many high-umami foods like oysters and soy sauce, Parma is the undisputed center of the universe for umami-seekers like me.

Living in the States, we think of Prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano-Reggiano as precious and expensive foods to be savored in tiny amounts. The miracle of visiting Parma is to see the city's tables piled with these hams and cheeses, as familiar and casual as old friends. I remember a night at Ai Due Platani, a charming trattoria in the countryside just out of town. I sat on the veranda and let the evening breezes from the surrounding fields wash over me. A basket of torta fritta—small pillows of fried dough that are a Parmesan staple—arrived. I picked one up, wrapped it with a slice of prosciutto and popped it into my mouth. I washed away the salt with a gulp of Lambrusco, the cold, fizzy, tart local red wine. Then I ate another. And another. This was not a special treat. It was the stuff from which a way of life has evolved. 

A Parma Foraging Guide

Where to Stay

GRAND HOTEL DE LA VILLE

Parma has just one five-star hotel, and at least one of those stars might rub off under scrutiny. Still, the Grand Hotel de la Ville is comfortable and an easy walk to all the downtown highlights. Housed in a former Barilla pasta factory and surrounded by health clubs, restaurants and cinemas, it makes you feel like part of the neighborhood.

PARMA, LARGO PIERO CALAMANDREI 11; \$260 TO \$490; 39-0521-030002; WWW.GRANDHOTELDELAVILLE.IT

Where to Dine

TRATTORIA AI DUE PLATANI

Tortelli—ravioli stuffed with ricotta and wild greens in spring and summer, and with pumpkin in autumn and winter—is the semiofficial pasta of Parma, and Chef Matteo Ugolotti has the insiders' vote for best tortelli in Parma. It's everything you want—thin, golden, toothsome and deep in flavor. For dessert ask for a scoop from the giant copper cauldron of zabaglione, ladled out tableside and served with crunchy cookie shards.

COLORETO (OUTSIDE PARMA), STRADA BUDELLUNGO 104/A; 39-0521-645626; WWW.DUEPLATANI.IT

GRAN CAFFÈ ORIENTALE

Take a tip from the locals and come not so much for the cuisine as for the camaraderie. Nibble a plate of prosciutto and drink like a Parmesan, which means local bubbly, either red (Lambrusco) or white (malvasia).

PARMA, PIAZZA GARIBALDI 19; 39-0521-285819; WWW.GRANCAFFEORIENTALE.COM

RISTORANTE PARIZZI

Situated downtown on Parma's main street, this minimalist oasis of white features a nice blend of traditional and edgy dishes in season: duck-stuffed ravioli in red wine and black truffle sauce; Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese flan with thyme sauce; risotto with snails and wild cress.

PARMA, STRADA DELLA REPUBBLICA 71; 39-0521-285952; WWW.RISTORANTEPARIZZI.IT

AL TRAMEZZO

Chef Alberto Rossetti is the most playful and creative chef in Parma, with the Michelin star to prove it. For a competition he reimagined the club sandwich as dessert, with fried pound cake for bread and crispy, caramelized Prosciutto di Parma in the middle. If you don't want to get that crazy, relax with a plate of ravioli stuffed with peas and mint in a sauce of leeks and hazelnut oil.

PARMA (OUTSKIRTS), VIA ALBERTO DEL BONO 5B; 39-0521-487906; WWW.ALTRAMEZZO.IT

Where to Go

PARMIGIANO-REGGIANO TOUR

PARMIGIANO-REGGIANO CHEESE CONSORTIUM; 39-0521-292700; WWW.PARMIGIANOREGGIANO.COM

PROSCIUTTO DI PARMA TOUR

Parma Golosa offers gastrotours of Parma, including producers of prosciutto, parmigiano and balsamic vinegar.

WWW.PARMAGOLOSA.IT

GHIRARDI ONESTO

WWW.GHIRARDIONESTO.COM

BALSAMIC VINEGAR TOUR

Emilia-Romagna's trifecta of great foods is completed by balsamic vinegar, made almost exclusively in the area of Modena (about an hour east of Parma). The House of Pedroni has been making balsamic vinegars with its own trebbiano grapes since 1862 and still uses many of its original barrels. Tours by appointment.

RUBBIARA DI NONANTOLA (OUTSIDE OF MODENA), VIA RISAIA 4; 39-059-549019; WWW.ACETAIAPEDRONI.IT

