

NATIVE SOIL: THE MAGIC OF MODENA

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THE MAGIC OF MODENA

An off-the-radar trattoria in the city's historical center attracts locals and tourists alike with hospitality and exceptional food.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

Strolling down Via Albinelli in Modena, it's the easiest thing in the world to miss. There is no sign and there is no menu. Yet the Trattoria Aldina fills up each day with an eclectic crowd of local businessmen, office workers, shoppers from the nearby Mercato Albinelli, and travelers from around the world. It is set on the Via Luigi Albinelli on the second floor of an antico palazzo, in Modena's historical center. Dining at Aldina's is like having lunch at Nonna's house.

"Buongiorno," says our waitress, who tells us the pasta is fresh and made in house. Stuffed pasta, tortellini, minestrone, and potato dumplings with black truffles are among the offerings. As she talks, she whips a pen and an old-fashioned carbon copy paper pad out the pocket of her gingham print apron.

She speaks in a heavy Modenese accent—almost too thick to understand—and gets right down to business. "Secondi," she says, and rattles off the main courses: roasted lamb, veal, pork or grilled filet steak with balsamic vinegar. Vegetable choices include onions, slow cooked in aceto balsamico, broccoli and oven roasted potatoes.

Another waitress quickly passes and places a breadbasket filled with tigelli (pancake rounds), gnocco (fried pillows of dough) and coppia Ferrarese (a twisted four-point bread horn that dates back 700 years). Without an introduction, our second waitress says, "Lambrusco per tutti!" Lambrusco is the local bubbly red wine that Emilia Romagna is famous for. She assumes, like all Modenese, that everyone will be drinking it.

There is a homey feeling all around. Regulars enter one by one, exchanging a kiss on each





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check with the owner. An older woman dines alone, eating a dessert behind a *La Repubblica* newspaper. Yellow and red oversized tablecloths dress each table, copper pots hang on the wall, and the windows look out onto the cinnamon hued rooftops of Modena.

There are six of us at our table. We are a group of food-loving friends (two couples in the mix), having lunch in a trattoria unknown to any of us. Our friend Alberto, a local food lover, Slow Food advocate, and founder of Eataly, suggested we come. We departed Bologna at 9 a.m. and in 45 minutes we could see the famous Ghirlandina poking out from Modena's skyline as we drove toward the center. We spent the morning visiting the Romanesque city and are now at the dining room table trying to figure out what to order.

Everyone decides to order both a primo—pasta, and secondo—main course. This is not something we normally do, but we are here in Modena, one of the richest gastronomic food cities in Europe, where pasta is still made by hand using a generous amount of eggs and wheat from the nearby farm country.

Our plates of pasta come soaring out of the kitchen brought to our table by Gianluca Ferri, the owner. Aromas swirl, blending sage, black truffles and Parmigiano-Reggiano. He quickly returns to the bar, pops open a bottle of Lambrusco and pours it into juice glasses with short stems. "Tutto bene?" he asks, meaning is everything okay.

The pasta—tortelloni piegati a mano—an egg pasta folded by hand and stuffed with whipped ricotta and spinach, sautéed in sage and butter, and the gnocchi have us silent.

Secondi include roasted veal with laurel and red peppercorns, a shin of pork slow-cooked with garlic and herbs in a light sauce of finely chopped carrots, onions, celery, white wine and laurel leaves; and, zampone, the sausage-like pig's trotter stuffed with spiced pork shoulder and pork cheek, and served with lentils.

Everyone takes their time eating and sipping on the light and bubbly Lambrusco. From the table, we call our friend Alberto and thank him for directing us to Aldina's.

With no room left for dessert, only the brave order. The waitress, however, brings six dessert forks followed by six tasting portions of Bensone Modena. The cake is a traditional moist cake stuffed with grape must and usually dipped into Lambrusco. Deep black espresso follows.

After lunch, the dining room clears out and we are the only table left. Gianluca comes over and asks if everything was all right. We tell him that Alberto from Slow Food sent us.



SHOPPING DAY: Fresh produce fills Modena markets.



MODENA CITY HALL
in the Piazza Grande
includes a clock tower that
dates to the 15th century.

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He quickly heads to the bar, opens a locked cabinet and returns to the table carrying a bottle of aged traditional balsamic vinegar and six caffè spoons. He fills each spoon with the aged vinegar and explains its characteristics. Chef Gaetano Strippoli, who is at the helm of the kitchen, pulls up a chair and joins us at our table.

The two partners get on like clockwork, basking in the glory of their success. Gianluca explains their workday. “It’s a lot of long days either in the kitchen or on the floor. We work in two shifts: lunch, then we break, and reopen for dinner. We rest on Sunday—we’re closed. The other six days a week the restaurant serves daily specials using local ingredients from the Mercato Albinelli and the artisan purveyors in the Emilia Romagna region. We cook in the season and respect the local artisans who work so hard to carry on the authentic food culture of our region,” he says.

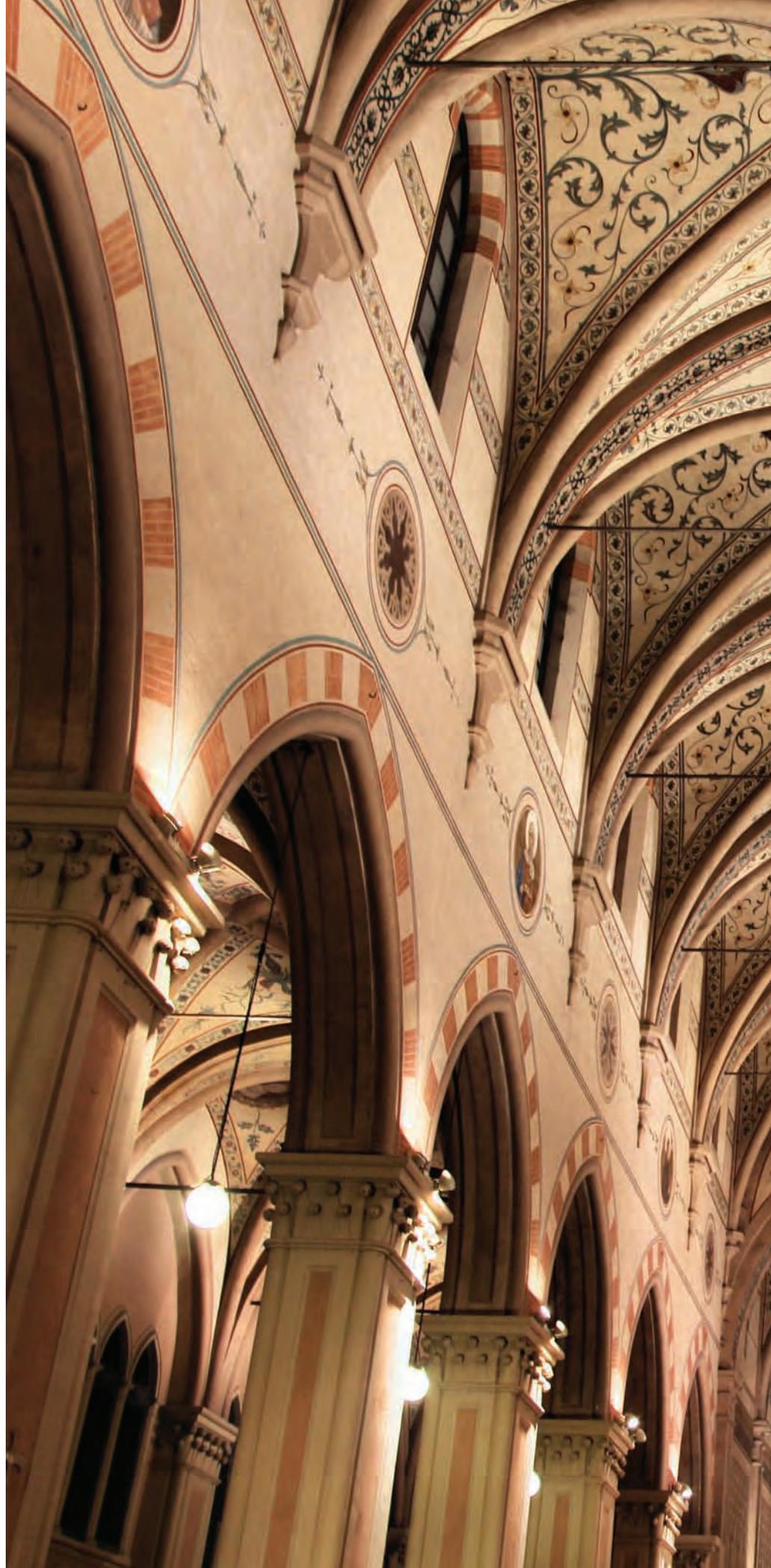
Chef Gaetano discusses an important premio, or award, that Aldina was given and keeps posted on its door. “The hard work and dedication pay off. We were awarded the Bottega Storica by the City of Modena and the plaque is displayed at the second floor entrance. This award recognizes Trattoria Aldina for keeping values and tradition the same for over 50 years with the original furnishings and high quality cuisine,” he says.

We leave Aldina not only feeling very full, but knowing we have made new friends. Gianluca and Gaetano invited us back for the Balsamic Vinegar festival on May 31.

Before lunch we toured the Mercato Albinelli, named after Luigi Albinelli, once the mayor. The Mercato Albinelli is a landmark covered market that houses high quality local artisan products: vegetables, nuts, spices, cheese, olive oil, fish, bread, pastry, salumi and meats, wine, prepared foods and flowers. The market is a National Heritage site and a tribute to Slow Food, welcoming more than 30,000 visitors every week. Smiling vendors happy to explain how to cook, and offering samples of their food, made it an appetizing experience. The covered market, which dates back to medieval times, moved from the Piazza Grande to Via Albinelli in 1903 to avoid congestion in the square. Pristine and organized, this covered market is a must on any traveler’s itinerary.

After lunch we visited the Cathedral, the Ghirlandina and Piazza Grande, a UNESCO site. The Cathedral, Torre Civica and Piazza Grande in Modena are a group of Romanesque structures from the 12th century.

The Cathedral, or duomo as it’s called in Italian, is a Roman Catholic church set on the Piazza Grande. The Piazza Grande is the





CHURCH OF SAINT FRANCIS
was built by the Franciscans starting in 1244 and took more than 200 years to complete.

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main square noted for its ancient cobblestones that was once home to the outside market. The Ghirlandina Tower is the bell tower of the Cathedral and reaches 86 meters, about 282 feet, high. It's the symbol of the city with its two balustrades that form a garland. Adjacent to the Ghirlandina is the Town Hall and Clock Tower, which dates to the 15th century. There is also the Ducal Palace and the University of Modena, one of Europe's oldest, founded in 1175.

Modena is certainly a food lover's paradise and is home to respected artisans who produce the prized traditional aged Balsamic vinegar (the youngest bottle has been aged a minimum of 12 years), Prosciutto di Modena and Parmigiano-Reggiano. These local foods take time to make and age, and are part of the Slow Food Movement. Founded by Carlo Petrini in 1986, the nonprofit Slow Food organization works to promote interests related to food, culture, traditions, identity, and lifestyle, respectful of local territories and traditions. It has 100,000 members, volunteers and supporters in 150 countries, a network of 2000 community small producers, 1500 pipelines and local branches, of which 17 are in Emilia Romagna. Aldina is one of only two Slow Food trattorias in Modena.

Modena was also home to Enzo Ferrari, the Italian luxury sports car manufacturer, and Luciano Pavarotti, the Italian operatic tenor. In fact, it is often called the Capital Of Engines, home to not only Ferrari, but De Tomaso Pagani and Maserati. Today the Ferrari group is not only producing the fastest cars in the world, including the Modena Yellow, but also features a leading wine and coffee brand.

After touring and shopping, we end our visit back at the Piazza Grande. Like all Italians we headed to the nearest bar for an espresso at Café Concerto, which spills onto the square. The café-restaurant is brimming with pastries from the ovens of renowned pastry maker San Giorgio of Modena, steamy espressos and cappuccinos, and an assortment of exotic teas. Prosecco and high-end wines from the region are also available by the glass. Everyone has a caffè and a few Amaretti di Modena and we call it a day. Slow food, fast cars, and a memorable day in Modena to remember.

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**BALSAMIC VINEGAR,
VINTAGE STYLE.**



THIS PAGE, TOP:

Fresh cheese and salami. Below: Gianluca Ferri owner of Trattoria Aldina and aged traditional balsamic vinegar.

