

# On Via Emilia

**Kurt Ganapathy** explores the western half of Italy's Emilia-Romagna region, a land famous for fast cars, frizzante wine and phenomenal food.

As I arrive in Bologna, the capital of Emilia-Romagna, I consider myself to be well acquainted with the region. Ducati, Ferrari, Lamborghini and Maserati – the names simply roll off the tongue. Each city along the ancient Roman artery of Via Emilia I remember from their football team's stint in Serie A. The food and wine – I know it all too well. Or do I? Thinking back, I realise that the lambrusco I've drunk was all cheap and a little too sweet. And the "parmesan" cheese? Too often powder sprinkled over pasta that was more American than Italian. At the invitation of Emilia Romagna Tourism and Camera di Commercio Reggio Emilia, it was time to discover the heart of this "land with a soul".

\*Photography courtesy of Kurt Ganapathy

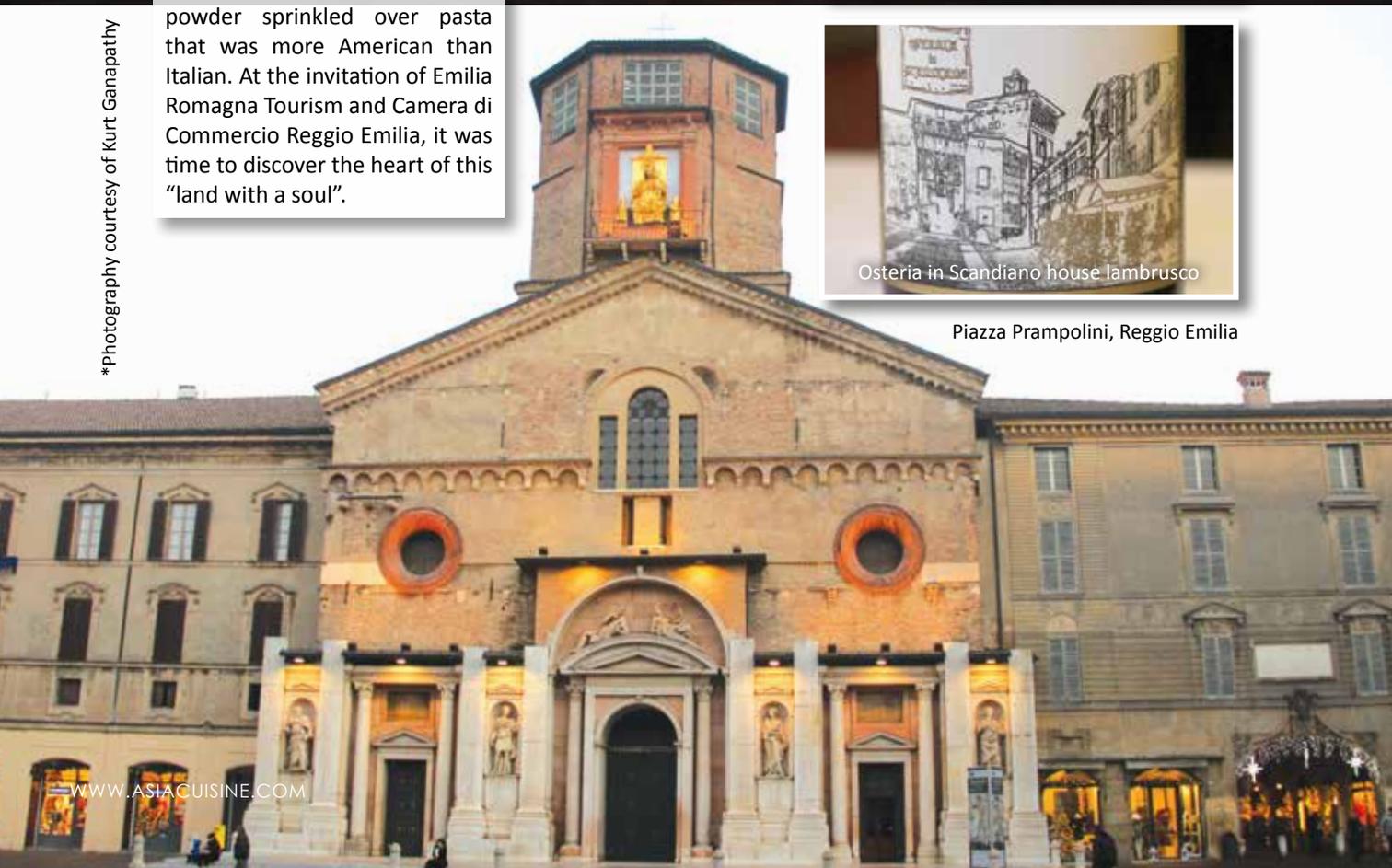


tagliatelle al ragù



Osteria in Scandiano house lambrusco

Piazza Prampolini, Reggio Emilia



## “Kilometre Zero”

After overnight travel by way of Istanbul, the stillness around me offers welcome respite. Gnarled vines and autumn foliage sprawl across the surrounding slopes and on a wide plain that extends until it disappears in the morning mist, smoke rises silently from chimneys. I am at Pianderna Agriwellness ([pianderna.it](http://pianderna.it)), an estate in the hills just outside the city of Reggio Emilia. The estate is an all in one destination for rest and relaxation, with accommodation and meals available onsite. Four lakes on the property await anglers and trails for would-be explorers run through 38 hectares of undisturbed woodland. The rest of the hundred hectares is planted with fruits and vegetables. Pianderna is part of the “kilometre zero” movement promoting produce that travels a negligible distance to get from farm to table. Their farmers market is stocked with wine, jams and preserved vegetables produced by the owners. Inspired by the concept, I descend to the town of Scandiano where lunch awaits at Osteria in Scandiano ([osteriainscandiano.com](http://osteriainscandiano.com)).

## A Scandiano Secret

Opened in 1985 by husband and wife team Contrano and Nadia Medici, Osteria in Scandiano is a family restaurant. Today, one of their sons, Andrea, helms the kitchen and another, Simone, manages service. To begin with, I am poured a glass of Brina d’Estate Tenuta d’Aljano from the local Colli di Scandiano e Canossa DOC. In the spirit of “kilometre zero”, this is a sparkling white wine made with a grape unique to the area – spergola. A fresh and fruity wine, it goes well with a cream of pumpkin soup with baked prosciutto di Parma. For my main course, my education on true lambrusco and Emilian cuisine begins. I am served tagliatelle al ragù – the original Bolognese pasta. My guide Federica Cortezzi explains how different it is from the Bolognese most often encountered outside Italy. The sauce is milk-based, not tomato-based, and nobody here calls it Bolognese; simply ragù. And don’t even think of dishing it out with spaghetti, it’s tagliatelle all the way. The dish is served with lambrusco bottled under the osteria’s own label. Seemingly humble at first, the wine pours a deep red with glass-filling froth. While rich in aromas of cherries and apples, it’s a dry wine well suited for the hearty ragù. For dessert, it’s zuppa Inglese (“English” trifle) paired with another spergola varietal wine, a 2012 Alfredo Bertolani Spergolina.

I spend the rest of the afternoon walking the grounds of Pianderna before heading to Casali Viticoltori ([casalivini.it](http://casalivini.it)), a winery founded in Scandiano in 1900. I meet Casali’s director general Gian Paolo Gavioli and winemaker Fabio Pizzi who take me on a tour of their facilities. Casali produces three lambrusco labels, which we sample straight from the tank, but perhaps their greatest claim to fame is what they’ve achieved with spergola. The vast majority of spergola wine is made with the Charmat method, but Casali’s Cà Besina is a classic method sparkling wine that spends seven years in their cellars before release. I sample the 2006 Cà Besina poured from magnums before dinner at the winery. Full-bodied, dry and fresh, it has elegance to it with its floral and tropical bouquet. It provides ideal company for slices of erbazzone (spinach pie), a local specialty. At dinner I see familiar faces, the Medici family from Osteria in Scandiano have prepared the meal in Casali’s charming dining area below ground level. The osteria’s signature cappelletti (the local name of tortellini) in capon broth pairs superbly with the 2015 Casali Pra di Bosso Premium Edizione 115 Lambrusco Reggiano. Moving on, an indulgent pumpkin risotto with foie gras gives me my first taste of traditional balsamic vinegar made in Reggio Emilia and a slow-roasted wild boar roulade with a ricotta soufflé sets me in the mood to experience the less conventional meats enjoyed in the region.



Luigi Benelli spongata of Brescello



Parmigiano-Reggiano inspection



Hombre Farm's dairy cows

## The Human Touch

It's early on my second day in Emilia-Romagna, but the team at Antica Fattoria Caseificio Scalabrini ([fattoriascalabrini.it](http://fattoriascalabrini.it)) is already hard at work. They are gatekeepers to more than 800 years of tradition. At Scalabrini and about 430 other artisanal dairies around the region, the only and original Parmigiano-Reggiano, or parmesan cheese, is being produced. Preparation for today's work began the evening before as milk from cows fed a natural diet was delivered to the factory within two hours of milking. Poured into holding basins and left to stand overnight, the cream in the milk separates naturally. When morning comes, this partially skimmed milk is transferred to copper cauldrons where it is mixed with whole milk from a morning milking. The mixture is warmed, and a natural whey starter is added. This whey comes from yesterday's production process and contains the natural cultures responsible for making the cheese. Soon, rennet is added and the milk begins to curdle. When the time is right, the maestro casaro (master cheesemaker) wields a massive whisk known as a "spino" and rhythmically cuts the curdled milk into granules. What follows is part science and part art. The maestro casaro and his assistants intently examine the granules in each cauldron, working by feel and a thermometer which uses the Réaumur scale; a scale that's obsolete everywhere else. With

water expelled from the granules, the heat is turned off and the granules sink to form a cheese mass. Finally, the cheese mass is lifted from the cauldron and split into two parts. Thus two wheels of Parmigiano-Reggiano are born. All told, 16 litres of milk go into 1kg of cheese. These young wheels of cheese sit in a mould for two to three days before they are stamped with identifying marks and assigned barcodes. Next, the wheels spend around 20 days immersed in brine before ageing on racks for a minimum of 12 months. After this year has passed, the wheels are inspected with a special hammer. It is only after this inspection that the cheese is certified as Parmigiano-Reggiano. It may continue to age for 24 months or more.

In Scalabrini's storage facility, stacked floor to ceiling with thousands of wheels of Parmigiano-Reggiano, I taste their 12-, 24- and 30-month-old cheeses. At 12 months, the cheese retains some elasticity and has a touch of tropical flavour to it. At 24 months the flavour grows stronger and sharper and the cheese becomes crumbly. At 30 months, it reaches its full strength with crystallised amino acids adding pleasure to each bite. Witnessing this process first-hand, identifying proper Parmigiano-Reggiano becomes easy, but Simone Ficarelli from Consorzio del Formaggio Parmigiano Reggiano offers a simple tip to help people avoid the fakes. If you see an Italian flag or a picture of the Coliseum, he shares with a laugh, it's not the real thing.



Gian Paolo Gavioli &amp; Fabio Pizzi, Casali Viticoltori

The wines of Villa di Corlo

## A Marriage Of Vine & Land

After my all-cheese breakfast, I'm ready to dive into the world of lambrusco. Who better to turn to than Alberto Medici of Medici Ermete ([medici.it](http://medici.it))? Because of the success of its sweet, simple and cheap incarnations, lambrusco has had to go a long way to reclaim its rightful place among the great wines of Italy. Medici Ermete has led the way with their Concerto. A single vineyard vintage lambrusco made with meticulously selected grapes, Concerto holds the distinction of claiming *Gambero Rosso's* prestigious Tre Bicchieri award for seven consecutive years. Medici tells me that lambrusco's presence in Emilia-Romagna can be traced back 2,000 years to the Etruscan era, a time frame that has allowed for perfect integration of vine and terroir. By some counts, there are around 60 different lambrusco grapes, but more accurately, there are between 13 and 17 varieties. Chief among them, Medici shares, are lambrusco gasparossa, lambrusco maestri, lambrusco marani, lambrusco montericco, lambrusco salamino (the grape that goes into Concerto) and lambrusco di Sorbara. Another unrelated grape, ancillotta, is often added to imbue sweetness. Medici Ermete is located within the Lambrusco Reggiano DOC, where most of the major varieties (except gasparossa) can be used.

There are three methods for producing lambrusco. The original method, rarely used today, is known as ancestrale. With ancestrale, secondary fermentation takes place in the bottle without the removal of lees. The Charmat method is by far the most common, but more producers are beginning to use the classic method. Medici Ermete's take on a classic method lambrusco comes in the form of Gran Concerto. If Concerto is the best of lambrusco, Gran Concerto is the best of the best. I savour the two wines side by side as I overlook the vineyard that produced them – the Concerto a juicy frizzante (slightly sparkling, bottled with no more than 2.5 bars of pressure) and the Gran Concerto a sophisticated spumante (more effervescent, bottled with at least three bars of pressure).

## The City Sights

For the rest of my trip, I am a resident of Reggio Emilia, taking a room at the historic Albergo delle Notarie ([albergonotarie.it](http://albergonotarie.it)) in the city centre. I visit Piazza San Prospero and Sala del Tricolore, the birthplace of the Italian flag, before adjourning for a private tour of Credem Collezione d'Arte. An active office space that's also a private museum, the basement of the complex houses ancient Roman ruins adjacent to conference rooms. A perfect symbol of the region's balance between past and present.



braised veal cheek with lambrusco sauce



Chef Gianni D'Amato & wife, Fulvia



erbazzone contemporaneo

salamino grapes may be used in wines from this DOC. A 2014 Cavicchioli U & Figli Vigna del Cristo tells you everything you need to know about the DOC with raspberry aromas and biting acidity (a “sword” as Caffari describes it). We head south of Modena next and arrive at the Lambrusco Grasparossa di Castelvetro DOC. This DOC promises wines of at least 85 percent lambrusco grasparossa, which are marked by lower acidity and prominent fruit notes. The 2014 Cantina Formigine Pedemontana I taste is true to form with intense cherry flavours and interesting earthy notes. My third stop is the Lambrusco Salamino di Santa Croce DOC in the northern reaches of Modena province where wines are at least 90 percent lambrusco salamino. The 2014 Cantina di Carpi e Sorbara Novecento is representative of the DOC; boasting mouth-filling red berry flavours, it is so deeply purplish-red that light doesn't pass through. With just enough time to study one more zone, I venture yet more northward to the Lambrusco Mantovano DOC, the only lambrusco DOC outside Emilia-Romagna, across the river Po in Lombardy. It's a personal favourite for Caffari. Lambrusco maestri, lambrusco marani, lambrusco salamino and lambrusco viadanese grapes are used here, creating full-bodied, tannic lambruscos with notes of tobacco, coffee and the forest floor. I experience this with the 2014 Cantine Lebovitz Rosso dei Concari.

## Matilda's Choice

To help spread knowledge of good lambrusco, it's important to recognise the producers who are dedicated to making the best wines possible. For six years now, that recognition has been bestowed by Matilde di Canossa – Terre di Lambrusco ([concorsolambrusco.it](http://concorsolambrusco.it)), a wine competition organised by Camera di Commercio Reggio Emilia. Named after Matilda of Tuscany, a ruler who held much of northern Italy in the eleventh and 12th centuries, the competition doesn't result in scores or medals. Rather, it creates an anthology of the best lambruscos across seven DOC/DOP and three IGT/IGP areas. At the offices of Camera di Commercio Reggio Emilia I meet Stefano Caffari, online editor of *Il Cucchiaino d'Argento* and lambrusco expert. He's travelled from Milan to introduce the typical qualities of the key production zones.

We start in the east, north of Modena, with the Lambrusco di Sorbara DOC, known for wines that are light in colour – pink rather than red – and high in acidity. Only lambrusco di Sorbara and lambrusco

## From Rustic To Revolutionary

My third morning is spent in Brescello, a town with many claims to fame. It was the setting for the *Don Camillo* film series that ran from 1952 to 1965 and it's the source of spongata, a spiced cake that dates back to the time of the Romans. I have lunch just outside Brescello at Osteria La Golena. La Golena is the domain of Azdora Antonietta, the kind of matriarch every non-Italian wishes they had in their family. She whips up a feast that at first seems confronting. Before me is a spread of homestyle dishes including rabbit cacciatora and donkey stew. Casting inhibitions aside, I dig in to be rewarded with an explosion of rustic flavours complemented by a carafe of draft lambrusco.

On the way back to Reggio Emilia, I call at Cantina Social di Gualtieri ([enotecaemiliaromagna.it](http://enotecaemiliaromagna.it)). A massive producer, their portfolio consists of over 30 products from table wines to the Terre di Lambrusco standard 2014 Ligabue Class. Always on the lookout for unusual varietal wines, I take an interest in their Fogarina di Gualtieri.



Clinica Gastronomica Arnaldo

A historically important variety in the region, fogarina had all but disappeared by the beginning of the 21st century when Gualtieri stepped in. They were instrumental in reviving the grape from a single conserved sample. Gualtieri's Mauro Manini tells me that Fogarina di Gualtieri – a lively off-dry rosé made entirely with fogarina grapes – is a one-of-a-kind wine.

With thoughts of lunch still with me, I'm off to a culinary adventure of a wholly different kind at Caffè Arti e Mestieri ([giannidamato.it](http://giannidamato.it)), the court of famed Reggio Emilia chef Gianni D'Amato and his wife, Fulvia. Chef D'Amato is best known for his restaurant Il Rigoletto which held two Michelin stars before it was badly damaged by the earthquake that struck the region in 2012. Caffè Arti e Mestieri is renowned for blending the classic and the contemporary which is evident in their *erbazzone contemporaneo* – a modern take on the dish enveloped in crispy pastry strings which are sent flying as you cut into it. This is followed by an equally inventive tortelli dish, served like lasagna, and an artistically laid-out plate of slow-cooked pork cheek in *lambrusco* sauce. The meal concludes with a fittingly updated tiramisù.

## The House That Arnaldo Built

Art dominates my penultimate morning as I walk through the halls of Collezione Maramotti ([collezionemaramotti.org](http://collezionemaramotti.org)), the private contemporary art collection of the Maramotti family – owners of the Max Mara fashion house. Soon, it's time for yet another culinary highlight and I arrive at a restaurant that's been called a temple of Emilian cuisine – Clinica Gastronomica Arnaldo ([clinicagastronomica.net](http://clinicagastronomica.net)) in Rubiera. Born in 1907, Arnaldo Degoli spent much of his early life as a nomadic musician before marrying into the family that ran the Aquila d'Oro inn. Degoli, and his wife Lina, opened the restaurant here in 1936. Today, daughters Anna and Franca, and their children, continue his legacy. Arnaldo might no longer be with us, but his presence is still felt in memorabilia that adorns the walls (including photos with a certain patron named Enzo Ferrari) and his caricature on the house *lambrusco*. The restaurant specialises in mouth-watering antipasti, homemade pasta, premium meats carved to order and sinful desserts all brought to your table on carts. My plate of meats – “secret” boiled beef tongue, roast veal and pork loin in Barolo – is simply exquisite. Service here is impeccable and the conversations that fill the establishment are not merely between servers and customers, but between old friends.



Alberto Medici



traditional balsamic vinegar on vanilla ice cream

## The Bridge Between Generations

The importance of family can't be understated in Emilia-Romagna and there is another thing that expresses family ties in a poetic manner – balsamic vinegar. Villa di Corlo ([villadicorlo.com](http://villadicorlo.com)) is a noted producer of lambruscos such as Corleto and Primevo, and in their namesake 17th century villa, they house an irreplaceable collection of balsamic vinegar. Products labelled “balsamic vinegar” are commonly seen around the world, but true Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale (Traditional Balsamic Vinegar/TBV) is only found in Modena and Reggio Emilia. Starting with cooked grape must, the vinegar is aged for a minimum of 12 years in a solera-style set of barrels (or battery), with each cask made with a different wood. At Villa di Corlo it is a tradition to begin a new battery with the birth of every girl in the family. Peering through the darkness of the villa's attic, I see names and birthdates that go back the better part of a century. Villa di Corlo's Maria Antonietta Munari Giacobazzi prepares a spoonful of one of their oldest vinegars – it's literally hair-raisingly good with its dazzling acidity. For the general public, their TBV is available in Affinato (12 years old) and Extra Vecchio (25 years old). Wonderfully versatile, TBV can be drizzled over everything from meat to vanilla ice cream.

Dinner today is light but definitely not boring. At the casual trattoria Botte Gaia, I'm served a charcuterie platter, Parmigiano-Reggiano with optional honey and TBV for dipping (which becomes my favourite way to eat it) and a plate of steak tartare – horse and buffalo steak tartare. The horse reminds me of venison, or a slightly gamey beef, while the buffalo's strong flavour demands a big tannic wine.

## One More Taste

It's my final day in Emilia-Romagna, but I won't leave without one more whirlwind tour of its highlights. I start at Hombre Farm ([hombre.it](http://hombre.it)), a Parmigiano-Reggiano producer that makes the cheese according to strict organic standards. There is a fullness to their cheese that sets it apart. The Panini family owns Hombre Farm, the same Paninis who have brought joy to millions of children through the years with their sticker books. The success of the company meant that its founder, the late Umberto Panini, could indulge in his love of cars and motorbikes. Within the property is Panini's astounding collection of Maserati cars with its most valuable members pointed out to me by his son, Giovanni.

One more meal to go, and I'm off to Castello di Formigine, a 13th century castle with a record of ownership that would give *Game of Thrones* a run for its money. The castle houses Ristorante Il Calcagnino ([ilcalcagnino.it](http://ilcalcagnino.it)), a bastion of Modena's cuisine. We're early for lunch and I get chef's table service from proprietor Claudio Cavani. Chef Cavani's braised veal cheek with lambrusco sauce and tosone steccato su valerianella e aceto balsamico (ham enrobed in fresh cheese from the Parmigiano-Reggiano production process) are dishes destined to leave lasting impressions. He also introduces a method of eating tortellini in broth that's popular with the region's older residents – a spoonful of two tortellini and broth with a dash of lambrusco added. It's a remarkable combination that heightens your senses.

For my last act, I make a pilgrimage to Maranello, the home of Ferrari. As I enter the Ferrari Museum ([museomaranello.ferrari.com](http://museomaranello.ferrari.com)), I am greeted by a quote from Enzo Ferrari – “The finest victory is that which is yet to be won”. It's a statement which fits Emilia-Romagna's status today. Those who traverse Via Emilia know the greatness of the region's genuine food, wine and produce. It's time for it to be known the world over. KG