

Where to Start in Emilia-Romagna?

The cheese, the pasta, the restaurants with Michelin stars? On a trip to this food-rich region of Italy, a writer's checklist overflows with delicious options.

By Sheila Yasmin Marikar Photographs by Susan Wright

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Tell people you are going to Emilia-Romagna, the food-rich region in northern Italy, and unsolicited recommendations follow: places to linger over pistachio ravioli and mortadella sandwiches, lasagna berberè and “really good” gelato.

“Possibly the greatest food city in the world,” one friend decreed about Bologna, the largest city in Emilia-Romagna, as well as its capital. “Beyond charming and crazy delicious,” said another.

By the time I arrived in Bologna in late March, my brain was swimming: Would it be better to do aperitivo at the place beneath the portico or the one in the alleyway? Would it be sacrilege to get pizza? When would I have time for a mortadella sandwich? Would there be anything to do besides eat?

The truth about Emilia-Romagna is that you cannot help but eat well, whether it's at a Michelin-starred restaurant — this is the home of the chef and restaurateur Massimo Bottura, whose temple of modernist cuisine, Osteria Francescana, put the region on the food-lover's map when it opened three decades ago — or a humble bar on a cobblestone street.

“We don't have the Dolomites,” said Mr. Bottura, while piloting one of his many Emilia-Romagna-made vehicles (a Maserati) down a country road. “We don't have the Amalfi Coast. But we have the countryside. We have a food valley.”

Then there are the hikes to take, the artisans to visit, the cars to drive — Ferrari and Lamborghini, as well as Maserati, all manufacture here — and the wine to taste. As I prepared for my trip, the list of things to eat, see and do seemed endless.



Aperitivo hour in front of the Chiesa di San Donata, in Bologna's historic center.

First, tortellini

My first stop, shortly after landing in Bologna from Los Angeles, was dinner at Al Sangiovese, a warm, wood-paneled restaurant on Vicolo del Falcone. I was joined by my friend Amanda Montell, an author and podcast host who was spending a month in the city.

“I wanted to stay somewhere that felt quaint but open,” she said. “I love the university vibe.” The University of Bologna, founded in 1088, is among the oldest in the world; the blocks surrounding it thrum in a way that evoke the Greenwich Village streets around New York University.

Having recently deplaned, and having not seen a salad in days, I requested a side of verdure — green vegetables — with my tortellini en brodo (tortellini in broth). Ms. Montell communicated this to our server in Italian. The server’s response came in English.



On the menu at Al Sangiovese in Bologna is tortellini in brodo and a dish of prosciutto di Parma, mortadella and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese.

“With the main? No, no, no,” she said, shaking her head with reproach. “The tortellini is the king of the pasta,” a king who, apparently, eschews consorts. “No vegetables.”

A bit of back and forth resulted in a plate of steamed spinach arriving with our “antipasti” of mortadella, prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano-Reggiano (three of the region’s D.O.P. or Denominazione di Origine Protetta products, a certification that ensures they are locally grown or produced). The server was right. The verdure had no place at this table. I could eat steamed spinach anywhere. Why bother in the city of “la Dotta, la Grassa, la Rossa?”

“It means, ‘the learned, the fat, the red,’” Ms. Montell explained. “They’re the nicknames of Bologna,” with the last referring both to the color of the medieval buildings and the city’s past as a communist stronghold.

Walking the ‘Path of the Gods’

The next morning, I was due to hike part of the “Path of Gods,” an 84-mile trail that connects Bologna to Florence. After a nightcap at Velluto, a sleek cocktail bar that was a 10-minute walk from the restaurant, near Bologna’s central piazza, I woke raring to go. “How long is the drive?” I asked Catia Aliberti, a local guide who met me at my hotel, eyeing her walking sticks with suspicion. How rugged would this path get?

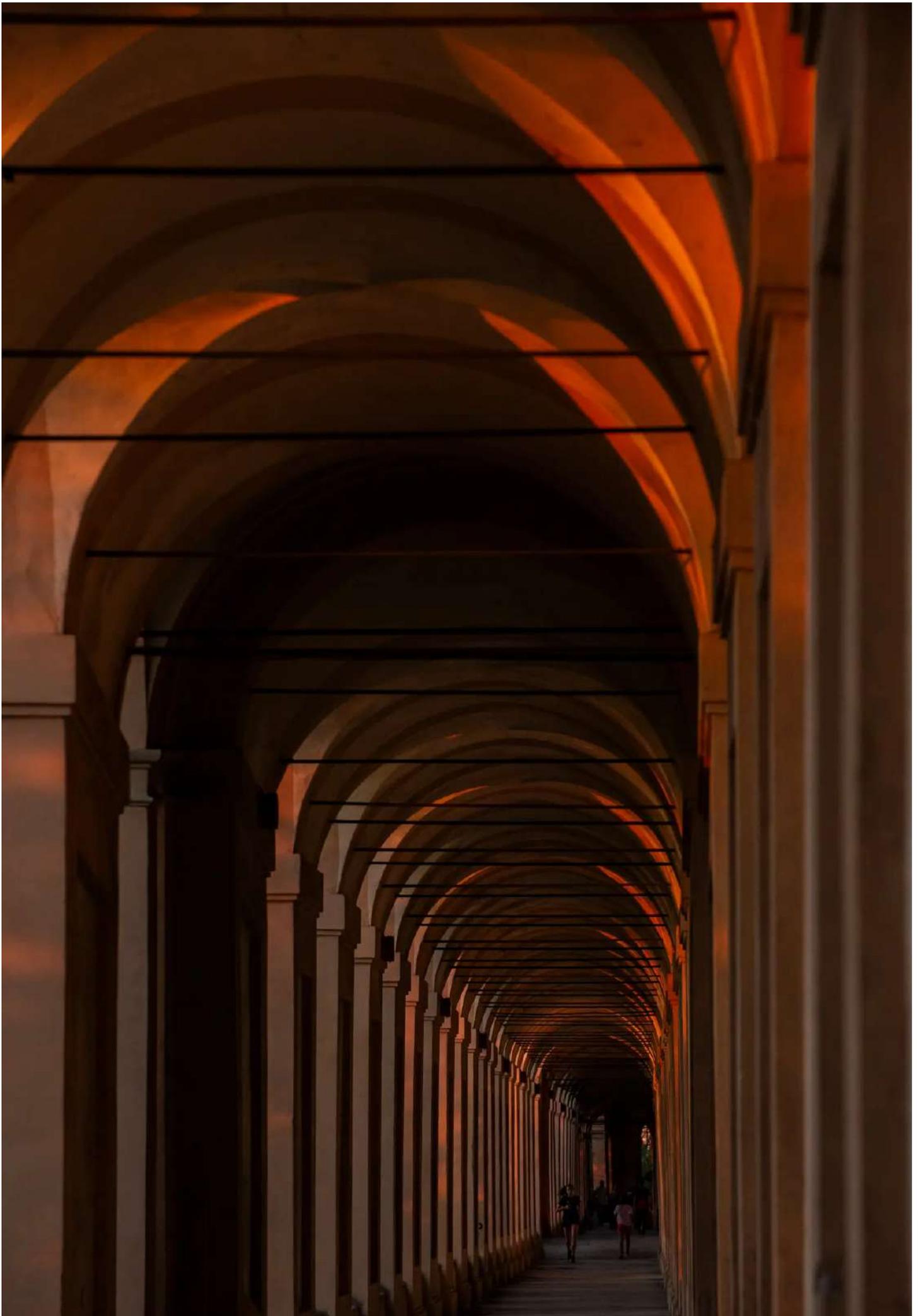
“No drive,” she said, genially.

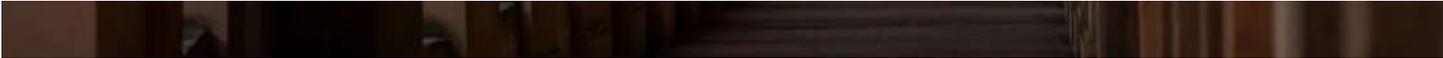
Before making its way through the countryside to Florence, the Path of Gods winds for four miles along Bologna’s streets, beneath the city’s porticoes. Built from the early Middle Ages onward, the porticoes make up a series of shaded archways that is protected by UNESCO, the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; strung together, they would cover more than 38 miles.



The Santuario di San Luca, a palatial 18th-century church that offers panoramic views of Bologna and the verdant hills beyond, was the destination for a hike along the “Path of the Gods.”







A view along the Portico di San Luca, the longest portico in the world, which runs through Bologna.

“The part we are doing, the Portico di San Luca, is the longest portico in the world,” Ms. Aliberti said. At first, we walked alongside shops, restaurants and stalls. Those gave way to a series of steps and an upward sloping, portico-covered path. Religious frescoes appeared. “In the past, if you did something bad and you wanted the Virgin Mary to forgive you, you’d do this hike on your knees,” Ms. Aliberti said. “Now it’s a place to walk and run, but back then, it was a place to pray.”

Two hours after we started, we reached the Santuario di San Luca, a palatial 18th-century church that offers panoramic views of Bologna and the verdant hills beyond. There was also, blissfully, a restaurant, Vito San Luca, whose tagliatelle al ragù might be the platonic ideal of a post-hike meal. (There was also another plate of mortadella and Parmigiano-Reggiano.) That plus two glasses of local Lambrusco — a sparkling red wine, this region’s answer to Champagne — necessitated a nap upon my return to my hotel. I awoke with just enough time to meet Ms. Montell and her friend, Kaitlyn Mikayla, at Camera a Sud, a Via Valdonica bar rife with books and records that makes a chuggable Americano (not the coffee — the cocktail of Campari, club soda and sweet vermouth).

Local products, local artisans

The light turned golden and then faded. I ventured off to Ahimè (Italian for “alas”), a minimalist restaurant and natural wine bar that opened in July 2020 on Via San Gervasio and which takes an aggressively local approach to cuisine. “There are people who go to the market, buy the cheapest Parmesan and veal, which probably comes from abroad, make ragù and tell you it’s traditional,” said Gian Marco Bucci, one of Ahimè’s owners. “We support producers from here and offer something different.”

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A dish of local cabbages and “roasted yogurt” tasted like something you might find in a trendy restaurant in Los Angeles; around me, urbane diners chatted in English. Ms. Montell texted me. Did I want to join her and Ms. Mikayla for a “little concert in an adorable apartment? Very Bologna, intimate, least touristy thing in town.”

I walked 20 minutes to Efesto House, which occupies the sixth floor of a centuries-old apartment building on Via Castiglione. Technically, Efesto House is a private member’s club, but unlike a multinational private member’s club that also has “house” in its name, dues do not cost more than the average monthly mortgage, and membership can be granted on the spot. The cost: 10 euros and your email address.

“We decided to keep our prices very low,” said Gaia Musumeci, a neurologist who runs Efesto House with two friends. “We want people to feel like they’re at home when they come here.” (Matteo Paragona, Efesto’s president, inherited the apartment, as well as the floors above it, from his great-grandmother. Seventeenth-century antiques and works from such artists as Carracci adorn the walls.)

The club regularly hosts musicians and comedians. The night I went, two dozen members sat, rapt, as an Italian guitarist in a Western shirt performed covers of Johnny Cash. “The idea is to *listen* to music,” Dr. Musumeci said. Virtually no one took in the performance with a phone in front of their face, save for one American tourist (guilty as charged).



Margherita Libouri, who owns the Double Trouble fashion and accessories brand with her sister, Caterina, in the company's workshop in Bologna.

The following morning, I went to Double Trouble, a fashion and accessories brand that I heard of from Ms. Mikayla, who had bought one of Double Trouble's signature, tortellini-shaped key chains the previous day. Founded by the sisters Margherita and Caterina Libouri, who grew up between Bologna and Gabon, Double Trouble sources surplus leather and fabric from factories that produce for brands like Dolce & Gabbana, and turns it into handbags, wallets and dresses.

The Libouri sisters share their work space and showroom, on Via Degli Albari, with Natalia Triana, a Colombian designer who attended the University of Bologna and founded the jewelry line Pepaflaca. As we spoke, she assessed a collection of porcelain earrings, fresh from the kiln, that looked like pieces of pasta.

"I came to Italy to study ceramics," Ms. Triana said. "I fell in love and I stayed. You can find artisans around every corner."

The women pointed me in the direction of another like-minded artisan: Sara Biancalana, the proprietor of Cobalto Lab, on Via San Felice. Like the Libouri sisters, Ms. Biancalana fashions designs from surplus fabric; she also breathes new life into vintage silks. "This is from the '70s," she said, extracting a wisp of a white shirt from a rack. With an embroidered collar and a boxy cut, it looked like something I'd recently seen at a West Hollywood boutique (for \$700 more).







A street decorated with colorful umbrellas leads toward the Duomo di Modena, the city's cathedral.



Massimo Bottura and Lara Gilmore, the owners of the Casa Maria Luigia, envisioned it as their country home but ended up opening it as a bed-and-breakfast.

To the country

Sated by the city, I drove 40 minutes to Casa Maria Luigia, a sumptuous, 12-room bed-and-breakfast in Modena that Mr. Bottura and his wife, Lara Gilmore, opened in 2019. “It was supposed to be our country home,” Ms. Gilmore said, greeting me in the property’s sprawling backyard wearing clogs and an apron. It turned into a full-time job that inspired a book forthcoming this fall, “Slow Food, Fast Cars,” that she co-authored with her husband.

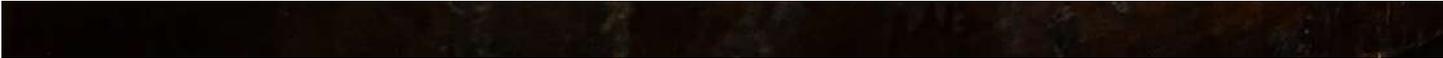
Art from the couple’s collection studs the property (the Duane Hanson in the gym could fuel nightmares). Jazz, rock and classical records amassed by Mr. Bottura line the walls of a turntable-equipped listening room (guests can make requests).

“We take a very personal approach,” Ms. Gilmore said, setting up a side table for a pair of guests who wanted to set down their Negronis. I asked if she could recommend a running path. The following morning, I found her downstairs, laced up. “I don’t have time to bike up to the Apennines today, anyway,” she said, referring to the mountain range that constitutes Emilia-Romagna’s southern border, as I huffed and puffed alongside her. “You *must* make sure to have breakfast,” she added, as we closed a four-mile loop. “It’s an absolute delight.”

I was due to check out the Mercato Albini, Modena’s nearly century-old farmer’s market, as well as the Modena Cathedral, an improbable construction of Carrara marble from the 11th century. Also on my agenda: Caseificio Rosola, a Parmigiano-Reggiano factory, and Cantina della Volta, a woman-owned Lambrusco winery. “If you’re a little late, it’s OK,” Ms. Gilmore said, batting away my concerns. “It’s Modena.”







A wheel of Parmigiano Reggiano from the Caseificio, with the symbol of the Vacche Bianche Modenese, white cows of Modena region, the local breed that supplies the milk.

Wood-fired artichokes with mint, a highlight of Casa Maria Luigia's resplendent breakfast spread, were worth delaying the day's events. A broccoli frittata made me wonder why none of my concoctions of eggs and greens ever tasted so good. There was more mortadella, more Parmigiano-Reggiano, this time drizzled with balsamic vinegar made in a production facility at Casa Maria Luigia, yet another place I wanted to check out.

Reality dawned: I would not have time to see everything. I would have to come back. But when?

"Late fall," Mr. Bottura said, when I asked his advice. "The season is incredible: you have mushrooms, truffles, chestnuts, pumpkin, eels, oysters from the Po River and the sea bass is fat."

And perhaps, next time, without a checklist.

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