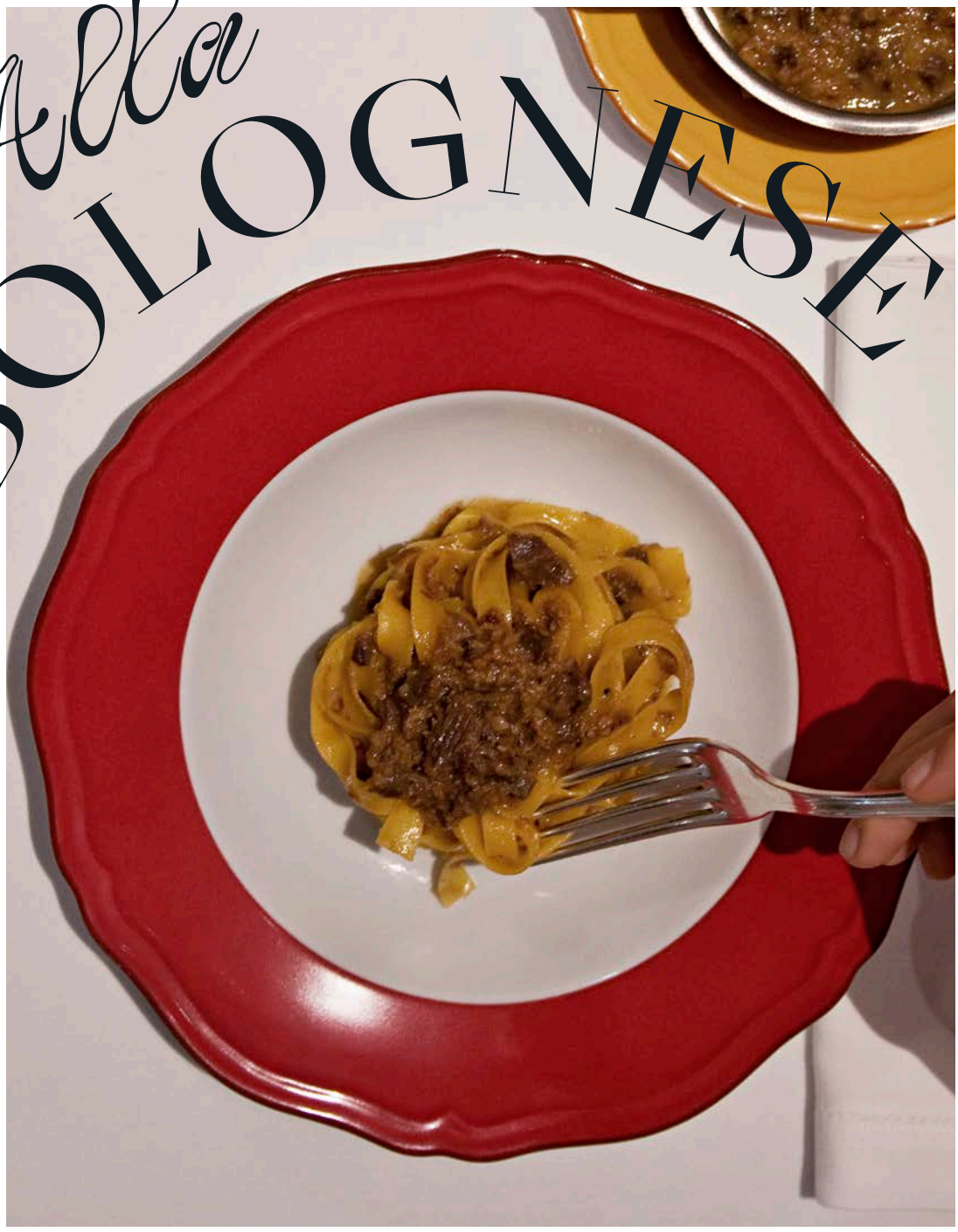
# Alla BOLOGNESE



*Prosciutto, Parmigiano-Reggiano, tagliatelle al ragù.... The Italian city of Bologna and the surrounding Emilia-Romagna region have given the world some of its finest culinary treasures. But its chefs and producers aren't done yet.* **By Marcia DeSanctis. Photographs by Andrea Wyner**

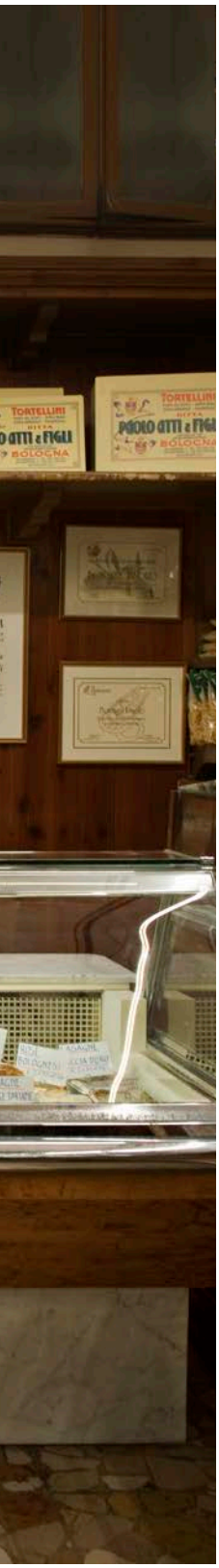
*Bologna's Piazza Maggiore.* **OPPOSITE** *Tagliatelle al ragù at Ristorante Cavallino, near Modena.*

WHEN YOU ARRIVE in Bologna, the gastronomic capital of a country that is arguably the gastronomic center of the world, it's best to arrive hungry. I arrived with a molar that had fractured on a cough drop en route to Boston's Logan airport. The concierge at my hotel procured an appointment with a dentist shortly after I landed. My toothache throbbed all the way down my neck as my cab passed shop windows filled with fresh pasta the color of spring hay, icebergs of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, and ladies forming tiny tortellini around their fingertips, before dropping me off at an anonymous building in the *centro storico*. Salvation appeared in the form of Dr. Celestina Leporati, who patched up my tooth, along with my spirits. For her, the matter was urgent. "In Bologna," she said, "you have to eat!"

That night I dined just outside the city center at Ristorante Al Cambio, which is known for its house-made, locally sourced, seasonal menu. The pasta course was a regional classic: tagliatelle with ragù, the purest version of what the rest of us call Bolognese sauce. As it was served, I had the same sense of anticipation as I did when my late, Abruzzo-born grandmother would serve up her handmade noodles, ladling them with sauce made with tomatoes and basil from her garden in Tucson, Arizona. It is hard to capture the elation I experienced as I ate that perfect plate of pasta with a brand-new tooth, and relived one of the most elemental memories of my

**BELOW**
*Crescentine, or fried dough, served with a trio of cheese-flavored gelati at Trattoria Da Me, in Bologna.*

**RIGHT**
*Bologna's Paolo Atti & Figli bakery and pasta-maker.*




**ABOVE**
*Nicoletta Madrigali in her vineyard on the outskirts of Bologna.*

**ABOVE RIGHT**
*A lounge area at Casa Maria Luigia, Massimo Bottura's Modena inn.*

childhood: my *nonna,* my Italian heritage, the love that went straight to my stomach.

IN BOLOGNA, the city at the heart of the Emilia-Romagna region, culinary tradition is as entrenched as the ancient porticos that line 38 miles of its streets. To understand why, I interviewed Piergiacomo Petrioli, an art history professor who also specializes in Italian food and wine. Petrioli explained that Bologna's gastronomic singularity was due to three things: its prime location on the edge of the Po Valley, Italy's most fertile agricultural area; its key position within Italy as a whole, which meant it became a crossroads between the north and south; and its role as a university town for almost a thousand years, which drew people and their culinary traditions from all over the world. "Variety, quality, and quantity," as Petrioli put it.

I was spending a week in Emilia-Romagna to indulge in the formidable heritage of Bologna and the "food valley" surrounding it: Modena, Parma, and the bountiful land in between the two. This region gave the world prosciutto di Parma, *balsamico,* Parmigiano cheese, and tortellini. I was curious to see how new chefs, producers, and growers were working with this extraordinary legacy to create something vital and inventive, yet still true to tradition. It was February: technically the off-season, but an ideal time for the cozy, warm-your-bones cuisine of Emilia-Romagna.

The trip was also a chance to connect with my daughter, Ava. A dual citizen of Italy and the U.S., she was in her final year of graduate school at the University of Bologna. A road trip would stave off my maternal loneliness, and have the additional benefit of treating her to some nourishment beyond the student meals she prepared in her small apartment.

To lead our journey around this serenely picturesque corner of Italy, we enlisted Authentic Explorations, a luxury travel operator. It would be a grave understatement to call what Florence-based co-head Jennifer Schwartz prepared for me an "itinerary." It was something else entirely: a seamless, culturally edifying, and wildly delicious moveable feast. For eight days, I was always happy, and never hungry.

FROM THE ELEGANT Hotel Brun, Bologna's newest luxury boutique property, Schwartz and I set out for Modena, an hour to the northwest. Enzo Ferrari and Luciano Pavarotti were once the most celebrated sons of this city of 185,000, but today there is but one star in the galaxy: Massimo Bottura. Over the course of my week, I would hear hoteliers and other chefs refer to "Massimo" with reverent awe. He is more than a celebrity with unbridled talent; he is an Emilian folk hero.

Bottura is unstoppable—and was, during our visit, temporarily unavailable. Instead I met his wife and business partner of 29 years, the New York–raised Lara Gilmore, whose chic, understated presence should make her the envy of all those who try too hard. Gilmore was to be my hostess on a tour of the couple's restaurants and social impact projects in Modena—which, as a result of Bottura's international profile, is today a nerve center of Italian gastronomy. It is also home to the global constellation known as the Francescana Family, named after the place where it all began: Osteria Francescana, the empire's

flagship restaurant, which has twice topped the World's 50 Best Restaurants list and will celebrate its 30th birthday this year.

The Bottura group has expanded its reach to Singapore, Miami, Beverly Hills, Seoul, and beyond with its Torno Subito and Gucci Osteria brands. In and around Modena, there are now six Bottura restaurants, each representing a distinct vision. One, Il Tortellante, is a lunchtime café and pasta lab where tortellini is made, in part, by young adults on the autism spectrum. Ristorante Cavallino, in nearby Maranello, the town Ferrari built, is a stylish reinvention of the favorite haunt of Enzo Ferrari, the company's charismatic founder.

Bologna's streets hum with the energy of nearly 100,000 students, but Modena, with its Baroque ducal palace and Romanesque cathedral, has a more polished feel. On the day of my tour with Gilmore, the air carried a damp, wintery chill—which made the cozy Francheschetta58 feel welcoming. The walls of this intimate, packed bistro are decorated with mismatched retro dinner plates the couple began collecting when they met in New York in 1993. But there is nothing sentimental about Bottura's vision. Though his roots in Modena are as strong as ever, his mission from the outset has been to move the Italian kitchen forward. "If you're just nostalgic about the dishes, they don't change," Gilmore explained. "As a chef, it's very important not to use the emotional part of cooking as a blindfold, but to really use it to innovate."

**ABOVE**
*A fireplace at Antica Corte Pallavicina, a 14th-century castle turned hotel and restaurant outside Parma.*

Innovation has many permutations. At Francheschetta58 Ava went for Bottura's simple but sublime tortellini in Parmigiano cream, while I ordered his now-iconic "Emilia burger." Ground from beef cuts discarded by his other restaurants, the slider also contains Parmigiano and *cotechino* (a Modenese pork sausage). The meat sits on a sauce of anchovies, capers, and parsley, and is topped with balsamic mayonnaise—resulting in a bite-size compendium of regional ingredients. "These are the umami flavors of Modena," Gilmore said.

In Modena, it was only right that I should stay in Bottura World, as well as eat there. In 2017 the couple bought a crumbling 18th-century manor, which they carefully restored and opened in 2019 as Casa Maria Luigia. Spirited sophistication flourishes within its walls: an Ai Weiwei triptych hangs under a ceiling covered in original frescoes, and in my room, rosy-pink Gucci wallpaper depicted herons and dragonflies. Buffet breakfast at Casa Maria Luigia is served on dreamy Richard Ginori plates, and I piled mine high with *erbazzone,* Emilia-Romagna's crunchy, cheesy, greens-stuffed savory pie.

Al Gatto Verde, one of two restaurants on the property, opened in 2023, and was recently awarded a Michelin star. I met its young Canadian chef, Jessica Rosval, on the lemon-tree-shaded patio in front of the restaurant, where we chatted for a few minutes before dinner service began. Rosval told me that because she is from Montreal, she doesn't feel a connection to the terroir, and that detachment may be her strength. "It gives me a lot of flexibility to move in different directions with all these local ingredients, and really have fun," she said, relating a compliment she recently received from a Modenese client: "I know I'm in Modena by eating this menu, but I've never tasted anything like this before."

From the moment I sat down for dinner in the restaurant a little while later, I could tell how much Rosval was inspired by Bottura's wildly creative approach to reinterpreting classics, the ingredients they are prepared with, and the aesthetics of how they are served. The batter for my *borlengo,* a local version of a crêpe, was made from porcini-mushroom flour and filled with local truffles. An oven fueled by birch and oak wood from the Apennine Mountains is the centerpiece of Al Gatto Verde, and Rosval made mind-blowing use of the fire to create my dessert: "sea land sky" was a molded rosette infused with caviar, raspberry, rose, yogurt, and seawater. Its pale gray color came from the ashes of the wood she had used to cook my duck and pork courses.

MORE THAN ANY other product, *balsamico* is synonymous with Modena. While we were in town, Jennifer Schwartz, my dedicated guide, took me and Ava to visit two *acetaiae,* or vinegar-making facilities, whose owners are part of a new guard of inventive young producers. Centuries ago, royals from the House of Este, which ruled over parts of Italy, hoarded secret casks of this rich, sweet liquid. What we know today as balsamic vinegar—the sour, mass-produced substance diluted with red wine vinegar and used in salad dressing—is worlds away from the pure stuff, which has only one ingredient, grape must (the crushed flesh, skins, and seeds of the fruit), and takes a minimum of 12 years to ferment.

"There is absolutely no vinegar in real *balsamico,*" said Andrea Bezzecchi, whose Acetaia San Giacomo is in Novellara,

**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE**
*Chef Jessica Rosval tends the wood-fired oven at Al Gatto Verde, one of the restaurants at Casa Maria Luigia; mare e melone, a dish of seaweed-smoked melon, seawater, and herbs at Al Gatto Verde; Casa Maria Luigia, as seen from the garden.*

## WHERE TO STAY

**Antica Corte Pallavicina**
A 14th-century castle outside Parma with a Michelin-starred restaurant that's both palatial and cozy. *Suites from $293.*

**Casa Maria Luigia**
Massimo Bottura's Modena inn is a former farmhouse with 25 chic rooms. *Doubles from $557.*

**Grand Hotel Majestic già Baglioni**
Bologna's grande dame, located on colonnaded Via dell'Indipendenza. *Doubles from $711.*

**Hotel Brun**
A sleek refuge in the heart of Bologna. *Doubles from $309.*

**Palazzo di Varignana**
This former palace on 75 acres of rolling farmland outside Bologna has a 57-page spa menu. *Doubles from $382.*

## WHERE TO EAT

**Al Gatto Verde**
The Michelin-starred restaurant at Casa Maria Luigia is focused on wood-fired cooking. *Tasting menu $144.*

**Casa Mazzucchelli**
Regional cuisine is reimagined at this Michelin-starred spot just outside Bologna. *Prix fixe from $103.*

**Francheschetta58**
Contemporary renditions of Modenese classics. *Entrées $19–$29.*

**La Taberna del Re Vallot**
A Bologna student favorite with a lively streetside setting. *Entrées $11–$15.*

**Ristorante Al Cambio**
The city's classic dishes, made with hyperlocal ingredients. *Entrées $20–$30.*

**Ristorante Cavallino**
This Bottura restaurant opposite from Ferrari HQ, in Maranello, serves a Ferrari-shaped zabaglione. *Entrées $23–$31.*

**Trattoria Da Me**
The place for *tagliatelle al ragù—real* Bolognese. *Entrées $10–$33.*

## WHAT TO DO

**Acetaia Malagoli Daniele**
Visit this family-owned farm for a fascinating foray into the history of *balsamico*.

**Acetaia San Giacomo**
One taste of the artisanal *balsamico* produced in the countryside outside Bologna will make you forever eschew the mass-produced stuff.

**Azienda Agricola Bertinelli**
A tour of this Parmigiano producer concludes with a tasting of cheeses of varying ages, plus a chilled glass of lambrusco.

**Tenuta Santa Cecilia**
Nicoletta Madrigali produces nine organic wines on a poetically lovely vineyard near Bologna.

## HOW TO BOOK

**Authentic Explorations**
Private tours set up by these luxury travel experts feature exclusive access to restaurants, food producers, and other one-off experiences. *Five-night trips from $1,000 per person per day.—M.D.*

**ABOVE**
*Ristorante Cavallino, which is named for Ferrari's logo.*

**RIGHT**
*The Parmigiano aging room at Azienda Agricola Bertinelli.*

about 23 miles from central Modena in the hypnotically green *pianura padana,* the plains of the Po Valley. Twenty-five years ago, while working toward a degree in law, Bezzecchi decided instead to cultivate his late father's hobby. Today he is a vocal crusader for preserving the original, deceptively simple, production of *balsamico,* which involves aging it in barrels collectively known as a *batteria*.

In his tasting room, Bezzecchi filled little cups with inky-black, velvety samples redolent of prunes and molasses. One, aged in juniper wood, tasted of the bitter berry. For Bezzecchi, the most radical way to innovate was to go back to the drawing board. "For me, we can adapt only if we understand the real essence of this tradition, and go deep into the culture," he explained.

After a night at Palazzo di Varignana, an elegant wellness resort about 20 miles outside Bologna that produces its own wine and olive oil, we doubled back toward Modena to visit Acetaia Malagoli Daniele. Its owner, Sofia Malagoli, related her story while seated in a room filled end to end with barrels of *balsamico* in various states of fermentation. My scientist

ILLUSTRATION BY BASHEL LUBARSKY

**ABOVE**
*Casa Mazzucchelli's snail with zucchini, verbena, and mustard sauce.*
**LEFT**
*Speck, pancetta, and mortadella at Artigianquality.*


daughter was riveted by her story. After earning a degree in civil engineering, Malagoli also pivoted. "I wanted to do my part to continue the traditions that made my country famous," she said. "If my generation doesn't act, our heritage will completely disappear." Nine years later, Malagoli produces up to 1,500 bottles of top-quality *balsamico* per year, prepared the way it has been for centuries: no added color, no sugar, and, of course, no vinegar.

From Bezzecchi and Malagoli, I learned that tradition is not fixed and unmoving, but evolves over time, with younger generations re-creating classics for modern connoisseurs. This holds true for Simona Scapin, whom we met at the spotless factory in Bologna where she produces artisanal mortadella under the brand name Artigianquality. This iconic product is where we get the word baloney—as in Bologna—and the inferior cold cut that goes by that name. Scapin is one of very few women in the manly meat business. "At first, people assumed I was at the food fair to fetch the coffee," she told us.

The daughter of a local butcher, Scapin ventured out on her own 10 years ago, she said, to preserve an ancient recipe (a mix of pork, garlic, and other spices) and build upon it with contemporary preferences in mind. Today, hers is the only mortadella actually made in Bologna—most are mass-produced in giant plants, with nitrates and fake flavors to match.

Scapin's mortadella uses the meat of local, free-range pigs, some of which feed on acorns and forest berries. "People today say, "If I'm going to eat meat, I want to know where it came from. I want to know what the pigs ate. I want to know that they were not on antibiotics,'" she told me.

WE WERE ZIGGING and zagging a bit on our grand food tour, but the distances were small enough, and Schwartz's skill navigating the autostrada was such that it never felt rushed. After visiting Scapin, we parked in the center of Bologna for lunch at the popular Trattoria Da Me. It was a return to Bologna's deepest traditions—the ones that leave you stuffed, astonished, and resolved never to simmer meat sauce for anything less than 12 hours, as chef-owner Elisa Rusconi does.

In 2016, newly out of culinary school, Rusconi relaunched the trattoria her grandparents had opened in 1937. She was driven, in part, to redefine Bolognese cuisine at a time when the world was waking up to the fact that much of what we know as Italian cuisine actually came from her hometown. "I wanted to translate our cooking into something more modern and international," she said. For instance, she considers her ragù a modernization because she makes it without milk or wine, which in the past were used to disguise poor-quality meat. "The meat is not so harsh anymore, so why neutralize it?"

For Rusconi, the pillars of Bolognese cuisine do not change, but interpretations do. To demonstrate, she brought us slices of fried dough called *crescentine* with slices of mortadella: a typical Bologna antipasto. "When you eat this," she said, handing me a portion, "you are in Bologna." Next, she smeared a *crescentina* with house-made gorgonzola ice cream. "When you eat it this way, you are at my place."

**(Continued on page 117)**


(Emilia-Romagna, continued from page 103)

TURNING TRADITION on its ear does not mean reinventing Grandma's sauce, even though an "official" recipe for Bolognese ragù is enshrined in the archives of Bologna's chamber of commerce. "Every family has a traditional recipe," explained Professor Petrioli. "Which means that there is no traditional recipe at all." Tradition, he went on, is by necessity adaptable. Today, many people don't eat gluten or meat, and no one wants their food to be laced with chemicals and additives. "Tradition can lead us into the future," Petrioli said.

The next day I had back-to-back visits with two women leading their families' industries into a new era, improving the quality of their products and disrupting the status quo along the way. (Poor Ava unexpectedly had an engineering geology exam to take, so we parted ways.) Both producers are based in Parma, about an hour west of Bologna. There, as in the entire region, tradition is anchored by its culinary icons: prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese.

Ilaria Bertinelli shepherded Schwartz and me through her family's *caseificio,* or dairy, where the most delectable cheese on the planet is formed into golden rounds and stacked to the ceiling in an aging room. The family's salty, grainy "grand cru," which I devoured in a few bites, was made from the rare, rich milk produced during a mother cow's first 100 days of lactation. A couple of miles away, I strolled the company's farm, where some 700 Friesian cows with tawny fur and gentle eyes reposed in the hay or munched on fresh grass.

The hay created from this grass, Bertinelli explained, is naturally infused with lactic bacteria endemic to the area. The resulting milk contributes to Parmigiano's unique taste and texture. "Everything is interconnected," Bertinelli said, explaining that her farm uses the whey that remains after the cheese-making process to make ricotta, then gives the leftovers to local pigs, which are raised for the production of Parma ham. "When we say 'sustainable,' we only need to look to the past, when everything was used," she said. "We have been sustainable for centuries."

Parma's location in the valley between the Ligurian Sea and the Apennines of northern Italy offers an optimal climate for the production of cured ham. In an industrial zone beyond the city center we met Mirella Galloni, who represents the third generation of her family's prosciutto business, Fratelli Galloni. As we inched through the factory, she tirelessly related her family's history and the many elements needed to create its product, considered to be one of the finest in the world.

Industrial producers don't have the time, she said, or the inclination, to monitor production down to a granular level. "If we used a robot, we could salt up to a thousand legs per hour," she said. Instead, Galloni's *salatori,* or professional salters, complete about 80 in an hour. "We never want to abandon this, as it is directly related to quality," she said.

Upon entering the tasting room, Galloni flicked on the lights with flair. Floor-to-ceiling rows of whole legs of prosciutto were arranged like folds in a curtain, which somehow gave the effect of an opera set, thanks to the room's dramatic modern chandeliers—apt for a factory in Giuseppe Verdi's hometown. Galloni sliced the ham with a rotating blade, and instructed me to put the whole piece in my mouth—"Never peel the fat off," she scoffed—and keep it there for 15 seconds so the salt could be released.

OUR MOTHER-DAUGHTER getaway had been facing setbacks, as Ava's final exams kept interfering with our plans. But on my last day in Bologna, my exhausted daughter and I could finally be together. Spring was just beginning to bloom in the city and people were spilling out of bars, clutching flutes of crisp, sparkling Pignoletto. We met at the statue of Neptune on the Piazza Maggiore, then walked past the cathedral and over to the seven churches of Santo Stefano, site of a weekend flea market where, Ava told me, she goes to pick up antique picture frames and postcards.

Under the miles of porticos, past the opera house, Ava led me to La Taberna del Re Vallot, a trattoria that is decorated with hundreds of cats—ceramic cats, kitty clocks, pet portraits. Despite the kitschy décor, she told me, it has some of the best food in Bologna, and is also cheap. She was genuinely relaxed, and hungry. "I always get the lasagna," she said. But for my last night, I was leaning toward the tagliatelle with ragù.

Earlier in the day, Ava had joined me on a visit to Bologna's chamber of commerce, housed in a 14th-century brick building in the center of town. There we met Giada Grandi, the general secretary, who entered the Hall of Flags bearing a polished wooden box. Mounted inside was a gold ribbon representing a tagliatella noodle eight millimeters wide—the perfect size to take and hold ragù—that must always be made with eggs, and by hand. "This is in our DNA in Bologna, and therefore we must protect it," Grandi told us.

At dinner, I showered my dish with fine Parmigiano cheese. The pasta was thick and tenacious, and, even at this unsung restaurant, my tastebuds could sense the slow cooking in the sauce. I recalled my first night, at Al Cambio: a connection to the past, to an elemental part of my history.

Traditions may exist to be shattered, but on that last night in Bologna, sharing a meal with my daughter after many months of separation, they meant something else. I swirled the pasta around my fork and remembered that, above all, traditions represent comfort, and the love that goes straight to our stomach.

Content in this issue was produced with assistance from Al Moudira Hotel; Antica Corte Pallavicina; A-Rosa River Cruises; Authentic Explorations; Babylonstoren; Cape Grace, a Fairmont Managed Hotel; Casa Maria Luigia; Cathay Pacific; Grand Hotel Majestic già Baglioni; Hotel Brun; Mount Nelson, a Belmond Hotel; Palazzo di Varignana; The Peninsula Hong Kong; R. Collection Raffles Al Areen Palace Bahrain; Rosewood Miramar Beach; Singita Ebony Lodge; Sterrekopje Healing Farm; Viking; and Visit Macon Georgia.