



## Ferrara's grace and good food

By Jane Ure-Smith

Published: October 17 2009 00:43 | Last updated: October 17 2009 00:43

While Americans are busy this month turning pumpkins into grinning, light-filled jack-o'-lanterns to ward off evil spirits, the inhabitants of the Italian town of Ferrara, just north of Bologna, prefer simply to eat them. Ferrara, like its near neighbour Mantua, is pumpkin city. *Cappellacci di zucca* (tortelloni-like pasta filled with pumpkin and Parmesan cheese) features prominently on menus in both cities, though the Mantuans add crushed amaretti biscuits to the mixture. Bright orange pumpkin pulp also forms the basis of risottos, cakes and the soufflé-like *sformati*, and autumn is the best time to sample its nutty flavour.

Ferrara is surrounded by fields producing (along with pumpkins) pears and nectarines, asparagus, garlic and rice. In its heyday, the town was ruled by the Este family, former feudal lords from the Veneto who consolidated their power at the end of the 13th century after a series of bloody battles. For the next 300 years, they set about making Ferrara one of Europe's most glittering cultural centres. Like the Sforzas in Milan and the Gonzagas in Mantua, the Estes were unwilling to play second fiddle to the Florentine Medici: Mantegna, Pisanello, Leonardo, Raphael and Titian were among the artists wooed to Ferrara to paint.

I arrived by car from Bologna, and slow-moving traffic and nondescript apartment blocks between the *autostrada* and the city did little to prepare me for the grace and elegance of Ferrara's centre – nor the fact that inside the city walls, everyone is on a bicycle.

I made my way to the front of the 12th-century cathedral, gazing up at the intricately carved Day of Judgment scenes on its façade. Here bodies clamber out of coffins while, in hell proper, someone is being pushed into a vat of boiling liquid. There's something very personal about romanesque/gothic church façades that later styles lack, perhaps because the carving is always a bit wonky. You can't help wondering about the anonymous sculptors and stonemasons who made them. Who were they, what kind of lives did they lead? It's the best kind of history lesson.

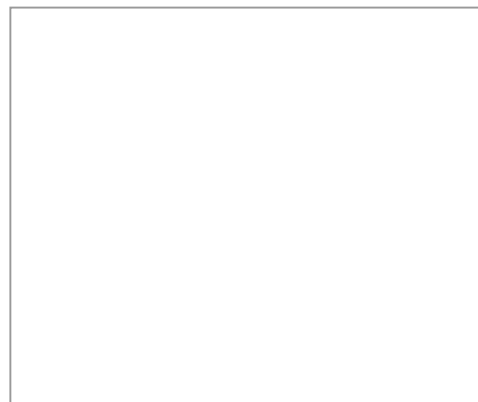


The greatest "who was he?" puzzle is shown in the Museo della Cattedrale, which has recently moved to the former church of San Romano. Mystery surrounds the identity of the so-called Maestro dei Mesi (Maestro of the Months), whose extraordinary talents are on display in a series of stone reliefs from the Porta dei Pellegrini, which graced the south side of the cathedral until it was walled up and dismantled in the 18th century. Thought to date from 1230-1240, the Maestro dei Mesi's sequence depicts the months in terms of the farmers' work in different seasons. February, for example, sees the pruning of the vines and the preparation of meat, while the July scene centres on the threshing of wheat.

The maestro's handiwork is best displayed in a fruit-picking scene (nobody is quite sure whether it is June or October), where the picker stands on tip-toe to reach up into the branches and, even more magically, in the September grape harvest scene. Wearing a close-fitting cap to protect his hair, this little man has bunched up his tunic and secured it neatly against his thigh, in preparation for the grape pressing. The skill with which every tiny detail is captured is quite astonishing: even the veins on the man's right hand stand out.

The centre of town is dominated by the Castello Estense. After a popular revolt in 1385, the Este family set about building a fortress next door to their existing house – with a corridor linking the two to provide an emergency escape route. During the 16th century, apartments were added, and today one can spend hours exploring the castle's 50-odd recently restored rooms.

There was scope for me to build on my knowledge about the months as a theme in art at the Palazzo Schifanoia, to the east of the city. Dating from the Romans (who used it in mosaics), the theme was prevalent in early medieval sculpture. In the 14th century, it spread to illuminated manuscripts and frescoes and, in the 15th century, an astrological


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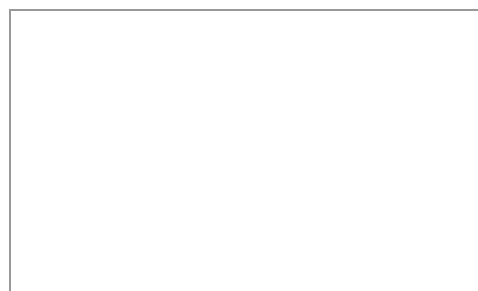
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element was introduced as well. This latter development is demonstrated admirably by the triple-decker frescoes in the Schifanoia's magnificent Sala dei Mesi (Room of the Months).

On my last night, at the wonderful Osteria del Ghetto, I sampled a *sformatino di zucca con salsa di Asiago*, the pumpkin so sweet that the dish could have doubled as pudding, and followed it with *salama da sugo*, a rich wine-and-spices-infused pork sausage stew that is another key Ferrara delicacy. I sauntered back to my hotel by way of the Piazza Cattedrale, where the whole town seemed to have gathered for a drink I did too, seizing the opportunity to raise a toast to both the humble pumpkin and the unknown Maestro dei Mesi.

## A guide to Ferrara

**Where to stay:** in the heart of the old city, Locanda Borgonuovo is a classy B&B, whose charming owner also offers fabulous homemade breakfasts (doubles from €100, tel: +39 0532 211100; [www.borgonuovo.com](http://www.borgonuovo.com)). Also central, Hotel Ripagrande is a textbook case of how to modernise an ancient building (doubles from €140, tel: +39 0532 765250; [www.ferrarahotelripagrande.it](http://www.ferrarahotelripagrande.it)) and the five-star Duchessa Isabella, in a 16th-century palazzo just inside the city walls, has doubles from €300, tel: +39 0532 202121; [www.duchessaisabella.it](http://www.duchessaisabella.it).

**Where to eat:** Osteria del Ghetto (Via Vittoria, 26; tel: +39 0532 764936) does classics such as *cappellacci di zucca* and *salama da sugo* to perfection, but be sure not to miss their seafood: I have never tasted such light, fresh, melt-in-the-mouth *alici scottadito*. Alternatives include the stylish Ca' d'Frara (Via del Gambero, 4; tel: +39 0532 205057) and Caffè Ristorante Centrale (Via Voltapaletto, 5; tel: +39 0532 240618).

**What's on:** Ferrara's churches, palazzi and permanent collections should keep you busy, but in addition, Palazzo dei Diamanti is showcasing the 19th-century portraits of Ferrarese painter Giovanni Boldini (until January 10); there's contemporary art on show until January under the banner of Art Fall 09; and the season of music, dance and drama (including Peter Brook's new production, *Warum Warum*) is in full swing at the Teatro Comunale. New year celebrations will include a grand concert, with fireworks at midnight over the Castello Estense.

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