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Many restaurants in Ferrara serve authentic dishes like *cappellacci di zucca*, and the city's artisans work hard to keep the old traditions alive.

LIFE OF PO

Once one of the great cultural centers of Europe, Ferrara hangs on to its rich history through curious breads, copious pastries, and miles of pasta. By Dan Hofstadter Photographs by Andrea Fazzari







Writer Giuliana Berengan, opposite, collects historical recipes of her childhood in Ferrara. Scenes from the city, clockwise from top left: Cobble streets lead to the gem at this walled city's center, the Castello Estense; mini-pizzas, served fresh daily, at Perdonati's bakery; the wine-festooned dining room at L'Osteria; some of Berengan's favorite things; the city's red-tiled rooftops; signature bread at Perdonati's; Teatro Comunale, a center for the city's lively arts community; and fish ready for frying.



The most important event in my son's life took place in Ferrara, but, sadly, he can't remember it.

He was three and had one interest: giant work machines. We were living in Italy, and at every bedtime for months, we read the same book about earth movers, road levelers, and cement mixers. His chief love was the *scavatrice*, the excavator, and wherever we went we looked out for them, keeping a tally. Fourteen in Venice, thirty in Rome ...

One balmy evening, as we were walking hand in hand, we came upon a huge excavator, a lord of the tribe, and way up in the glass cabin, silhouetted against the sky, sat a burly operator with a bushy mustache. The tiny boy gazed at him, transfixed, until all at once he beckoned, and the child was hoisted up into the cabin, where, with the city spread out before him, his hand was guided toward the excavator's switch.

He celebrated that evening by eating bangers and mash, a favorite of many kids. I use this term in jest, however, since it cannot in good conscience be applied to the Ferrarese specialty of *salama da sugo* served with *purea di patate*, a splendid union. The *salama* is not so much a sausage as a bladder stuffed with minced pork liver, tongue, neck, and throat, all of it flavored with red wine and fortified wines and spices; arrestingly rich and intense, it is called *da sugo* because when its skin is pierced, it releases a sort of sauce, or *sugo*, for the mashed potatoes, which are golden, of variable consistency, and flavored with milk, cheese, nutmeg, olive oil, and butter. As my little son could attest, this dish makes irresistible food—it's its nursery food raised to the level of art.

Recently, I have hunted the *salama*, chasing through the

Ferrarese countryside on a bicycle until I got lost. I'd thought I understood the way to La Bozzola, a farm where it is made as it ought to be, slowly, without preservatives, using only the right parts of the pig, by a man named Sergio Natali. When at length I found him, he showed me a hushed and darkened chamber where the sausages were hanging like little lobed melons, their flavor gestating for close to a year.

Ferrara's *salama* is not alone in its distinctiveness. Most of the specialties of this lovely little city, which lies in the eastern lowlands of the Po Valley, are unique. For one thing, the dampness of the surrounding countryside conditions its agriculture: Melons, pumpkins, mushrooms, truffles, and rice do well here, whereas grapevines do not. And social factors have heavily influenced the cuisine. From 1240 until 1598, the Este family, Longobards from the east of Italy, ruled Ferrara, extending their domains to the south and west and creating an astonishingly refined court that attracted artists, humanists, architects, and poets. Here, Cosmè Tura directed a workshop whose painters covered the walls of the Palazzo Schifanoia with frescoes depicting the labors and pleasures proper to each month, and Piero della Francesca tarried in town around 1450. The Estensi also furthered the art of the banquet, turning the *scalco*, or butler-chef, into a cultural bigwig. In addition, they encouraged large numbers of Jews to settle in the town, which needed banking services and literate tradespeople. Many of these Jews had been expelled from Spain, along with the Moors, in 1492, and they brought with them Near Eastern culinary traditions that would influence the local cuisine for centuries to come.

In this region, known as Emilia, the foundation of all cooking is *la sfoglia*, thin sheets of rolled-out dough made of flour and eggs. The pasta may then be cut up into squares that are folded over onto themselves to form "hats," *cappellacci*, or the smaller *cappelletti*, enclosing fillings of pumpkin or meat, and this quality of involution, of something delicately self-enwrapped,

BUTTERNUT SQUASH CAPPELLACCI WITH SAGE BROWN BUTTER

Adapted from Giuliana Berengan

SERVES 4

ACTIVE TIME: 1½ HR START TO FINISH: 2½ HR

These "hats" are a classic dish in Ferrara, where you'll find them filled with a range of different things, from meat to vegetables. In this version, the toasted flavor of the butter and the herbal quality of the sage in the sauce really bring out the nuttiness of the parmesan and butternut squash in the filling.

Pasta dough (page 158)

- 1 lb butternut squash, halved and seeds discarded
- 2 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 tablespoons grated Parmigiano-Reggiano
- ¼ teaspoon grated nutmeg
- 1 tablespoon fine dry bread crumbs
- 5 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into pieces
- 1½ tablespoons chopped sage
- ¼ teaspoon fresh lemon juice

EQUIPMENT: a pasta machine

MAKE FILLING WHILE DOUGH STANDS: Preheat oven to 425°F with rack in middle.

► Brush cut sides of squash with oil and sprinkle with ¼ teaspoon each of salt and pepper (total). Roast in a shallow baking pan until golden brown and tender, 30 to 45 minutes. Cool to room temperature, then use a spoon to scoop out flesh, transferring

it to a medium bowl and discarding rind. Stir in cheese, nutmeg, bread crumbs, and salt and pepper to taste.

MAKE CAPPELLACCI: Quarter dough. Cover 3 pieces with plastic wrap. Pat out remaining piece into a flat rectangle; dust with flour. ► Set rollers of pasta machine on widest setting. Feed rectangle, a short side first, through rollers. Fold rectangle in thirds, like a letter, and feed it, a short side first, through rollers. Repeat 6 or 7 more times, folding dough in thirds and feeding it through rollers, a short side first each time, dusting with flour to prevent sticking. ► Turn dial to next (narrower) setting and feed dough through rollers without folding, a short side first. Continue to feed dough through without folding, making space between rollers narrower each time, until the second- or third-narrowest setting is used. (Do not roll too thin or pasta will tear when filled.) ► Put pasta sheet on a lightly floured surface and cut into 3-inch squares. Place a rounded teaspoon of filling in center of each square, then lightly moisten edges of square with water and fold in half to form a triangle, pressing down firmly but gently around filling to seal and forcing out any air. Bring 2 opposite corners together, overlapping ends, to make a small ring, then press them together. Transfer to a lightly floured kitchen towel (not terry cloth). Make more *cappellacci* with remaining pieces of dough and remaining filling, transferring to kitchen towel.

COOK CAPPELLACCI AND MAKE SAUCE: Cook *cappellacci* in a pasta pot of simmering salted water (2 tablespoons salt for 4 quarts water) until al dente, 6 to 8 minutes. Gently drain pasta.

► Meanwhile, heat butter in a heavy medium skillet over medium heat, swirling, until golden brown, then cook sage, stirring, until sage is crisp and butter is deep golden brown. Stir in lemon juice and salt and pepper to taste. ► Serve *cappellacci* with sauce.

sometimes reminds me of the city itself. Ferrara is girded by walls, like a town in an old engraving, with a perfect gem of a castle, the Castello Estense, at its center; and wherever you walk in its cobbled, bending streets, passing an extraordinary collection of churches and palaces as you go, you feel as if you're being referred back to something you've already seen. The square surrounding the castle blends imperceptibly into the cathedral piazza with its booths and shops (many built right into the cathedral), and this marketplace itself turning quietly into the Via Mazzini, the main street of the ghetto immortalized in Giorgio Bassani's fiction. In the medieval quarter, elderly gentlemen stand chatting with their hands clasped behind their backs, and young women wheel toddlers in strollers. Occasionally, you may see a flock of students fly through the arches on a long, vaulted street, and here, too, the window of some *salumeria* may catch your eye. If there is, as in a novel like Bassani's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, a tragic sense of a lost past and consequently of a fragile present, this applies not only to the Jewish community, decimated by the Nazis, but also in some degree to the populace as a whole. In the 16th century, Ferrara was one of the great cultural centers of Europe, with treasures almost equal to those of Florence; systematically looted after the fall of the Estensi, wounded by the world wars and modern commercialism, today the city is charged with

maintaining a huge architectural and artistic heritage and a demanding and complex culinary tradition. And yet, undaunted, Ferrara hangs on.

Giuliana Berengan is a writer—a classicist by training—who has written a short but effective and touching cookbook titled *La Cucina delle Donne a Ferrara* ("The Cooking of the Women of Ferrara"), about the cuisine of her youth. I find this interesting because the authentic local dishes here, the sort you find in good restaurants, are not often prepared in homes: They are too heavy and labor-intensive, many being essentially *pietanze da festa*, dishes for Catholic feast days, or for Carnival or possibly Sundays, that almost no one ever consumes on a daily basis.

Giuliana has a perpetually mobile face, abundant jet-black hair, arched eyebrows, and the memory of an elephant. Today, in her studio, she is recalling life with such traditional dishes and with those who prepared them all the time—the people she calls "my women." "Our cuisine is based on *strutto*—lard," she tells me. "It's unwholesome, of course—and delicious. Also, they used brains in making *fritto misto all'italiana*"—a typical Emilian dish in which vegetables, fruits, and meats are fried together—"and the adults loved to ply us kids with morsels of these fried brains. 'Here, here,' (Continued on page 152)

THE DETAILS

STAYING THERE

Ferrara's hotels come in many styles, from the frescoes and draperies of the **Hotel Duchessa Isabella** (Via Palestro 70; 011-39-0532-20-21-21; duchessaisabella.it; from \$390) to the exposed concrete of the interiors at **Prisciani Art Suite** (Via Garibaldi 70; 011-39-0532-20-11-11; prisciani.com; from \$190). In between are the *alberghi*. The **Albergo Ferrara** (Largo Castello 36; 011-39-0532-20-50-48; hotels-ferrara.com; from \$237) and the **Albergo Annunziata** (Piazza Repubblica 5; 011-39-0532-20-11-11; annunziata.it; from \$190) are modern and comfortable and situated near the Piazza Castello, opposite the Castello Estense. The Annunziata offers a particularly sumptuous breakfast. (N.B.: Many Ferrarese hotels provide bicycles, free of charge, which is the best way to get around this cycle-thronged university town. But be forewarned—few bikes have headlamps, since riding over cobblestone streets tends to jostle them out of commission.)

EATING THERE

Most restaurants in Ferrara are quite good, and almost all of them offer the town's traditional dishes. **Ristorantino di Colomba** (Vicolo Mozzo Agucchie 15; 0532-76-15-17) serves authentic *sguazzabarbuzz* (bean soup with *maltagliati* pasta) and recipes that Colomba Ghiglia learned from her friends in the former Jewish ghetto, such as *budino di zucca* (pumpkin flan) and *buricche ferraresi*, a stuffed-phylo pie. Some nights, the restaurant is full of musicians—Claudio Abbado and his current orchestra, perhaps—in town to perform at the Teatro Comunale. **L'Osteria** (Via de' Romei 51; 0532-20-76-73) has a vaulted interior and a wine list the size of a telephone book. You can find *cappellacci* here, but try the more innovative dishes like rigatoni with lamb ragù and artichokes. **Max** (Piazza Repubblica 16; 0532-20-93-09), the best seafood restaurant in Ferrara, features good selections of *crudo* (raw fish), a novelty here. **La Provvidenza** (Corso Ercole I d'Este 92; 0532-20-51-87) is the culinary shrine of the Ferrarese haute bourgeoisie. Here, the people-watching is almost as good as the truffles in season or the *fritto misto all'italiana*. **Panificio-Pasticceria Otello Perdonati** (Via San Romano 108; 0532-76-13-19) offers every form of Ferrarese bread and

pastry—for instance, *pampapato*, a chocolate pastry that takes a week to make. **La Pasticceria Leon d'Oro** (Piazza della Cattedrale 8), in the Municipio, the town hall (facing the cathedral), is Ferrara's principal café and meeting point, where the Paganelli family prepares local specialties. Try the *pasticcio di maccheroni* (macaroni pie) and the *prosciutto d'oca*, a goose prosciutto thought to be an ancient Jewish substitute for ham. **Al Brindisi** (Via degli Adelardi 11; 0532-20-91-42) is reputed to be the oldest *enoteca* (wine bar) in Europe. This province is not renowned for wine—its soil is too moist—but the local Bosco Eliceo Sauvignons go nicely with pumpkin dishes.

BEING THERE

The tourist office in the Castello Estense provides thorough information about the many splendid sights in the city, such as the Castello itself, the cathedral, and the main museum, the **Palazzo Schifanoia**. Not to be missed beyond the city are the superb Romanesque **Abbey of Pomposa**, in Codigoro, whose extensive frescoes are still intact, and the Adriatic town of **Comacchio**, with its canals, wetlands, eel fisheries, old eel-smoking plant (Manifattura dei Marinati), and waterbirds, including flamingoes. A good spot to eat eel is **La Trattoria de La Pescheria** (Via Edgardo Fogli 93; 0533-81-59-7), an unpretentious, inexpensive place that serves vast portions, suitable for two or three people, that go down well with a bottle of Bosco Eliceo DOC Fortana. The province of Ferrara has also produced outstanding artists, including the 16th-century poet Torquato Tasso; Biagio Rossetti, the greatest architect of the Ferrarese Renaissance; the Baroque painter Il Guercino; the filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni; and the novelist Giorgio Bassani, whose fans should visit the **Museo Ebraico e Sinagoga** (Via Mazzini 95), a gentle tribute to a community largely destroyed by the Nazis, and take note of his younger sister Jenny Bassani Liscia's account of Ferrarese-Jewish cookery, *La Storia Passa dalla Cucina*. Virtually unknown outside Emilia are the marvelous 19th-century realist painter Giovanni Pagliarini and the mid-20th-century Ferrarese Jewish painter Roberto Melli; the work of both can be seen at the **Palazzo Massari** (Corso Porta Mare 9). —D.H.

they'd say, *'fa bene!*—they're good for you.' Nowadays such things can't even be legally sold."

Giuliana's women were all storytellers, with tales so vivid they felt to her like distant extensions of her own childhood memories: Sometimes she feels she can recall incidents as far back as the 1890s. Certainly, she can remember a bygone world. In her young days, the kitchen was a feminine gathering place, off-limits to men when women were cooking, a place for nursing infants, for saying the Rosary, for exchanging confidences in tones too low for children to make out. She recalls the large skylight that let a celestial glow drift down into the kitchen, and in it her grandmother Santuzza working an enormous quantity of flour together with 20 eggs on a vast, cold marble table. It was amazing, she says, how this continent of dough never flopped over the edges, and more amazing still was the kneading, in which, because of the great mass involved, the pressure of the wrists and hands merely transmitted a motion of the entire body, a sort of mystical dance that Santuzza had picked up from her mother, Teodolinda, and that had been handed down through generations of women. I myself saw a version of this massive golden *impasto* being worked on for *cappellacci* in the kitchen at Sergio Natali's farmhouse—and I immediately understood why most people no longer have time for it.

"Ferrara, you know, was different back then," Giuliana says. "A trattoria, for instance—it wasn't what it is today. In Ferrara the trattoria floors were of wood, stained with wine and strewn with cigarette butts, and there was a special one where my Nonna Santuzza used to take me when I was a little girl."

I gather that Nonna Santuzza made a vivid impression on Giuliana. A handsome woman, dressed always in dark clothes as if in mourning, she lost three young children to illness, lived through two world wars, and witnessed the destruction of her husband's fortune. "The place that Nonna Santuzza liked," Giuliana tells me, "was called Trattoria da Norina, and whenever we came in, Norina, who always wore a black apron, would drape a dishtowel over me to protect my clothes and give me a plate of *nervetti di maiale*. These were meaty pork sinews sprinkled with salt, and I would greedily gobble them up. When I was done, Nonna Santuzza would say to me, with a signifying look, 'Now then, who's not

going to tell Mamma that she ate at Norina's?' Because it always spoiled my appetite for dinner.

"We're a kind of museum," Giuliana says with a sigh. "So many recipes! Our recipes were oral, never written, but they always had a name. *Le tagliatelle della Linda*, and so on. But they were also in code. We used dialect expressions for measurements, like *un pugnin* [a little fistful]. But the women in our family had different-sized hands, so whose fist were we talking about? Only we knew."

OVER IN THE HEART of the medieval city, at the crossing of the Via San Romano and the dark and vaulted Via delle Volte, people hurry through the echoing streets, laden with packages from the butcher's and the cheese shop. Inside the Panificio-Pasticceria Otello Perdonati, Giuliana's friend Romano Perdonati is doing something that, in my experience, most Italian bakers like to do. He is insulting the former Communist Party.

Of course it goes by a different name now, and nothing about it is recognizably Communist, but artisans and tradespeople tend to despise it nonetheless. Romano is one of the few bakers in this town who still know how to do everything, nearly 100 kinds of traditional bread and as many kinds of pastry, and he assures me that in 20 years no one will succeed him. The tax structure won't allow it. And young people don't want to work.

Romano has a companionable way of grasping you by the forearm and denouncing all kinds of idiotic things. Take *cappellacci di zucca*, those pumpkin-filled ravioli usually served with *ragù* or with butter and sage, which Romano's people make to perfection. As it happens, they also make them in Mantua, to the northwest, but the Mantuans put Amaretto in them. Now I ask you.

In the back of the shop, as Romano explains that among young people nowadays only immigrants will work in bakeries, though not long enough to learn the arduous métier, I watch his assistants Alessandra and Marisa at work on those vast golden sheets of pasta for *cappellacci* and also the chocolate batter for *pampapato*, a kind of stiff, spicy chocolate pastry, virtually addictive, which must dry for at least two days after baking before being covered with a coating of dark chocolate. And this is where I hear the last word in Italian gastronomic exclusivity.

It is common for the inhabitants of any Italian city to tell you that their food cannot be replicated elsewhere because of the quality of the water. And there is certainly something to this, since water does vary from place to place. But as I watch Romano's people prepare dough for the famous *coppia*, the local X bread, which is rolled out with both hands in two separate "snakes" to be joined later at the middle, I am casually informed of the following: Nobody else can make our bread, because *nobody else has our air*.

Your air, I say, with a cynical smile, ready to show them they can't pull my leg. And then I realize that it's true. The kneading and rising are so time-consuming, and Ferrara's climate is so consistently humid, that such conditions would indeed be hard to reproduce elsewhere.

Whenever I'm in Ferrara, I remember my son, whose 17th birthday is approaching. I remember the excavator, and the *salama*, and the mashed potatoes. By now he also loves chocolate, and so at Romano's I try the *tenerina*, the notorious, luscious birthday-party cake of Ferrara, regretting that he isn't here with me. I'll bring him along next time. ☺

BETTING THE FARM

Continued from page 94

entire paradigm of federal farm policy from subsidies and price supports to conservation, stewardship, and support for innovators like the Stiegelmeiers.

He and others call the new approach "multifunctionality." It is an idea that has been hidden and underfunded in different titles and sections of federal farm policy for more than a decade but has never been promoted as a unifying principle. Most farmers, including Matthew Stiegelmeier, have never heard of it.

Under current federal policy, farmers receive "direct payments" each year, no matter what crops they grow or how they grow them. A multifunctional approach would build on and rechannel those payments, along with other crop-support subsidies, toward sustainable social and conservation goals. "Instead of tying payments to crops and yields, we should tie them to the services that farmers provide for the public." In the past, "public services" has meant cheap food at the supermarket, but Dobbs believes it is time to rethink the whole idea. "Pay farmers to reduce synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. Pay them to enhance wildlife, diversify their crops, build soil, and