

Web Exclusive: Ham and Cheese

Want to serve authentic Italian food at home? Then don't bother turning on the stove.

Story by Joseph Guinto * Photos by FOTOCARRA



IT LOOKS VERY MUCH LIKE PASTA. It is made with eggs, flour, olive oil and sometimes salt; it is stuffed with ricotta and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheeses and chopped Swiss chard; it is cut into squares with serrated edges; and it is finished with a drizzle of warm butter. But this is not pasta. Not really. This is tortelli di erbetta from Ai Due Platani, a rustic restaurant that sits on a lonely stretch of road in the pastoral outskirts of Parma, Italy. And here, the tortelli di erbetta has firm, al dente edges and a soft — almost gooey — center. It is akin to an over-easy egg. But it's not really like that, either. No, this is something else. This is magic. Food magic.

And as such, it is completely, frustratingly unreplicable. Even if you know the magician's secret — down to the smallest details, like when to add salt and when not to — you cannot pull off this trick. You can try. But you will fail. You will fail because you are not cooking tortelli di erbetta in a rustic trattoria on a lonely road in the pastoral outskirts of Parma, Italy. And that's where the food magic is.

I was warned about this. In another restaurant in Parma, the Michelin-star-rated Al Tramezzo, where chef Alberto Rossetti makes his tortelli by mixing 30 eggs (30!) into every kilo of flour — about three times the norm for fresh pasta — a chef's apprentice cautioned me about trying to take Emilia-Romagna's cuisine back home. "You can't really re-create Italian food in the U.S.," she said. "The flavors are just much more vibrant here in Italy."

To be sure, vibrant flavors abounded on my recent gastronomic tour of Emilia-Romagna, Italy's best food region. With Parma to the west and Bologna to the east, Emilia-Romagna is the birthplace of fresh pasta and home to Parmigiano-Reggiano, Prosciutto di Parma and the famed balsamic vinegar of Modena, Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena. Emilia-Romagna is also home to countless restaurants where they make magic in the form of tortelli in brodo (broth) and tagliolini con tartufo, which you will also never, ever be able to replicate, because American chickens don't lay eggs like Italian chickens and because American Swiss chard doesn't taste like Italian Swiss chard and because only in Italy does Italian food really taste like, well, Italy.

But don't despair. Emilia-Romagna isn't keeping all the magic to itself — there is a little bit that is made available on the U.S. side of the Atlantic, too. And, by magic, I mean ham and cheese.



IN LANGHIRANO, a small town in the southern part of the Parma province, concrete-block buildings dot the hillsides. Each one has tall, narrow, rectangular windows that are covered with vertical blinds. The buildings look like prisons. But inside, they contain legs of ham. Thousands of legs of ham. At the Leporati facility, for instance, hams hang 10 high, 12 across, in dozens of rows. And that's just on one floor. There are 100,000 hams hanging here. And everything in Leporati's facility, which is about the size of an auto plant, is perfumed with sweet, slightly salty, cured ham. Even the 11-foot-high stainless steel elevators smell delicious. I came to Emilia-Romagna, at the invitation of the Consorzio del Prosciutto di Parma — a trade group representing the 167 makers of Italy's most famous ham — to see and smell this. And, though it is an awesome sight, it smells much better than it looks.

That's because Prosciutto di Parma is, initially, just raw meat. Prosciutto means "ham" in Italian, and there are two kinds: cooked (*cotto*) and raw (*crudo*). Prosciutto di Parma is *crudo*.

For hundreds of years, Prosciutto di Parma has been made exactly the same way: The pigs are fed with chestnuts and whey left over from the production of the region's Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. During the strictly regulated curing process, the hams are also still seasoned only with sea salt — no additives, no

preservatives, and, they are still exposed to the open air for part of the year. Air that blows in from the Mediterranean Sea, just 90 minutes west. Air that's cooled as it comes up from the south, traveling over the Apennine Mountains and down into the plains of Emilia. This is Parma's particular microclimate — "90 minutes to the sea, 20 minutes to ski," as the Parmese put it. Only here can you make Parma ham. Legally, that's a fact. But it is also true because nowhere else in the world can you pull off this trick of taking nothing more than a pig's leg and salt and making it into this particular brand of food magic.

Which is why Prosciutto di Parma, along with Parmigiano-Reggiano, is arguably the best-known and possibly the best export to come out of all of Italy. Sorry, Ferrari.

To be sure, though, neither Prosciutto di Parma nor Parmigiano-Reggiano is cheap stateside. I pay about \$20 a pound for the ham and anywhere from \$17 to \$19 a pound for the cheese in my local market. But both offer something you won't get from even your very best effort at tortelli di erbetta. As TV chef Lidia Bastianich once put it, "When you serve Prosciutto di Parma at home, you have Italy on a plate."

IF WE'RE GOING TO TASTE REAL ITALY here in America — if we're going to have "Italy on a plate" by doing nothing more than going to the store and paying the recession-unfriendly price of \$20 a pound for sliced pork and \$17 a pound for cheese — we had better eat that meat the same way the Italians do.



That was my goal, anyway, of the "Parma party" I held after my return from Italy: to serve the most famous food of Italy's most appetizing region the way it is supposed to be served. Unlike making tortelli di erbetta, capturing the magic of Italy's best exports turned out to be simple. I just followed these rules:

Don't cook it. Before the magic tortelli arrived at Ai Due Platani, I told the Consorzio's Fabrizio Raimondi that I have long grilled figs stuffed with Gorgonzola cheese and wrapped with Parma ham. Delicious, right? He thought not. Raimondi glared at me as if I had insulted his mother. "I prefer to keep Prosciutto di Parma in its raw state," he said. "To cook it is to take away the subtleties of the product." (There is one exception: Emilians will cook the back end of prosciutto crudo because it is too stringy to eat in raw slices.) So, okay, no cooking. Serve raw, on a plate, with cubes of melon or slices of fig (uncooked, too) on the side.



Slice it correctly. Every restaurant, every salumeria, and almost every home in Parma has a deli slicer. In the commercial spots, most of these slicers are the hand-cranked kind. Electric slicers spin too quickly, which melts the delicate fat in Prosciutto di Parma, Culatello di Zibello and Emilia-Romagna's other top salumi. Stateside, you will be lucky to find a deli with a hand-powered slicer. But if you are so lucky, shop there. If not, take care to sample slices from your deli person. Too thin and the ham will taste like cardboard. Too thick and it will be impossible to chew. Ask for sample slices and have it cut the same way every time you go back.

Don't get fancy with the cheese. Parmigiano-Reggiano is Prosciutto di Parma's best pairing. Stick a knife in a big wedge, twist and let it fall. Across Emilia-Romagna, you will also see the king of cheeses served with droplets of aged Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena — the stuff that can cost \$250 a bottle. If you can't afford that, get a condimento balsamico, a sweeter, less-acidic balsamic reduction. Drizzle that directly on the cheese or just put it on a plate and have your guests dip as they will. Honey works too.



If it grows together, it goes together. The maxim about wine — to drink the wine that is made near the food you're eating — holds true here. In this case, that would be dry Lambrusco, most of which is made near Modena in Emilia-Romagna and all of which is much better than the sweet Lambrusco that has dominated the U.S. market since the 1970s. Dry Lambrusco dominates the dining tables in Emilia-Romagna, where the grape has been grown perhaps since Roman times. And Jeremy Parzen, an Austin-based marketing consultant and author of the wine blog DoBianchi.com, says there is more authentic Lambrusco now available in the U.S. than ever before. He hails it as the perfect match for Emilia-Romagna's rich cuisine. "The restrained alcohol content, bright acidity, and fizziness make Lambrusco a great thirst quencher when paired with the salt-cured, heavy staples of Emilia like Prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano-Reggiano," Parzen says. Worth noting: My 30 guests, most of whom had never had Lambrusco before, consumed a case of the stuff.

Make the tortelli. Okay, so it will never be the same as at Ai Due Platani. But you've got the ham that tastes like chestnuts and sea air, and you've got the cheese that tastes of buttery, Italian milk fat. You've got Italy already. So, even though you will fail to get the tortelli to taste just right, you will still fail deliciously.
