



Head to the main cathedral square in the centre of Parma...

Beyond Buon Appetito

27th February 2016

Parma is home to two of Italy's most popular exports: Parma Ham, of course, and Parmesan Cheese. But, delicious as these undoubtedly are, as Olivia Greenway explains, there is so much more to this quaint Italian town than its culinary delights...

Tell anyone you are going to 'Parma' and immediately the assumption is that you mean 'Palma', the capital of Majorca in Spain and a popular destination for thousands of British holidaymakers every summer. Florence, Rome and, of course, Venice are all well known Italian hot spots, but the city that gives its name to two of Italy's most famous exports – Parma ham and Parmesan cheese – manages to keep itself under the radar. Quite why it's been so shy of publicity is a bit of a mystery. It's a pretty, well preserved medieval city; and as the sun sets each evening, 'the buildings look like they have been dipped in honey', another equally appreciative writer once wrote. It's relatively easy to get to, compact and walkable, and with narrow cobblestone streets hiding delights around almost every corner, it has both history and culture in big measures. It's also bicycle friendly, with almost everyone seemingly travelling on two wheels.

Opera lovers should visit in October when, for a whole month, the opera house Teatro Regio holds

a Verdi festival. The Italian maestro was born near here in 1813. Even if opera is not your thing, take some time to admire the 1829 building internally, with soaring marble columns and life-size statues in the lobby and through to the spectacular painted ceiling detail in the auditorium with a four-metre long central chandelier weighing over a tonne. Underneath are four tiers of private boxes with rich red velvet covering all of the 1280 seats. Audiences here comprise locals and certainly opera aficionados, and are known for giving vocal disapproval to performances. They may not prepare and eat their dinner in the boxes as they did in the past, but they are not beyond a hiss or boo.

Antique buffs should head to Parma in October or April for Italy's oldest and largest antiques fair, held over nine days. Five hangar-like exhibition rooms house antiques from over a thousand dealers based all over Italy and Europe, with several hailing from the United Kingdom. A dealer from Manchester was attending for the twelfth year during my last visit, and told me English silver and grandfather clocks were good sellers. Arranged in a grid fashion, the stalls are crammed with a myriad of items from chandeliers to fine and costume jewellery, rugs, furniture, religious paintings and artefacts and everything collectible one could imagine. It's like the world's biggest Aladdin's Cave. The Mercanteinfiera at Fieri di Parma is easily reached from the city centre and there is a shuttle bus.

Back in Parma, history lovers must head to the main cathedral square in the centre. Originally fortified, the large building here is the former bishop's residence. By the 13th century, buildings in the square became more ornate – if you look carefully you can see colourful ceramic bowls and coloured glass in the brickwork. Opposite here is the yellow sandstone cathedral, with the famous painted fresco dome by Antonio da Correggio portraying the Assumption of the Virgin. It was eight years of toil for the artist, who finished the work in 1530. The 64-metre bell tower was built later. Next to the cathedral is the hexagonal shaped Baptistery, dating from the 13th century. The central stone font was first used in 1216 and has been in regular use to bless babies ever since. Around the walls are stone motifs of the signs of the zodiac and the painted domed ceiling is well preserved, with painted frescoes decorating the walls underneath.

A short walk away from here, in Piazzale della Pilotta is another theatre, this one made of wood. The Duke of Parma built the Teatro Farnese in 1618, basically to impress his powerful enemies. It was cheaper than marble and stone and quicker to build. 'Marble' sculptures are cleverly fashioned from wood and convincingly painted. On one famous occasion, a play was performed set at sea and the floor of the theatre was deliberately flooded. Dukes and other dignitaries had raised seats, which gives rise to the theory that this theatre had the first 'royal box'. Although it looks impressive, though, the theatre was not a success and was only used nine times before it fell into disrepair. Then it was bombed during the Second World War and seemed to be consigned to the history books. Happily, it was rebuilt to the original design in the 1950s and is now a popular tourist attraction.

Five minutes' walk from here is Piazza Garibaldi, named after the famous revolutionary involved in the eventual unification of Italy. His statue gives the name to the square that often hosts a market: on the weekend I visited, for example, there was an Italian food fair in full swing, with oversized pans of bubbling risotto and numerous pasta sauces, assorted cheeses, breads and even ice cream to taste. You will not go hungry in Parma.

Mentioning food (in the end, it's impossible not to), genuine Parma ham, made from the rear legs of the animal, is produced in the immediate area only and cured for up to a year. An even better meat is Culatello, made from just the fillet cut of the ham. Its taste is said to be sweet and

unmistakably mouth-watering. Once you have tried Culatello, it is claimed you will hold no truck with Parma ham – and that is a pity, as European and government regulations have driven Culatello almost to extinction.

Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, known the world over, owes its quality to its source. The cows that produce the milk graze only on grass and hay in fields around the city, and the cheese is aged from 18 months to nearly three years. In the rest of Europe, we tend to sprinkle the cheese on a pasta dish, but when in Parma, nibble on a couple of hunks with your glass of red. Freshly cut Parmesan is not dry, but moist, salty and crumbly – and light-years away from those desiccated tubs or hard dry lumps found in our supermarkets.

The side streets that lead off here nearly all have a delicatessen or food shop, although it was hard to browse in the popular ones as, it being a Saturday, some of them had queues stretching out into the street. The shops are small and stuffed to the rafters with hanging hams, cheeses, fresh pasta, other cold meats and fresh bread. These shoppers aren't tourists, but savvy locals, who still go to the delicatessen to buy their food rather than the supermarket. Food is simple here, but all the better for it. Fresh just-baked focaccia, razor thin slices of the best Parma ham, a few hunks of fresh Parmesan cheese, fresh pasta made to a secret recipe with a handed-down-for-generations home made sauce – and you have a meal fit for a king.

If all this food window-shopping is making you hungry, there are numerous trattoria; just pick one you like the look of and you're likely to be more than satisfactorily fed. Or, if you want a treat, Trattoria Ai du Plantini is a ten-minute taxi ride away. This impossibly pretty restaurant serves beef tartare, the best pumpkin (zucca) ravioli, saffron risotto with truffles and has the gelato cart wheeled to the table where you create your own ice-cream creation. Lambrusco, served icy cold, is a perfect foil to the rich food and does not have the cheap connotations of the drink back home. It can be found in most restaurants and bars and is inexpensive and refreshing.

Around 6pm, bars around the main square start serving free snacks with their aperitifs – so grab a Campari or Martini and soak up the atmosphere. With no trains to catch, workers gather around these bars after work, to chew the fat and gossip before finally finding their bicycle among the hundreds and riding home. It's a slow, civilised lifestyle that I envied – and easily managed to enjoy, for too short a weekend.
