

“When this region goes hungry, the rest of Italy will have already starved.”

Ripe fruits and vegetables at Antica Corte Pallavicina, growing in the vast garden of resident superchef, Massimo Spigaroli.

GETTING TO ZIBELLO

Tristan travelled to Fidenza with hotel and rail booking specialist Railbookers (☎ 0203 327 0733, www.railbookers.com). London to Fidenza can be done in a day, although a journey break in Paris or Zurich is recommended, allowing for spectacular views over the Gotthard Pass.

Gourmet guide ZIBELLO

Tristan Rutherford explores a little-known area in Emilia-Romagna that packs a gourmet punch to wow any passing tourist.

Around Zibello there's a local saying: "When this region goes hungry, the rest of Italy will have already starved." On the branch line that bumbles through vineyards, past fields of corn and cows and over a gently oozing River Po, that truth is apparent in abundance.

Although just an hour south of Milan, Zibello is dodged by the southbound autostrada. Travellers whiz between Lombard risotto and Tuscan soup without giving this golden gastro-triangle a second look. But judging by its recent rash of foodie fans, Prince Charles included, something is clearly simmering under the surface. Last autumn I lifted the lid and a lost culinary world came bubbling over.

As tourist numbers are limited I ask my Italian father-in-law, Giuseppe, to come along

as a culinary companion and local guide. A local vintner who's never happier than talking about food and wine – preferably with a plate of food and glass of wine in front of him – he's a veritable Giuseppe-pedia on the region's traditional cuisine.

Motoring out of local rail hub Fidenza, huge cutout hoardings make no secret of its specialties: Parmesan cheese, local Lambrusco and *culatello*, the refined prosciutto made from pigs' bottoms. In one case a cartoon porker advertises the latter, welcoming visitors with two thumbs-up.

The first stop we choose on the Strada dei Sapori – the newly marked driving trail around the region's culinary highlights – is Parmesan maker, Caseificio Censi. We stuff down samples of the 24-month-old cheese on entry; great golden →



Culatello, a refined prosciutto made from pigs' bottoms.



Antica Corte Pallavicina is home to the Michelin-starred restaurant, Casa Spigaroli.



Thin shavings of delicious culatello, a much-prized local speciality.



“After years spent touring Italy, I have never seen such a rich abundance of bona-fide local fare.”

The cellar at Antica Corte Pallavicina where 5,000 of the famed hams hang to be slowly aged.



Wheels of Parmesan slowly ripening at Caseificio Censi.



A dish at the award-winning Casa Spigaroli restaurant.



Parmesan wheels sit on the towering shelves of the ageing room for 24 months.

➔ hunks lying under the counter start at just €12.50 a kilo. May we look around, we ask owner Signor Censi? “Certo” – of course – he replies.

Have they ever had any foreign visitors before? “Zero” is the response.

We wander from hour-old wheels to two-day-old forms. Each is wrapped in a limited edition plastic band, imprinted with the words Parmigiano Reggiano, plus the date and producer code to ensure the strictest production controls are met. They're then soaked in salt water for 20 days before being matured in a warehouse for 24 months. This ageing room makes one feel like a mouse in paradise; an Olympic pool-sized hall 100 cheeses long, 50 cheeses wide, and 20 cheeses high. Here they slowly ripen to yellow, each phase ticked off by an official Parmesan inspector.

A tangy sugar stench sticks to us like mist, and I fully expect someone to grate us over a bowl of tortellini. Signor Censi affirms that Parmesan can add spice to any dish from sandwiches to steaks, while Giuseppe asserts that his partisan father, Domenico-Antonio, survived a World War II winter

on the run from the occupying Germans by eating an entire wheel. I'm utterly cheesed out.

A RICH ABUNDANCE

We need fresh air and lunch and select Antica Corte Pallavicina as our first dining stop. The vast garden of resident superchef Massimo Spigaroli – rows of mint, garlic, rocket, chicory and more – abuts a grand courtyard containing a glass cube of a dining room. A plaque announces this restaurant/guesthouse's opening date: 27 July 2010. Signor Spigaroli's brainchild is symptomatic of how the Zibello area is changing: a timely reinvention of the old with an eye on the finest local ingredients.

Dominating the dining room is an antique iron oven, laid like an Alice in Wonderland Eat-Me temptation for devotees of Italian cuisine: pickled shallots, a five-litre vat of *mostarda di Cremona*, honey and apple *acquavite*, *Grappa di Moscato*, preserved pears, and a cheeseboard of belly-busting proportions. After years spent touring Italy, I have never seen such a rich abundance of bona-fide local fare.

I want to take a photo but Signor Spigaroli arrives to take our orders himself. The EU flags on his chef's robes confirm that he regularly cooks for Europe's presidents, just one of the many surprises that crop up in this unassuming quarter. A silver salver is lifted on our first course: it's a dégustation of air-cured *culatelli* hams – an 18-month, 36-month and a black pig – laid out on three mini wooden podiums across our plates. The younger slices are like an exquisite bacon-flavour crisp, melting slowly on my tongue. The 36-month is ruminative and intense. In gold-medal-winning position is the black pig. It's pure porcine butter, a concentrated pork-scratching tang distilled into a tiny wafer of meat.

Amazingly, all visitors to the restaurant are allowed to visit the underground corridors of the *culatello* cellar. Here 5,000 *culatelli* – the bums of 2,500 pigs – are slowly aged. They hang by the hundred like oversized grapes, waiting to be sliced into €100 per kilo tranches at Europe's finest restaurants. Fenced off in a secret chamber are the pre-purchased hams, each dog-tagged with the

name of its prospective owner: fashion designer Giorgio Armani, luxury delicatessen Fauchon in Paris, and S.A.R Principe Carlo. Prince Charles? Yup, this is confirmed back upstairs as Signor Spigaroli shows us a complimentary hand-written letter from Clarence House.

A SELECTION OF GOURMET TREATS

The second day's drive along flowing riversides is fascinating. Giuseppe points out abandoned farms for €50,000 and a ruined *palazzo* that was snapped up for €100,000. We pass three vineyards that were planted within the last year, plus a new regional bike track. In a country where visitors once touted Umbria as the new Tuscany, then Le Marche as the new Umbria, it's shocking that this heavenly triangle – slap in the middle of northern Italy – has been bypassed by the masses.

Our target today is Ristorante Stella d'Oro in Soranga. The town hosts a May food festival, a Jewish museum, a Parmesan museum, and a castle, all just three miles from Verdi's house, none of which I knew anything about. ➔



Enjoy fine cuisine, such as this burrata of round mozzarella capped by ice-cold tomato passata gel.



The elegant interior of the modern Stella d'Oro restaurant.



A simple but sumptuous spaghetti dish at Stella d'Oro.



Ivan Albertelli shows off the fabulous local produce used in his restaurant.



Chef Barbara at the welcoming Hostaria da Ivan.

INFORMATION

Antica Corte Pallavicina
www.acpallavicina.com

Hostaria da Ivan
www.hostariadaivan.it

Ristorante Stella d'Oro
www.ristorantestelladoro.it

Zibello
www.comune.zibello.pr.it

Giuseppe's winery
www.tomasettifamilywinery.com

Caseificio Censi
Via Giaranzana, Zibello
☎ +39 0524 99187,

✿ All the restaurants listed in this article have charming accommodation attached starting from around €70 per night.

➔ Chef Marco Dallabona welcomes us into his elegant dining room, where the dents and chinks of 10,000 satisfied diners are embossed into the silver of each fork. A menu from 2 December 1886 hangs on the wall: *maccheroni alla Medici* and *frittura di vitello* among the lunch items. But the items on Stella d'Oro's modern-luxe menu couldn't be more different.

Against my best advice, Giuseppe orders a mammoth five *antipasti* dishes. It's nice being able to. Despite holding a prestigious Michelin star, both the Stella d'Oro and yesterday's Antica Corte Pallavicina present world-class cuisine for half the price of the equivalent in London. These appetisers arrive together, each timed to perfection: a crisp-crunch tempura of courgette flowers; a *burrata* of perfectly round mozzarella topped by an ice-cold tomato passata gel; a raw tartare sequence of horse, veal and beef; a sweet goats' cheese topped with pork shavings; plus another platter of the famed *culatello*. Heaven is interrupted by a smiling Marco, who returns to take our orders for first course and mains.

Before I return to Britain from this ripely productive land that guidebooks forgot, there's

room for one final blowout at the Hostaria da Ivan in nearby Fontanelle. Back-slappingly charming Ivan Albertelli and his chef wife Barbara have been winning plaudits for their inventive takes on regional classics for two decades. We walk in past the restaurant's vegetable garden and through a door plastered with well-deserved Italian recommendations: Veronelli, Osterie d'Italia and Gambero Rosso.

We're interested in local cheese and wine, so Ivan ushers us into his *cantina* tasting room. We compare local Lambruscos with Champagne, hard Grana Padana from Brescia with Parmesan, and *culatello* with the finest hams from the nearby regional capital of Parma. After a girth-expanding three-day orgy of consumption, it all tastes amazing.

Would Ivan lay on such a sampling spread for any visitor interested in local produce? "*Certo*," he replies. "*Sono obbligato*" – I'm obliged.

And will tourists like the Zibello region when word gets out about it and they start exploring?

"If they like eating," says Giuseppe, glass of Lambrusco in front of him, "they should get on just fine," he confidently asserts. **T**