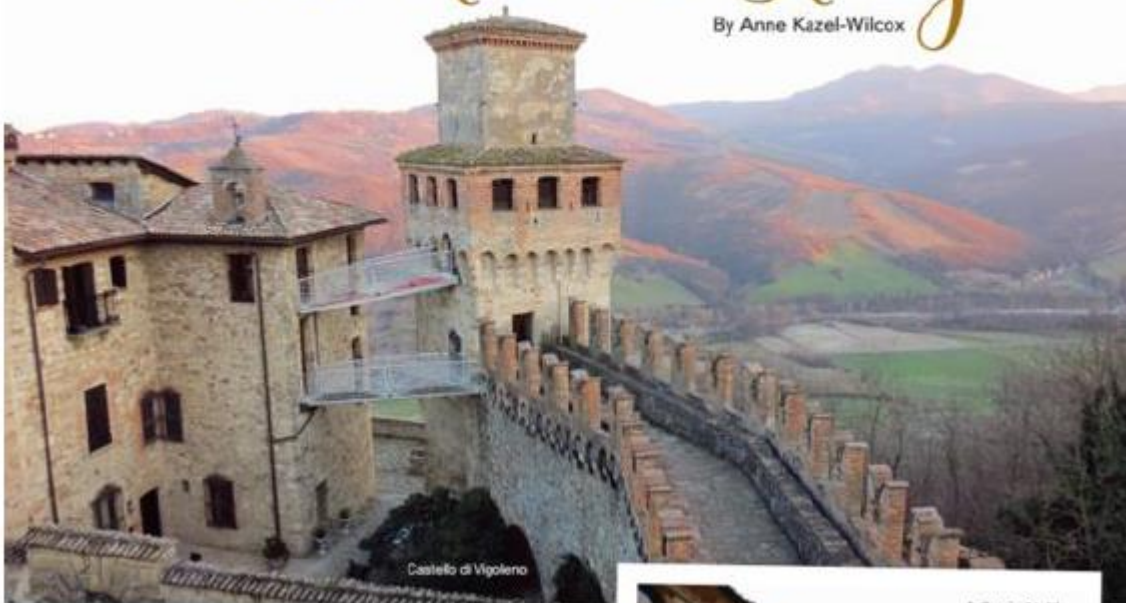


# THE SWEET SPOTS OF *Northern Italy*

By Anne Kazel-Wilcox



Castello di Vigoleno

I'm sitting in a classic car, my hand on the shift, ready to begin my road tour. But this is no ordinary car, nor ordinary journey. I'm in a '61 Alfa Romeo, which has been delivered to me within the walled grounds of a medieval castle. I rev the engine, ready to roar past towers and dungeons. But I hardly want to escape the charming grounds of this Italian castle, Castello di Vigoleno, where I have a period suite with windows that open to views of the Apennine Mountains. For this one night, I figure, I'll savor my step back in time. Tomorrow, I can push the fast forward button and roam the hills and valleys of the Emilia Romagna region of northern Italy. It's a relatively obscure region in terms of American recognition, but one that is intensely rich in history, culture, cars (plenty more on that later)—and above all gastronomy. I'm ready to be enraptured.

The Emilia Romagna region sits between Milan, which is to the north, and Florence to the south. Its landscape sweeps from the ridges of the Apennines to the beaches of Rimini along the Adriatic Coast. More familiar to most, however, might be the region's cities like Bologna, Parma and Reggio. Or should I say, most familiar might be their culinary products: Bologna is the birthplace of bologna, Parma ham comes from Parma, and the one and only true Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese originates from the cities of Parma and Reggio (both claimed cheese fame but settled on a truce). Balsamic vinegar also derives from the region. Suffice it to say, a visit to the region will include lots of eating, which one might walk off touring . . . but for me, it's back to that Alfa Romeo.



Author in '61 Alfa Romeo Giulia Spidee



La Rizza Parmigiano Reggiano factory



Ferrari 166 Inter Aerius 1939



Faenza ceramics maker

**A GUEST, NOT A TOURIST** After a night in the castle, my small group eases into our classic cars, which includes the Alfa Romeo and a '72 Fiat Spider. They've been arranged by Canossa Events, a luxury operator of tours via classic and sports cars. Often you'll find the lovely proprietors, Luigi and Francesca, operating big rallies in Italy or tough circuit races. But we're on a leisurely circuit to less-known sweet spots of Italy, where I'm told, "You're a guest not a tourist." And we're off.

We motor along scenic country roads, stopping at small villages including one, Rivalta, with another castle. There, our guide checks to see if the resident count can join us on our tour, but alas, he is away. Instead, we hear about other residents like the ghost of Giuseppe, an amorous man who'd set his eyes on the wrong woman. He then befell an "accident" and supposedly now endlessly walks the halls. Of those ornate halls, most mesmerizing to me is one with an amazing collection of military costumes from the late 1800s to early 1900s. The guide expresses surprise at a woman, like me, fawning over uniforms but there's a certain romanticism to them (and what woman doesn't like the image of a spiffy officer and gentleman?).

We then detour to a Parma ham farm, Rosa dell' Angelo, where my head spins at the fresh selections of prosciutto, pancetta, salami, mortadella and more. I quickly learn that they are all "salumi," a reference to cured meats, with salami just one form of salumi. (Whow . . . so when ordering I can just say "bring me your best selection of salumi," and leave the rest to the experts). This northern Italy region is the land of artisanal salumi and cheeses, and any pre-conceived notions of either should be thrown out the window. (The artisan bologna I will taste in Bologna, for example, is one of the most delicious, spiced-up meats I've ever tasted, and I didn't think I liked bologna). More often than not, these artisanal products are all natural and devotedly hand-made by the same families that have done so for generations. And each has its specific protected denomination of origin, or DOP (also PDO).

These DOPs don't take quality lightly. Famigiano-Reggiano inspectors, for example, tap each and every large cheese wheel with a metal hammer—like ringing a bell—to detect its firmness, or lack of, with the quality then designated. The patriarch of one producer, La Rizza, tells me the cheese originated from Benedictine monks in the 9th century who needed to conserve milk for long periods. Cheese was their answer. Nowadays, there is a particular grass cows graze on that results in superior milk, and that milk must be used within 24 hours for the perfect cheese. (Spoiler alert: if the brand in your refrigerator says "parmesan," it's probably not real Parmigiano-Reggiano, despite any Italian flags on the label, which are meant to mislead. Look for DOP or the grind's telltale, pinprick Parmigiano-Reggiano branding).

**MOTOR VALLEY** My sweet-spots tour of Emilia Romagna continues with more culture, culinary—and cars. I indulge in a cooking lesson at Alma International School of Italian Cuisine, Italy's top culinary school. Then it's time for more in the way of motors. The Emilia Romagna region, after all, has a pseudonym: Motor Valley. This is home to Ferrari, Ducati motorcycles, Lamborghini and more. Why this particular region? It seems there is a confluence of industrial entrepreneurship in the area, and men who like their toys. Like Enzo Ferrari.

The Ferrari hometown of Modena—also Pavarotti's hometown—has not one but two Ferrari museums in its vicinity: a small one that stuns visually with its car display; the second, in nearby Maranello, relays Ferrari's history and has a plethora of sublime designs on display. Which museum to visit depends on whether you desire a close or to submerge in all things Ferrari. I tour both and am lucky enough to visit the Ferrari factory as well (sans camera lest I share little-red trade secrets). Most astounding is the precision assembly line with its moving platform that transfers a car assembly every 19 minutes, on the dot, to the next expert along the line, with TLC especially given to the engine "soul." Every single car is already accounted for (cost €264,000 and up) and thus can be personalized up to minute accents like upholstery stitching.

Once Ferrari-ed out, I hop back into a classic car, the Fiat Spider, which has plenty soul for me. Next stop, Bologna, a big city—by this region's standards—but compact enough for the heart of the city to be pedestrian-friendly. There is a small hotel chain, Bologna Art Hotels, and each of its hotels has a superb location just steps from main sights, whether the duomo (cathedral), town square, shopping or medieval towers (including one that is very leaning). Among my travel group is a music critic who likes the gritty feel to Bologna. I love the city's food, bologna in particular, especially an artisan version made by an 85-year old who still peddles his wares from restaurant to restaurant. I have been advised, however, to never order spaghetti Bolognese. "If you ask for it in Bologna," said Alma chef Christiano Broyllo, "they'll kill you." The Americanized name is yet another ill-conceived notion of Italian cuisine; the dish is more correctly labeled pasta con ragù.

**GRAND DAME RESORT CITY OF RIMINI** My classic car tour of Emilia Romagna continues. Other highlights including the Ducati motorcycle factory in Bologna and visits to balsamic vinegar and olive oil producers. Then I'm headed to the Adriatic Coast. Along the way, I am enamored with two villages, Faenza that is renowned for its ceramics, and nearby Brisighella, one of the most charming small villages I've ever seen. The medieval town was built in defensive form, to protect against enemy lords, with homes built into rock walls flanked by castle walls. Not to miss is Via Dolciastini, or "Donkey Road," that housed some of these old homes as well as donkey stables.

Wrapping up my canvassing of the region, I conclude in the seaside city of Rimini, renowned as a summer escape—and for Federico Fellini films like *Amarcord* (foreign language Oscar 1974). Here, in Rimini, a Roman road originates, marked by the Tiberius Bridge begun by Emperor Augustus and finished by his successor, Tiberius, in 21 A. D. In Medieval Square is a fountain where da Vinci is said to have heard "musicality." And then there is the iconic Grand Hotel, the grand dame of the seaside area. For sure, this is a lyrical city with parts Roman, Renaissance and contemporary combining effortlessly into one vibrant resort city. Says the Mayor of Rimini, Andrea Gnassi, "We are a true place, not a plastic atmosphere."

And with that, I toast with the mayor to the charm that is Emilia Romagna—where no one is a visitor but rather, a guest. **stb**  
Visit [www.emiliaromagnaturismo.com](http://www.emiliaromagnaturismo.com)

## TRAVEL FACTS

**GETTING THERE & AROUND:** Fly into Bologna, which is served by major US airlines with international partner connections such as on Alitalia, Air France and British Airways. Canossa Events can arrange individualized, classic-car escorted tours, or join a classic car rally, [www.canossa.it](http://www.canossa.it)

## SLEEPING THERE:

(Rates include breakfast)

**REGGIO EMILIA:** Hotel Posta is a beautiful four-star hotel, celebrating 500 historic years and overlooking the main square. Singles start at €65. [www.hotelposta.re.it](http://www.hotelposta.re.it)

**BOLOGNA:** Bologna Art Hotels has four boutique hotels in the city center, rated three and four stars. Singles start at €80. [www.bolognarthotels.it](http://www.bolognarthotels.it)

**CASTLE EXPERIENCE NEAR PARMA:** Step back to medieval times at the lovely Castello di Vigoleno. Some suites look out to the Apennine Mountains. Rooms start at €80 per night. [www.castellodivigoleno.com](http://www.castellodivigoleno.com)

**RIMINI:** The iconic, five-star Grand Hotel Rimini overlooks the Adriatic Sea with rooms in Venetian and French-antique style. €115 [www.grandhotelinrimini.com](http://www.grandhotelinrimini.com)

## USEFUL CULINARY LINKS:

- Parmigiano-Reggiano dairy farm, [www.agriturismolarazza.it](http://www.agriturismolarazza.it)
- Parma ham farm, [www.rosaangelo.it](http://www.rosaangelo.it)
- Balsamic vinegar producer, [www.acetaiaicasei.it](http://www.acetaiaicasei.it)

Grand Hotel in Rimini

