

TASTES *of* ITALIA

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

FALL 2019

SEASON'S BEST

TUNE UP YOUR TASTE
BUDS WITH THESE
CROWD PLEASERS



Chocolate
"Pralines"
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BOLOGNA'S BEST

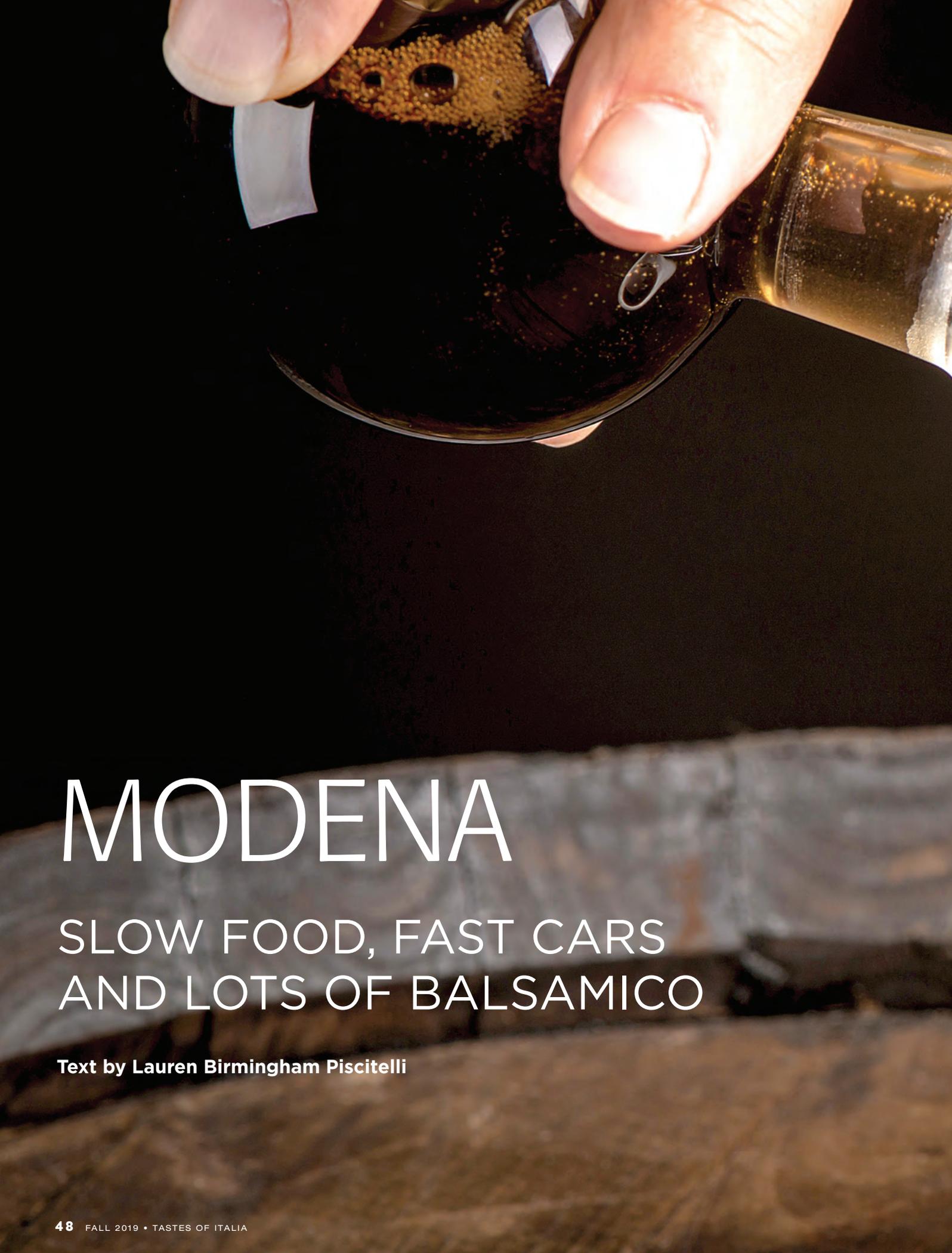
Culinary Delights
And History, Too

LIGURIA'S CLASSIC RED

Deep Roots,
Refreshing Flavor

MODENA MUST-HAVE

Authentic
Balsamic Vinegar



MODENA

SLOW FOOD, FAST CARS
AND LOTS OF BALSAMICO

Text by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

NATIVE SOIL



NATIVE SOIL

My morning begins with a slow cappuccino at the Gran Caffè set on the cobblestone Piazza Grande in Modena, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Bankers, shopkeepers, the butcher and a priest stop in for their first caffè of the day. Watching these Italians soak up *la gioia della vita* (the joy of life) while sipping a simple black coffee and exchanging *buon giornos* has me feeling like I'm sitting in front row seats at the opera.

Modena is the city of slow food, fast cars and *aceto balsamico* (balsamic vinegar). Nothing is rushed here. It's an elegant city dazzling with small streets that intertwine, the majestic Duomo built in 1184 and La Ghirlandina, the bell tower, built in 1179. Set in the region of Emilia Romagna and on the flat plain of the slow-flowing Po, it's one of Italy's greatest gastronomic places, known for authentic Lambrusco wine and Osteria Francescana, one of the world's top 50 restaurants.

It's also the birthplace of the Ferrari and Lamborghini sports cars and opera tenor Luciano Pavarotti.

After finishing my coffee, I stroll to the famous Mercato Albinelli, the oldest covered market in town, which opened its doors in 1931. Often referred to as Italy's most beautiful market, it doesn't disappoint. Uniform stalls are manned by local artisans selling their seasonal fruits, vegetables, cheese, meat, fish and wine from the region. There's even a fresh pasta section where tortellini, tagliatelle and pasticcio can be purchased for lunch. A delicious gallery sells traditional wood-oven baked breads, *tigelle* (a traditional Modenese flat bread made in a cast iron pan) and even *il benesone*, a simple cake, while the landmark Schiavoni Bar serves small sandwiches accompanied by glasses of Pignoletto. It's a colorful stage as shopkeepers offer samples and locals exchange recipes while catching up on the day's news in Modenese dialect. It's a food lover's dream.

After shopping, I follow a small country road that cuts through rolling vineyards, cherry and apple orchards and lavender fields. I feel like I am inside a Claude Monet painting.

I arrive at Via Giardini Sud and Signor Paolo Rossi Barattini welcomes me. He's an artisan *aceto balsamico* producer whose family was one of the first to make the



PHOTO: JOHN SILVER

Museum Enzo Ferrari Modena.



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authentic IGP (Protected Geographical Indication) and DOP (Protected Designation of Origin) deep dark balsamico in 1600, maybe even earlier. Not only is he at the helm of the family vinegar business, but he also owns and farms several hectares of land where he cultivates black cherry trees and vineyards, and produces a line of *composte di frutta* (marmalade).

“Ciao buon giorno,” he greets me at the gate with a gentle smile. He shows me around the property, then leads me into the historical palazzo where age-old barrels are filled with grape must in an attic.

“You cannot rush the aging of aceto balsamico di Modena,” says Signor Paolo.

“The DOP and IGP products originate from our grape must that is cooked, acetified, then aged in wooden barrels. The must is derived directly from the grapes harvested on our property, from the vines of the Rossi Barattini family. This process helps maintain the flavor and quality that has been selected and refined by the family over hundreds of years. The resulting product, *mosto cotto*, is aged for a minimum of 12 years in a battery of several barrels of successively smaller sizes. The casks are made of chestnut, cherry, oak, mulberry, ash and juniper wood,” he explains.

“The Rossi Barattini aceto balsamico combines hundreds of years of experience and aging in special wood barrels from some of the most ancient families in the region — ancestors of my family in Modena. Our balsamic is certified as DOP and is regularly monitored by CERMET, the local certification authority. The IGP product maintains the characteristics of a natural food without the addition of anything,” he adds.

“Even though you see so many different balsamic vinegar varieties on the market today, they are not authentic because the grape must is not aged long enough nor in the same way,” Signor Paolo says.

“What truly counts is the time that the grape must is fermented in the wooden barrels and that no other product is added. An industrial IGP balsamic vinegar remains in barrels for only 60 days before being sold. Traditional balsamic vinegar is produced in the original barrels from 100 years ago, as well as in other barrels from 40 years ago and barrels that are 12 to 20 years old — that’s the difference” he says.

As Signor Paolo shares his story, the tasting tour begins, starting from the youngest samples to the very oldest. I feel





Balsamic vinegar barrels
for storing and aging.

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Rossi Barattini's balsamic vinegar originates from grapes harvested on the family's property and goes through several steps and years of aging before it is bottled.



PHOTO: LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

the centuries of history in this ancient attic, and I'm privileged to be spending the day with him. He shares his family history.

"My father's surname was Barattini and his family dates to the 1300s. The families who grew up within the walls of this ancient city at that time all knew each other and were also related," he says.

"The Aggazzotti family was the most important and influential. We know that in 1850, Signor Francesco Aggazzotti wrote a letter documenting the recipe of how balsamic vinegar was made. He was passionate about the Modenese grapes, wine and how they were aged into balsamic vinegar. We also know that the first written traces of this agrodolce, bittersweet, condiment dates back to 1100," he says.

After all these years, Signor Paolo still possesses this agricultural property bought at the beginning of the 1900s and continues the tradition of producing balsamic vinegar and cultivating the precious grapes. His paternal grandfather also had a passion for winemaking, but there are only a few bottles that remain, which are opened only on special occasions.

"We have DOP certification, a European certification DOP, which means our product is a Protected Designation of Origin of Modena, certification for products aged more than 12 years and more than 25 years. Barrels are considered old when they are over a century old, not when they are 20 to 25 years old. Times are long when you make balsamico; you can't be in a hurry. We use Lambrusco grapes for our IGP and Trebbiano grapes for our DOP. Before bottling, the product is always tasted by a panel of expert tasters who evaluate it. If the product does not meet qualitative standards, it is returned to the producer. In this way, if the product is bottled it means it has been deemed to have the desired fruity taste and is guaranteed to be of excellent quality," he says.

"Our aceto balsamico products include Tradizione Modena DOP aged 25 years, Vecchio Cantalupo, Nobile Cantalupo, Sfuso Nobile, Nero d'Uva, Ovalina and Velluto vinegars. We also produce a pear, prune and strawberry marmalade with aceto balsamico and a salsa di

cipolle, sauces of onion, ortolana, vegetable and radicchio," he says.

The scent of crushed grapes, seeds and skins permeates the air, as he continues to tell his story of an age-old art.

As we step from room to room — each one lined with wooden barrels almost touching — I learn that the most important ingredients are the indigenous grapes from Modena and time.

"Everything which started in our family remains in our family. The way the balsamico was made then is the way we continue to make it today."

He reveals his three Ps for *l'oro nero*, the black gold. "*Progetto, prezioso e pazienza* — project, precious and patience. Project because the traditional balsamic vinegar of Modena cannot be realized without a certain project and planning over time. And, given the number of years it takes to produce the limited-edition product, it cannot be defined differently — along with the precious fruit, there is the commitment and dedication of those who produce it. Finally, a lot of patience, another element necessary to have a quality vinegar."

After an informative tasting and sharing of his family recipes — glazed chestnuts and pralines — I feel like I've only scratched the surface of the art of making aceto balsamico.

"We drizzle it over polpetta, meatballs, grilled beef, assorted boiled meats, omelettes, radicchio, asparagus, salads, gelato and strawberries. We also take a sip or two after lunch or dinner — it helps digestion," he says.

Besides balsamic vinegar, Modena is known for its chocolate, which Signor Rossi also enjoys. See the recipe for simple truffle on page 57.

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Chicken with Balsamic Vinegar

- 1 cup balsamic vinegar
- ½ cup broth or water
- 3 cloves garlic, diced
- 3 basil leaves, chopped
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken, cut into serving pieces
- 1 teaspoon sea salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons olive oil

In a large glass bowl, combine the vinegar, water, garlic, basil and bay leaf. Mix well. Add the chicken and coat with the mixture. Refrigerate and marinate for at

least 1 hour or overnight.

Remove the chicken from the bowl and place on paper towels. Reserve the marinade. Place the chicken on paper towels and sprinkle with salt and pepper.

Place the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Sauté the chicken until browned on all sides. Add the reserved marinade to the skillet and bring to a boil. Lower the heat to a simmer, cover and let cook about 30 minutes, turning the chicken occasionally. Add water a little at a time, if necessary, to keep the liquid from drying out.

When the chicken is done, remove from the skillet onto a platter. Serve with the remaining sauce from the pan, if desired.

Makes 6 servings.

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Pasta with Sausage

- 1 pound pasta, cooked according to package directions
- 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 pound Italian sausage, finely chopped with casings removed
- 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 1/2 teaspoon dried red chile flakes
- 1/2 cup onion, minced
- 4 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1/2 cup dry red wine
- 1/2 cup chicken broth
- Coarse sea salt, to taste
- 3 tablespoons butter
- 1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
- Fresh parsley, finely chopped
- High quality balsamic vinegar, for drizzling

In a large skillet, combine the olive oil and sausage and brown on all sides. Add garlic, chile flakes and onion and cook on medium for 5 minutes. Add tomato paste, wine and broth. Bring to a boil and simmer about 5 minutes.

Remove 1/2 cup of pasta cooking water and add to the skillet. Add the pasta and salt to taste. Toss well to mix and cook until pasta water almost evaporates. Add butter, Parmesan and parsley and mix well.

Serve with high quality balsamic vinegar, for drizzling, if desired.

Makes 6 servings.



Chocolate “Pralines”

- ¼ cup butter
- 1 egg white
- 3 cups icing (powdered) sugar
- ½ cup vanilla sugar*
- ½ cup chocolate, melted
- ⅔ cup cocoa powder

In a bowl, cream butter and egg white with an electric mixer for about 5 minutes until foamy. Add the sugars and melted chocolate and continue to beat for an additional 5 minutes. Take a small amount of mixture and roll into a ball, then roll through cocoa.

Makes 2 dozen.

*– Adapted from a recipe from
Signor Paolo Rossi Barattini*

* Vanilla sugar is sold in many supermarkets and online.