

**DESSERTS FOR THE SEASON**

# Tastes of Italia

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

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**CREAMIEST TREATS EVER**

CLASSIC CANNOLI

PERFECT PANNA COTTA

ELEGANT CHEESECAKE

EASY PUFF PASTRY

EGGNOG GELATO

AMARETTI CHOCOLATE CAKE



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SECRETS OF CLASSIC BISCOTTI AND MORE

Classic Cannoli Page 40

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**HOLIDAYS IN BOLOGNA AND PALERMO**

# Christmas In Bologna

A CULINARY WALKING TOUR OF BOLOGNA'S ANCIENT STREETS REVEALS A WEALTH OF TRADITIONAL DISHES AND TREATS THAT ARE ESPECIALLY PROLIFIC DURING THE HOLIDAY SEASON.

BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

**B**ologna is a city steeped in tradition and abounds with friendly food-loving Bolognese who welcome you like family. Signor Fabio is one of them. He's not only my dear friend, he's also a licensed guide who knows Bologna better than anyone — plus, he loves good food and wine.

I am waiting at Caffè Piano Piano, a sweet little treasure set on Piazza Maggiore in Bologna's main square. The scent of warm cornetti, a buttery flaky pastry, and freshly brewed espresso permeate the air. The Torre dell'Orologio, Bologna's clock tower, rings and reminds me it's 7 a.m., while cheese artisans, farmers, fish mongers and a flower vendor push their carts across the square in the direction of Via Pescherie Vecchie. This ancient street slices through the Quadrilatero market, an important part of Bologna since medieval times. Christmastime is in the air.

The piazza dazzles. It's like stepping into an old-fashioned storybook filled with ancient everything. The bell tower and surrounding medieval buildings emulate the colors of Christmas gingerbread houses.

The piazza was built in the 13th century and is still the center of Bolognese life. Its radiance is offset with a towering 16th-century fountain and a statue of Neptune holding a trident and adorned by four angels and four mermaids representing the four continents that were known of at that time: the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa.

The piazza continues to be a lively gathering place where aspiring musicians play Lucio Dalla songs (the famous Bolognese musician lived a few streets away until he passed), young Italian mammas push their baby carriages, and university students converse at outdoor tables late into the night.

Signor Fabio arrives. We exchange a kiss on each cheek before having a coffee. The barista sets a plate of Ravioli con la Mostarda on the bar and offers us a taste.

Fabio helps himself to the sugar-dusted, crescent-shaped confections.

"Ravioli con la mostarda are a short crust pastry stuffed with a blend of rich candied fruits made in the shape of a half moon — they're terrifically Bolognese. We always refer to them in the plural because you can never eat just one. Please, you must try them!" he says.

I break a sweet ravioli in two while looking out the window at this city of eternal beauty. There are endless portici (porticos, colonnades and arches spanning over 60 miles around the city), museums, theaters, book shops and wine bars, not to mention shopping. Bologna is also a UNESCO World Heritage site.

While we sip and snack, Fabio tells me about his beautiful city.

"Bologna has three nicknames: la Citta Grasse, the fat city, thanks to its delicious hearty cuisine; la Dotta, the learned one, it's home to the first university dating back to 1088; and la Rossa, the red one, because of its



**Top left:** Gregory (or Gregorius) 13th on the facade of city hall. Photo by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli.  
**Top right:** The Neptune Fountain Piazza del Nettuno, next to Piazza Maggiore, is illuminated by a Christmas tree during the holidays. Photo by Luca Corso. **Above left:** Artisan salumi. Photo by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli.  
**Above right:** Arches above Via Hugo Bassi. Photo by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

## NATIVE SOIL

red rooftops,” he says.

We walk to Via Peschiera Vecchia, which means “the street of fish sellers, where fifth-generation families sell their wine, Parmigiano Reggiano, aged balsamico, vinegar, pastas and Prosciutto,” Fabio says. He grabs a raviolo for the road, then we step onto the piazza and Fabio’s storytelling begins.

“Several medieval buildings enclose the piazza, including the Palazzo D’Accursio, Palazzo del Podestà and the Basilica di San Petronio. Let’s start with the Basilica. Construction began in 1390, but it was never completed because the Sovereign Popes of that time didn’t want it to be bigger than Saint Peter’s in Rome. The church remains unfinished with shiny pink marble on the bottom and bricks on the top. Nonetheless, it’s beautiful, and dedicated to San Petronio, the patron saint of the city, who is also called Lord of the tortellini,” he says.

He notes that the church is built in Gothic style with three naves and 22 chapels filled with famous Italian paintings and sculptures dating from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It is also home to the largest calendar in the world built by Pope Gregorio XIII and spans 270 feet long on its floor.

“BOLOGNA IS KNOWN FOR MANY THINGS,  
BUT ESPECIALLY FOR APERITIVO! IT’S OUR  
FAVORITE TIME OF THE DAY...”

“Every day at 12 p.m. or 1 p.m., depending on daylight saving time, the sun crosses over the roof of the basilica from east to west and beams through a hole in the left nave and projects on the calendar line, giving you the month and day, and it still works after all these years!” he says.

Fabio’s storytelling continues as he talks about a special fall celebration, San Petronio’s Saint’s Day, on October 4.

“Bolognese citizens celebrate the occasion with a competition among the best tortellini makers in the city. Twenty-five top chefs challenge each other with a different interpretation and variety of the original tortellini recipe. The event takes place in an ancient palazzo overlooking the square, and everyone gets to taste and rate the most innovative tortellini in the city,” Fabio says.

Next we head toward Via Pescherie Vecchie, a narrow street that slices through Quadrilatero, Bologna’s oldest market. It’s picturesque and lined with red and yellow buildings and plaster facades.

“For over a thousand years, the merchant guilds had their own streets here: the fish mongers’ street, the goldsmiths’ street and the shoe sellers’ street. The streets were named after each guild so they would always be

remembered. Today, this area is the kingdom of beautiful lavish bakeries and artisan food and wine shops, including Atti, dating back to 1870,” Fabio says.

We turn onto Via Drapperie and enter the landmark bakery Atti, officially called Paolo Atti & Figli Panificio. A long glass case displays traditional breads and pastries.

Another case displays pasta fresca, ravioli, tagliatelle and tortellini. There’s a sweet section where treasured cakes and desserts tempt — think Pinze Bolognese, a butter-based pastry crust stuffed with almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts, figs and rhum, and la torta di riso, a rice and sugar spiked with candied citron, almonds, lemon and maraschino liqueur.

Chocolates and glazed chestnuts of every kind are endless. Fabio, friends with the store clerk, exchanges a “buon giorno” before she fills a paper plate with everything while wearing white gloves. The scent of butter and cheese, chocolate and cherries is heavenly.

Next stop is a pasta shop. We enter a small family-owned shop where a group of sfogline, women pasta makers, work around a table. Using their artful hands and a wooden rolling pin, they transform flour and eggs into thin sheets of pasta dough then cut and stuff each

square into tortellini.

After the generous food and wine tasting tour, we climb up the Degli Asinelli tower boasting 498 internal steps leading to the top for a 360-degree view.

The Garisenda, the shorter tower, is a beauty, but is not open to the public and leans 0.10 degrees more than the Tower of Pisa. The two towers were built in 1109 for military function and to symbolize power.

From this high viewpoint, the Piazza Maggiore looks like a geometric patchwork of terracotta rooftops sparkling with Christmas lights in colors of marigold, apricot and ochre.

Our last stop is at Zanetti, a landmark pastry shop which opened in 1930. “Bologna is known for many things, but especially for aperitivo! It’s our favorite time of the day — everywhere else in Italy people order Prosecco, but in Bologna we order Pignoletto. It’s utterly typical Bolognese, especially at Christmastime.”

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**Top:** Christmas Panettone.  
**Above:** Bolognese Christmas  
Cake. **Right:** Marzipan Christmas  
treats. Photos by Lauren  
Birmingham Piscitelli