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A LOAD OF BOLOGNA - ITALY'S FOOD CAPITAL WELCOMES THE WORLD'S LARGEST AGRI-FOOD PARK

BOLOGNA, the oldest university town in Europe, boasts several nicknames - la dotta (the learned), la rossa (the red) for its politics and la grassa (the fat) for its pre-eminence as one of the major culinary centres of Italy. Many of the foods and dishes that define Italian cuisine - parma ham, balsamic vinegar, parmesan cheese, tortellini, mortadella and tagliatelle al ragu hail from the surrounding region of Emilia-Romagna, which is home to Italy's highest number of IGP and DOP-designated foods and wines - 44 in all. But last November, tradition took a backseat when Eataly World - the largest agri-food park on the planet - opened its doors 30 minutes drive from Italy's "City of Food".

Developed at the cost of \$193 million, the ambitious project is a collaboration between private investors, Bologna's civic authorities and Oscar Farinetti, the mastermind behind the globally successful Eataly food hall chain. Founded in 2004, Eataly now has 38 outposts around the world. Italy itself has the most stores, but the company has expanded into the US, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Brazil, the Middle East, Russia and Scandinavia. But even if you have visited one of these huge upmarket mega-stores, nothing prepares you for the 10 hectare spread dubbed the Disneyland of Italian food.

Much of the action is focused on the Mercato, a 100,000 square metre expanse carved out of the old Agri-Food Centre of Bologna, a former wholesale market

founded in the 1980s. Eataly World hopes to welcome six million visitors a year and there's certainly plenty of room to accommodate them in the kilometre-long lineup of shops and pop-up stores.

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Yes, I can see why there has been a lot of grumbling from locals and the long-established residents of Bologna's Mercato Mezzo, where generations of families have displayed their meats, vegetables and cheeses. But here's the thing. Anyone visiting Bologna from overseas can enjoy a wonderful day out at Eataly World and also stroll through the local farmers' markets set amid the city's Renaissance squares and alleyways.

Eataly World is free for starters. Forget the theme park jibes, one of the most fun things to do is ride around on one of the 500 adult-sized tricycles with shopping

baskets designed by Bianchi, the world's oldest bicycle maker still in business. The atmosphere resembles the sort of food precincts we are used to in Australia such as the Tramsheds in Sydney. A mix of upmarket providores, cooking schools, food demos and restaurants, albeit on a much larger scale. There are over 40 branded Italian eateries that run the gamut of budgets from Michelin-starred Amerigo to street food stalls. Open kitchens are the norm and many of the restaurants hold daily sessions showcasing locally-produced foods and food prep techniques.

Any kids in tow and adults suffering from culture overload will appreciate the touchscreens, holograms and interactive media that take you through the history of Italian food, the millennia-old relationship between humanity and nature and the importance of eating well. Four universities are also working with Eataly World's backers on new advances in sustainability. In the Pasta Emporium section, you can watch sfogline (pasta maestros) roll out sheets of fresh lasagne, hand-cut tagliatelle and fold tortellini.

Italian flair and style is the guiding rule and there's nothing cheesy at all, no matter what the critics say. In fact, parmesan cheese cannot be made in Eataly World because the site is seven kilometres outside the IGP (Indicazione Geografica Protetta) limits for Italy's most famous cheese. Mortadella is mass-

produced all over the world but it is one of Bologna's most iconic sausage products. Artisan makers are even in decline in Italy, but one of the first stands inside the Mercato is a traditional mortadella maker.

Pop-up stores selling fresh produce and Italian kitchenware, classrooms, sport and play areas, a cinema and a 1000 seat conference centre have drawn the ire of slow food fans. But it's hard not to be charmed by Eataly World's surrounding hectares of farmland, home to hundreds of cows, pigs and chickens and the Terra del Tartufi. If you have ever wondered why labradors are the number one choice of truffle hunters, expert finders of the culinary delights are on hand with their dogs to explain why. The labs are very friendly if you are missing your pet back home as well.

There's also a semi-permanent crowd around the balsamic vinegar installation which offers tastings of aged vinegars ranging from 12 to 25 years old. For a small charge of two euros, resident experts offer advice and insight into the subtleties of vinegars from Reggio and Modena, also the home of Ferrari and Lamborghini, who both happen to have stands at Eataly World.

Emilia-Romagna produces 15 per cent of Italian wines. Gruppo Cevico, founded in 1963, and one of the most important business consortiums in Italian wine-making, were heavily involved in setting up the wine sectors of Eataly World. Stop

by to taste famous varieties such as sangiovese and albana in the company of artisan winemakers and oenologists. The feeling is half working winery and half wine emporium and the tasting tables also offer prosciutto and dry-cured capocollo. Luca Pirola, the internationally known bar expert, has also curated a selection 200 vermouths, 100 gins and 200 bitters you can buy or enjoy immediately in cocktails. Looking for a quenching ale? There's an on-site Italian craft brewery.

I left Eataly World after enjoying a glass of sparkling Pignoletto wine and oysters in the seafood emporium, an homage to the nearby Adriatic coast, and a gelato by famed ice cream brand, Carpigiani. The next day was set aside for enjoying the delights of the Quadrilatero, the rectangular grid of mediaeval streets in the centre of Bologna, packed with stalls and shops such as Baita Vecchia for cheese and Atti & Figli for pastries. And what better way to end a visit than at Osteria del Sole, a lively bar that's been serving wine since 1465.

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