Bologna is proud of its culinary heritage, evident at every turn in the historic city. But a new foodie theme park is dividing opinion, finds Laura Millar

ever, never ask for spaghetti Bolognese in a restaurant here!” laughs Catia Aliberti, who’s taking me on a food tour of the city on a crisp but sunny wintry morning. “So many people think it’s a dish invented in Bologna, and want to order it, but it doesn’t actually exist.” What people actually mean when they think of a dish with long strands of pasta with a rich, tomato and minced beef and/or pork sauce is tagliatelle al ragu. Any Italian worth his or her salt knows that you simply can’t serve spaghetti with a hearty meat sauce – you need a thicker pasta that will make the sauce cling to it, otherwise it will just slide off.

Misconception corrected, Catia goes on to list the other dishes Bologna is best known for. There are tortellini, small, stuffed knots of fresh pasta made with flour and eggs, filled with meat and usually eaten in a light broth; tortelloni, which are bigger, often filled with ricotta and eaten with either butter or Parmesan or a tomato sauce; pazzatelli, small, short pasta strings made with bread and egg; lasagna, made here with layers of green, spinach pasta (white pasta sheets hail from Rome – this, it seems, is an important distinction); and coqollo alla Bolognese, a pork cutlet fried in breadcrumbs and topped with a layer of Parma ham and Parmesan. And that’s before we even get onto dessert, which includes zuppa inglese (a light, thin custard), torta di riso, a rice-pudding type flan, or torta di adobbi, decorated with hundreds and thousands. …

It’s only ten in the morning, but already Catia’s catalogue of Bologna’s culinary delights is making my mouth water. I have a feeling that on my return from this long weekend, I’ll have earned myself the same nickname the city has: La Grossa, or ‘the fat one’. Bologna actually has three nicknames, which all refer to its history. La Grossa nods, of course, to its abundance of food. We’re in one of the most fertile and productive regions of the whole country; wheat and maize grow abundantly in its lowlands, to become the flour used in pasta dough and the grain for polenta, while pigs are reared by the thousand to provide plentiful Parma ham, coppa, and mortadella. Here, pasta is made by hand, balsamic vinegar is barrel-aged, and Parmesan cheese is stored in giant wheels. And boy, do its residents love to eat; currently, the city has over 900 restaurants. Its second nickname, La Dotta, or ‘the learned one’, refers to Bologna’s university, the oldest in Western Europe. It was founded in 1088, and to this day, one fifth of the city’s population of half a million are students. Finally, it’s known as La Rossa, or ‘the red one’, which can be attributed either to its traditionally left-leaning, former Communist politics, or the colour of its buildings, made largely from terracotta. Catia and I pass plenty of these on our way to the Quadrilatero, the district which used to be home to the old, medieval market. Today it’s still the city’s centre of commerce, where silk sellers rub shoulders with salumerie, and shrunken but feisty nonne barter with fruit and vegetable sellers over the plumpest melanzana, or the ripest zucchini. It’s a fascinating, atmospheric, chaotic network of interwoven streets, such as via Drapperie, the main artery (named after the drapers who sold fabrics here) and via Pescherie Vecchie (or the ‘street of the old fishmongers’).

I want to dart into every store, and start with bakery Atti, which has been here since 1868. They make all kinds of cakes, pastries and panettone on site, as well as fresh tortellini, which are bigger, often filled with ricotta and eaten with either butter or Parmesan or a tomato sauce; pazzatelli, small, short pasta strings made with bread and egg; lasagna, made here with layers of green, spinach pasta (white pasta sheets hail from Rome – this, it seems, is an important distinction); and coqollo alla Bolognese, a pork cutlet fried in breadcrumbs and topped with a layer of Parma ham and Parmesan. And that’s before we even get onto dessert, which includes zuppa inglese (a light, thin custard), torta di riso, a rice-pudding type flan, or torta di adobbi, decorated with hundreds and thousands. …
The cherry

EXCELLENT SEAFOOD AND DIVINE PASTRIES MAKE LISBOA A GOURMET'S DREAM, WRITES NEIL GERAGHTY

T he summer never feels like it will never end.
I’m browsing the shelves at Café Piriquita, a small café in central Lisbon. A popular delicacy in Lisbon is the ginjinha, a small glass of cherry liqueur, and I stop off at a ginjinha bar for a night cap.

The fruity liquor sends a cascade down onto the table top and over. Served warm, the travesseiro (Sintra pillows), a cake that is arguably even more moreish than the best turron in Spain, remains in the glass which I drink from the bottom shelf but in Portugal it is served in glasses.

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