

Welcome to the Disneyland of food

Emanuela Barbiroglio visits Bologna's Fico Eataly World

On the outskirts of the northern Italian city of Bologna is a massive, futuristic, grey building.

At first glance there is nothing unusual about the building, which sits in the middle of a suburban area awash with supermarkets, wholesalers and warehouses. Then you spot the menagerie of around 200 animals - cows, pigs, sheep and chickens - grazing in pens labelled with the breeds' different characteristics.

Inside what is in essence a 1m sq ft warehouse, there are more than 100 stalls selling different food and drink products from across Italy, not to mention 40 restaurants and numerous carousel rides. Welcome to Fico Eataly World, which opened in November last year and is described as the biggest 'food theme park' in the world.

To some, Fico - the Italian word for fig and also the acronym for 'Fabbrica Italiana Contadina', which roughly translates to 'Italian farming factory' - is a gastronome's dream. However, others argue that the park, which sits in an area of Italy known as 'la grassa' (the fat), is a betrayal of Italian gastronomy.

So how did this divisive development come about - and will people really give a fig about Fico?

The food theme park was built on a site that formerly housed part of the local wholesale fruit and veg market, known as CAAB (the Agri-Food Centre of Bologna), which no longer needed the space.

Around four years ago, Bologna's mayor Virginio Merola teamed up with Oscar Farinetti, founder of Italian food hall operator Eataly, with a view to creating a tourist attraction for foodies that would educate visitors about Italian biodiversity and the origins of some of the nation's most celebrated culinary dishes and ingredients.

Speaking to the Italian media in 2016 Farinetti said his aim was to create a place where people could walk around and "take a ride on the carousels and have fun like they do at Disneyland, while learning".

Financing for Fico came from a special private fund called Parchi Agroalimentari Italiani (the 'Italian agri-food parks'), which raised €120m (£107m). Investors in the project include the Italian Consumer Cooperative and Eataly, which

recently signed a deal with British Land to open a 42,000 sq ft venue at Broadgate in London - its first food market in the UK.

Eataly, which opened its first market in Turin in 2007 and now has nearly 40 markets either open or planned across Europe and the US, manages Fico Eataly World.

Speaking during her lunch break, Tiziana Primori, chief executive of Fico Eataly World, says there is demand for a foodie visitor attraction.

"It is a great opportunity for comparing small and large companies to make them learn from each other and grow together," she explains between mouthfuls of zuppa inglese.

"We opened Fico for three reasons: to tell the world how the food supply chain works, to have one place where the whole country and its companies were visible and to help create pride [in the idea] of 'made in Italy'."

"We opened Fico to tell the world how the food supply chain works"

Tiziana Primori, Fico

The park employs 900 people and Primori says that in the first 11 weeks after it opened, it attracted 750,000 visitors. Entry is free, but visitors have to pay for some of the attractions - the park features a number of paid-for experiential 'environment carousels' that explain how the food supply chain works.

Visitors can walk through the cavernous building at their own pace or take a tour on specially made Bianchi bikes. They can watch Parmesan cheese being made, gorge on delicious Sicilian pastries and buy hunks of San Daniele ham that they can mail back to themselves using the park's own post office.

It is hoped that in the first 12 months Fico will attract three million visitors, with the long-term aim being six million visitors per year. "Our park is for the entire world," says Primori. "We hope

to reach two million visitors from Bologna, two million from the rest of Italy and two million from abroad."

A 200-room hotel is being built opposite the site, which will open in 2020 to accommodate the anticipated influx of visitors.

According to the latest figures from research consultancy Nomisma, 60% of Fico's visitors to date have come from other Italian cities or from overseas. It is anticipated that local businesses will benefit financially from the scheme - Primori thinks Fico will "indirectly create another 3,000 jobs - probably more".

Tourism boost

A spokesperson from the local tourist office is equally bullish. "Hosting the biggest food theme park in the world is not an everyday thing," says the spokesperson, adding that although they don't have any empirical evidence to substantiate this claim, they believe that people who visit Fico will also visit Bologna.

"We expect an increase in the interchange, thanks to a tour we just launched that links a visit to the park with a journey into the old town," says the spokesperson.

Despite claims that the wider Bologna region will benefit from Fico, many locals are sceptical.

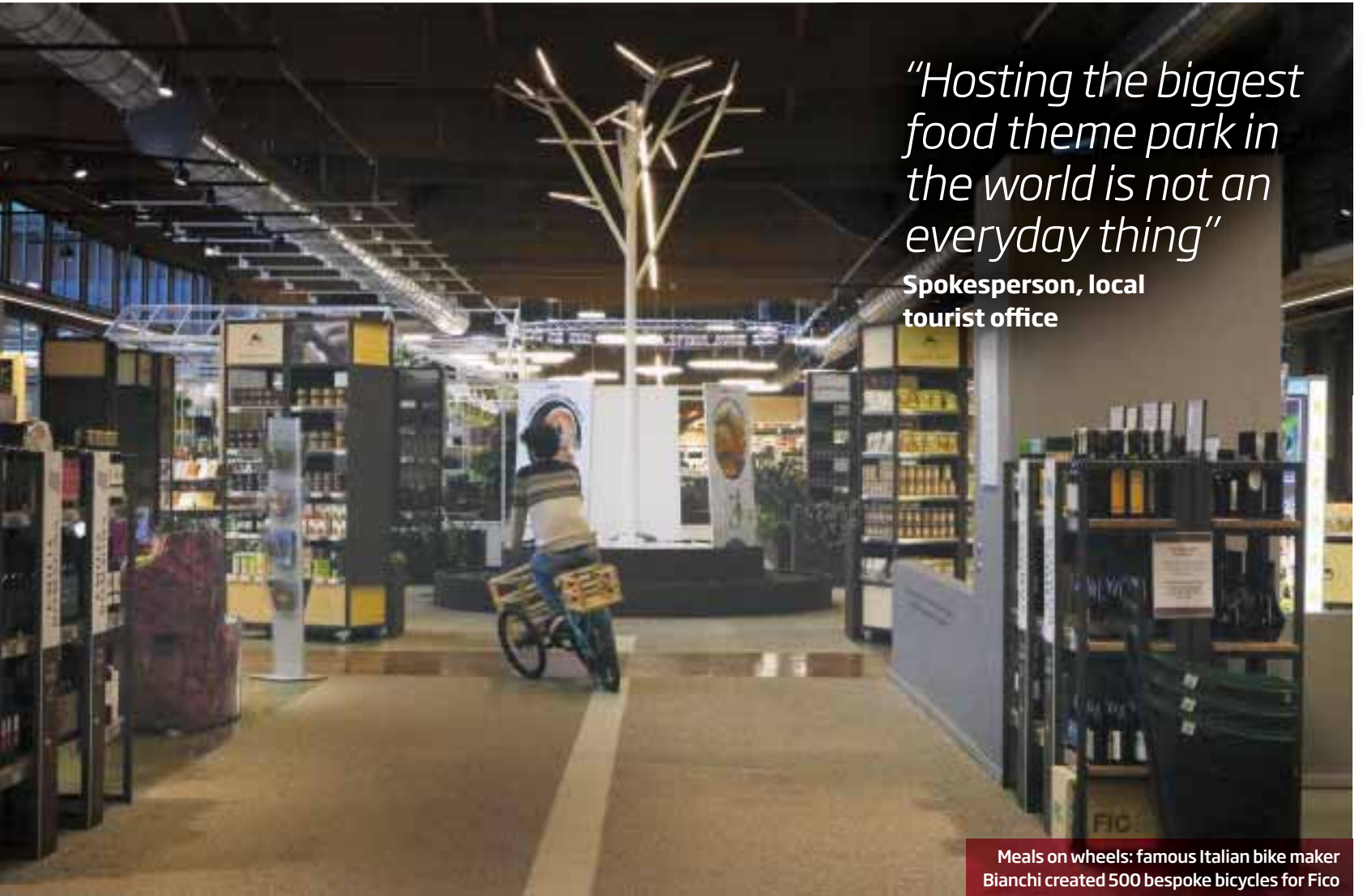
Local blogger Wolf Bukowski, who has followed the Fico story from the outset is critical of what he describes as the "gentrification through food" caused by Fico. He says the site has benefited from public money that he argues would have been better invested elsewhere.

"For example, tickets for special buses that go to Fico are available at €7," says Bukowski. "Those shuttles travel pretty much empty and were funded with more than €3m of public money, while people are squeezed on to urban buses every day."

Small local farmers and producers also express reservations about the impact Fico will have on the area and on their business. Others argue there is simply no comparison between what's on offer inside Fico with what is available elsewhere in the region.

"Personally, I don't feel the need to fight Fico as what we do is completely different," says Elena Hogan, president of the Campi Aperti

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“Hosting the biggest food theme park in the world is not an everyday thing”

Spokesperson, local tourist office

Meals on wheels: famous Italian bike maker Bianchi created 500 bespoke bicycles for Fico

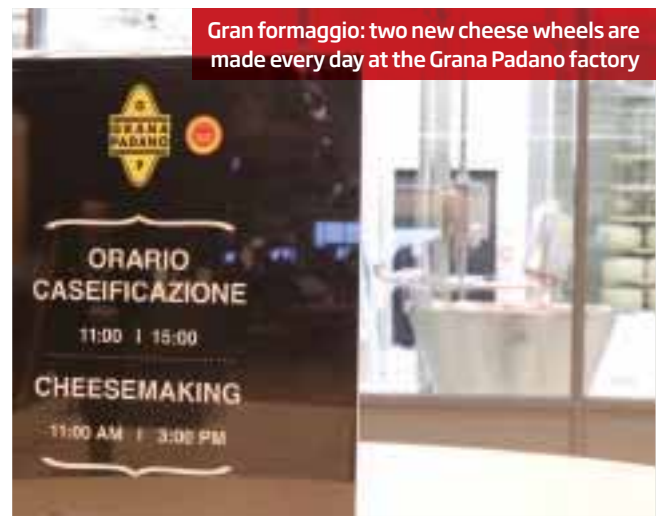


World away: the 1m sq ft Fico consists of outdoor space for animal stalls and 2,000 different types of plant

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Animal attraction: six 'carousels' offer interactive learning



Market forces: Elena Hogan runs a stall selling her own fresh vegetables in Bologna city centre

farmers' association in Bologna. "Fico is just the expression of the big manufacturers, whereas you see my face and I grow what I sell you."

However, Primori counters: "About 60% to 70% of the permanent stands here represent small companies. We also invite a lot of small companies to showcase a particular Italian craft every month on a rotation basis. For instance, at the moment we are running a 'cheese month' and we have many of them [small producers] here."

Hogan remains unconvinced. She questions the educational message underpinning Fico, which is one of the main selling points of the site to visitors.

"I grew up in the US in the 1980s, where many people actually didn't know that milk comes from a cow, but in Italy there is a strong connection with the countryside and everybody has a family member with a garden for vegetables. In my view, Fico is likely to fail," says Hogan.

"I wish I could see more foreign visitors here because they are usually more fascinated than Italians are"

Nicola Castiglione, San Daniele

It certainly has a long way to go if it is to succeed. On the day of my visit there were only a small number of people walking around the park. However, it was a cold and misty Monday morning in February so it was hardly going to be a bustling hive of activity.

At other times in the week Fico is busy, claims Nicola Castiglione, who works at the San Daniele ham store. He says that at weekends the park is usually crowded, although he would like to see more people come through the doors.

"I wish I could see more foreign visitors here because they are usually more fascinated than Italians are, but I'm sure they will come with time," he says.

During my tour of the park I did bump into some overseas visitors, including a couple from Utah who were celebrating their fifth wedding anniversary.

"We went to Rome first, then Florence. We came to Bologna just for this place," says the husband, who had just been making pasta at a

workshop. "If we could have something like this in Utah it would be awesome."

Elisabetta De Carlo, who is visiting the park with her family, says: "It's a beautiful place where children can play. However, prices are high for someone who is not a tourist. A margherita pizza for €8? It is good quality, but you will find it in Bologna centre for €4."

Tourist trap?

And therein lies the rub. Many locals will no doubt balk at paying over the odds for something they can find elsewhere in Bologna. As a result, they may only end up visiting Fico once or twice, whereas tourists may find the price tag palatable compared with the food prices they pay at home.

On the other hand, the theme park may eventually find a happy balance in terms of its offer and price point - witness the success of the Time Out food market in Lisbon, which attracts hordes of tourists and locals alike.

Whatever scenario ultimately plays out, locals recognise the importance of Fico and its potential impact on the local economy.

As the taxi driver who takes me to Bologna airport says when he finds out the purpose of my visit: "Make sure you give it a good write-up in your piece. There has been a huge investment and we need it to work." ■