

Bon Vivant Bologna

A sophisticated city of many passions, left-leaning, life-loving Bologna casts a spell on all who visit.

By Andrea Vogt

My friend Muriel was in Bologna for a day on her way south to Tuscany, where she--and it seems everyone else lately--was vacationing. I couldn't wait to show her my adopted city (I'm married to a Bologna native), so I hooked my arm in hers and we walked under the Due Torri, the two landmark towers that loom over Bologna's historical center, and headed to Feltrinelli, Bologna's biggest bookstore. A literary labyrinth founded by iconic leftist editor Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, it's an apt introduction to this city known as Bologna la Dotta, or "Bologna the Learned," a nickname bestowed in part because Bologna is home to one of the oldest universities in the world. Scanning the shelves, I handed Muriel *The Name of the Rose*, the best-selling novel by one of Bologna's biggest literary names, Umberto Eco, noting, "It starts slowly, but you'll love it." Euros in hand, she walked by a portrait of Feltrinelli socializing with Cuban leader Fidel Castro on her way to pay. I thought of a Bolognese friend who'd joked that there are only three places where communism still thrives: China, Cuba, and Bologna. It isn't just the rosy Bolognese clay used to build the aristocratic palazzi that has given Bologna its second nickname, Città Rossa--Red City. Bologna also has earned a reputation for being red politically: Its election of leftist city councils made it for years a capital of Italian communism--never mind the two streets named after Lenin and Stalingrad. A bohemian undercurrent winds through this city that has always marched to its own beat, and the university is a major factor. Just step into its original building, the medieval Archiginnasio (now the municipal library), off Piazza Maggiore, and you'll see more than 6,000 heraldic coats of arms of graduates, who include Petrarch, Copernicus, and Dante. One of the earliest public dissections of corpses also took place at this university, in 1315, by revered professor Mondino Dei Liuzzi. We walk around the tiered wooden seats in the

Teatro Anatomico, built in the 1600s, imagining the shock of students seeing their first dissection.

Today's university quarter--a mix of low-budget bars, osterie, and shops around Via Zamboni and Via del Pratello--occupies the eastern area of Bologna's historical center, which has remained remarkably intact despite the city's long history as an Etruscan settlement, Roman colony, independent city-state, and papal territory. For me the center's center is the Neptune Fountain by Piazza Maggiore, the pulsing heart of downtown, from which the city's streets fan outward. The nude Neptune allegedly so scandalized women during the 19th century that he was covered for a while in bronze britches.

When I moved here, I tried to picture Bologna in the Middle Ages, when it bristled with over 180 towers built by prosperous families as symbols of prestige and power (today's equivalents are the Ferraris, Maseratis, and other luxury goods produced here). Some 20 towers still stand, and of these, the Due Torri--Torre degli Asinelli and Torre Garisenda--are the most recognizable. Torre degli Asinelli is the tall one (318 feet) because Garisenda's height was curtailed when it started to lean during construction. I've huffed my way up Asinelli's 500 steps often to show guests the grand view of Bologna's rooftops, with the Apennines beyond and the Alps visible on clear days. Afterward I indulge in a glass of prosecco, the sparkling Bolognese wine aperitif.

"Woo, that goes to your head, doesn't it?" I hear a young American woman say, giggling, in the Bar della Mercanzia as she polishes off a glass. I want to tell her prosecco is just one of many gastronomic delights that have earned the city a third nickname: Bologna La Grassa, Bologna the Fat. Lauded as Italy's food capital, Bologna is headquarters to the Academy of Italian Cuisine and the Academy of the Tortellino, and home to nearly 500 pizzerie, osterie, trattorie, and restaurants.

"Com'è?--How is it?" asks Anna Maria, owner of Trattoria Anna Maria, where my husband, Marco, and I have stopped in for a meal of handmade tortelloni (big tortellini) with butter and sage; braised guinea hen; roasted rabbit; and panna

cotta, a custard with caramel sauce. We're dining around the corner from Piazza Verdi, named for composer Giuseppe Verdi, who hailed from a town an hour away but never won over this city that instead championed his rival Richard Wagner. Appropriately, Anna Maria's walls teem with signed photos of opera stars waxing poetic about her pasta. "Meraviglioso, Anna Maria, come sempre--Marvelous, Anna Maria, as always," answers my husband, who has known the affable owner for years and has come here regularly for her "tortellini in brodo," the pasta in broth that is her signature dish. We walk home past another Bologna landmark, the 14th-century Basilica di San Petronio. Designed to be the largest basilica in Christendom, its construction was interrupted by a papal decree ordering it not to surpass St. Peter's in Rome. The alteration is still visible: A third of the way up the facade, marble gives way to brick. Even downsized, however, the basilica saw its share of major events, including the crowning of Charles V as Holy Roman emperor by Pope Leo X in 1530. We stroll through the narrow streets of Via Pescherie Vecchie, Via Drapperie, and Via Clavature, site of a busy vegetable and fish market. Gourmets love it here, what with the seafood still squirming on ice, and everything from zucchini flowers to truffle oil to skinned frogs available by the kilo. The vie are sheltered by portici, the covered arcades that are another Bologna trademark. Their origin is interesting: After the university's founding in 1088, the city's population doubled. To accommodate the growth, the government allowed residents who took in students to expand their apartments by adding rooms over the streets. Today, over 25 miles of these arcades form a ribbon of covered walkways through the old city. An afternoon sun spills pink light onto the porticoes. I've just said good-bye to Muriel under the Due Torri. She's off to Tuscany, and I find myself wondering how she'll remember my new Italian home. This I do know: She departed the city a little more dotta, a little more rossa, and a little more grassa than before.

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