

REGION BY REGION: ITALY'S FOOD FESTIVALS  
MARY ANN ESPOSITO ON: **COOKING WITH GARLIC**

TASTES *of*

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SEPTEMBER 2007

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# Emilia-Romagna

**I**t's rare when someone opens the door to his home and you're greeted by a cold blast of air that reeks of grape must that's been fermenting for 25 years. The sharp smell sends such a tingle through your nostrils your eyes water. But that's what happened to me when I visited the villa of Giorgio Barbieri, who produces balsamic vinegar in his attic, or *acetaia*.

My time with Barbieri was part of a three-day adventure in Emilia-Romagna where I got a backstage look at the region gourmets consider to be home to Italy's finest cuisine. Foodies flock here to enjoy impressive markets and tony shops, which feature Modena's balsamic vinegars, Parma's prosciutto and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheeses, and Lambrusco wines.

Restaurants from rustic osterias to elegant dining rooms offer the region's signature dishes, including tagliatelle with Bolognese sauce, tortellini, and pork sausage.

Though it was fantastic to mingle with the natives in the shops and restaurants, I especially enjoyed the getting an insider's peek at time-honored traditions that have kept the quality of food here exceptional for centuries.

"One conducts an *acetaia*, a person doesn't own it...it's a living thing," Giorgio Barbieri told me, as he showed me around his vinegar loft. At 6' 8" tall, the slim and genteel retired national volleyball player is a master conductor.

Using a giant glass dropper, he meticulously decanted vinegar from one antique barrel to another, while explaining the vinegar-making process he learned from his grandmother, which involves judiciously transferring grape must from year-to-year to barrels made of different woods, so a variety of flavors is absorbed into the liquid.

Barbieri is one of 55 producers approved by a government-run consortium to make what is considered the only "real" balsamic, labeled *Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena*, and stamped DOP, which stands for Denomination of Protected Origin. A rigorous testing process must be undergone to meet the consortium's standards. Barbieri's vinegars, which he ages from twelve to twenty-five years, have always passed inspection.

"I've never had real balsamic vinegar before," I said, amazed, when I tasted a demitasse spoonful he offered me. The thick, syrupy condiment burst with a balance of sweet and sour flavors that didn't come close to what's called balsamic in the States.

"It's also the best thing for a sore throat," Barbieri's wife, Giovanna, said, as she served lunch in the downstairs dining room. The dishes she'd prepared were all complemented by her husband's balsamic, including pumpkin tortellini with sage butter and an arugula and apple salad. "Soldiers used to carry vials of it into battle, to use in case they got injured," she added, drizzling a thick stream over chunks of Parmigiano-Reggiano.

The origins of Parmigiano-Reggiano can be traced back to the 14th century when Boccaccio wrote in the *Decameron* about a Land of Plenty, describing a hill of the region's famous hard cheese. When I visited a Parma dairy, rather than a hill, I saw what Italians call a "Cheese Cathedral"—a vast warehouse where wheels are stacked to mature for twelve to thirty-six months, and the smell Italians call *Piedi di Dio* (God's feet), is heavenly.

The young husband and wife team who ran the dairy were, like the Barbieris, friendly but had little time to chat. They were hard at work in the cheese-making process that has remained basically unchanged for eight hundred years. Like balsamic, government standards for Parmigiano-Reggiano are strict. It must be produced in a designated zone from cows fed only on locally grown hay or grass, and cheese-making has to begin within one hour after milking. Throughout the aging process, inspectors scrutinize each wheel to make sure it's worthy of the DOP label.

Winemaking has been going on here since the Middle Ages, and I got a taste of it at Maria Bortolotti's home, overlooking her vineyards. As we sat in her dining room and her son poured samples of the organic wines he produces, Maria insisted on giving me a tagliatelle-making demonstration.

Like magic, she mixed egg and water with a mound of flour and in no time transformed golden dough into thin delicate strands. Sure enough, there are even rules for pasta here: a tagliatelle strand must measure 8 millimeters wide. Maria proudly showed me with a ruler how hers were right on target.

I couldn't resist applauding. She bowed her head, like all the natives I'd met, showing a sacred respect for a tradition that has made this delicious region deservedly famous.



## Chicken with Balsamic Vinegar and Fennel Sauce

1 whole roasting chicken, about 3 pounds

1 sprig of sage

1 sprig of rosemary

Salt and pepper

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar

1/4 teaspoon fennel seeds

Preheat oven to 300°F.

Rinse the chicken in cold water and pat dry thoroughly with paper towels. Rub salt and pepper both inside and out. Place sage and rosemary inside the body cavity, and put the

chicken in a pan on a roasting rack. Drizzle olive oil over the chicken and place in the middle of the oven.

After 10 minutes, drizzle balsamic vinegar over the chicken. Continue to bake for about another 40 minutes, basting it from time to time with the pan juices.

Remove the chicken from the oven and tent it with foil to keep it warm. Spoon off the oil from the pan juices, and pour the remaining into a sauce serving dish. Stir fennel seeds into the sauce.

Carve chicken and serve, passing the sauce. Makes 4 servings.

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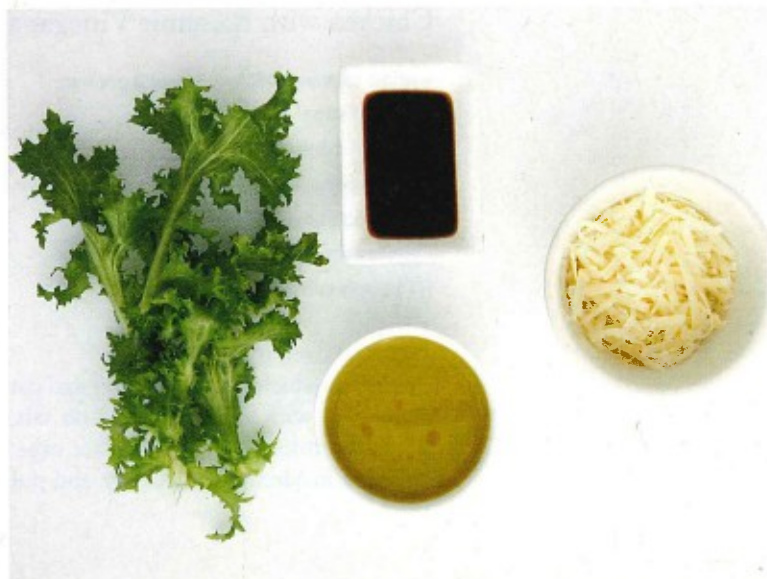
## Endive Salad with Balsamic Vinegar

- 8 heads Belgian endive
- 1/2 cup Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese shavings
- 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 1/2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- Salt and pepper to taste

Coarsely chop the endive and place it in a salad bowl. Sprinkle the Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese shavings over the endive.

Whisk Balsamic Vinegar into the olive oil. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Drizzle the dressing over the salad, toss gently, and serve.

Makes 4 servings.





### Strawberries with Balsamic Vinegar

1 pound strawberries  
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar  
Sugar to taste

Wash the strawberries thoroughly in cold water and hull them. Cut them in halves or quarters and place them in a bowl.

Pour the balsamic vinegar over the strawberries. Cover the bowl with a lid and gently shake the contents so the fruit becomes steeped. Let marinate for at least 15 minutes.

When ready to serve, gently stir in sugar to taste.

Makes 4 servings.