

**Bologna La Grassa**  
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Bologna has always fascinated because it is at once *la grassa* (the fat) and *la rossa* (the red). This twin heritage of good food and far-left politics produces a delicious paradox. Neither communist government nor ordinary citizens appear to be obsessed with the austerity of their political convictions. Despite living in a city famed for its rich food, Bologna's inhabitants stay slim because eating, health, politics and urbanity are seamlessly integrated. Gastronomic and political preoccupations translate into spaces designed for an active, walking-centred daily life.

Taking a stroll through Bologna doesn't imply circumnavigating car park entrances, loading docks and traffic obstructions. Instead of enraged motorists on red routes there is a leisurely *passeggiata*. The Bolognese don't go in for power walking in lycra, walkman and weights to tone up after fast food. That would offend *bella figura*. And the indignity of fatty snacks doled out in low-grade cafs or the sad slimmers' sandwiches hermetically sealed in supermarket refrigerator units is avoided. Instead, the Bolognese take lunch in restaurants, converse in cafes and imbibe in *enoteca* where not only is spontaneous conviviality possible, but a substantial local food tradition is reinforced.

In a city notorious for its rich gastronomic heritage (think of butter, cream, Parmegiano Reggiano, prosciutto, tagliatelle, ragù, tortellini, lasagne, mortadella) living on into extreme old age is surprisingly common. 19<sup>th</sup> century gastronome, Pellegrino Artusi, reported that octogenarians and nonagenarians abound in Bologna as nowhere else. Today, city planner Allan Jacobs reports, the *centro storico's* piazzas, markets and surrounding streets remain Bologna's walking, strolling, shopping and meeting grounds, a role they have played for centuries. It is just about impossible *not* to meet your friends here.

Wandering Bologna's sublimely well stocked market hall (a building that perhaps intentionally looks a little like a Doric temple), it is clear that body image problems are not high on the list of local concerns: good food is. The Bolognese, says gastronome Waverly Root, are famous trenchermen, but after a long lunch of slow food, walking home for a sleep (or any other post prandial exercise – again excellent for burning calories) can easily be achieved by traversing Bologna's arcaded streets.

Against an architectural backdrop of human scaled, richly lime-washed buildings, porticoes stretch for some 20 miles through the city. Edged by rows of columns that not only define the narrow road for cars but act to slow them down, the porticoes make excellent outdoor rooms. Pedestrian advocate Bernard Rudofsky describes them as at once cloistered and open, elegant yet protective and comfortable, with changing perspectives on the view ahead glimpsed through alternating moments of sudden light and deep shade. As Rudofsky has said, the porticoes are especially attractive in summer, becoming cool tunnels, fragrant with the exhalations of fruit shops and *caffè* bars and resounding with strollers voices. Above all, the *portici's* continued existence

celebrates a city wide commitment to public space over the very long term, that is as important for social as for climatic reasons.

Despite the strength of this unique spatial and gastronomic heritage, like many other towns, Bologna's relationship with the car reached crisis point in the 1970s. Faced with unacceptable levels of pollution, congestion, noise, accidents, and visual intrusion, the city rejected traffic engineering solutions (more, faster, and wider roads, more parking, less arcades) and decided instead to pedestrianise their *centro*.

Under the aegis of its leftist city government, Bologna instituted one of Europe's most comprehensive pedestrianisation schemes – widely copied, it remains a model of its type. And civic action to protect and extend the porticoes, ban most cars from central streets and squares, provide better public transport and bike routes, and enforce stricter parking controls was a rare triumph for communism. Best of all, it was achieved without sanitising the centre with more expensive shops and offices. Instead of giving in to the enveloping tide of gentrification, the city government increased the amount of affordable housing within the historic urban fabric, again reinforcing the pedestrian population and protecting a subtle way of life.

Many will say Bologna's experience is not a very relevant planning or gastronomic example for our conditions. But the ways our cities could protect pedestrian space are as diverse as cities themselves. While arcades provide beautiful, weather resistant pedestrian space year round, (good news for those facing the increasingly perplexing climatic conditions produced by global warming) they are, of course, not the only answer for making healthy cities where eating what's on offer doesn't have to make you anxious, ill or fat.

In the developing megalopoli of south eastern Australia for instance, many town and city streets have unrealised capacity to become comfortable - even elegant - outdoor rooms, emphasizing walking scale, and focusing on good food places. Closely planted trees for shade in summer, as well as canopies, porticoes, verandahs and pergolas can work at all sorts of development densities and in a wide variety of streets, new and established.

Of course that won't sort out the dominance of drab food chains, "metro" supermarkets or "road pantries". Their critical mass is part of a broader political economy of food needing attention too. The important differences between Australians and Bolognese is that there pedestrians have high status, here they don't; there a sense of civic connection is strong, here it isn't. There regional food is central to the culture, here it is not.

Still, if we don't want to go on being a nation of overweight, unhealthy, car-dependent gym junkies, one obvious part of the answer must be a focus on city design solutions that are less in thrall to cars, and more concerned with people, conversation and food.