

# Eataly World opens but leaves a bad taste in Bologna

It's the world's biggest food park with over a kilometre of shops, big brands, even farm animals. But is Eataly World a betrayal of Italian gastronomy?

Italy's "City of Food" has a new attraction. After wandering the alleyways of [Bologna's](#) Mercato di Mezzo - which is filled with local, family-owned grocers such as the well-known [Atti & Figli bakery](#), or [Tamburini](#) of tortellini fame - visitors can now take a 20-minute shuttle bus from outside the central station to [Fico Eataly World](#), where food from all over Italy is on show.

Inaugurated by prime minister Paolo Gentiloni on 15 November, Eataly World claims to be the world's largest agri-food park, and promises visitors "a discovery of all the wonders of Italian biodiversity" under one vast, 100,000 sq m roof. However, many are struggling to make sense of a project that stands in direct contrast to the traditional allure of Italian gastronomy - the pleasure of meandering the farmers' markets in Renaissance town squares, or sampling the delights of small producers in remote hilltop towns.

To enter Eataly is to step into what can only be described as a US-style megamart, a Wholefoods on steroids. The site used to be a wholesale market, built in the 1980s, and the original A-frame barn structure supported by big wooden beams forms an L-shaped walkway that stretches for more than a kilometre.

Inside are more than 45 branded Italian eateries, which according to Fico are "bonded by a passion for excellence and the role they play in producing and promoting the best of Italian food and wine". The kitchens in the restaurants are visible behind glass panelling, and host over 30 daily sessions to educate the consumer on food production, be it how to make [William Di Carlo](#) sugared almonds from Abruzzo, or how [Olio Roi](#) presses olive oil using its in-store press.

There is a multitude of pop-up-style stores, selling Italian produce and kitchenware; six experiential educational pavilions; several classrooms, sports and play areas dotted throughout the space; as well as a cinema and 1,000-capacity congress space. It's all surrounded by a pristine outdoor area, with several hectares of farm animals and vegetable plots.

The organisation behind Eataly, Fico - [Fabbrica Italiana Contadina](#) (Italian Farming Factory) - is the result of a collaboration between Bologna's mayor, Virginio Merola, and Oscar Farinetti, the mastermind behind the successful [Eataly](#) food hall brand, which is big in the US and Asia as well as Italy. The public donated the defunct wholesale market hall known as the [Agri-Food Centre of Bologna](#) (CAAB), and Farinetti, along with the Italian Consumer Cooperative (Coop) and several other private investors, funded its transformation into Fico Eataly World. The project took four years to complete, at a cost of EUR120m, works with over 150 Italian companies, from relatively small to very large, and has created over 3,000 jobs. If all goes to plan, Fico predicts it will attract 6 million visitors a year, a substantial boost in tourism for the whole area.

It's easy to lose your sense of place and purpose in the brightly lit aisles. On the one hand, Eataly can be rightly lauded as an interactive museum and education centre. There is an outstanding display of producers, offering adults and children classes in the history of food, and in food production "from the field to the fork" (EUR20). "Environment carousels" innovatively recount the relationship between humankind and nature, and the importance of eating well, using a high-tech approach to learning - touch screens, holograms and interactive multimedia. Moreover, with the backing of four universities, the Fico Foundation for Food Education and Sustainability hopes to be at the forefront of research for food sustainability.

But, on the other hand, the quantity of heavily branded restaurants and bars, and the way in which visitors are directed through the areas past Lamborghini memorabilia, as if at an airport, highlights the mass consumer culture behind the project.

Fico caters for every taste and budget, from the most expensive [Amerigo](#), a longstanding Michelin-starred trattoria from Bologna's hills, to Il Barbecue, a street food stand offering burgers for EUR5.

However, Carlo Facchini, an employee at the [Ceccarelli Amadeo](#) delicatessen in town known for its produce from the surrounding region of Emilia-Romagna, has worked in the *salumerias* of Bologna for 40 years and summed up the general feeling among locals: "Eataly has nothing to do with the city of Bologna. It's like Ikea - an outlet in the outskirts where you might go for a one-off day trip." It is rumoured that tour operators will offer a day at Eataly and a day in town, but Carlo says the market doesn't need that kind of custom. He is right; the scale of Eataly, and its location out of town, will attract a different type of customer from those he nurtures at his own counter. Like many of the merchants in the Mercato di Mezzo, Carlo is sceptical about those 10,000 customers a day ever materialising.

There is a tension between the old and the new, whereby traditional practices are exhibited in a space which feel incongruous. Before leaving the park, I grabbed an espresso, because - just like after an outing to Ikea - my body felt assaulted by sensory overload. The girl at the cashier rightly pointed out that even though Eataly aims to celebrate the history of Italian food culture "it is doing so in a distinctly un-Italian way".

Despite many of the restaurant spaces being beautifully conceived, and the presence of a strong educational and ethical impulse, the reality of watching mozzarella being made under strip lighting, or eating Michelin-quality cooking while shoppers whiz by on Bianchi-sponsored tricycles, makes me think Oscar Farinetti has conjured a dystopian vision of the future, rather than a homage to Italy's rich food heritage and culture.