

Wisconsin Holstein's Italian Adventure

A group of 24 Holstein enthusiasts traveled to northern Italy in November 2025 to experience Italian culture and food. The trip was scheduled around the Cremona International Exhibition dairy show.

Day 1 (Sunday/Monday)

The group met in Chicago and boarded our overnight flight to Milan. We had a smooth flight and landed in Milan early afternoon Monday. After a bus trip to Parma and freshening up, the group walked to central Parma and had a nice group dinner with our tour guide for the week.

Day 2 (Tuesday)

Our first stop of the day was a tour of Caseificio Ugolotti, a small Parmesan Reggiano factory. Milk for their cheese comes from seven farms in the area. To be certified as Parmesan Reggiano cheese, only milk from the region can be used and the cows must be fed with at least 75% crops grown in the region. Each of the vats holds 1000 liters of milk which will produce two wheels of cheese and they only make 10-12 wheels per day. After the wheels are pulled from the vat and rinsed, they go in molds and then to a salt bath. After the salt bath they are moved to the storage building which holds 900 wheels total and stored for at least a year. Most are sold at 24 or 36 months but some will be aged longer. Each wheel sells for about \$600 euro depending on age and quality. Quality grading is done by only a handful of trained people (much like classifying cows). We then sampled their 12, 24 & 36 month varieties and picked up a few souvenirs. It makes for an interesting tour when it includes dairy farmers and industry people! Lots of great questions for our guide.

The afternoon was spent on a walking tour of Parma, with stops at a baptistery and cathedral built between 1074 and 1300 and an old theater.

Day 3 (Wednesday)

Wednesday started the day with a walking tour of Cremona. First stop was another baptistery and cathedral. The church was founded in 1107 but destroyed by an earthquake in 1117, rebuilt and finished in 1190. One of the unique features on the church tower is an astronomical clock which tells the astronomical sign, month, day of the week, time and phase of the moon. Built in 1583, the mechanicals of the clock are amazing to think about. The church is the biggest in Cremona and has several large frescos done by six different painters between 1506-1523.

Next stop was the violin museum where we learned about how violins have been made by hand through the centuries. The most famous violin maker, and still some of the most coveted instruments, were by Stradivari. People come from all over the world to train in Cremona to make violins.



The afternoon was spent visiting two outstanding farms

in the Cremona area. Castleverde Holsteins is owned by the Quaini brothers, who are the third generation on the farm. Marco gave our tour as the other brothers were at the show grounds with their nine head entered for the show. Castleverde milks 430 Holsteins 3x/day in a double-20 parlor and average 42.4 kg/cow/day (93 pounds). Their milk goes to a raw milk factory and milk price is contracted directly with the factory every three months. They enjoy showing but the goal is to breed long lasting milk cows. Heifers and two year olds are bred to sexed semen and they do use some beef x dairy (Angus). They use mostly US bulls and really like the Delta Lambda two year olds. The herd currently has 56 EX cows and the last classification resulted in 55-60 two year olds that averaged 85 points.

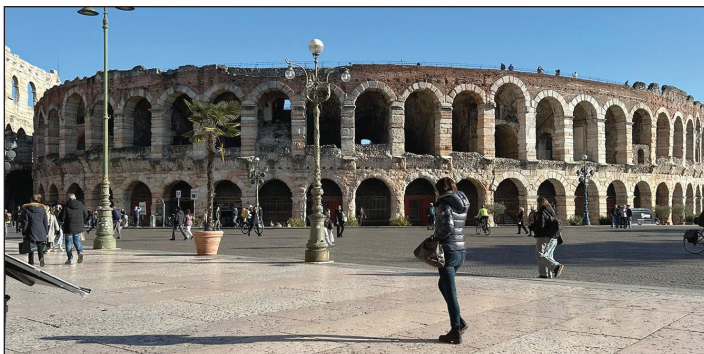


Alce Farm is operated by the Cerri family. Pietro Cerri gave our tour and was joined by his sister and father. The family has farmed at that location since 1920 and are the fifth generation. They milk 400 cows including about 40 Jerseys and also raise pigs. Cows are milked 2x/day (per cheese requirements) in a double-14 parlor. The milk is sold to make Grana Padano cheese and pigs are sold for prosciutto. They also have some solar panels and a digester to produce electricity for the farm and to sell. They use sexed semen and some beef x dairy. The Belgian Blue cross calves are sold and Angus cross are kept and fed out to butcher at their own shop. They use mostly Select Sires bulls and like their Parfect cows (second lactation). All calves are genomic tested and their highest heifer is +3300 GTPI. Pietro says they use genomics to make improvements in their herd, not to chase the high numbers. The original freestall barn was built in the 1980s and a new barn was built three years ago in order to expand to the current size. Leo and Karen Hurtgen were on the trip and own two Jerseys with the Cerri family. The heifer they own was at the show and Leo got to meet his cow in person in the freestall barn.



Day 4 (Thursday/Thanksgiving Day)

Thursday's tours included stops in Mantova (or Mantua) and Verona. We did a walking tour of Mantova highlighted by another beautiful cathedral and a small section of the Ducal Palace. The cathedral was built between the 15th and 18th centuries with some final paintings done in the early 1800s. The palace was built in the late 1200s-1600 in stages and is 35,000 sq meters with 950 rooms. The palace was owned by the Gonzaga family and



we visited a bedroom with several frescos that are some of the last pieces by artist Andrea Mantenga.

In Verona we had time for lunch and shopping at the Christmas market. We then did a walking tour of the amphitheater and surrounding "old city". The amphitheater was built in the first century in "the country" and then the city of Verona was built around it. It's the third largest amphitheater in Italy and holds 30,000 people. They currently hold concerts and operas there May through September. It will also host the closing ceremony of the 2026 winter olympics as well as the opening ceremony of the paraolympics. The rest of the tour included viewing homes/buildings with centuries-old frescos painted on the side that have slowly been discovered over the years and walking the small streets of a beautiful city.

Day 5 & 6 (Friday & Saturday)

We spent Friday and Saturday at the Cremona show, enjoying the classes on display and a large trade show. The show organizers put on a great show with music and lights for each class and a great atmosphere for champion selection. Junior Champion was sired by Detective and Reserve Junior Champion sired by HaveNoFear. Outstanding classes of Holstein cows from start to finish. Grand Champion was a Dateline daughter (production class) and Reserve Grand went to a Gold Chip 5-year-old from Castleverde Holsteins.



Day 7 (Sunday)

We loaded the bus from the hotel in Parma to travel to our first stop at a balsamic vinegar producer near Modena. The Giusti family has been producing balsamic vinegar for 420 years - 17 generations of the family. Balsamic vinegar production is actually kind of fascinating. "Back in the day" every family made their own in their home. Giuseppe Giusti had the idea of mass producing and selling it to others and they've been doing so since 1605. Making balsamic vinegar takes three things - grapes, wooden barrels and time. They take both red and white grapes (purchased from certain growers in the region due to regulations), juice them and cook them down at a low temperature to get a "mast". The mast is put in barrels in the attic and left unsealed to ferment over time with no temperature control. After 12 or 25 years, the balsamic vinegar is bottled and sold. Additional steps include monitoring the evaporation and mixing between the barrels.



Their balsamic vinegar is broken into two groups - DOP which has very strict rules for production and you won't find sold in stores. Or IGP which designates it as from that region but there's a little more flexibility as to how it's produced and they can make more to sell commercially. We tasted both groups of balsamic vinegar as well as some flavored versions and many in the group bought bottles to take home.

After lunch in the city center of Modena we visited the Ferrari museum and learned about the life of Enzo Ferrari and the many versions of the car through the years before heading to our hotel in Bologna.

Day 8 (Monday)

Our final day of an amazing trip. We did a walking tour of Bologna and learned some history of the city. We visited city hall and sat in the room where they do civil wedding ceremonies - which had two chandeliers from the 1700s and were brought as wedding gifts for Napoleon's sister. Since we hadn't seen a church yet that day, we did a quick walk through of Basilica di San Petronio. Construction was started in 1390 in the gothic style and "finished" in late 1600s in the baroque style. Although it's not really completed - they ran out of money, so the front is brick on the top half and is missing all of the statues meant to be in the small niches of the facade. The church also has the oldest organ in Italy, from 1471. Other items of note - this central part of the city was once surrounded by walls and is known for its large number of universities. They also have 35 km of covered porticos in the city center so most of the time you are protected from the rain or sun.

After a little free time, we headed to our final outing - a pasta cooking class. We learned how to make two kinds of pasta from scratch and a meat ragu and then finished the night eating what we had made. It was surprisingly good for a group of untrained pasta makers!



After a wonderful week in Italy, the group loaded the bus to catch our flight from Milan back to the U.S. Unfortunately there was a snow storm in the midwest and our flight was delayed a few hours which meant missed connections for those traveling to northern Wisconsin and an extended vacation in Chicago.

Everyone agreed it was a memorable trip with many new friends made and discussions about where we can travel to next!



*Photos and recap by
Laura Wackershauser; any reporting errors are her own ☺*