

## PARCO REGIONALE DELTA DEL PO

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Region: **Emilia Romagna**  
Area: **53,653 ha**  
Established in: **1988**  
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### The "Eel Factory" comes back to life

Once upon a time, in Comacchio, there was the Eel. Today, the Eel has come back to play the main role in a project which involves cultural and material goods (some buildings in the historical town center) and an important local tradition, in both social and economic terms.

The protagonist of this project is the Regional Park of the Po Delta, together with the Municipality of Comacchio. In October 2004 the first target was achieved: the opening of an important part of the buildings in the town center. This is only the first step of an unprecedented challenge: i.e. to rebuild the traditional production process of the marinated eel.

Eels arrive alive on the market and can be eaten fresh, according to the many traditional recipes. As the fishing season is concentrated in a short period (mostly in November and December), eels have always been marinated in vinegar, in order to preserve them longer. In the Delta, marinating factories have an age-old history and in Comacchio, at Azienda Valli, there was a factory employing many workers: anyway, marinated eel production ceased in 1992 and nowadays the eels captured in the Comacchio Lagoons are either sold fresh or processed outside the area.

In the late 90s, the Municipality developed a recovery project of what could then be called an example of industrial archaeology. Since February 2000 the building complex has been restored, thanks to important works within a P.R.U. (Urban Recovery Plan) financed by the Italian Ministry of Public Works. At that time the idea was to turn the "Eel Factory" into a museum, with an exhibition tour on the different steps of the entire marinating process, which used to take place in the very same museum rooms.

Later, the Regional Park of the Po Delta came on stage. After obtaining a regional co-financing (80%) for an intervention worth 516,000 Euros for the museum preparation and equipment, in 2003 people started to work and make the "eel factory" something more than a traditional museum.

Working in cooperation with the Municipality, two main ideas emerged: turn the factory complex into the seat of a Slow Food Laboratory on the Marinated Eel from Comacchio and into a Park visitor center focusing on the Stations of "Comacchio Town Center" and "Valli di Comacchio", (the Park's varied territory is divided into six areas, called "stations"). Slow Food Presidia are action plans adopted to support excellent small-sized food productions, which today risk to be wiped out together with old professions, traditional manufacturing techniques, autochthonous breeds, ancient fruit and vegetable varieties. There are over 170 Slow Food Presidia in Italy, which aim at involving the producers directly, offering them counseling in order to improve the quality of their products and find new market outlets.

And here comes the future of our restored buildings. The entrance pavilion leads the visitors to three exposition rooms which occupy three distinct architectural spaces of the complex. Here there are the first information point and the commercial area where typical products can be sold. From the entrance, on the ground floor, the visitors reach the so-called "Preparation Room" with the Visitor Center for the Stations "Comacchio Town Center" and "Valli di Comacchio". With models, images, projections and interactive learning stations the visitors

will receive all the useful information to visit Comacchio and its lagoons. The intermediate floor houses a didactic room and a conference hall with tables, where the marinated eel "guided tastings" by Slow Food take place.

The activity of the Laboratory (starting in October 2004) will be limited to a short period of time during the year, when a fixed quantity of eel is manufactured, cooked and marinated directly on the spot, bringing the ancient production process back to life. Some of the twelve chimneys for eel cooking on the spit have been reactivated. The chimneys are in the so-called "Fire Room", the very heart of the complex. It is a large room with an impressive wood truss covering, where the steps of the ancient manufacturing technique are reconstructed with life-size figures and light and sound effects. In other periods, the Fire Room can house various public events and exhibits. The area, open to the public, is over 900 square meters plus the 200 square meters of service rooms where the toilets for the visitors and the changing rooms for the personnel of the Marinated Eel Laboratory are located.

Moreover, the front and side yard, beside the Fire Room, is paved with asphalt and white crushed stone, in order to house exhibitions of materials and products of the Lagoon culture such as boats, huge baskets and working tools. The yard may also be used for summer events in the open air.

Much more than a museum...