

Why I Went to Italy to Find a Way to Eat Smoked Meat Again

by David Szanto

The University of *what?* they ask. Of Gastronomic Sciences, you say. In Italy. The one co-founded by Slow Food. Gastroenterology? they titter. Gastric-bypass science?

It will go on for a bit. They've got a million of 'em. But so the conversation begins.

By the time you get through explaining the etymology of gastronomy (effectively, the rules of the stomach), the university's integrated, cross-disciplinary approach and the Slow Food connection, you're usually ready to take another hit. *So you must be a really good cook now. What's your favorite thing to make?* You make a mental note, for the next time you will perform this opening salvo: mention the fact that it's *not* a cooking school.

These conversations have been good practice for me, however, because in November of last year I graduated from the University of Gastronomic Sciences master's program in food culture and communications, and have now started working for it. So in my current role, I do need some snappy and straightforward explanations of what the hell a gastronomy university actually is.

A young organization, UNISG (the school's equally alien acronym) recognized quickly the need to do outreach to other academic institutions, to the Slow Food community internationally and to a broader media base outside of Italy. So, since February, that's been me. This means lots of hands-on relationship building, clear and comprehensive communications and finding like-minded champions within our many communities to help with visibility and, importantly, applicants.

It's a relatively big challenge. Few universities teach food studies as a distinct, self-contained academic construct. Though some are starting to develop such programs, it is an early time in our history. Often associated with faculties of geography, nutrition or public health, food studies is in somewhat the same position today that women's studies likely found itself in some 40 years ago. I imagine that the same vice-deans who stood around then, guffawing at the need to "study" women, have bred a new generation of

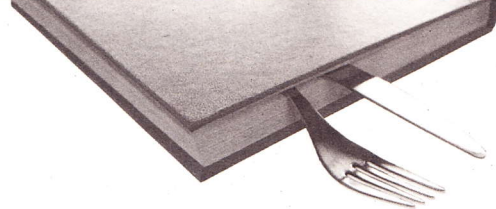


food-studies scoffers. *Oh yeah, gimme that bagel. I'll study it for ya.*

But given multiple crises—social, environmental, human health—plus food-fear exploitation, crumbling gastronomic identities and dwindling biodiversity, the time is certainly upon us to formalize the study of food. It was long disregarded as a base subject by the academes, a matter of the body, not the mind. And given food's primacy in our day-to-day lives, studying it intensely in all its meaning and implications might drive one mad by over-saturation. (I sometimes suspect that might have happened to some of us in the master's program ... at least temporarily.) So it is a critical period for the university to exist, and to grow, and to start producing new food fellows with the skills and context to lead change. Some of them might take part in Slow Food organizations around the world.

L'Università degli studi di scienze gastronomiche came about in 2003, a co-venture of Slow Food and the regions of Piedmont and Emilia-Romagna. With its two campuses in Pollenzo (south of Turin) and Colorno (north of Parma), the university offers four programs in food studies at both undergraduate and master's levels. Taught in various combinations by a faculty of both permanent and visiting lecturers, communications and economics are scheduled alongside biochemistry and botany; anthropology and social psychology are interlaced with historical production techniques and industrial sensory analysis. Throw in a little branding, some policy and geography, countless tasting labs and a hefty dose of (non-academic) conviviality, and you have one UNISG.

Ah, UNISG. The temptation for me now is to get personal. To describe my own extraordinary



time in the program—the visits to mozzarella di bufala producers in Campania, tasting biodynamic Chablis north of Dijon, hosting dinner parties for the inspiring lecturers who made us want to be anthropologists or olive oil educators—and to extol my remarkable and peculiar ex-Colornesi colleagues, now spread around the world in equally remarkable and peculiar occupations. It was personal indeed: a transformational experience.

And why not? Food is, after all, intensely personal. It's one of the few things we invite into our bodies. Like little else, it binds us to our families and cultures and our own sense of identity. Being personal about food is the way we give it new meaning, hold it in high honour, and pay attention. All so that we might make more thoughtful choices in our day-to-day behaviour.

During my time as a feisty, young-again student, I started expressing the importance of being personal about food through writing. I had been an editor and consultant before going to Italy, so working with words was not unfamiliar. But in writing about food—and my relationship to it—I've come to connect more strongly to own my beliefs. As a result, I've made part of my work with the university about facilitating that process

for others. I teach classes on blogging and wikifying, and am developing a project for an extensive, socially developed online food resource—a collective repository of personal, individually meaningful food content. Now back in Canada after many years away, I'm both daunted and excited by doing that here. We are a nation of distinctiveness, not homogeneity, and our food sensibilities popu-

A transformational experience Graduate from UNISG

late an enormous spectrum. Seems like the perfect situation for fierce and passionate regional-food-loving individuals to express themselves.

As you read this, a good-sized handful of other Canadians are moving through the ranks of the university. Wise sorts, I have found, who understand the place that food holds in our hearts as well as our heads and stomachs. To further abuse the Claude Lévi-Strauss attribution, it's "good to think about" for the future of food.

For more about the university, visit www.unisg.it. To read some of the Colorno master students' blogposts, visit www.cibomatic.com/blog.