

Regional Food Systems

A Growing Reliance on Seasonal and Local Products in the Age of the Globalized Food Industry

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Abstract

This first-person narrative details one ISI Florence alumna's perspective on leveraging her experience as a short-term Italian resident during her semester abroad, to inform her professional work in regional food systems in the United States. Inspired by the Slow Food movement, the author discusses insights that have influenced a more interconnected, hyperlocal food system in her community in the US. This narrative focuses on the unique aspects of the Florentine- and greater Italian- food landscape, and the challenges and benefits of relying on seasonal and local products in the age of the globalized food industry and COVID-19.

Keywords: food, nutrition, sustainability, gastronomy, culture

During my time as a student at ISI Florence in 2017, I had the chance to experience day-to-day living like a local: supporting “*agriturismo*” by taking the bus to Castello di Verrazzano and neighboring farm-wineries in Chianti, dining at multi-generational, family-owned *trattorie* around the city, and shopping for dinner necessities at the Mercato di Sant’Ambrogio or Mercato Centrale. I gained an unparalleled education in food and nutrition without even trying to – not in the classroom, but because good food was an inescapable and essential element of existing as a Florence resident. Through these regular encounters with local producers, I gleaned first-hand insight on the impacts of food on just about everything else. Climate change, in the form of unseasonable temperatures and unanticipated heavy rainfall, meant that acres of green grapes were spoiled and there would be no white wine produced that year. Local economies in smaller Tuscan towns that relied heavily on tourism and local dollars, were slowed in the winter as restaurants, *gelaterie*, and other shops stayed

closed until visitors would start to crowd the streets again. I learned from multi-generation farmers about their gratitude and compassion for the animals they raised or shared acreage with, whom they developed relationships with in the pastures (not ever in a CAFO)¹.

These lessons created a shift in my behaviors. I started separating my food scraps from trash and recycling and made use of the compost bin down the block. I enjoyed seasonal cuisine like *ribollita* in small brick-wall restaurants and found that I didn't miss pineapple too much. I found that I was fighting colds less often and consistently walking several miles each day. The environmental, economic, and health impacts of partaking in the local food system were becoming clear as my months at ISI came to an end, so much so that they influenced my personal values system and led to lasting changes in the way I shopped, advocated, and ate after returning home.

A few months later, after graduating from my home institution, I took a job with a non-profit organization in my hometown, the Montgomery County Food Council, leading local- and state-level food policy and advocacy efforts. In addition to a small staff of four, the Food Council was comprised of 25 Montgomery County, Maryland residents who also happened to be food system trailblazers, serving in a volunteer capacity to support the organization and represent the interests of farmers, home vegetable gardeners, restaurateurs, food entrepreneurs, dieticians, and other parties within in the local food system.

The first of several programs that I came to lead over my years with the Food Council was in its infancy in 2018: the "MoCo Made" program². The "MoCo Made" initiative was developed in partnership with local government, with the intention of offering resources and support to local farms and food and beverage producers, thus increasing the visibility and awareness of the diverse products made and grown in Montgomery

1. Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation: <https://dhs.wisconsin.gov/environmental/cafo.htm>

2. Montgomery County Food Council, MoCo Made Program: <https://mocofoodcouncil.org/mo-co-made/>

County. Though I wasn't sure what the future held for this program when the project came across my desk, a return trip to Italy transformed my outlook.

Less than a year into my new role, I was selected as a US Delegate to the biannual Slow Food Terra Madre Salone del Gusto in Turin. While many of the individual conference sessions that I attended at this one-of-a-kind event have brought inspiration to my professional work over the past several years, it was the connections that I made and witnessed that piqued my interest. The palpable passion, creativity, neighborliness, and exuberance shared by the hundreds of gourmands who had achieved "Snail of Approval" status helped me to see how I could make an impact in my community through the "MoCo Made" program.³

As with the producers I had interacted with during my semester abroad in Florence, the diverse exhibitors at Terra Madre lived and breathed their craft, whether it be producing high-quality, smooth and spicy rum in Jamaica, salty-sweet chunks of handmade halva in Israel, or fennel-bejeweled Finocchiona in Tuscany. Despite advances in modern technology and a consumerist global society accustomed to standardization and mass production, most of these producers had built a successful business by embracing imperfections, respecting natural processes, and honoring traditional methods. They were equally proud to belong to the Slow Food community as they were to belong to their home community.

This culture of belonging is what I hoped to cultivate with producers in Montgomery County through the "MoCo Made" program. Prior to the launch of this program, there had been limited opportunities for local producers to come together and share best practices, challenges and solutions, or resources and contacts that could bolster their business. There had also been few opportunities for local producers to engage with local consumers, outside of spotty participation in seasonal farmers markets. My colleagues and I sought to change that, taking some guidance from the Slow Food model: regular, open-air markets and market-style events,

3. Slow Food Terra Madre Salone del Gusto: <https://slowfoodusa.org/gatherings/terra-madre/>

increased community access to and engagement with farms and agritourism, and enhanced connectivity between local producers, retailers, and restaurants.

Though these strategies had roots in Italy— with markets serving a central role in the Tuscan economy even before medieval times⁴ and agritourism being traced back to the Italian countryside in the 1970's⁵ – they are still widely recognized as foundational practices to support community reinvestment through a circular economy⁶.

Starting in late 2018, the Food Council began organizing new opportunities for the 40+ “MoCo Made” program participants to come together on a monthly basis, sharing ideas for community engagement events and activities while using the gatherings as a space for producers to build community amongst themselves. The Food Council scheduled a series of “MoCo Made Happy Hours,” a quarterly opportunity for residents to enjoy and taste food made by local businesses, while supporting the hosts – local farm breweries and wineries. We hosted roundtable discussions with local restaurateurs, and facilitated connections that put local potatoes onto the public school lunch menus, local kale into local soup jars, and local soup jars onto retail shelves.

In partnership with the local network of farmers markets and an assortment of locally owned food retailers, we also launched “MoCo Made Days.” This series was intended to spotlight and increase the number of Montgomery County based farms and food and beverage producers selling at local farmers markets, and to incentivize shoppers to patronize these businesses by offering special discounts and “MoCo Made” branded merchandise. Inspired by the Slow Food “Snail of Approval,” I spent many

4. Florence and its Markets: A Florentine History <https://www.guidemeflorence.com/2018/02/11/florence-and-its-markets/>

5. An Introduction to Agritourism: A Power Tool for Storytelling and Revenue Generation <https://www.aianta.org/an-introduction-to-agritourism-a-power-tool-for-storytelling-and-revenue-generation/#:~:text=Agritourism%2C%20a%20portmanteau%20of%20agriculture,way%20to%20experience%20the%20countryside>

6. Circular Economy Overview: <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/topics/circular-economy-introduction/overview>

days distributing stickers, window decals, and signage with a “MoCo Made” logo to participating businesses and dozens of retail partners to increase visibility and awareness of the initiative amongst local consumers.

The success and momentum of these events from late 2018 through February of 2020 resulted in the growth of the “MoCo Made” membership by nearly 100%, with more than 70 businesses engaged in the program by March 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though supply chain challenges, rising food costs, and layoffs triggered by the pandemic quickly affected individuals and businesses globally, the inclusive and collaborative culture that had developed within the Montgomery County food and beverage community offered innovative solutions.

Together with funding from the Montgomery County government and in collaboration with a network of local non-profit and private funding partners, the Montgomery County Food Council leveraged the infrastructure of the “MoCo Made” program to establish the “Montgomery County Farm to Food Bank Program⁷.” Dozens of food producing farmers shared in conversations to identify the costs and logistics of getting locally grown fruits, vegetables, grains, and meat delivered to a local food assistance provider—most commonly, a food bank or food pantry—for distribution to community members, many of whom were experiencing food insecurity for the first time in their lives as a result of the pandemic. Farmers received a fair price for their crops and contributions, and recipients enjoyed fresh, nutrient-dense, and culturally appropriate foods.

At the same time, an increasing number of farms throughout Montgomery County launched Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs and began to offer on-farm pick-up options or door-to-door delivery for customers. It was reminiscent of the food system my grandparents had been raised in, when the milkman would drop off farm-fresh dairy at their doorstep, and the dinner menu was based on what the nearby farms were harvesting. This was mostly consistent with the hyper-local food

7. Montgomery County Farm to Food Bank Program Overview: <https://mocofoodcouncil.org/new-farm-to-food-bank-investment-set-to-strengthen-montgomery-county-food-economy-fill-nutrition-gap-for-residents-experiencing-hunger/>

system my great-grandparents had been accustomed to in Italy, prior to immigrating to the US in the early 1910's.

Regardless of socio-economic status, in the midst of a global crisis, Montgomery County residents were getting closer to their food out of necessity. The culture of belonging had taken hold in the local food system, as neighbors helped neighbors to stay safe and nourished during a time of struggle and uncertainty.

In 2023, this sense of belonging remains, as the metaphorical twine tying together farmers, food entrepreneurs, and consumers in the Montgomery County food system as a more self-sustaining community. As always, there is room for improvement. Yet the demand for local food is greater than ever before. According to data collected at the end of 2022, foot traffic at most farmers markets in Montgomery County has increased by at least 50% as compared to 2019, farmer participation in the Montgomery County Farm to Food Bank Program has nearly tripled, and the Food Council is currently embarking on a project to establish a shared kitchen and cold storage space to support farmers' increased growing capacity and expand robust farm-to-table efforts.

Though a novel virus may have served as the impetus to reintroduce this type of food exchange in my own community, it is perhaps exactly what my Italian ancestors envisioned as a sustainable food access solution, by organizing marketplaces where agriculturists and artisans could gather to trade goods. The same co-dependence that was necessary hundreds of years ago is essential now— in both modern-day Italian cities and rural areas, and in the suburbs on the East Coast of the United States—still with a sense of belonging, culture-building, and community at the forefront.