

Mapping My Dominos

From Umbra Institute to Once Upon a Pesto

Jessica Paholsky

Did I ever imagine being dubbed the “Princess of Pesto?” Would I believe you if you told me I’d have an Instagram following of over 16,000 at the start of 2023? Was it likely that Littlestown High School’s “Most Shy” senior would go put her face and name on social media for the world to see? The answer to all three is a resounding “No.”

But oftentimes, and comically, we find ourselves experiencing the opposite of expectations. Expectations, whether we’re consciously aware of them and their impact or not, play a key role in nearly every detail of our lives. We have expectations for how fast an Amazon package will arrive, what the food at a new restaurant will taste like, when we will get married, how our first day at a new job will go, what activities our children will get involved in, and which friends will be there for us when we need it most.

When I started my first semester at Penn State University in August 2010, I knew studying abroad was part of my plan. I expected to find a program that would take me to Australia (two reasons being I had a fascination for the movie *Finding Nemo* and listened a lot to country artist Keith Urban). Then after talking to a teammate, who just returned from a semester in South Africa, one day at cross country practice, I changed course and considered a program there instead. Months later, as I got to know my roommate and had planned out most of the courses I’d take in the semesters ahead, I changed my expectations altogether. Instead of studying abroad in a country in the southern hemisphere, I expected (and committed) to a spring semester program in Perugia, Italy through Umbra Institute. I called my mom to make sure she was on board, submitted my application, and began a whole new list of expectations for what it was going to be like to live the Italian life.

Life is like a sequence of dominos. There are plenty of other tiles that could connect to your current one, but the difference is in the other

half—its color and its number of dots. Most often that other half looks totally different from the one you’re connecting it to. Sometimes your current tile will end up connecting to multiple other tiles, sometimes just one. No matter how your dominos come together, it’s always easier to see the ways they connect AFTER the fact.

My sequence of dominos began in the spring semester of 2012. For just over four months, I not only discovered Italy, its culture, food, land, and people, but I also laid the foundation of the person I’d continue to shape, mold, and understand in the years to come. My career, my hobbies, and my sense of independence all webbed out of this momentous four-month experience. I didn’t foresee any of those details through a crystal ball, but looking back, the dots connected perfectly from one domino to the next.

Domino #1: Study abroad at Umbra Institute in 2012

When I was home for the winter break during my sophomore year, I remember I listed out all the countries I wanted to travel to during my fast-approaching semester abroad based in Italy. Croatia was at the top of my list, but I also included several other European bucket-list items. I packed my suitcase and a carry-on with what I thought would “fit” the style of this continent. I had no fears or hesitations joining a foreign program where I’d never met any of its students, faculty, or staff. The flight went smoothly, I was fascinated with the landscape in and surrounding my new temporary home in central Italy, and I felt a newfound sense of awe when we traveled to Tuscany for a weekend orientation.

Quicker than I ever expected, that list of countries I put together became just an exercise in geography. I decided instead to use the four-day weekends to travel to all 20 regions in Italy. I boarded trains, planes, and buses to experience the Italian peninsula north to south, east to west. I experienced all of the national consistencies as well as the provincial diversities. Each city and region I visited added to a reservoir of memories, observations, and friendships that I documented within hours after returning home to my apartment in Perugia. The mostly independent travel

I did on weekends built skills in organization, logistics, communication, and self-confidence. On my trans-Atlantic flight back to the U.S., I had added to my luggage souvenirs for my family as well as an exponentially increased appreciation for Italy.

Of course, studying abroad wasn't just about weekend travel. During the week (Monday through Thursday), I took courses in fresco painting, digital photography, Italian language, art history (specifically about Leonardo da Vinci), and "The History and Culture of Food in Italy." This last class, little to my knowledge, was especially crucial to my personal future endeavors. How neat it was to me to learn about Italian food, dishes, and their history. Yes, we were focused on Italy, but I started to wonder how many other countries and cultures have unsurfaced stories to share. Hold that thought for four years later!

Domino #2: Mini-documentary about olive oil in 2013

As a student in Penn State's Schreyer Honors College, one graduation requirement is to produce a thesis. For most majors, this includes a lengthy research and written project. As a fine art and journalism double-major, my thesis took a different form—a mini-documentary with a complimentary short paper. The professor I had chosen to be my honors advisor knew about my semester in Italy and so he recommended I read a book called *Extra Virginity* by Tom Mueller. It's an investigative journalism piece that explores some of the false marketing practices in the olive oil industry across the world. I read the book, contacted an olive farm in Paciano, Italy, and booked a five-day trip during the next olive harvest. Once all my filming and interviews were complete in Paciano, I made a quick trip across the Tuscan border to Perugia. Though only my home for roughly four months, this Italian hill-top town was so familiar to me even 18 months later.

When I returned a second time to the U.S. from Italy, I added to my reservoir the raw footage that then became a key element in my professional video portfolio. After a few rounds of editing and revisions, I tied the bow on my mini-documentary called "What's in Your Bottle?" and turned it in mid-spring semester in 2014.



A photo shoot for Once Upon a Pesto at my local grocery store. Pennsylvania, U.S. 2022

Domino #3: First post-college job in 2014

One of the courses I took during my final semester at Penn State was Italian. Even though my semester in Perugia was my first taste of the Italian language, I continued courses in the subject over the next two years. One day, my Italian professor hosted a Zoom call with a gentleman who was using Italian in his full-time job, which showed us how our current studies had real-world uses, too. As I was walking across campus after that class, I pulled out my phone and scoured the website of the company where that gentleman worked to see if they had any job openings in videography. They didn't, but I found the gentleman's email and sent a quick thank-you note. I also added a professional query. To my delight, the staff at Travel for Teens had been considering hiring a videographer to produce marketing content for their international trips for high school students for a little while. After a few calls and an in-person visit, I secured my first job after college. I started about two weeks after graduation in May 2014 and then boarded a flight to Madrid, Spain in June. That was the start of two months traveling between the company's trips in Europe to gather video footage.

During that summer of 2014, I returned to Italy a third time. This visit included Rome, Florence, Pisa, Sicily, Venice, and the Cinque Terre—all places featured in my 2012 itineraries. The only difference this time was that I was not a student. Instead, I was one of the guides leading teenage students and also a professional videographer. Maybe this goes back to the old saying that things come in threes—my third stay in Italy triggered a realization that my dominos' dots were connecting all along.

Domino #4: Launch a food blog in 2016

After two years with Travel for Teens (my second summer involved two months traveling throughout China and Costa Rica), I landed a job with Rodale, Inc., specifically as a video producer for Men's Health magazine. It was one of my life goals to work at a health and fitness publication and there I was in 2016 checking that off my list. Soon after onboarding and learning more about the parent company, I updated my goals list. The

latest addition: to publish a cookbook. Although I was working at a publishing company, I soon understood that getting a cookbook into the market is a very lengthy process, especially if you're starting from scratch and don't have "celebrity" listed on your résumé. Nevertheless, my ambitions fueled my creativity and I came up with my theme of pesto. How did I land on pesto? My platform on olive oil through my mini-documentary led me to this other Italian food item that had some misunderstandings about it, too.

With a bit more research, writing, and thinking, I found that pesto is often overgeneralized. The word *pesto* comes from an Italian verb (*pestare*) that means to pound or to crush. Thus, pesto is a process and not a specific recipe. I then explored different ingredients and flavor pairings and came up with my brand name Once Upon a Pesto. At the core, I wanted to inspire people of all culinary skill levels to have fun in the kitchen and discover new foods and cultures. I spent the next few years developing, photographing, and writing a commentary about my 50 pesto recipes, plus two ways to use each pesto—from breakfast and snacks to dinner and desserts. My recipes highlight cuisines across the globe, not just in Italy. After concocting 50 pesto variations, I changed my website from a blog format to its current structure.

I continue on my journey of publishing Once Upon a Pesto as a cookbook. Every day, I post stories, recipes, and other content on social media through my handle @onceuponapesto. Over the last year and a half, I've also landed several media hits with local, regional, and international press outlets. From Penn State and Umbra Institute to Italy Magazine and Harrisburg Magazine, my name and work have become more widely known. I've even acquired nicknames like "Princess of Pesto" from a local magazine editor and "Pesto Queen" from a local radio show host (much different from my senior superlative "Most Shy").

Domino #5: Into the unknown of 2023 and beyond

When I look back at the dots and connections that led to what I've done and what I continue to do today, I quietly laugh. I don't take for

granted the opportunities I've been afforded, the connections I've been able to form, or the accomplishments I've set out to tackle. Each one is like a single tile in the web of a complex domino structure, but it's a complexity that's not confusing. Instead, it's complex because it never really fit my expectations. Perhaps that's the root of setting expectations: human minds can only stretch imagination so far, but reality elicits a story of correlations, fate, and understanding that's beyond our ability to direct. Looking back on my own journey, I understand now how studying abroad in Perugia, Italy was the North Star that's directed these past eleven years and will continue to do so in the years yet to come.

Biography

Jessica Paholsky is the founder of Once Upon a Pesto. As a full-time communications professional and having traveled to more than a dozen different countries, she is a storyteller and visual creative who is passionate about having a global perspective. She studied abroad at Umbra Institute during the spring semester of 2012 through Penn State University / Arcadia University.