

Beyond

n.6

The ISI Florence & Umbra Institute
Studies in International Education



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Beyond Sustainability

The modern English word sustainability comes from a late thirteenth-century verb *sustenen*, which came through French from the Latin verb *sustinere*, “to hold up.” Already in the early fourteenth century the English verb meant “to give support to; support physically, hold up or upright; give assistance to; keep going.”¹

In this issue of *Beyond*, the various contributors to the sixth edition reflect on various approaches to sustainability. Crucially, rather than fixate just on *ecological* sustainability—the kind we most often think of when we hear this word—the ISI Abroad professors, students, and alums consider other possible meanings, always in the context of international education.

The issue opens with a series of reflections by Thomas Brownlees (a professor at ISI Florence) on the benefits of teaching his course “Sustainability in Fashion” to students. Rather than just think about production or transportation, Brownlees’ students are forced to consider supply chain management, the impact of collection design, and how consumer (not only producer) behavior impacts the fashion industry. Another article in this section, Clive Woollard’s essay on the so-called circular economy, illustrates numerous ways that Tuscan businesses and not-for-profits have approached sustainability, both reducing their ecological footprint and creating commercial opportunities that will endure with time.

The segue from these two discussions to the third essay in the Academics section might not be obvious, but in Catia Santi’s interview of Claudio Manella, the reader can see the lightly drawn lines that link it with the other two. Manella, an ISI Florence instructor and a renowned author of textbooks and other works on the Italian language, recounts how he’s been able to keep up at a brisk pace of writing and how his

1. From <https://www.etymonline.com>, which draws principally on the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Barnhart’s Dictionary of Etymology*.

books have helped likely hundreds of thousands of people learn Italian.

Perhaps most interesting are the reflections offered by ISI Abroad students, both recent and from further back in time. In their article on the InVisibilities Project, the students interviewed by Nicolette Alexandra Brito-Cruz unconsciously channel one of the other meanings of to sustain, i.e., “to give support.” This series of interviews with people of color living in Florence (both residents and short-term visitors) is part of a project developed in Spring 2024, whose primary focus is to render more visible the underrepresented groups of people who reside in that Italian city.

Some students switched from non-fiction into historical fiction. In her essay “Listening For Inspiration,” Ashleigh Cohan gives assistance (yet another meaning of *sustain*) to Eleonora of Toledo’s sixteenth-century desire for a garden, for a space of her own. Cohan’s short story about Eleonora lets the reader re-imagine that history in a greener, freer way.

Finally, three other student alums (two from ISI Florence and one, Jessica Paholski, from The Umbra Institute), discuss how their in-class experience in Italy has intertwined with their post-study abroad lives. Rosemary Faircloth talks about her time in museums while abroad and how it affected her thinking; Catherine Nardi describes connecting her courses on food in Florence to her work back home with the Montgomery County Food Council; and – last but not least – Jessica Paholsky paints a decidedly green picture, tracing her current role as the “Princess of Pesto” back to her time in Perugia doing what was then called the Food Studies Program.

To sustain is, among other things, to keep going. I hope this edition of *Beyond* helps you keep going towards a more sustainable future!

Zachary Nowak

A dark, monochromatic photograph of a person's feet in loafers standing on a wooden floor with a grid pattern. The image is oriented vertically, with the feet at the bottom and the text at the top. The lighting is low, creating a moody atmosphere. The grid pattern on the floor is a prominent visual element.

academics

The Benefits of Teaching Sustainability in Fashion to Study Abroad Students

Thomas Brownlees

Abstract

In more than 15 years of teaching in Study Abroad, I have had the chance of addressing many valuable subjects in my business classes. The perspective of a business class can be very helpful in understanding many of the challenges and opportunities in contemporary society.

From social media to financial markets, from ethics to marketing, conversations in class can be broad-ranging and engaging, allowing students to reflect on their own habits and patterns of behavior. Starting from our personal experience is often helpful, and even more so during a term abroad.

Study Abroad is in fact a “journey to oneself”, and personal reflections can be extremely fruitful in terms of processing new information and connecting it to a new everyday routine. Just like in Italian language classes, it’s important to maintain the conversation on a practical level so that students can “put to work” their new found information almost the same day in which it has been acquired. As students adjust to life in Florence, they need to rebuild their own routine, sometimes in an even more conscious and informed manner.

This is definitely the case with one of my favorite classes: Sustainability in the Fashion Industry. In this short article, I’d like to take the opportunity to discuss some of the unique dynamics that I have experienced while teaching this class at ISI Florence.

Keywords: fashion, sustainability, study abroad

Teaching Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

I am fortunate to say that this class has always had high enrollment numbers. I’ve had the opportunity to hold the class with many engaged and interested students who were keen to learn more about sustainability

in the context of the fashion industry.

In class I try to make sure that students are able to develop a personal understanding of the subject, thereby letting them focus on the ideas of sustainability at a simple, practical level. I often make the case for this by suggesting a different notion of sustainability, one that I can personally connect to because of my background in music. I tell students how my personal understanding of the topic comes from connecting sustainability to the “sustain” pedal of the grand piano. When you hit the “sustain” pedal, the notes you play last just a little longer and their sound endures and resonates louder. This is actually the same notion of sustainability that I like to discuss in class, as sustainable companies are those which carry out practices that increase the chances of them “enduring” and becoming more future-proof.

Within the general ecosystem, on one hand, the fashion industry is very appealing and exciting. Many students are drawn to it, and see themselves pursuing a career in this field. In many respects, fashion is increasingly embracing diversity and is becoming a leader in terms of inclusiveness, not only through collection design, but also through committed company cultures.

On the other hand, fashion is among the most polluting business sectors in the world, second only to fossil fuels. In class we examine how this industry can be made more sustainable by exploring three lines of accountability: one focused on supply chain management, one linked to collection design and one associated with consumer behavior. Ideally, by navigating these three perspectives, students first identify the macro-level issues and then slowly and steadily switch the focus to themselves, realizing that change can start from ourselves, before demanding it of others.

To become more aware of our own behaviors, aside from the more traditional case studies, I encourage students to approach the subject experientially. Among others, here below are some of the activities that can support our in-class discussions.

- **“Country of Origin Analysis”**. In some cases, looking at labels and noticing the origin of manufacturing of our garments can be the only traceable information regarding a company’s supply chain. Following up on this, I sometimes ask students to notice how often they wear the same clothing item, so as to realize the sustainability of their own shopping habits.
- **“Sustainable Fabrics”**. Noticing the textiles used in our garments and learning how to tell fabrics apart is an important element of thoughtful fashion consumption. We visit leather stores and artisanal workshops to learn more about the history and value of fabrics associated with Florentine history.
- **“Family-run Made in Italy”**. Learning more about family-run businesses that create heritage products with a very low production volume. We also look into other sustainable businesses in fashion that try to meet sustainability by tackling a social or environmental cause, yet still managing to keep the organization financially stable.

All in all, the idea is that the subject needs to be experienced “behind the scenes” of retail stores, to really be able to understand the impact of our shopping decisions. In many cases, this awareness comes from understanding that information is much more the result of an emotional experience than of a simply cognitive one.

As an instructor, I like to help students to become curious and inquisitive; yet, at the same time, it’s important not to become overly skeptical over a company’s motives. At the end of each term, I always like to finish off the course on a positive note, trying to make sure that the information students have gained can make a meaningful difference in the course of their lives.

So, what is it that an instructor can do, to inspire students beyond the four walls of the classroom?

I've realized that two ideas are worth exploring during our classes so that students are able to bring the subject to life, inside and outside of school. I'm going to consider these ideas further in the next section of the paper.

Some Ideas to Bring Fashion Sustainability to Life

Sustainable transition is a massive challenge; on a personal level, it requires the following two sets of behavior.

- First, it is important to pursue a long-term mindset. When addressing such important challenges, we need to change our perception of time. As we make changes to our life, and we ideally help other customers to become more aware of the impact of their fashion habits, we can't expect things to take place overnight.
- The second element has to do with character. Influencing other people to be more sustainable in their daily lives requires us to develop leadership skills. In order to inspire change, we need to be optimists. Without a healthy dose of optimism, there is no way we can make sustainability a long-term successful career challenge and bring long-lasting change.

Apart from this, there are two other ideas that have inspired the creation of the course curriculum to make sure that our lecture hours revolve around ideas that will stand the test of time.

Fashion and Culture

Fashion is to be understood in terms of culture, as a language of communication to convey our unique sense of identity, or to show our belonging to a common and shared identity. In this sense, our fashion purchasing choices can become more aligned with our values and sense of self. Seeing fashion as a more profound communication language can

help us be better aware of our purchases and ideally more resilient to weekly fads and trends. In some cases, this can lead us to pursue “quieter” outlooks in fashion, connected to understating appearance. This kind of approach is also embodied by many Italian fashion brands. Developing this more profound connection to our wardrobe can help us to consume less and invest in higher-quality garments. By doing this we can increase our clothing’s lifespan. During the course we delve into many cultural and business dimensions of fashion, thereby providing students with a more in-depth understanding of how fashion trends work, and how helpful it can be to understand their origin.

While abroad, students have an opportunity to reflect on this as they respond to the Italian way of life and its customs, in fashion and beyond.

Assess Impact and Redefine Metrics

The other big idea that is discussed in class has to do with re-defining our metrics. How is it that we value status? How is it that we value success? How is it that we value influence?

In traditional business, the common answer to all three questions is “profitability”.

That is how sustainability can be challenging. We cannot measure success, status, or influence just in terms of revenue and profits.

We need to re-design our metrics to actually understand what really matters. This is not only valuable in terms of how we are measuring our company performance, but also in terms of how we’re promoting change. In many areas of sustainability, both environmental and labor, we don’t spend enough time understanding what we need to measure. We often need to re-define our own idea of success so that we can better measure it through something that really matters. By placing more attention on this notion, we can better assess the impact of our sustainable initiatives to actually assess if our ideas are just going to “look good” in sustainability reports or if instead they are going to make a meaningful difference towards our stakeholders.

As students are able to reflect on their personal goals and ambitions,

as they experience life away from home, they can identify a new way to assess the success of their study abroad experience, aside from traditional metrics.

Conclusions

In this short paper, my intent was to discuss some of the wonderful opportunities that the classes in Sustainable fashion have offered. This is a subject which provides instructors with some responsibilities, given the challenges posed by overconsumption and landfill waste. At the same time, the subject does not have to be bleak and discouraging; on the contrary, there are a lot of solutions that need to be found, and more than ever, the job market is seeking brilliant minds to address them.

I truly believe that study abroad students have the opportunity to acquire some “special powers”. These come from experiencing a new foreign culture and getting to see things with unbiased and curious eyes. Furthermore, they can re-establish habits and patterns to deal with a new stimulating environment. These positive outcomes can further benefit from a reflection on fashion consumption. We would like to think that some of the new positive habits that are established during their life in Florence may be hard to break, even after returning home.

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The Italian Language Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Catia Santi interviews Claudio Manella

Claudio Manella is regarded as one of the main authors of textbooks for students of Italian as a second language. A linguist, a creative writer, and a contemporary historian, he has published extensively on cooperation movements and Italian diaspora between the late XIX century and World War I; among his books on these last two topics are *La grande avventura* (Locarno: Dadò, 1993) and *Le bande svizzere* (Milan: Mursia, 1998). On learning Italian as a second or third language, he has written and edited many texts, such as *Ecco! Grammatica italiana, Sì! L'Italiano in mano, Come&perché, Italiano plus*, all of which have been published by Progetto Lingua Edizioni; most of them are now regarded as “classics” by both students and teachers of Italian.

For more than twenty years Professor Manella has been teaching and researching in this field of study. In addition to founding and coordinating a number of associations and clubs on literature and film studies, he is President of AILA (Accademia Italiana di Linguistica Applicata). After several years of work, he published *Amico. Dizionario italiano* in 2019, the first Italian language dictionary specifically conceived for non-Italian users. This work has been widely praised by experts in this field. Professor Manella lives and works in Florence

Professor Claudio Manella, could you please tell us about your first book and why you wrote it?

My first book was on Italian verbs. As such, it was titled *Guida ai verbi italiani* and it filled a gap among reference books. It turned out to be very successful, so much so that the publishing house immediately printed a second edition; eventually, many more followed. Significantly, this book is still in print, like all my other books of this kind.

I'm curious to hear about your passage from author to publisher, when you launched Progetto Lingua Edizioni back in 1998.

Yes, Progetto Lingua Edizioni was born on February 14th (Valentine's Day), 1998. In a sense, it had to happen. The books I wrote were selling so well that it became necessary to "protect" them against excessive photocopying, as is often the case with publications of this nature. And so, I thought of setting up an official structure to that purpose. A book like *Ecco! Grammatica italiana* (which has been printed no fewer than 40 times and is now available in five different languages) had to be protected this way. Only a real publishing house can do this. This is just one among many examples I could give. That is why Progetto Lingua Edizioni started. It currently has more than thirty books in print (which can be purchased both online and in bookstores), all of them on learning the Italian language.

Why writing more than thirty books on the Italian language?

I think it is necessary. Only by providing good books (that is, texts by teachers who have decades of hands-on experience) can one satisfy a request that today comes from literally all over the world. Let's not forget that Italian is one of the most-studied languages; as such, it is becoming a true "bridge language." For this reason, Italian deserves to be presented and taught in the best way possible to those who wish to learn it.

Today everything is becoming virtual and digital. How are your books reacting to this crucial change?

We should not consider books as something obsolete. That would be a huge mistake. More specifically, books without drawings, photos, and colored images of any sort are meant to emphasize the written text and draw the readers' attention to it. It is the written text that they must understand and learn. Clearly, that does not mean that images of various

kinds cannot serve as visual aids; yet, they are not supposed to be the ‘essence’ of a language book, thus replacing its words.

So, do you think that paper books have a future in the language-learning field?

Recent scientific research shows that studying on paper books vs. e-books is more effective and less stressful. My in-class experience confirms this. It is a fact. So, long live paper books!

How would you sum up your ten-year-work on *Amico*, the dictionary you published in 2019? And why did you choose this title?

Amico. Dizionario di Italiano is an act of love to this beautiful language. I must admit that writing it was far from easy. There were no previous models to rely on. This is the first dictionary ever designed for students of Italian as a second language. It also takes a good deal of courage and, maybe, folly to write a traditional (that is, paper, not online) dictionary today. To me, writing it was a challenge, a sort of fascinating trip through words, a trip, I’d like to add, that I decided to share with my students and the broader, international community of all those who wish to learn Italian. Every single word in the dictionary is explained in a simple, direct, and clear way, as a good teacher would do in class. This is what the title alludes to: a true friend, a classmate (maybe a little nerdy, if you will) who explains in simple words what we do not know or have a hard time understanding.

Based on your experience, why do most people wish to learn Italian?

There can be many reasons. Yet, what is common to all learners is in my opinion the pleasure one feels when speaking Dante’s language. This is good news for all; if so many people study this language *just* because it

is beautiful (instead of necessary, useful in the job market or for any other practical reasons) it means there is hope for the future. I mean, a future in which joy, pleasure, and beauty play a leading role, instead of anxiety, suffering, and war. Trust me when I say that only beauty can save a world in crisis. I'd like to add that studying Italian in Florence is an extraordinary experience, that I sincerely recommend to all those who wish to enjoy the Italian language while immersing themselves in this city's dazzling beauty.

Who studies Italian today?

Everyone studies Italian. My students' age range is between 15 and 90. And they all approach this language with the same enthusiasm, happy to learn something that is good for them, both mentally and physically.

We now live in a global, homogeneous culture. What future do you see for the Italian language in a context like that?

Italian has a great future, like anything that is not standardized by a kind of globalization that tends to obliterate differences, leveling everything off and suppressing originality. I think all forms of Italian excellence will play a crucial role in the world to come. We are ready to do our part. So, I wish a good Italian language experience to all!

The Circular Economy

How are Businesses in Florence and Tuscany Adapting to the New Economic Reality?

Clive Woollard

Abstract

This article outlines the key features of a circular economy and the business opportunities that may arise from adopting these techniques. Also, it reviews some of the businesses and organizations that are adopting these principles in Florence and elsewhere in Tuscany.

Keywords: economy, business, family business, economics, circular economy

Introduction – The Climate Emergency and Economics

It is apparent that we are experiencing a climate emergency!

“Human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gases, have unequivocally caused global warming, with global surface temperature reaching 1.1°C above 1850–1900 in 2011–2020 [...]. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred. Human-caused climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe. This has led to widespread adverse impacts and related losses and damages to nature and people. Vulnerable communities who have historically contributed the least to current climate change are disproportionately affected.” Extracted from the 2023 IPCC report (the United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change).

How we deal with this emergency is a matter of some political conjecture; many environmentalists would say that we should slow down and even stop much economic activity (Greenpeace, 2023). To maintain

ecology at the current state, some experts believe that we would need to return to the levels of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) seen in 1965 (IPCC report, 2018). Even the International Monetary Fund (IMF), responsible for global financial stability and growth, believes that growth in GDP should be sacrificed to counter climate change and is recommending that countries act quickly (IMF, 2022).

The words of Bobby Kennedy resound louder than ever today.

“GDP measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.”
Kennedy (1968).

The Circular Economy allows for growth in economic activity, even encouraging many new industries, whilst defending the infrastructure of the planet and its future viability. This is the reason so many politicians and businesspeople are convinced this reset of economic thinking is required.

What is the Circular Economy?

Much of our current economy is made up of products which are produced from virgin materials (materials that have not been used before or recycled). They are made into products that have a shorter and shorter product life, due to breakage, obsolescence, rapid degrading or fashion. It is well documented that light bulb producers in the 1930s formed a cartel to limit the life expectancy of their bulbs, to ensure a constant marketplace, as bulbs fail and must be replaced (Mihm, 2020). Yet, in Livermore California, there is a light bulb that has been burning for over 120 years (Centennial-bulb website). This is typical of many industries that design products to be obsolescent or fail within limited time periods. This strategy appeared valid when resources were thought to be unlimited, but today these types of products are unsustainable. This conventional economy is often referred to as the take-make-waste economy or the linear economy.

The circular economy breaks this pattern by adopting measures that change the way we produce economic value.

Take less virgin resources from the natural world.

- Use recycled or renewable raw materials where possible.
- Only produce what is strictly necessary.
- Create economic value by using recycled materials.

Optimise the use and the life of the product.

- Design products to be serviceable, repairable, and upgradable.
- Design durable products (design against planned obsolescence towards planned endurance).
- Share the usage of these products.
- Optimise the usage of these products.

Create zero waste systems.

- Design products to be disassembled into recyclable components.
- Use materials that will disperse back into nature (biodegradable and compostable).
- Ensure that all materials are treated as resources not waste.

Using recycled materials mean that we don't need to take new virgin resources from the eco-system and it also reduces waste.

The European Union and Circular Economics

On 11 March 2020, the European Commission adopted a new Circular Economy Action Plan (Eurostat 2020). This plan, put forward as part of the EU Industrial Strategy, presents measures to make sustainable products the norm in the EU, to empower consumers, to focus on sectors that use the most resources, where the potential for circularity is high and to ensure less waste. The World's leading economies had already formed PACE (an organization set up to investigate the ideas and principles of

circular economics) to accelerate the adoption of these precepts (World Economic Forum 2018). PACE has developed 7 key measures of circularity, that nations can use to assess their performance regarding circularity. These 7 measures include:

- Recycling refuse.
- Percentage of circular materials being used.
- The productivity of resources.
- Relationship between used resources and the amount of refuse.
- The amount of renewable energy being used.
- The repairing of products.
- Soil degradation.

Italy and Circular Economics

Italy leads the way in Europe in terms of adding circularity in keeping with these 7 key measures, reported ANSA on May 16, 2023. The main source for this piece of information is the annual report published by the Circular Economy Network (CEN) in collaboration with the Italian National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development (Enea).

Circular Economics in Florence and Tuscany

Rifò

Niccolò Cipriani founded Rifò in 2017 in Prato. His company takes old clothes and recycles or upcycles them into new items. 'Recycle' means to reduce to the constituent parts and then remake from these materials; 'upcycle' means to take an old item and repair, modify and add to it, to make a new item. Cipriani's firm only makes to order; so, it only produces what is necessary. Rifò informs customers of the percentage of recycled materials in its products, which in turn drives an economic value in them.

2.3 Fighting overproduction


Limited editions Zero-Waste

We keep working to reduce production surplus as much as we can, that is physiological for every clothing brand.

Whenever there is a leftover yarn or fabric, we do not throw it away but instead we try to reuse it to turn it into something else.

In this way, no resource is wasted and we are able to offer garments at a convenient price as the material is practically cost-free.

Our zero-waste capsules are the result of a joint effort between imagination and the production needs of local artisans. Generally these materials are thrown away because it is easier than trying to reuse them. However, thanks to the willingness of our artisans, we are able to take on this new challenge.




66 Our concrete commitment

2.3 Fighting overproduction

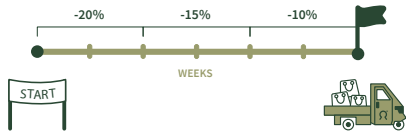
2.3 Fighting overproduction

We have always felt that circular economy and sustainability are ideals that may be attained not only by using recycled materials, but also by reducing consumption and preventing overproduction, that cannot be absorbed by textile recycling techniques. We want to raise awareness toward a reasoned consumption model. That is able to return to valuing what is truly necessary and thus deserves to have an influence on the environment for its production.

Presale model



To avoid overproduction, we test our garments both online and at trade fairs to evaluate if they could be potentially successful before placing a production order to our suppliers. The presale period lasts from 3 to 6 weeks, during which customers can pre-order our products at a discounted price, up to 20%. The closer the order is to the shipping date, the more the discount applied decreases. The pre-sale takes place before effective garment production so that we are able to produce targeted quantities that take into account the actual market demand. This is possible thanks to our proximity to the local artisans involved in the creation of our garments. The lean structure of these family artisanal businesses allows them to be flexible and adopt a collaborative approach.



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Extractions from website no overproduction, no sales.

Funghi Espresso

Funghi Espresso (Scandicci) collects coffee grounds from local bars to grow mushrooms which are rich in statins and protein. When the mushrooms are harvested, the remaining material is composted and used for growing worms that feed fish in an aquaponics system that produces more food. Of course, coffee grounds could be easily returned to nature through composting, but this is not truly circular economics, because of the waste of the nutrients contained in the grounds. Circular economics means giving value to all materials; there is no such thing as waste, there are only resources.

Treedom

Treedom is a Florence-based business that provides tree planting services for companies such as Dell, Intimissimi, Ferragamo, and Pinko. Whilst some environmentalists question the use of carbon offsetting as

an indulgence, the benefit of these systems is circular and has a positive ecological and sociological effect. After all, the indulgence for carnal sins was effectively invented by a Florentine family, i.e., the Medici (Parks 2006); hopefully this indulgence won't cause the same kind of split in the ecological community as it did in the religious community of its time.

Zero Waste Centre, Capannori

In 2013, Rossano Ercolini, a primary school teacher from Capannori, near Lucca, won the Goldman Environmental Prize for protesting successfully against the installation of a refuse incinerator. After receiving the prize in the oval office in the Whitehouse from President Obama, he was instrumental in setting up the Zero Waste center in Capannori. This center has the aim of making the local "commune" (council) zero waste by developing the recycling of all household disposed items, implementing a compulsory door-to-door recycling collection service. Again, this is directly circular, as it turns waste back into resources (and valued resources, for that matter) not just energy that could be recovered from an incinerator. Just like Funghi Espresso, it's not only about recycling, but about using resources to their best effect.

Unicoop Firenze

Unicoop Firenze have several programs that are circular. Both Coop and Conad source more than 30% of their products locally. This is a much higher proportion than we would usually see in supermarkets in other countries. These products have a much better chance of circularity than globally sourced products; this is not just because of the carbon footprint of global logistics, but the ability of the retailer and the producer to vertically integrate and become closer in their relationships. In this way, for example, they can ask their meat suppliers not to use antibiotics or encourage organic farming methods. They also have programs to recover plastic from the sea, use solar energy for their stores, and reduce packaging.

Shake Café

Shake Café used the pandemic break in operations to retrain their kitchen staff in zero waste production, proportioning and sourcing ingredients in the exact quantities that are going to be used. In this way, less food waste is developed. According to Dana Gunders, food waste is the world's dumbest problem, because if wasted food were a country, it would be right behind China and the US in producing greenhouse gases.

Scooter Rentals

According to an article in *Firenze Made in Italy Magazine* (Favi, Jan. 2021) "In Florence, since December, the electric scooter and scooter rental service has been in operation, alongside electric cars and bicycles. On the electric mobility front, the Florentine fleet consists of 900 scooters, 600 mopeds and 220 cars, which can be used in 'free flow' mode, i.e., a method that allows the vehicle not to be returned to the place where it was rented." It's most likely, as walking around the streets of Florence would suggest, that these numbers have now increased. This too is part of our circular economy, as the shared ownership means that products are used more efficiently. Conventionally, our vehicles spend most of their life parked and this creates waste.

Shared or rented usage can influence suppliers as well. Imagine that we no longer purchased lightbulbs but rented them directly from a manufacturer. In this way, the manufacturer would have an advantage in making the lightbulb last longer and would receive value from making the product more durable. By shifting these paradigms from conventional economics to circular economics, we can still drive economic value, creating GDP and wealth for our society, but also move towards a sustainable future. Of course, some people may say that it is not enough.

There are many more organizations in Florence and Tuscany that consider these principles to be important and are taking valuable steps towards circularity. Apologies to those not included in this review; the author would be delighted to hear of your projects.

Quotes

“We are at the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”

Greta Thunberg (2019) speaking to the U.N.

“Even if we act to erase material poverty, there is another greater task; it is to confront the poverty of satisfaction -- purpose and dignity -- that afflicts us all. Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our Gross National Product, now, is over \$800 billion dollars a year, but that Gross National Product -- if we judge the United States of America by that -- that Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage.

It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armoured cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities. It counts Whitman’s rifle and Speck’s knife, and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children.

Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials.

It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.

And it can tell us everything about America except why we are

proud that we are Americans. If this is true here at home, so it is true elsewhere in world.”

Bobby Kennedy at University of Kansas March 18, 1968

“Ecology and economy have the same route, “Eco”, from the Greek, “Oikos” meaning home or dwelling. Economy must defend ecology, but globalist, capitalist economy is destroying our ecology.”

Carlo Petrini, founder of Slow Food 2012.

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alumni.

InVisibilities Project

People of Color in Florence, Italy

Nicolette Alexandra Brito-Cruz

Introduction

ISI Abroad, together with ISI Florence and The Umbra Institute in Perugia, have recently initiated a work-study scholarship for students who wish to study abroad but are not eligible for other funding or wish to integrate this award with other scholarships. The projects range from photography, communications, social media, video-making, journalism, diversity and inclusion, and SEO and web development, or an intersection of any of these.

As one of the work-study advisors, I like to interview the students first in order to create an ad hoc project to fit their interests and skills.

Nicolette Alexandra Brito-Cruz, a student attending ISI Florence from Rutgers University, was a recipient for the Spring 2023 semester. They chose to pursue a project in Photography and Communications. After interviewing them and going over their creative interests and focus, I developed a project that also incorporated aspects of diversity since that seemed to be a recurring theme in their work. The project is called "InVisibilities" and is described below:

Within the study abroad experience, identify the various layers of identities and cultures. We are all study abroad students from American University institutions and most of us are American. Beyond this first and homogeneous cultural bubble, we find a whole intersectionality of identities: POC, first-generation, low-income, LGBTQ+, people with visible and non-visible disabilities, non-American or dual nationality, etc.

Document the various stories with words and images, including eventual struggles or benefits, for one or more of these identities or intersectionality of these identities. How did their identity influence their choice of study abroad? How does their less-visible piece of the puzzle fit the bigger picture? Do these "diversities" actually enhance their study abroad experience?

How do external factors (the surroundings, the country, the access to re-

sources, etc.) affect them as an individual? Is visibility important? Is visibility enhanced in an empowering way or do they feel even more of a stranger?

How will their experience abroad shape their identity once back home? How does study abroad benefit their individual struggle?

Give them a voice!

Choose at least 6 people to photograph and document their own personal journey during their time abroad or as an "inVisible". This can be students, staff, professors, or even local residents/people you meet. If you do choose locals, how does their diversity affect their place in society? What can visibility do to better their lives and what can they offer to future generations?

Nicolette chose to concentrate on just people of color for this project. We are pleased to present their project and conclusions in this issue of Beyond. Their project also provided valuable insight to us as a study abroad institute, which helps us improve and grow in our diversity, equity, inclusion and access efforts.

Nina Peci, DEIA officer and work-study advisor, ISI Florence

Growing up, my mother always sited a quote by Spanish-American philosopher Jorge Ruiz de Santayana. "*Los pueblos que olvidan su historia estan condenados a repetirla*". This translates to "The towns that forget their history are condemned to repeat them." Since coming to Florence to study abroad, I have repeated this quote various times to myself, and I feel as though I can now truly say that I understand what de Santayana meant by this. As someone who holds many identities, I've come to realize the importance of staying true to and honoring them, even if I am the only one doing so. This not only ensures that I bring a diverse perspective to every room that I walk into but also that I acknowledge and respect the cultural differences that I notice while stepping into a completely different environment.

I first took on this project to shed light on the struggles of people with mixed identities in a city like Florence. At first, I wanted that to entail

gender, race, sexuality, and religious differences from the “norm” of a small Tuscan city to that of American standards. I quickly came to realize that there is one minority identity that I hold which is nearly completely invisible in this city, and that is my ethnicity. For context, I am an Afro-Caribbean, Dominican-American individual. Since arriving in Florence, I have not met any other Caribbean or Latinx individuals, and it was not until I actively started making an effort to search for Black individuals that I found two of the six people that I interviewed who actively and proudly use the term to label themselves. Of the six that I interviewed, four were of African descent. Going into this, I had a set of expectations for these individuals, but they gave me new perspectives on how the communities that they were raised in shaped their way of seeing Blackness. The same can be said for the two other individuals, who are Latinx and Asian. Five out of the six people were raised in a middle-class and predominantly white town/city. Seeing that I come from the diverse inner-city of Newark, New Jersey, and was raised by a working-class single immigrant mother, it is needless to say that we had completely different experiences growing up. We thus have different views on the world and current events today.

Florence Franks - Student Services Assistant at ISI Florence

Florence Franks, born in Florence to an Italian mother and a Nigerian father, is the Student Services Assistant at ISI Florence. While interviewing her, I got an interesting insight into how being born and raised in Europe as an Italo-Nigerian has affected her perspective of race and ethnicity. She spent ten years living in Paris before returning to Italy about a year ago. During her time abroad, Florence underwent a self-discovery process and learned to unlearn some things about identity and racism. She refuses to use the term “mixed-race” due to the colonial past, where it was used to oppress and divide people. She defines herself as a black woman, a political act since there is no census in Italy that allows people to identify their ethnicity. Instead, Italy uses data from identification cards such as passports and asylum applications to calculate its population.

According to Florence, her childhood was privileged, and she nev-



Florence Franks

er discussed the different heritages within her family. She lived life as a typical European for 25 years, and most of her friends were white. It was not until she moved to France that she realized her blackness. In France, she heard stories of other black women who experienced racism, and she started to acknowledge that her story had a small piece of the black experience. Her father worked in national education, so he was well-integrated into Italian society, which gave Florence a privileged status. She acknowledges that many black women do not have this privilege and often experience not only racism but also colorism within the community. Race is not spoken about in Italy and is part of the culture. In her opinion, this is a legacy of colonization, and through language, we have the opportunity to change society.

Florence has experienced racism, but it was only after she stepped out and learned about others' experiences that she could recognize it. She has experienced microaggressions, which are subtle and often go unnoticed by those who do not experience them. Anti-blackness is high in Paris and other parts of France, and people would often ask her where she was "really from." However, she was never denied any basic rights, so she never thought about it deeply. When I asked if she had a support system with whom to discuss these topics, she stated that since her family did not speak about race or ethnicity growing up – they still don't – she keeps most of her experiences to herself. She also stated that there are no spaces for people of color to gather and celebrate each other in Florence, and if there are any, they are not mainstream.

Florence recommends that students of color study abroad in Italy, but they need to be active and create their own paths; it won't fall into their laps. When students study abroad, it is so easy to use the city as a base to travel to other countries on the weekends. While these experiences are obviously fulfilling, it is also important to take the time to immerse oneself in the culture of where they are studying.

She believes that institutions can do better to accommodate students of color, but they need to let the staff know how they can help them, whether this be through clubs, events, scholarships, etc.

April Parrish - Penn State

April Parrish, a Penn State sophomore with a double major in Science and Italian, has been dreaming of coming to Italy since seventh grade. She intends to live here someday and be a doctor. She chose Florence because of the courses offered by ISI. Although she has not experienced direct racism in Florence, she has encountered discrimination based on her nationality, with people assuming that she is American.

April rarely deals with microaggressions and usually brushes them off since she cannot change the people who make those comments. She does not want to give them the satisfaction of getting a reaction from her, so she acts oblivious. Although she has not found spaces for people of color to gather and celebrate with each other in Florence, April believes that studying abroad in Florence is an excellent opportunity for students of color. It exposes them to a different culture while also being in a touristy area where many people speak English. To keep in touch with her culture while studying abroad, April recommends that students not compromise their social norms if they make them uncomfortable, such as wearing certain clothes or relaxing their curly hair. April, for example, can always be seen walking the halls of ISI Florence wearing bright red clothing (and it suits her very well)!

April believes that institutions in Florence can help accommodate students of color by providing clubs and activities to help them meet locals who share their ethnicity and by hiring more racially diverse staff members. Although April does not think there are any advantages to being a person of color in a city like Florence, she advises students to be prepared to be stared at frequently since it happens to her every day, but to acknowledge that there is power in standing out from a crowd. Overall, April's experience as a student of color in Florence has been positive, and she recommends that other students take advantage of the opportunity to spend a semester in this beautiful city.

Nicolas Joaquin Gomez - University of Maryland

Nicolas Joaquin Gomez is a Colombian-American student at the University of Maryland majoring in Biology with an Italian minor. He



April Parrish



Nicolas Joaquin Gomez

chose to study in Italy due to his mother's experience living in Milan for many years and his interest in learning Italian. He found the study abroad programs in Maryland to be diverse and preferred Florence over other major cities because it is smaller, and he would be able to truly immerse himself in the culture. Although Nicolas has not experienced any racism himself in Florence, but he said that his roommate was attacked after wearing a Star of David necklace in a nightclub. Another incident he spoke about took place in Madrid, where Nicolas got into an unprovoked verbal altercation with someone on public transportation, and afterward, his necklace was yanked off.

There are no specific spaces for people of color to gather and celebrate their culture in Florence, but Nicolas recommends embracing Italian culture to have a better experience abroad. He suggests that institutions can help students of color study abroad by offering more scholarships, as it is a privilege that not everyone can afford.

He believes that visibility can help others by providing a different perspective on life, and although there may not be advantages to being a person of color in Florence, having a diverse background and knowing another language can be beneficial in Europe. His advice to students of color is not to be afraid of being the only one and to embrace the opportunity to learn outside of their identity.

Haylee Gaines - Marywood University

Haylee Gaines, an interior architecture student from Marywood University in Scranton, Pennsylvania, found herself in Italy through her school's architecture program with ISI Florence. While in Italy, she has faced instances of racism, such as witnessing a person (who seemed to be American as well) yelling at a security guard for being Black. Additionally, she has experienced microaggressions, such as a professor playing with her hair after she removed her braids.

Haylee has a support system of roommates, but they do not always understand her experiences. However, her Asian roommate provides a space for understanding and support. Despite the challenges she has



Haylee Gaines

faced, Haylee recommends that students of color study abroad in Italy, as it provides a unique opportunity to encounter different lifestyles and learn how to balance everything from school to traveling and meeting new people.

To stay connected with their culture while studying abroad in Italy, Haylee suggests that students call home. She also believes that institutions can accommodate students of color by offering support systems. For example, the ISI app has a feature for LGBTQ+ people to find community in Florence; they could do the same for Black people. Haylee's experience abroad has helped her become more in tune with who she is, understand her boundaries, and become self-sufficient. She has learned how to balance relationships between home and Italy, and though it takes time to warm up to people, she is learning to manage everything and appreciate small moments.

Zachery Peronilla - Rutgers University

Zachery Peronilla is a junior at Rutgers with a double major in Psychology and Communications and a minor in creative writing. He chose to study in Italy because it was a bucket list destination, and his cousin studied at ISI and loved it. Zachery has not experienced any explicit racism, but he has received many stares, especially during the beginning of the program (in January), because it's mostly locals in the area. He faces microaggressions regarding his sexuality, which he believes is a universal issue, so he isn't particularly disturbed by it in Florence. He does not have a strong support system in Italy but stays in touch with people back home who can relate to his experiences. He recommends students of color study abroad in Italy and explore different areas, not just Florence. He uses the website Meetup.com to connect with different communities and speak with people regarding current events and his personal experiences.

He thinks institutions can help accommodate students of color by recognizing their presence and promoting inclusivity. He believes visibility is essential to bettering others' lives and offering opportunities to



Zachery Peronilla

future generations. Being a person of color in Florence gives him a sense of uniqueness, which he appreciates. Zachery's experience abroad has made him appreciate his home country and realize that there is beauty everywhere.

Devon Lawson - Penn State

Devon Lawson, a junior at Penn State majoring in Psychology, decided to study at ISI Florence after visiting Italy over the summer and falling in love with the food and culture. She hasn't experienced explicit racism but has dealt with microaggressions, such as being ignored by classmates and receiving a lot of stares. She relies on her roommate for support, as she can connect with her on a certain level. Despite this, she recommends students of color study abroad with friends that they are comfortable with because being in all-white spaces can be difficult.

Devon believes that institutions can help accommodate students of color by bringing them together and making it known that they are there. She also recommends keeping in touch with one's culture by calling home and meeting up with people who look like them. Being a person of color in Florence has advantages, as it offers a unique perspective and prepares one to handle adversity better. Devon's experience abroad has given her cultural awareness and the ability to be around different types of people, even if they have different opinions.

Conclusion:

Some of the main pieces of information that I hope you, as a reader, take away from these profiles are:

- Be sure to keep connections with people at home, especially if you have a difficult time assimilating into the culture/a new environment.
- Explore! Take advantage of being in Europe and visit different cities and countries on the weekend.
- Use every moment as a learning opportunity. By the end of your study abroad journey, you'll realize how much you've changed as an individual and can then apply the lessons you've learned here to your life back home.
- Being a person of color in a predominately white space will make you stand out; use this as an advantage by learn-



Devon Lawson

ing about a different culture and teaching others about the uniqueness of yours.

- Search for your community!

Biography

My name is Nicolette Alexandra Brito-Cruz. I am a first-generation, third-year undergraduate student at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism & Media, specializing in Global Media and Italian Studies with a minor in Women and Gender Studies.

During my three years at Rutgers, I have maintained a 3.8 GPA and excelled in all my courses. This has opened doors for me and allowed me to become a Benjamin A. Gilman, Fund for Education Abroad, and Hispanic Scholarship Fund Scholar. I am also the President of the Women's Center Coalition, Artist Manager for Celebrating Latinx Arts & Works, and Diversity Inclusion Chair/Historical Liaison for the Rainbow Pines on my University's campus.

During this past summer, I was able to study abroad at John Cabot University in Rome, Italy, and I was inspired to create the Juliet Rose Review. In this literary and art review, I feature the art of people of color and other marginalized groups. Seeing that I was one of the only POC in my classes in Rome, I felt as though it is important to give individuals these spaces to express themselves. I have received and published submissions from the following countries: Italy, Egypt, France, and the United States. In this outlet, I also feature my photography.

In January 2023, I went to Kuwait for two weeks to do observational research on the effects of colonization on Kuwaiti society with Dr. Mokhtar through the Global Leaders program, my living-learning community on the Douglass campus at Rutgers. I am currently studying abroad in Florence, Italy, until May. During this time, I hope to gain insights into both cultures and understand how their laws and media function. I will surely use the skills I learn during these experiences to excel in my career as a foreign correspondent.



Nicolette Alexandra Brito-Cruz

Listening for Inspiration

Ashleigh Cohan

During January 2023, I had the incredible pleasure of participating in a travel course to Florence. My project while there was to use the inspiration from the city to create fictional short stories about tourists visiting the city. Despite what I had planned sitting in a café in Orange County, when I actually arrived in Florence I was overcome with the inspiration I had been missing from my daily life at home. What I had intended to write, stories about churches and chefs, all came from preconceived ideas about what I *would* experience in Florence. But the thing about inspiration is that it can't be forced. No amount of well-wishing will bring an idea to life. This, I truly understood upon my arrival.

The first of my stories came from my experience at Palazzo Vecchio. We stood outside the enormous stone building, preparing for the first of our many tours around Florence, chattering as our frozen breath rose into the cold winter air. Before I arrived, I had not prepared to write a story about Eleonora De Toledo, wife of Cosimo I. But our guide mentioned very briefly at the beginning of the tour that Eleonora longed for a garden. I paid no mind to it at first, but then, we were in a secret passageway behind a room all covered in Renaissance maps, where Eleonora would listen into political conversations taking place in the grand hall. As a woman, of course, she was not permitted to take part in government tidings. Once inside that room, we all craned our necks to peer into the great hall. The tour guide mentioned again that Eleonora continued to ask for a garden, and it made me realize that, in some way, she was dissatisfied with her life in Palazzo Vecchio. This struck me because her sentiments must have been so strong that her desire for a garden is still known today, some five centuries later. In my mind, I imagined that part of her craving for a garden was because she did not feel at home in Palazzo Vecchio. Her husband did not take her seriously enough to give her what she wanted

because he did not value her partnership. I tried to emulate her voice as a younger woman before this move, when she wishes to go home.

History remembers Eleonora as passionate and artistic. I wanted her voice to feel lively and, at the same time, forlorn, wishing for something that she didn't know she could have. After our trip to Palazzo Vecchio, we visited Palazzo Pitti and the Boboli Gardens. Already having the idea, I retroactively imagined what Eleonora would have asked for because I could now see what she got. It made me happy to know that, in the end, she got the garden she desired.

As I continued my journey around Florence, I wanted to look for contemporary things that caught my eye. The city is bustling with sights, shops, stands, people—even pigeons. I was overwhelmed with new stimuli, all providing incredible things to write about, pushing me out of what I see daily at home. I began to notice the intricacies of the city during my stay, one of which was the souvenir stores for all the tourists. All the leather bags, which Florence is often known for, were the same. In green circles, blue triangles, orange wallets, whatever it may be—thousands of identical purses scatter the city. Of course, there is a logical explanation: a lack of craftsmanship being traded in for more readily available commodities. Everybody wants a purse from Florence, and a factory somewhere in the world is producing identical purses for all the different stores. But I wanted to create another reason why, and we had just been looking at art for two weeks, so I decided the purse shops were a front for smuggling stolen artwork.

I like to make dark twists on seemingly innocuous things; so this felt like a perfect opportunity to explore the underbelly of Florence. “Tourist Trap” is about a woman who goes into a leather souvenir store and gets caught snooping. She learns that the bags are used to smuggle stolen artwork, and I used first person present tense to try and emulate intensity. What she is experiencing is happening in real time. Though it is short, I reflected on deep curiosity in this story. I thought of the intoxicating feeling of needing to know; so I created a story where the answer is discoverable but just out of reach. The protagonist is forced to decide whether she

wants answers or is content with never knowing.

After writing this story, I had a conversation with my professor, and he pointed out that my initial instinct for the story was to create something related to organized crime. Stereotypes about the mafia are deeply embedded in Hollywood culture, gangster pictures, the Godfather — all of it. As a screenwriter, I spend a lot of my time immersed in the world of make-believe and simultaneously being indoctrinated into those stereotypes. This offered an opportunity for reflection. The world I grew up watching was nothing like the world I was seeing. But my explanation for the endless amount of identical purses fell into the category of a Hollywood generalization. My intention for this story, however, is to show one explanation for why all these stores sell exact duplicate purses.

On my trip through Florence, my expectations were exceeded regarding creative inspiration. Initially, I had preconceived ideas of what I would write about but quickly realized inspiration cannot be forced. As I explored the historic city, I found new ways to push myself out of my comfort zone and allow me to create unique and (hopefully) thought-provoking stories. Through my writing, I examined historical figures such as Eleonora De Toledo and contemporary issues such as organized crime and the tourist industry. This trip to Florence allowed me to reflect on my own preconceptions and stereotypes, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding and connection to the world around me. But more than anything, I learned there is no place like Florence.

Eleonora's Garden

Though my mother sometimes spoke of longing, I could not have known what she meant until I left. Only on the ride away from my home did I understand what the sinking feeling in my chest might come to mean. In Spain, soft heat bathed my gardens in light, and struck by its verdant beauty I would take comfortable strolls through the hanging trees, feel the grass under my toes, the white flower petals graze my fingertips. But here, in a cobbled city built of bricks and blood, chains tighten around me as the days pass. My new home, however, adorned in great frescos as it may be, holds not a place for me. At times, when I feel the sinking creeping in, I walk to my secret passageway. Lost behind maps of foreign lands is a balcony where green moss grows. After a flood of rain comes down upon our palace, often little clovers sprout from cracked tiles. This strange city is not my home, where my children run in the courtyard, where my servants talk to me in a language they think I don't understand. The warped tongue they speak, so strangely similar to my own, keeps me far away from ever truly belonging. No amount of grandiose windows can give me a rustling tree shaking in the night.

I plead of my husband, the man whose face lies molded in my children's, to give me a garden. A man who has everything but always wants more can never seem to hear me even before he leaves my bed. My garden would be great, I promise; long stone steps would split the green grass leading up a hill, and from that hill, tall hedges would form a maze, each guarding a different door to a different little world. Bushes would sway back and forth in gentle winds as statues would greet me in stone silence. Hundreds of trees would live together, weaving a quilt of leaves; tall, dark trees dancing with short light ones, some flowering and others giving soft shade to me as I walk. Hidden from the world, I could sit in a meadow and let the setting sun filter golden light through the branches, the only indication that any time had passed at all. I would be no mother, have no duties because I would be as a doe, lying in dewy grass or a bird feeling the breath of wind under my feathers. But, no such garden exists.

I'm struck with a deep yearning, aching in my bones like a second voice begging to get out. Wanting, wanting, wanting. Wishing once more to smell the smell of home. To roam the corridors of my youth beyond a fleeting memory, I am now a ghost. Here, where I haunt the walls of my prison or where the memories haunt me as I try to snatch them before they dissolve in my hands. And maybe, all of this would change if only I could have a garden. My husband might finally see me as though I were more than just another one of his conquests. With a garden, maybe I could resolve to stay here. But all I see is the door to my sister's quarters, where surely she writes in the window, as I do. Though I am stricken with guilt at the thought, I wish dearly that he had picked her instead of me.

Tourist Trap

The first few days in Florence have been exceptional. Some of the best moments of my life were spent gorging myself on carbs—which don't seem to hurt my stomach here—or touring the many buildings woven with history, hidden at every turn. The vibrancy, the richness of the city brought such peace to me that the thought of leaving made me quite sad. This revelation all comes to me as I'm brushing my teeth. How could I possibly leave this wonderful place? But the truth is, nobody wants to leave vacation. I put the toothbrush down and spit out the toothpaste. The problem now is that I have to buy souvenirs for my friends, the true hallmark of a vacation drawing to a close. Down the stone steps and onto the street, the bustling sidewalk throws me for a loop every day. The folks here are hurried, that's for sure. I often wonder where they are off to, with their scarves wrapped tight and cigarettes in hand (or on their lips). The sun is up, but a cloud cover sways the indecisive shadows back and forth like a pendulum across the beeping taxi cabs. People walk in the road here is something I've noticed, but then again, I've taken to noticing many things that are so foreign to me, though I'm the foreigner. I pass the man who has been serving me coffee: 2 Euros for a "caffé latte." No coffee for me today, or at least right now, because I have to buy some souvenirs! Drew wants a scarf, my dad wants a David statue, and my mom wants a purse. They are known for the leather here, and she wants one. The first storefront I walk by has more than a hundred purses of varying sizes, shapes, and colors. Duffle bags, handbags, tote bags, and more — wallets even. I shuffle into the store and observe, running my eyes over the variety. Nothing particularly to my liking. A man with gray hair wobbles toward me.

"Ciao," I say.

"Anything I can help you with? Looking for a bag? Ours have the best price," he grabs a bag and puts it near my face. Given that he's so close to me, I can't help but notice the strange, electric blue scar under his right eyebrow.

"No grazie," I smile and walk out.

And again, I go to a store three blocks down the road, only to find the same merchandise. Now that I think about it, even the stands packed in the square or outside the Mercato Centrale are lined with all the same bags. Undoubtedly, they come from the same place.

“What would you like?” another man comes up to me, grinning before putting a backpack in my hand.

“Not this,” I laugh and push it back to him.

“Good price, good price,” he promises. He shows me a brown wallet with many flaps as he returns. Fascinating.

“I’m alright,” I say. I look at him. He has a blue scar under his right eyebrow as well. My curiosity is getting the best of me. I want to know what it is...should I ask? But I know the answer. Of course, I can’t... except I might. I put my hand up and walk away—no wallet for me.

After the third store, the darkening sky made me realize it is almost time to head home. I’m getting tired, but I need to get something. The David statue and scarf are in my purse, but now it’s time to get mom a bag. I find a reliable storefront, yet it has all the same purses wrapped around each other, busting from the door frame. All fighting to be purchased. I step through the door frame.

“Ciao,” I say politely. Nobody responds. I finger through the bags, feeling the quality of the make, running my thumb up the seams. There’s one that catches my eye. It’s perfect. A beautiful red bag: sturdy, with two handles and a flap that folds over to a golden clasp. I pick it off the shelf and turn it over in my hands. I stand by the counter, tapping my foot with the bag in my hand.

“Helloooo,” I call. But nobody is around, strangely enough. Where is the owner of this shop? It hardly seems like a sustainable business practice not to greet customers *and* not watch your merchandise. From seemingly out of nowhere, a woman pops up behind me. She has a matching blue scar. How absolutely strange.

“Hello,” I say, “this bag please.” Her eyes bug out of her head.

“Not this one!” she exclaims.

“What? Why?” I ask.

“Other one?” She gestures around the room.

“I want this one, please,” I say. She nods.

“Wait here,” she says and takes my bag.

“Excuse me!” I yell out after her, but she’s disappeared into the door behind the counter with *my* bag. I would leave, but that’s the one I want. Time seems to pass extra slowly when you are waiting for someone. I could have been standing there an hour for all I know. Right before I decided to leave, I heard some yelps coming from behind the door. There seemed to be faint screams inside the room in front of me now.

“I think I’m going to go,” I say. Still no response. Every part of me says to run, begging me to turn around and forget it ever happened, maybe even call the police, but I can’t. The smallest voice in me says, “go look.” I creep around the counter and press open the door. It folds open, revealing a dim staircase.

I suddenly understand what it’s like to be in a horror movie; my desire for knowing overpowers my logical thinking. Though I definitely don’t want to get axe murdered, I can’t leave without knowing where the woman with the blue scar disappeared and who was screaming. Each staircase is covered in dust, revealing fresh shoe prints descending but not coming back up. Soft taps of my footsteps echo through the stone hallway until I reach the bottom floor. It’s amazing how dark it is down here. I can barely see before me, but I can make out rows and rows of bags along the walls, some opened, some closed. A thud echoes down the hall, and then an “oof” followed by something hitting the ground. I have to go back now. I imagine another version of myself clawing me back, dragging me by any part of my body, and pulling me back up those stairs. But each moment brings me a step closer. The hallway opens to a larger room, where sconces on the wall burn feeble light, illuminating tables full of bags. On the tables next to the bags are pieces of art. Small, large, framed or not, hundreds of paintings lay beside bags of corresponding size.

“What the hell....” I whisper. I hear footsteps coming down a hallway directly in front of me, though there are hallways leading out of this room on every side. Immediately I fall to the ground, crouching behind

a workbench.

“So you mean to tell me that some tourist grabbed a bag with an original Medici altarpiece in it?” says a deep voice with a thick Italian accent.

“I have it right here, sir,” whispers (who I can only assume) the woman from the shop meekly, “she did not take it.”

“Do you have any idea how difficult it was to steal this piece from the Galleria dell’Accademia?” said the voice, getting closer. I cover my mouth with my hand to stop my breathing, but little gasps of air keep sneaking through my fingers.

“No sir,” says the woman.

“Only put the bags out when the handlers arrive,” says the deep voice, the feet standing right in front of me now. “You know what to look for, don’t you?”

“The red scar,” she says.

“Bravo,” says the man, slamming his fist on the table, “because you don’t want to know what happens if one of those bags gets sold. The police won’t be able to find all ten fingers.”

“Yes sir,” whispers the woman.

“Every store is getting its new shipment next week,” he begins walking away from where I crouch; “you’ll be notified if your storefront is going to be used to move any new... items.”

He walks away. The woman standing in front of the table begins to snifle. She turns and walks out of the room. I have to get out of here. But somehow, I have to get to the storefront before she does... I scramble to the other side of the room, staying low to the floor, knocking a purse off the table and kicking it down the hallway.

“Hello?” she calls.

Staying low, I run out of the room, trying to be as light on my feet as possible. By the time I see daylight, I can finally breathe again. The only thing between me and safety is the next ten stairs. When I push the door open, a man stands in front of me and the shop’s entryway.

“Now what were you doing down there?” he asks, with a heavy Italian accent.

Living Museums

Reflections on The Museum Experience Abroad

Rosemary Faircloth

My study abroad journey began in the United States during my sophomore year of college, two years before I arrived in Florence. I decided to take my first art history class (the Italian Renaissance) due to my general interest in art and history. Instead of simply enjoying the class and then moving on, I fell in love with the art of the Renaissance. I longed to see Michelangelo's David, Brunelleschi's Dome, and Botticelli's Birth of Venus. Seeing these works through a textbook simply was not enough, I knew I needed to go to Italy and discover this art in its place of origin. Thus, I declared my major in Art History and I began preparing to study abroad in Florence.

Over my time at the University of Virginia, I took many field trips to museums across the United States. As I chose a variety of classes on both art and curating, I became interested in the presentation and accessibility of art. Exploring further down this avenue I discovered a branch of law called Intellectual Property Law. IP Law covers a range of topics, but I was specifically interested in the idea of who owns art. When I traveled to different locations around the States, I began to take note of how art was presented to the public, especially in terms of curating, marketing, and technology. I carried this in mind as I traveled to Europe, wondering how the museums and historical sites may differ in presentation.

Finally arriving in Florence during my senior year, I spent my first weekend touring the city and visiting much of the art I had dreamed about. I almost immediately went to Palazzo Pitti,¹ the famous (and beautiful) palace once owned by the Medici family. As is well known, it now holds a vast collection of Renaissance art, much of which I had learned about in previous art classes.

1. For reasons of space and owing to the nature of this article, I will only refer readers to the official websites of the museums that I am going to mention. In this case, see <https://www.uffizi.it/en/pitti-palace>

My first impression of the museum was that it was quite different from anything I had seen before. Built in the 15th century, it was obviously much older than any building we have in the United States. Before even stepping into the museum, the expansive outside made me pause and realize the grandeur of the experience.

For the same reason, it is also very uncommon in the US to see a large art collection inside a historical building. In general, buildings are created to hold collections of art and history in America; this is not the main pattern in Europe, where many old structures have been converted to museums. These converted museums strike the common American viewer from the outside, as the historical significance is obvious before even setting foot into the museum.

Another “oddity” I observed right away was the lack of detailed information on the artworks. Each room holds a vast collection, all scattered throughout the walls and floor. Many of the frames had the artist and sometimes the title mentioned, but they did not stand out to the viewer. There were several famous pieces within the palace, yet they were not obvious to the typical museum guest. These paintings were mixed in with the other works. In the US, instead, a work of note is praised in its own separate space inside the museum; sometimes an entire room may be dedicated to it.

Despite my initial impression, as I continued to wander through the Galleria Palatina inside the Palazzo Pitti I started noticing some similarities with the Phillips Collection in Washington D.C.² The latter was started by the Phillips family in the 1920s as they collected modern art of their time and displayed it within their home. Like the Medici and many other prominent families in the Italian Renaissance, they collected artworks not only for their own private enjoyment but also to impress their guests through a strategic display of wealth. Also, before going to Florence or DC most tourists know the Uffizi or the National Gallery of Art but have never heard of the Phillips Collection or the Galleria Palatina at Palazzo Pitti. Nevertheless, these two museums manage to attract both art lovers

2. <https://www.phillipscollection.org/>

and a general audience. Furthermore, like the Galleria Palatina, the Phillips Collection (which also holds a large number of artworks in a relatively small place) provides limited descriptions of the items on display.

Venturing outside of Florence, I had the opportunity to travel to Venice during a long weekend. While visiting I stumbled upon a free contemporary art museum: the European Cultural Centre “Palazzo Mora.”³ I was intrigued by the variety of works in the museum, turning each corner not knowing what would be on the other side of the wall. Each room was dedicated to a contemporary artist; many artworks were statements about current affairs in politics and the environment. There was a diverse amount of material, most pieces using mixed media to convey their message. A unique piece was created from black and white trash in an eye catching and systematic display. As I began to walk away, I noticed that the art was actually a working QR code leading to more information about waste and the environment. Much of Europe focuses on environmental issues, sustainability and preservation; during my semester at ISI Florence I noticed this reflected in the art as well. While living abroad I have become much more aware of the environmental impact I have and how to reduce my own waste. Palazzo Mora furthered my understanding of the link between environmental and political issues in Europe.

Also, this Venetian museum seemed to reflect a conversation between artworks on the one hand and their viewers on the other. Many rooms were small, so that only a few visitors could fit in at a time. This made it a more personal experience compared to larger collections like the Museum of Modern Art in New York,⁴ which hosts similar artworks but in massive rooms swarmed with tourists. Some rooms in Palazzo Mora had activities, such as taking a quiz to see what your ideal color palette is or drawing on the walls of a funky white room. Since all of the art in the museum was recent, visitors were also provided with information on how to connect with the artists through social media, often using a QR code. Many of the artists

3. <https://ecc-italy.eu/locations/palazzomora>

4. <https://www.moma.org/>

had also chosen to include a video briefly explaining their works in the room. The integration of technology within the museum felt seamless and enhanced the visitors' personal experience. For all of these reasons, Palazzo Mora turned out to be one of my favorite contemporary art exhibitions.

An exciting part of studying at ISI Florence is being able to travel extensively on the weekends and on fall break. I chose to spend my fall break in Amsterdam, where I visited another fascinating art collection: the Rijksmuseum.⁵ As is well known, this large museum is dedicated to Dutch art throughout the centuries. Among its most famous pieces is *The Night Watch* by Rembrandt. It is also well known that – like Washington D.C. – Amsterdam has a museum district. For instance, close by the Rijksmuseum is the Stedelijk Museum,⁶ a modern and contemporary art museum. Like many other modern museums in Europe and America, the Stedelijk museum has an interesting shape and layout to display artworks. One feature of the museum that I greatly enjoyed is the free audio guide; when you walk into each room there is a new audio that plays. Personally, I believe that this makes art much more accessible to the public, as much of contemporary art can seem highbrow and may require more background knowledge to be understood. The Stedelijk Museum also has an impressive layout: instead of grouping items according to time period or style, the museum is structured around a series of themes. This helps to create a sort of “dialogue” among artists who have addressed the same topic.

My favorite part of the entire museum was a temporary exhibition which spanned the entire basement. Due to the many overlapping rooms and many directions, I became a bit lost, falling into the ways and rooms that called to me. Eventually I stumbled upon a long escalator in a bright white tube. Once I got down to the basement it was a very dark room with lockers. It invited you in with little explanation about the artist and then the museum guests were immersed in a contemporary art exhibit. Anne Imhof was given free reign of the 1100 square meter basement to

5. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en>

6. <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en>

which she collected ideas of unsettling individuality. Throughout there were vibrant videos, disruptive sounds, and intense installations. This was my first opportunity to experience an immersive exhibition, which is not common in museums near me. It is also worth noting that the Stedjlik changes the basement exhibition every other year, often opting for a multidisciplinary immersive experience.

As the weather turned colder, my roommates and I traveled to Munich, Germany and visited yet another internationally renowned art collection: the Deutsches Museum.⁷ The Deutsches is the world's largest science museum, hosting more than 1.5 million visitors a year. Its exhibits range from interactive demonstrations of aerodynamics to the science of sound and instruments. To US students like me, one of its most interesting aspects is observing science from a German perspective rather than an American one. The Deutsches Museum has a more general focus on science, featuring important people from all over the world. This is different from the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum,⁸ where most exhibits are US oriented. For example, there is a large portion of Air and Space that is dedicated to the Space Race between the United States and the USSR, which is reduced to a single panel in Deutsches.

My favorite part of the Deutsches Museum was how interactive every exhibition was. The museum was very family oriented, encouraging friends and family to work together and learn through games and activities posted throughout. One activity in the aerodynamics exhibit had the guests create different airplane conditions to see how the plane reacts in the air. Another in the optics section shed light on the science of colors by splitting the guests' shadows into beams of light. Getting to experience the German perspective on science and learning further broadened my understanding of international museums, thus expanding my understanding of Intellectual Property.

Studying abroad in Florence has not only increased my understand-

7. <https://www.deutsches-museum.de/>

8. <https://airandspace.si.edu/>

ing of art and museums but has helped shape my future career. I have decided to pursue a career in Intellectual Property Law, which focuses on who owns and has access to intellectual property. I plan to concentrate on art specifically, with an interest in public art in museums. Before my journey to Italy, I was limited to the museums in the United States and European museums' websites. Having the opportunity to see many works of art, history and science across Europe has given me a greater understanding of intellectual property in the public sphere and how different countries in the Western world present these ideas. Studying abroad has changed the way I perceive public space and history, which I intend to use in my future career. I am incredibly thankful for my experiences and I am excited to take my new knowledge back to my studies in America.



Above left: The entrance to Palazzo Pitti.

Above right: *La Vittoria*, Vincenzo Consani, 1859.

Sala di Giove, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Firenze.

Facing page: The author outside Rikjsmuseum.



Regional Food Systems

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

Catherine Nardi

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.

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.

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