

**Zach Evanitsky
Food Tour in Italy
May 19-31 2010**

Thursday, May 20, 2010

I arrived in Milan, Italy this morning on my flight from PIT. I traveled alone through the Milan airport and met with my group at ten. I felt a sense of excitement and slightly timid as I was surrounded by a different language and culture. I quickly overcame my nervousness and attempted to buy some food on my own. I was successful at ordering a sandwich at a small place in the airport just outside of baggage claim. It was a fantastic sub filled with fresh tomatoes, herbs and turkey. I felt my comfort zone was expanding as my intimidation faded. After everyone was grouped together, we travelled via bus to the Capital of the Piedmont region of Italy called Torino. Piedmont literally translates to “at the foot of the mountains (Alps).” It was a fantastic view of the mountains from the bus as we traveled. Upon arrival, we moved into our hotel residence and prepared for a guided tour of Torino by members of St. John’s University.

Once the bags were unpacked, we were off. Collecting bus tickets for the group and getting to know the public transportation system was the first obstacle. After the group of us crowded a convenience shop and purchased tickets, the mass of us traveled down the street to the nearest bus stop. We were a group of typical American tourists and I felt comfortable being in a group and being guided by Italians who knew the area well. We crowded the bus and I stood by a few Italian women, holding a pole for balance. I’ll never forget what I heard. Amongst the Italian commotion, I heard one woman sigh and gasp “Mamma Mia”. I couldn’t believe it and the majority of our group joined in laughter. Once at the main bus terminal in Torino, we began our tour.

A traditional style city, Torino is full of fascinating architecture, cathedrals, and other historical landmarks. At the same time, the city is very modern, including many shops, gelato parlors, and restaurants. It was a very interesting tour and some captivating stories were told regarding Italian



history and culture. Some landmarks we saw were the Piazza Castello which was a large open square with two large cathedrals and many statues.

From this point we walked through the city, getting recommendations for restaurants and gelato parlors. Eventually we came to Piazza Vittorio

Veneto. This was essentially the restaurant section of the city. A large open square was filled with modern shops, restaurants, and bars just along the Po River. We walked to the river and traveled via bus to our hotel to freshen up and go to our first Italian dinner at a nearby pizzeria. A translator accompanied our group of 20 Americans who had very little Italian language skills. It was a fantastic evening filled with laughter, great Italian pizza, and house wine. My pizza was called Cappricosia and was covered with tomato sauce, mozzarella, basil, and prosciutto. Everyone was shocked at the sight of the large, uncut thin crusted pizzas. It is expected to cut the pizza with a fork and knife and slowly eat small squares. This was a very different way to eat pizza from what we all used to and it was a very fun and interesting night. We all traded dishes and it was a fantastic first dinner in Italy. Even though it was fun and exciting, it was exhausting. I retired to sleep early this night and prepared for our first food production tour the next day, a Gelateria! I can't wait.

Friday, May 21, 2010

This morning included a quick breakfast at a Café down the street before our scheduled bus ride to St. John's International University Castle Campus. I was starving and couldn't wait to get a large coffee and some pastries to wake up. To my surprise, the coffee I ordered was the size of a thimble. Italians don't drink large coffees like we are used to back home. Even though it was small, it was very good and strong. The pastry was filled with lemon and chocolate and was also very good. It seemed to be an unusual flavor combination, but was very good. After breakfast, the tour bus took us to the University campus.

The campus was small, one building with a small courtyard, but the building was an old castle! It was very interesting. The castle had modernized lecture halls, offices, and even a little café where we were getting lunch later. We all met for a lecture regarding Italian food customs, popular dishes, and European food regulations. The lecture was very interesting and I became excited because we were planned to visit production facilities for much of the food which was talked about. After the presentation, lunch was had at the St. Johns café. Unfortunately this was not my most favorite Italian meal. The menu was semi-translated in English for the ease of ordering. The dish I ordered was called "Scallops with lemon". When I read it, I thought of the seafood. I couldn't have been more wrong. The scallop part of the title was still Italian and was actually filleted pork cutlet. This dish was awful and many of the others were as well. Oh well, everything can't be perfect. A key difference in Italian dining versus American is that Italians do not serve bread with butter or oil. Plain bread it served to cleanse the pallet and was a surprising observation for me. At least the German beer I ordered was good. Despite the bad meal, I was again getting excited because we were now traveling to the Agri-Gelateria.

Once we got off the bus at the place, everyone in the group was surprised at what we saw, even the tour planners! This was no ordinary ice cream parlor. This was a complete agriculture system from cow to cone. The place was very captivating. It was a working farm and gelateria all in one. There were green houses full of fruits, cows, and a large gelateria. This is the first view I had to Agri-tourism which is the touring of agricultural production systems. The place was rural, but was very popular and crowded with people from all over. We toured the cow barns, milking operation, and then the gelato making process. Gelato has less fat than ice cream and usually has more distinct flavors. The first cup of gelato I

had was “Crème” and “Frutta di Bosco”, or sweet crème and forest berries. It was fantastic. The cold and flavorful gelato was a great contrast to the hot weather. After the gelato, we were told we could purchase “latte crudo”, or raw milk, from a dispenser outside. The machine dispensed empty plastic bottles which were filled by milk from another dispenser. It was fun to use and the milk was delicious. I was the only one to buy it, as everyone was afraid of getting sick. The Italian tour guide said they have “good milk here” so I trusted him. I drank a half a liter and felt great. It was a great day packed with knowledge and new experiences.

Italians are known for taking very high quality ingredients for making all types of food products. The cows were fed grass mostly and the government doesn’t allow hormone use in animals for food production. The use of simple, high quality ingredients is the basis of much of Italian foods. The fruit used in the gelato is only used seasonally, keeping a more local and sustainable food system. Italians are known for mostly consuming regional goods as part of tradition and this place held the same philosophy of good practices. After the tour, we returned to our hotel and then organized to go to dinner in the Torino city center. This was my first insight to a popular Italian custom called Apertivo. You can go to a restaurant or bar and there is a flat rate to purchase a drink and then have serve your-self appetizers. We enjoyed some classic Italian sausages, mozzarella, bruschetta, and other good foods. It was a warm and fun night on the town. The next day will be a tour of an Italian Open Air-Market and typical grocery store.

Saturday, May 22, 2010

This morning I had a similar breakfast as before including some coffee and fruit. We left early to go to the city center market and see the largest open food market in Italy. We split up into smaller



groups and dispersed upon arrival at the market. I have never seen so many people in one place screaming before. It was very nerve racking. Italians were pushing all directions and food was everywhere. I worked up the courage to attempt to buy some fruits and after some struggling I was successful at getting 2/10 of a kilogram of cherries and 2/10 of a kilogram of olives. Everything was fantastic. Despite being out of my comfort zone, I was successful at getting what I wanted from the Italian food vendors. There was everything imaginable from fresh fruits and cheese to cured meats and fresh fish and even live snails!

It was an awesome experience. We all gathered together for lunch. It was much better than the day before and most of the group got pasta. I got a ravioli style dish with ricotta cheese and a butter cream sauce. It was delicious. Later in the day we traveled back the hotel and then went to a local supermarket

on our own. I went with my roommate and we bought some Italian style bread sticks, baguettes, prosciutto and lard, cheese, yogurt, wine, and other goods. We had some friends over and stayed in having our own Italian style appetizer dinner. Slicing pork lard thin and laying over toasted bread is my new favorite food. Afterwards, we walked to the river and took pictures with the lit up bridges. It was another great day in Italy and tomorrow we are traveling to the Alps.

Sunday, May 23, 2010

It was an early travel day and there was a long bus ride ahead of us. After leaving the city for the day, I quickly dozed off in sleep and was overwhelmed with what I saw upon waking up. We were at the base of the Alps Mountain range. Snow capped peaks loomed overhead and I sat looking out of the window in awe. We traveled to a honey bee farm and horticultural outreach center at the base of the mountains. Italians invest a lot into agricultural practices and this outreach center was one of many that do important research regarding food production methods and sustainability.



We spent the majority of the day in the Alps region after the tour and had another great lunch. I enjoyed a hot dish of mushroom and truffle risotto. Our waiter at the restaurant spoke no English but was lively and fun. We explored the town and even saw some castles. The scenery of the day trip was amazing and I'll never forget the experience held here.

After returning to the hotel in Torino, we grouped up and traveled to the city center for dinner and dessert. I had another pasta dish, but this time I was surprised with a spaghetti and seafood dish. It was very good and we all shared some plates of tiramisu for dessert. We toured different sites in Torino at night and had some espresso at a small café. It seems like all we do is eat. Tomorrow we will discuss the origin of the "Slow Food Movement" at a larger specialty grocery store called Eataly and tour rice production.

Monday, May 24, 2010

The store was a 15 minute walk from the hotel so it was a very relaxed morning. Breakfast was good and quick and we walked to the store as a large group. Eataly is a store that puts emphasis on locally and regionally produced goods. Italians spend a much higher amount of income on food than Americans and refuse to skimp on quality for a cheaper price. The Slow Food Movement is based on



these ideas and that sustainable, high quality foods are the center of Italian culture. The store housed thousands of different specialty goods, and even had a vast wine and beer cellar.

I ate lunch with a small group at one the many restaurants in the store. When the waitress came out to take our order, everyone at the table just stared at her in confusion when she started speaking Italian very quickly. She became very frustrated and sent out another waitress who could speak English. I ordered a pasta dish with cheese which was not what I expected.



The pasta was good, but the sauce was very pungent. It was good, but it was an Italian dish I was not familiar with. It is always fun ordering things which you don't know what they are. After touring the store, our tour bus driver picked us up to travel to a rice production plant and rice fields.

Once at the production facility, the production manager discussed the process of rice cleaning, polishing, and packaging. Rice is harvested from fields in patties which are then dried. The dried grains are passed through a series of machines which remove the outer hull of the seed and the final product is clean, white rice.

Rice production is only common to the northern region in Italy in the plains south of the Alps. In the spring months, the snow in the mountains melts and is used to flood the rice fields for irrigation. This technique is used to prevent the freezing of rice during the cold nights. The warm water prevents the earth from freezing and allows the rice to remain unharmed. The production plant and agricultural practices for the rice was very interesting. Rice is a bi-annual crop and takes two years to produce. The farmers in this region have been farming these plots for generations and now have modern technology to help increase efficiency and production. After a long tour of the rice production facility, we returned to Torino for a group aperitivo dinner and had more Italian delicacies. Tomorrow will be the tour of the National Association on Beef Piedmontese Breeder research center and Bava Winery.



Tuesday, May 25, 2010

In the morning, we traveled to the Provincia di Cuneo to learn about Italy's special Piedmontese Beef cattle. We visited a breeding research center and learned about the most important beef cattle breed in Italy. The presentation covered the special properties of the double muscle Piedmontese breed and its importance to Italy. The presenters were very informative and use artificial insemination techniques in order to select for the best genes for which to breed the best animal for beef production. We toured the



research center and learned about the importance of genetic mapping and selection. It was a very informative tour and was the most interesting tour yet. I was fascinated by the animals and learned a great deal at this facility. After seeing the research center for breeding techniques, we traveled to an operating beef ranch of Piedmontese cattle. The large ranch had about 200 animals in various stages of development. The animals are raised mainly on grass and hay until the fattening stage in which grains are used to add extra calories to the animals' diet. Overall, the Piedmontese cattle were an amazing part of the tour thus far. After the cattle ranch, we traveled to another region to visit Bava winery.

It was an amazing transformation in scenery as we drove from the ranch to the famous wine regions in Italy. It was some of the most beautiful scenery I have ever seen. Once we arrived at the winery, we were welcomed with a taste of a spiced wine and chocolates. We then traveled to the vineyard with the estate manager who explained the importance of grape quality. Grapes are very susceptible to disease and pest damage, and Italian wine producers use very scientific methods to limit

the amount of damage caused by these problems and also limit the amount of pesticides used on the vines. Making wine starts with the grapes and it is impossible to make good wine from bad grapes, thus it is very important to check grape development often for optimal ripeness and acidity to make great wines.



After the vineyard tour, we traveled back to the wine production facility and learned the basics of wine making. It is a simple process, but small changes can yield a very different product and is a very laborious process. Monitoring wine production is the key and is essential for making great wines. After the process description, we tasted Chardonnay, Barbera, and sparkling Lambrusco wines. After the trip back, I ate dinner with a small group after a group aperitivo at a local wine bar. I ordered pan fried

veal cutlet with hazelnuts and it was really quite good. Then we all went out for gelato for dessert after. It was the best day of the trip so far and I think it will only continue to get better. Tomorrow we are going to our first cheese plant. We are going to a large scale gorgonzola cheese plant and then visit a specialty cheese aging facility. I can't wait.

Wednesday, May 26, 2010

Today we traveled to a regional specialty gorgonzola cheese production facility. The processing plant was in operation and I witnessed the entire production of the cheese starting with milk and ending with packaging. A specific enzyme called rennet is added to milk to induce the production of curds. Bacteria and mold cultures are added as well to inoculate the milk. The curds clump together and are pressed into wheel forms and the whey is removed. After the pressing of the curds, salt is added and the cheese is aged up to a week. Holes are created by the use of large needles to puncture the wheels. This allows air to pass through so that the molds grow in the cheese.



After the proper amount of aging, the cheese is cut and packaged. After this tour, we traveled to a near-by lake for lunch that was near the next cheese plant tour.

At the lake, we stayed as a group and went to a small restaurant outside. Despite the amazing atmosphere, the food was not that great. In fact it was the worst dining experience I have had in Italy so far. The waiter would not give us menus and we had only pizza or pasta to choose from. I got the pizza and it was

some of the worst pizza I had ever eaten. The food took forever to arrive and they were very inconsistent with food deliver times. We got ripped off big time. Oh well, it happens to everyone in a foreign place ha. Even though everyone was upset about the meal, I was very excited to go to the Luigi-Guffanti artisan aged cheese plant.

The plant was more of a basement cellar than a production facility. We dropped down into the aging cellar where hundreds of different cheese varieties aged on shelves in humidity and temperature controlled rooms. It was amazing how much variety there was. Upstairs was just the opposite, a completely modern facility used for cheese storage and as a distribution center. After touring and learning the basics of cheese aging, we tasted some different cheeses and champagne. We tasted a soft ripened three milk (cow, sheep, and goat) cheese called Robiola, a semi-firm cheese with saffron and pepper, and a four and nine year aged Parmigiano-Reggiano. It was a fantastic offering of specialty



cheeses and I feel that I would love to return to school to learn the art of cheese aging. After the tour, we returned for our last night in Torino and had a farewell dinner with our tour guides here.

We went to a popular local restaurant in Torino and my professor recommended we order risotto or a crepe at the restaurant, but a few of us wanted to try pasta and have crepes for dessert. Three of us at the end of the table ordered what we thought was pasta until it arrived. We were rewarded with three plates of delicious filet and fantastic sauces. I was glad I didn't order the risotto. Italians normally have a very different mindset of foods than Americans when going out to dinner. Pastas are rarely served with meats and meat dishes are rarely served with sides. Our three fillet dishes were essentially a big pile of meat dressed in sauce. I'm not complaining at all, but it is very surprising. We all had crepes for dessert and shared them all and ended the dinner with Lemoncello shots for everyone. It was the best dining experience so far. Tomorrow, we travel to Parma.

Thursday, May 27, 2010

It was a long morning on the bus, but we eventually arrived to Parmalat, the largest aseptic packing plant in the world. Europeans largely rely on shelf stable milk and most of that is produced in this facility here in Parma. The facility produces over one million liters of processed milk daily along with juices and yogurt. It was an amazing plant and the size was out of this world. I will never forget how large and intimidating the plant was. In the loading area, robotic fork-lifts move products around. This was the most advanced production plant I had ever seen. I worked at a dairy plant in high school and was absolutely shocked when I saw the differences at this plant. It was truly an amazing site.



After having a group lunch at a pizzeria, we traveled to our hotel in Parma. The residence was outside of the city, so we decided to dine locally for dinner after touring the town area. We found a large castle and spent the time talking and laying in the sun. We ate dinner as a group at small local restaurant. We had a family style dinner and had two pasta courses and a meat course followed by dessert and espresso. The first pasta was fantastic, a creamy herb ricotta filled fresh pasta ravioli was a perfect start. The second dish had long thick noodles and was a dark mushroom base. A generous amount of Parmigiano-Reggiano added fantastic flavor to the dish. The meat dish was a fatty pork chop stuffed with a bread pudding served with roasted potatoes. The meat was delicious and melted in my mouth. The dessert was a lemon and chocolate bread pudding that was not a good end to the meal. Overall it was a very fine night to enjoy dinner out at a local restaurant. Tomorrow is going to be a hell of a day. We are going to a Parmigiano-Reggiano production plant, visit a prosciutto production site, and even tour and taste traditional balsamic vinegar of Modena!

Friday, May 28, 2010

The day started off with an amazing complimentary breakfast at the hotel. It was fantastic and very filling. After the meal, we traveled to tour a Parmigiano-Reggiano farm and production facility. The plant was fascinating. We witnessed the production of the cheese from start to finish. Milk is cooked in large copper kettles and rennet and inoculated whey is added to each batch. Once the milk curdles just right, the solution is cooled and the curds sink and clump together. The forming of the curds into wheels relies on manual labor much like the gorgonzola cheese plant. The wheels are aged and pressed and then soaked in a salt brine solution for up to four weeks. After, the wheels are dry aged on shelves. Thousands of wheels of cheese loomed over as we entered the aging room. It was a truly amazing sight. After the tour, we tasted various aged cheeses and compared them. It was a great start of the day. After the tasting, we hit the road and traveled to Salumificio La Perla.

At this plant, we witnessed the slow aging process of making Prosciutto di Parma, a traditional delicacy. Prosciutto is specialty product this is made by aging the hind legs of specially fed pigs in the region. It is cured and salted and air dried and takes about two years to make. The final product is a delicious sweet, salty, raw cured meat. After the tour we had a fantastic tasting buffet that I will never forget. It was truly a very interesting experience. After this tour, we then traveled to Modena to learn about the production of balsamic vinegar.

Aceto Balsamico, or balsamic vinegar, is produced by using the pressed juice and must of acidic grape varieties such as Nebbiolo, which are common in Modena. The juice and must undergo two fermentations: from sugar to alcohol and from alcohol to acetic acid. To do this, the must and juice is cooked



down and is reduced by about one third. The remaining liquid is added to a barrel containing yeast and “mother,” bacteria responsible for the second fermentation. For traditional balsamic vinegar, a special system is used to age the vinegar for 12 years in a variety of different barrels. For balsamic vinegar of Modena, large barrels and steel tanks are used to create fast fermentation and more common type of product. After the tour, a tasting was given of all of the types of balsamic vinegar that the company makes.

After Modena, we traveled to Bologna for the night. We split up into small groups after unpacking and



headed out for dinner. We went to a very small place in which we saw a crowd of older locals. We decided that it must have been good. The waiter spoke English and the food was amazing. I had tortellini stuffed with cheese, potatoes, and prosciutto covered with a sage butter sauce. A friend ordered a balsamic vinegar fillet which was fantastic. After dinner I turned in early that night after a long day.

Saturday, May 29, 2010

We left early the next morning after breakfast and attended an informal pasta making class at Vecchia Scuola Bolognese. We learned how to make various filled pasta shapes and noodles. After making the pasta, we were lucky enough to have it cooked and other goods prepared for us which made for a great lunch. After lunch, we returned to Bologna for a day to tour the city. We walked all over, touring cathedrals and markets, just letting the flow of the crowd take us to interesting sites. We traveled to Milan late that afternoon and had dinner of more cheese and pasta and I had another early night.



Sunday, May 30, 2010

Today was our last day as a group in Italy and we spent it touring the city of Milan. A small group of us traveled via subway to a castle and eventually a very large cathedral called the Duomo. It was a massive cathedral. Unfortunately some of us were not dressed appropriately and could not go in. So while the others went inside, a few of us ate McDonalds for lunch. It started off as a joke, but I really wanted French fries. Ha it tasted just like home. Eventually we walked around and shopped and had one last group aperitivo and dinner together.



Monday, May 31, 2010

We left at 3:30 in the morning and I got checked in for my plane at 7:15. Eventually I made it to the US and was delayed in JFK for 7 hrs. I finally got home at 2:30 in the morning. It was a long trip and very interesting but I was glad to be back in the US.