

Wednesday - May 19, 2010

After several long months of waiting, the time had finally come to journey across the Atlantic to Italy, and it was hard to believe. An excitement filled three hour car ride could not have gone any slower as we traveled to Dulles Airport in Washington, DC. The routine thought the airport went smoother than expected as we made our way through security and towards our designated gate. Finally, it was time to board the aircraft to Frankfurt, Germany where we would then travel over the Alps, which was the most amazing site I have ever seen, to Milan, Italy.

Thursday - May 20, 2010

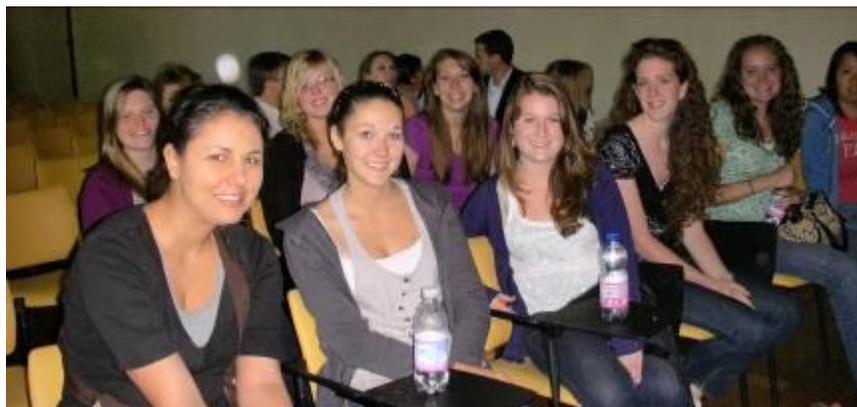
Approximately ten hours later, we had reached Milan. However, our travels were not quite over yet. From there, we journeyed two hours south west to the city of Torino. Upon our arrival, we checked into the Exporesidence where we would be staying for the next week which would give us plenty of time to familiarize ourselves with the city. Afterwards, we received some free time to unpack and freshen up for the welcome dinner that Saint John's International University had arranged for us. The dinner was planned at a real Italian pizzeria where I had received the largest personal pizza I had ever seen! Not to mention it is not custom in Italy to share meals, so I knew the chances of gaining weight were one hundred percent on this trip. After dinner, exhaustion had gotten the best of us, and we all crashed in hopes of a good night sleep.

Friday - May 21, 2010

The morning had come sooner than expected. In the lobby waiting for us was a Saint John's representative who led us on an hour and fifteen minute bus ride to the University in Vinovo where we learned about the Italian food culture, how it arose, and how it is a combination of the all of the foods from the surrounding countries. It was pretty amazing to learn how things such as pizza evolved over the years due to the resources and vegetation that Italy has gained throughout the years. We also learned how the different geographical landscapes that Italy offers such as the Alps, the Mediterranean, and the combination of the both had an effect on the types of food and the different customs.

After Saint John's University, we made our way into the country to visit Agrigelateria, a farm in which the owner raises cows to produce milk for gelato, and Italian frozen dessert. The farmer did not just raise cows, but he also raised lambs and goats, as well as fruits such as strawberries. Following our short tour of the farm, the owner gave us a presentation on how to make gelato, after which we received a taste test of two flavors of our choice. It was definitely some of the most delicious frozen dessert I have tasted... even better than ice cream.

Afterwards, it was again time to make our way back to the hotel where we would then make our way into the city center of Torino for dinner on our own. Dinner was quite the experience as we had no idea where to go, and when we finally found a place we could not understand the menu since all of us spoke little to no Italian. The looks on our faces as we saw what we had really ordered were priceless, and I have never laughed so much in my life! It was certainly a learning experience. Our adventure continued after as we found the pricey night life and made our way twenty plus blocks back to our hotel by foot.

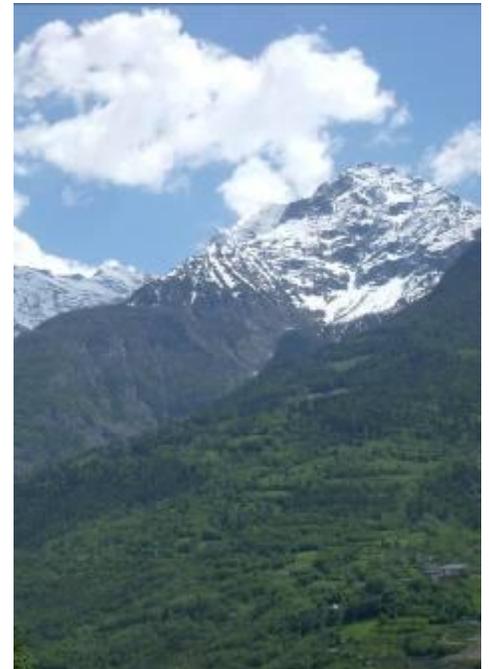


Saturday - May 22, 2010

Today was a short day as there were few things planned for us to do which gave us plenty of free time to explore on our own. First, we visited one of the largest open air markets in Italy. The site was pretty amazing. It was filled with fresh produce, meats, and fish as well as flowers, clothing, shoes, and miscellaneous objects. It was almost like the equivalence to a large flea market in America. As if bargaining prices was not hard enough in English, try doing it in Italian! Next we visited an Italian supermarket which was surprisingly different than those in America, and it was not just because they sold alcohol. They did not sell things in bulk due to the fact that Italians shop on a day to day basis unlike Americans. The store hours were also different, opening at 9am and closing at 9pm Monday through Saturday and closing early at 6pm on Sundays whereas here, most are open 24 hours. The night progressed as usual as we searched for a spot to eat and could not find our way home. However, we visited a local Irish Pub, Murphy's, where they welcomed us with open arms and we got to meet some "foreigners" like us.

Sunday - May 23, 2010

The day had come that everyone had anticipated; it was the day we were going to visit Aosta, a small town nestled between the Alps. The site was absolutely breathtaking. While in Aosta, we visited a demonstration center outside of the city that was focused on aromatic herbs, bee keeping, and vegetables. Here we learned some interesting facts about some practical uses for certain herbs such as some symptoms they are capable of curing. After the presentation was over we had some time to explore the city on our own and to discover more amazing sites. When the time came, we journeyed two hours back to our residence for dinner and a night on the town.



Monday - May 24, 2010

There were several things planned for the day, starting off with a tour and time on our own in an enormous grocery market, Eataly. Eataly, different from many grocery markets in the US, focused on fresh products produced from smaller scale local farms. The products were separated into separate sections such as the vegetables and pasta sections, each containing their own dining area with prepared dishes from that specific section. The cellar of Eataly was

designated to wines, brews, and liquor. It contained a small bar area where customers can taste their selection before actually purchasing it. After exploring Eataly on our own, a small group of people and I had decided to eat lunch in the vegetable section where we received one of the most delicious salads we have had. It as amazing!

After Eataly, we traveled some way to a rice production factory that had seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. And the site was, well... rice patties. They were everywhere! When we arrived at the factory we were greeted by one of the most unforgettable ladies you could ever imagine. She was so proud of her country and everything she did. She truly loved her job and would not trade it for anything in the world despite all of the hard work it consisted of. The factory was simple as it peeled the rice, cleaned it, and it was packaged by hand. After seeing the modern factory, we were transported to their home in which an old production plant was located and run by a water mill. It was astounding seeing how much things have changed and how efficient they have become over the years.

After a long day, we journeyed back to Torino where we attended a traditional aperitivo at a wine bar. An aperitivo is much like cocktails in America. It is just a buffet of smaller dishes also known as appetizers.

Tuesday - May 25, 2010

Today was a busy day as we started out with a not so brief lecture about the Piemontese cattle breed. During the lecture, we learned about a genetic “mutation” that is actually an advantage to the cattle. It as called double muscle and it is literally what the name implies. We then visited the Semen Production Station and the Genetic Station. Here we saw cattle at each stage of their life, from young to old where unfortunately they would then transported to the slaughter house. We then made our way back into the lecture room where they had lunch prepared for us.

Following the tour of the Piemontese Cattle Breeding Center, we made our way up the mountains and through the valleys two hours to a family owned vineyard and winery. Here the family worked hard to raise their own grapes to produce wine in a modern facility. After a tour of the vineyard followed by the production plant, we had a wine tasting, and I must say it was some of the best wine I have ever had. We tasted three varieties that they have produced, a red wine, a blush wine, and a white wine, all of which were delicious.



Wednesday - May 26, 2010

Today was our last day in Torino, and the entire day was designated to what better, cheese! We started our day touring the Gorgonzola cheese factory were we got to see every step of the cheese making process from beginning to end. Not going to lie, the smell of ammonia was pretty intense as we made our way throughout the factory. We first saw where the whey was removed and the penicillin was added. From there, the cheese was scoped into wheel rounds

where they were placed in a room to be turned several times and marked with the place of production as well as several other things. They then moved into a refrigerated area where they were pierced to allow the air to get into the cheese forming the blue color. Afterwards, the cheese was salted then allowed to sit and age for several months. When the time has come, the cheese is packaged into its given size and shape, mostly done by hand, then it is shipped to its designated area.

From here, we traveled to a smaller facility in which numerous types of cheese were set to age for a given period of time under specific conditions. Typically, cheese should be aged in a cool, dark place. We ventured into the cold cellar where we saw hundred of cheeses, many of different types, just sitting on shelves. When the time is right, the cheese is shipped off to be consumed in one way or another. After our tour, we were able to taste a variety of the cheeses, as well as comparing the taste of a young Parmigiano Reggiano to an older one. The taste was remarkably different as the older cheese won everyone's preference.

Just as they had arranged a welcome dinner, Saint John's had also arranged a farewell dinner at a restaurant famous for crepes: dinner crepes filled with meats and dessert crepes. The dessert crepes were huge and to die for. They were so delicious. I would not mind having another one of those.



Thursday - May 27, 2010

We started off the day checking out of our residence in Torino and heading to Parma making a few stops on the way. Our first stop was to a small demonstration plant where we were supposed to have a presentation by the EFSA, the European Food Security Authority. However, they never showed up, so we had a small presentation on food regulations.

Our next stop was to Parmalat where they make numerous products: juice, condensed milk, yogurt, etc. As we toured the factory we saw some remarkable things. For example, when we reached the packaging portion, there were forklifts that did not have anyone controlling them. They were like robots, and they didn't crash into each other or anything! In fact they slowed down when there was another forklift approaching. Directly after the tour, we were given a small presentation about Parmalat itself, then we headed to our new hotel located in a quiet suburban area. Nearby, we visited a castle with a huge lawn following which we had dinner at a restaurant different than anything I had ever been to. It was family owned in which the family did everything: they cooked the food, they served it to us, and they even cleaned up. It was as if we were part of their family, and I must say the food was extraordinary!

Friday - May 28, 2010

The next morning we checked out of our hotel in Parma and headed to Bologna, a place famous for their amazing food. On the way we stopped at a Parmigiano Reggiano production plant in which they made and aged Parmigiano Reggiano. We again toured the factory and saw every stage of production. It was intriguing to compare factories in Italy to those in America. The cleanliness and safety factor is very different. For example, they did not make us wear hair nets here, and they also had a little child running around boiling pots! In Italy, health standards did not seem to be as important as keeping to their tradition. Any way, when we reached the aging part of the factory, it was an incredible sight. There was cheese stacked to the ceiling in several rooms, each of which had to be turned and flipped once a week!

Our next stop was to a Prosciutto production that was family owned, and I have to admit that it was not my favorite stop. As we walked in, they opened several temperature regulated rooms that were just filled head to toe with pig thighs. The smell was pretty intense. Afterwards, we went into the restaurant where we got to sample some of the prosciutto along with some wine and cheese.

Our final stop of the day was to a balsamic vinegar plant, and it was very interesting how balsamic vinegar is made. Over a duration of twelve years, the vinegar is put into a series of different wooden barrels in which they are able to pick up the different wooden tastes. At the end of the tour, we all got to perform a sensory test on the different qualities of balsamic vinegar as they ranged from one leaf to four leaf, four being the best. The difference between them was remarkable! The four leaf was so good and you could actually taste the different woods. At the conclusion of the sensory test, they gave us each a bottle of four leaf vinegar that costs about 20 dollars a bottle in the US.

Saturday - May 29, 2010

In the morning, we checked out of our hotel in Bologna and journey toward Milan, the fashion capital of world. We again had a pit stop on the way. We stopped to see some crazy man full of energy making faces at us in a store window. This crazy man was going to teach us how to make homemade pasta along with his family who was just as rambunctious as he was! It was so much fun! We made little tortellini's as well as raviolis, tagliatelle and other shapes of pasta. After we were done making the pasta, the family prepared it in several different forms. They made us a delicious tortellini soup, ravioli with butter, and tagliatelle with meat sauce, all of which were absolutely delicious!

After making pasta, we traveled to our new hotel where we were able to digest and see the city of Milan on our own.



Sunday - May 30, 2010

Today was completely a free day in which we could spend how we pleased. Unfortunately, it was our last day in Italy. I personally slept in a bit, then a friend and I walked to the city center of Milan where we got some lunch with a gorgeous view of a cathedral. After

that, we walked around, visited another castle, stopped at some gifts shops, and walked through a huge mall filled with brand names and ridiculous prices. I did not see anything under 100 Euros! Everything in Milan was very expensive. Later in the evening we met with the group for another aperitivo, followed by dinner on our own.

Monday - May 31, 2010

Home sweet home was just, well, a long time away. We woke up with our bags packed ready for a long journey home. Our journey started by hauling our luggage about mile station through the city, a farmers market, and a park to a train station where our driver awaited our arrival to take us to the airport. As we arrived at the airport we checked in our bags and waited to our flight to depart back to Frankfurt, Germany where we then travel back to Washington, DC. It was a bitter sweet moment getting home. It was good to be back, yet I do not think any of us wanted to leave the beautiful country of Italy.