

My Italian Food Experience

By: Mason Gordon

Studying abroad has always been a collegiate experience that I dreamed of having. As a transfer student, my window of opportunity to travel abroad was limited. When I arrived at Purdue last fall, I immediately began looking into study abroad experiences. My love for Italian food and appreciation for a good wine immediately led me to the study abroad program to Italy. After speaking with Dr. Gunderson, the professor for the trip, about the content of the trip, I knew that it would be an incredible opportunity to learn more about Italian agriculture.

For ten days, I, along with nine other Purdue College of Agriculture students, toured the Tuscany, Emilia Romagna, and Liguria regions of Italy. We visited wine, balsamic vinegar, Parmigiana Reggiano, extra virgin olive oil, and dairy producers throughout the three regions. It was an incredible opportunity to see the vast differences between American and Italian agriculture.



Each farm that the group visited was very proud to be growing crops/products organically. Each, in one way or another, stated that organic production was the best form of production for the earth and for consumers. That mindset did not surprise me. Many producers in the United States also share that belief. But, as the group toured a grocery store and a produce market, I was surprised by the lack of organic labels on goods. In the United States, food packages are filled with labels claiming “natural”, “organic”, “GMO free”, but those claims were almost non-existent in Italy. Italian farmers were not growing



cropping organically because that is the way that they believed it should be done.

While in Italy, we learned about the various certifications that wine producers can attain. The certifications are IGT, DOC, and DOCG. IGT is the lowest level of certification and DOCG is the highest level of certification. Each level requires more strict locations within a

particular region and more restrictions on production practices. DOCG wine producers take great pride on their level of certification. As many producers told us, DOCG does not mean that the wine is the highest quality; instead, it means that the wine was raised in a very strict manner and has the potential to be the most realistic regional wine. Back home in the United States, I can still see these certification labels and make buying choices based on the label.

My biggest professional takeaway from the program was the importance of community and regions to the Italian people. Everywhere we went, folks were incredibly proud to be from their respective region. As a result, small communities were thriving much more than small communities in the United States. Italian small towns were still holding strong to their individual identities while it seems like small towns in the United States have lost their identities. The communities that I witnessed in Italy have me excited to learn more about how other countries are tackling rural decline. I'm interested in continuing to study rural communities in Italy and attempt to apply their ways of life to rural communities at home.

I would highly recommend this study abroad program for future students. The sights were incredibly beautiful. The farmers that we visited were incredibly intelligent and excited to share their beliefs and practices with our group. The authentic Italian experiences were amazing and memories from those experiences will last a lifetime. I cannot speak more highly of Dr. Gunderson, the regions of Italy that we visited, or my peers that accompanied me on the trip. I could not have asked for a better study abroad experience.



