

Food Studies Reimagined: Putting Experience on the Page

IN GENERAL I DISLIKE DISCUSSING the future of anything as it detracts from the moment we are living in (at least that's how I see it). But as someone who adores organization and who works within the realm of education, I know all too well the need to look forward, plan in advance, and hypothesize about *what's next?* In fact, the title of my master's thesis for the University of Gastronomic Science's Master in Food Culture and Communication program was "Using Mindfulness to Explore the Future of Food," and it was inspired by three months of interning at a future-focused food institute in Bologna. Needless to say, I got my fill of future food projecting during those months and have since stepped into a position that explores food from a tangible point of view: from the ground up.

I am currently involved in the planning and execution of a ten-week program that offers experiential, place-based food education. The program puts participants in a completely new food landscape during the winter months in rural Sicily and forces students to take a hard look at what is going on around them locally and what this means globally. This, in my opinion, is the direction we need to point if we want a future of food studies that is relevant in today's fast-changing society.

As of 2018, 33 participants have engaged in the program during three sessions first starting in 2016, and thus far they have come from seven different countries: the United States, Canada, Australia, Brazil, the UK, Italy, and the Netherlands. The course is intended for all age groups; and the participants—three-quarters of whom have been female—have ranged in age from 22 to mid-60s. They come from backgrounds as varied as fashion, finance, farming, front and back of the house restaurant work, wine, catering, community organizing, teaching, nonprofit management, politics, and real estate.

Our students come to us because they are searching for something more. They are connected to food but want to understand it better. They come to us because we are in

Italy, a country heralded for its cuisine. They come to us because the idea of spending three months in a school surrounded by 1,200 acres of vineyards and receiving lessons in an eighteenth-century farmhouse sounds impossibly romantic. They come to us to figure out, *what's next?* And what do we give them?

Everything. And nothing. No answers. No rights, no wrongs. Just opportunities. To see how life is in a town that probably got electricity just 80 years ago. To understand that the farmer next door, making the best ricotta (subjectively of course), is struggling to make ends meet, refuses to get Protected Designation of Origin (a place-based, value adding label) certification because it means an investment in building new structures, and has no one to pass his tradition to (his son loves the animals, not the cheesemaking). To find themselves in a place where everyday staples—tomato sauces, olive oil, and honey—are almost impossible to find for sale because everyone in the community grows their own or knows which neighbor to call to find them. To destroy the romantic vision of a great food culture when they see children eating pizza topped with hot dog and French fries, townspeople that drink only plastic bottled water, and a local population that is seemingly overweight. We give them daily life, which has at its heart, food.

You may think I am biased, and I am. It would otherwise be impossible for me to do my job and encourage these strangers from all parts of the world to give up their daily lives (and often their jobs) to spend three months in rural Sicily if I did not believe in the work I do. It is impossible for me to see just one future of anything and the same goes for food studies. Food is dynamic and the study of it should be as well. For that reason, from experience, I propose potential ingredients that should make up the future of food studies. These ingredients, combined with the inherent curiosity of each student, comprise the recipe for successful food studies.



FIGURE 1: *Learning from the land.*

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EAT

How can you study food if you don't ingest (and digest) it? If we want to understand food, we have to let our taste buds be our compass. That does not mean we have to agree on what is best, or what is good, but we have to try. From industrial mortadella to hand-harvested sea urchin, hydroponic lettuce to heirloom tomatoes, wonder bread to rye bread, it is important that students use their senses to understand food. It means engaging with food on a basic level by first asking ourselves, "What is food?" What better way to make the distinction between edible and nourishing than to eat?

COMMUNICATE

Once we have discovered food at a sensorial level, we need to explore the dictionary of terms that are attached to food: good food, bad food, natural food, healthy food, traditional

food, and so on. This means understanding how to evaluate food and how food is communicated. In order to question the standard lexicon around food, we have to become familiar with it. And so students should be introduced to standard sensory analysis alongside methods to articulate taste beyond triangle tests, flavor profiles, and a mechanical nose that picks out molecular components assigned to common smells and taste. It means creating a thesaurus of taste terms and a shared language around food so two people sitting down to a meal can understand objective and subjective evaluations and why they might eat the same meal and not have the same reaction.

GROW

If we don't start from the soil, we're not talking about food. In this day and age when meat is being grown in petri dishes and pig crackling can be engineered from plants, we forget that most of



FIGURE 2: Beautiful and edible flowers for the plate.

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FIGURE 3: Local knowledge, local varieties, many greens.

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the world survives thanks to small farms. There is no understanding of food, or the future of food, if we can't understand how it grows, why it grows, and what turns dirt into a dish. This means an investigation into seeds, an exploration of techniques used to manipulate foods, and the variety of growing practices and environments that produce very different foods from the same seed. As the wise and often quoted Wendell Berry, in his 2010 book *Bringing It to the Table: On Farming and Food*, said, "To be interested in food but not in food production is clearly absurd."

COOK

Food may start at the ground but it ends on our plate and most likely this is the form with which the average person is most

familiar. Unless one adheres to a strictly raw diet, I am willing to bet that food arrives altered from its original state, most likely cooked. Cooking is not just about fire or heat, it is about understanding the chemical reactions and transformations that turn whole ingredients into delicious dishes. Cooking is science, movement, and magic rolled into one. It is a process that gives value to the food we eat, that takes time, and that adds flavor. It is the bridge from the agricultural world to the "foodie" experience, and it is crucial for a foundation in food studies.

EXPERIENCE

Food doesn't happen on the page, it happens in real life. Food studies must get students out of the classroom. And this



FIGURE 4: Winter citrus season in Sicily.

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FIGURE 5: Real hard work is handwork. The making of provola in Sicily.

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FIGURE 6: *What he eats, we eat.*

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FIGURE 7: *Shades of green growing all around.*

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doesn't mean to polished organic farms built using exclusively LEED-certified building techniques and running on solar power. It means this *and* going to industrial slaughterhouses, visiting urban greenhouses, seeing small-scale and large-scale cheesemaking, going to aging caves for cured meats, seeing where four-dollar bottles of wine are produced, and meeting biodynamic farmers who plant and harvest with the moon cycle. It means exposing students to many realities of our food system and recognizing why these realities exist and how they are supported in their communities. The more exposure students have to different processes and productions in the food chain, the more critical they can be about what they are seeing locally, and how the world is responding globally.

INFORM

Yes, at the end of the day, food studies is still about studying. As much as we need to collect input about food through our senses, through eating, experiencing, and cultivating food, we also need to understand what is behind food. We need to pay attention to what academic articles are being written as well as who is writing them. If the aim is to have a comprehensive look at food, this means reading Marion Nestle alongside Nestlè-backed "research." It means paying attention to independent publications like *Food and Water Watch* and *Food First* as well as the content that multinationals like Barilla and Monsanto are putting out. Food studies needs to consider each angle of the food discourse in order to understand our place in the present, realities of the past, and projections for the future.

ENGAGE

Food studies needs to go beyond the academic. Sure, we need to converse, document, review, and collaborate, but we also need to act. This means after we have explored, experienced, tasted, and talked about food, we need to take what we have learned back to our communities and make change. Whether this is growing our own kitchen garden, sharing what we have learned with others, or connecting food realities in our communities, there is a need to put into practice what we are studying. We must refuse to let food be a subject. Instead we need to encourage it to be the protagonist. Food should be a way to make change: social, political, economic, and environmental change.

I don't care if we call it comprehensive, experiential, or holistic, the future of food studies needs to be active. It needs to be taken out from *only* the academic realm and plopped into the reality of today. The future of food studies should leave its students hungry: for more information, for different tastes, for diverse experiences, for constant action. We may call it a field of study, but it also needs to be an engagement: with our senses, our communities, and our environments. We must start with our individual senses and then move beyond, joining our local and global communities to the environment we have now and working toward that which we want to cultivate in the future. I stand by my bias. We need more involvement in food and less passivity. We need more cooking, eating, and thinking. More growing, making, and doing. Instead of only studying and projecting the future of food, let us create one, the best way possible. ☺