

The Mediterranean Diet: Piedmont Project's Sustainability Initiative in Italy, Summer 2010

Adam Carlisle¹, BA; Jake Light²; Ruth Parker³, MD.

Emory University: ¹Medical Student, ²Undergraduate, ³Professor of Medicine

Background: This May, Emory University college undergraduates embarked on a total cultural immersion in Italy for the twenty-third consecutive year. The program, led by Emory's Director of Italian Studies Professor, Judith Raggi Moore, seeks to expose students to Italian culture by guided and complete immersion. Twenty-three students, and four faculty augmented by visiting faculty and teaching assistants journeyed from north to south through forty-three Italian towns over the course of six weeks. In addition to the Italian studies and culture course taught by Prof. Moore, students can take a course entitled Medicine and Compassion taught by Dr. Paul Cantey of the Center for Disease Control and Dr. Ruth Parker of Emory School of Medicine. For the last 6 years, this innovative course taught by medical school faculty has drawn over 150 undergraduate students, many of whom are contemplating careers in medicine or public health. This writing course focuses on ethics, professionalism, and lessons from history, art, and architecture of Italy. Students explore their own definition of compassion, utilizing class readings and discussions of contemporary issues facing health care workers today. As the program travels across the country, this class explores numerous sites and has related classroom discussions about the historical foundations of health and healing across the millennia.

Piedmont Project Curricular Content: This year, the "Medicine and Compassion" class incorporated a large component to explore and experience modern medicine's meal of choice, the Mediterranean diet. Inclusion of this teaching component into the curriculum was supported by the Piedmont Project of Emory University. Curricular content included classroom discussions and site visits of the following:

- Definition of the Mediterranean Diet as a "lifeway" or "lifestyle" that includes regular exercise and dining with others as foundations of the "diet"
- Review of the current medical literature of associated improved morbidity and mortality for those that follow the Mediterranean Diet. This class was led by medical student TA, Adam Carlisle.
- Discussion of the current American and Italian health status related to exercise and diet
- The emerging understanding of food geography as a determinate of public health.
- Teachings of Carlo Petrini, founder of the "slow food movement", Italy's response to fast food, which entails four simple components: 1) eat local 2) eat seasonal 3) ethical education regarding food as a value 4) eat leftovers and avoid wasting
- visit to museum of Dr. Ancel Keys in Pioppi on southern coast of Italy. On-site discussion of Keys' contributions including his Seven Countries Study, and contribution to understanding role of cholesterol in cardiovascular health. Discussion was co-led by medical school faculty (RP) and medical student (AC). Class walked through his home, library, and looked from his balcony at the views of the Mediterranean he saw as he studied and wrote of the impact of diet as a "lifeway" on health.

Students kept a 48 hour diet log of their food consumption both before traveling to Italy as well as once during their stay in southern Italy. Simple comparisons revealed how available food choices and fitness opportunities significantly varied between the U.S. and the Mediterranean region. On average, students walked 5 to 8 miles daily in Italy and during the days of their Italian food log consumed ONLY locally grown, organic products that are all a part of the Mediterranean diet. These lifestyle "choices" were made much simpler by the limited alternatives available and cultural value placed on walking in Italy.

Lessons along the way: During travels throughout Italy local restaurant owners, merchants, hotel proprietors, and citizens provided the class with in situ experiential learning through conversations that included many lessons. Undergraduate student Jake Light conducted these conversations in Italian and provided the translations to students of the following on-site lessons:

Paestum

To understand the exact composition of the Mediterranean diet, it is important to first address a fundamental misconception. From the American point of view, the term “diet” itself conjures up notions of significant changes in food consumption, fixated on the idea of self-deprivation. “Swear-off carbohydrates; don’t touch anything with fats; say goodbye to everything you used to love to eat.” In the Mediterranean diet, eating is not a matter of depriving yourself. Rather, as the locals put it, the diet is a *modo di vita*. That is, a way of life. The Mediterranean *modo di vita* is one of satisfaction; it is a mind-set that one enjoy the natural, and above all, local cuisine of the region. This local cuisine finds its roots in the historically agrarian peasant culture adjacent the Mediterranean Sea whose striking poverty led to a diet based on pastas, olive oil, and legumes. Legumes are particularly important as they serve the dual function of providing a high-protein source, as well as replenishing the soil with nitrogen for fertility. These peasant origins are still prevalent, apparent in the popular Italian dish *pasta e fagioli*, a delicious dish of pasta with beans.

The Mediterranean diet implies a high value placed on the aesthetics of eating. Food is considered a part of culture. One must take the time not only to prepare and eat a meal, but also to appreciate its quality. Flavor is only one component. Colors, textures, aromas, and freshness are also fundamental. In doing so, “*Mi fa bene o mi fa male?*” follows naturally. “Is this good for me or bad for me?” In Italy, this concept is currently promoted strongly by the younger generations, and presents a significant contrast between the Mediterranean and American youth.

Paestum, Campania

Students visited the Vanullo Farm outside Paestum, the hometown of *mozzarella di bufala*, a cheese handmade daily, on site, from the milk of buffalo. The Mediterranean diet emphasizes eating locally produced fresh food. The epitome of this idea is a particular product for which the city of Paestum is renowned: *mozzarella di bufala*. This cheese, a far cry from the mozzarella we know in the United States, is made fresh every morning from the milk of the *bufala*, a “buffalo” more comparable to a cow than to the American bison. Kept in warm water until eaten, *mozzarella* is always consumed within three days. This practice is based upon the fact that *mozzarella* is viewed as a *prodotto vivo*, or a “living product” and it is only believed to be nutritious while still “alive.” This view of food being alive compels locals to have a unique respect for the produce and those that produce it. The men and women of Paestum who make *mozzarella di bufala* are thought of as artisans whose craft directly contributes to the culinary and cultural identity of the region precluding the notion of preservatives and of consumption outside that region.

Baglio Vajarassa; Marsala, Sicily

In the coastal town of Marsala, located on the western shore of Sicily, students found the hospitality of Dino and his family at the Baglio Vajarassa, their private family farm. An amazing traditional Sicilian lunch awaited them. Virtually the entire meal was grown in the very location where the students gathered for family style eating with the group of 30. Sicilian pesto consisting of tomato, basil, garlic, and olive oil, grown and gathered 200 feet from the table flavored *grano duro*, or durum wheat pasta made in the town of Marsala. An equally fresh salad of lettuce, tomatoes, olives, vinegar, and olive oil followed. Dino’s wife’s signature homemade cake complimented the regional Marsala wine, made on-site from the *grillo* grapes cultivated in Dino’s vineyard, again a mere stone’s throw from the table. Only 150 yards from the dinner table were a collection of olive trees from which Dino hand picks his olives. After taking the olives to the community press, he lets the oil sit for two months to filter impurities and then bottles the pure oil

at his home. The oil is consumed within a few months on the farm, and never more than one year from when it was produced.

Selinunte, Sicily

Continuing their journey to discover the Mediterranean *modo di vita*, the students found themselves in the *campagna*, or countryside, outside the beach town of Selinunte on Sicily's southern coast. The hotel proprietor, Orazio, extended an invitation to his family farm for the quintessential Mediterranean country dinner and a tour of his family's vineyards. With an abundance of seasonal vegetables, pasta, roasted meats, and good wine, all were immersed in a culture that bleeds hospitality despite hard times. Ample time is consciously devoted to food and company, a vital component of the way of life in this land.

Matera, Basilicata

Further exploring the peasant origins of the Mediterranean diet, students visited the city of Matera in the region of Basilicata, an area long characterized by the juxtaposition of incredible poverty and a rich peasant culture. In the midst of historical and social tragedy, students experienced a temperate weather and gastronomical abundance that was so elusive to native people in the past. At the *Trattoria Lucana* the class sampled a vast array of traditional peasant dishes based upon the vegetation and seasonings grown for centuries in the adjacent fields. Students tasted how the Mediterranean diet, heavily based on fruits and vegetables, has been a way of life that nurtures health and happiness for centuries.

Most significantly, students were afforded the opportunity to not simply learn, but live the Mediterranean diet in the land that it calls home.

Course Readings

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