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Fornello: Connecting to Culture at the Roots

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This post was authored by Theresa Felicetti, the Project Coordinator at the John Brown Heritage Foundation

I come from a family of food loving Italians and mandatory Sunday lunches. Where your pasta sauce intake is just as important as your water intake. Needless to say food has always had a significant role in my life, specifically my Nonna's pasta sauce. Up until recently however, my focus had always been on eating it and not on making it, partially because there didn't seem to be a need. My Nonna cooks with an unwavering energy that fools me into thinking we'll be eating pasta at her house together until I'm in my 90's. She mixes and rolls out consistently perfect dough and seasoned sauce to the point I had convinced myself that it's an ability the women in my family are born with. After many failed attempts I quickly learned it's not.

I decided to learn the recipes, to rid myself of the overwhelming anxiety that accompanies the thought of taste turning solely into memory. In the process, I realized it's not the taste I feared losing most, it's the connection it has created to people in my life past and present. It connects me back to my grandparent's life in rural Italy, our yearly tomato jarring, a scaled down reminder of where it all came from. The Sunday lunch, the product of taking the time to celebrate hard work and each other. Early on I experienced food as a connection to people and place, past and present, but only on a personal scale. Until I participated in the Fornello Project with Messors in Puglia, Italy, which allowed me to see how food connects us on a cultural scale.

The project is one that aims to preserve the slow food movement and shepherding culture in southern Italy, through the hands-on restoration of an ancient cave site. It's a project that is significantly important in the region, due to recent EU regulations, which cater to cheese production on an industrial scale as opposed to a local one. With expensive machinery now mandatory in cheese production, it has become increasingly difficult for cheese makers to sell cheese produced on their own farms, despite it being done for many lifetimes. This in turn effects the shepherding culture as there is a diminishing local market for their milk, forcing them to sell their milk to industries for as little as .75c per litre.

As it becomes harder for the shepherd to make a living, the familiar image of the shepherd and his flock could become one that disappears from the sun-drenched fields of Puglia. The disappearance of the shepherd could be the start of the disappearance of the slow-food movement in southern Italy, a significant part of the regions culture. I believe the pace at which food is produced also effects the way in which it is enjoyed. Italy, in my eyes is known for being the leader of long dinners and fresh ingredients. If there is a change in pace in how food is produced in the region, could it not also change the way in which it is enjoyed? If that is the case, how do

you keep the slow food movement alive with the encroachment of industrialization? Well you can do as Messors has done and turn to history to reconnect ourselves to the value of culture and the importance of keeping it alive. The Fornello project is inviting people to do so through a hands-on holistic experience, not just lectures and stories.

Historically the site has been home to shepherds and wheels of cheese, and the goal is to open the cave doors to both once again. The work consists of restabilising and preparing the caves and shepherds house for production and storage, to provide a space that will support the local agro-pastoral community. With the site having a strong relationship to the regions food culture it made sense that as participants, we had to be immersed in the food culture of Italy in order to drive our passion when it came to the restoration of the site. Meals were shared together and prepared from local ingredients, joining in on the preparation was encouraged and conversation during meals was pretty much mandatory. During the workshop you met with the shepherds and made cheese with the cheese makers. Additionally, we visited different part of the region to see how changes are starting to effect the area, as well as other places that have remained unaffected, to remind us of the beauty of keeping the balanced pace of life in Italy alive. All of this combined allowed us to fully grasp the necessity for the work we were doing. Archeological digs and the study of the frescoes are also undertaken onsite to further understand the history of the space we are working on and how it played a role in the development of the overall region and its culture.

The involvement of tourists in the project is also one that encourages the involvement of locals. When we become overly accustomed to something we often can forget its value. Similar to the impossibility of imagining my life without my Nonna's sauce, it may seem hard for the locals to imagine Puglia without the shepherd and local food community. However if we don't start to reconnect with the roots of something, we can become forgetful of the substantial impact something has had on us individuals or cultures collectively. This in turn can make us complacent in addressing issues and finding solutions. Seeing other people from different parts of the world travel to be involved in this type of project, makes the locals see a value in their home and traditions. The realization of this importance can start to invigorate a sense of urgency within the locals to start to implement ways and become more active in maintaining their cultural heritage and traditions. I have participated in the workshops twice and have first-hand seen an increased interest in locals coming to join us on site.

Through their workshops Messors reminds us of the values connection has on us on a personal and cultural level. Working on a site that dates back to 6th century BCE opens your eyes to the longevity of a shared cultural value and its role in shaping the region. These reminders are important to ensure we don't compromise culture for progress, and instead find ways in which the two can work hand in hand, which Messors has proved is possible.