



DREAMING OF

Tuscany

Pursuing the Anthropology of Culinary Tourism

BY JANET CHRZAN

IF YOU WERE TO think of a place you have visited, especially a well-known tourist destination like San Francisco or New Orleans, what immediately comes to mind? Is it a famous view like the Golden Gate Bridge or a major event like Hurricane Katrina? Or is it the local food, such as sourdough bread, seafood, gumbo, and oyster poor-boy sandwiches? Our minds often link places with food, especially when a place is a popular destination, since most travel involves eating some of the local cuisine. Can you imagine going to Maine without eating a lobster roll? Or being in Burgundy without tasting Boeuf Bourguignon, washed down, of course, with a good bottle of local wine? If you cannot imagine going somewhere without searching out local specialties, then you might be a Culinary Tourist.

During the last two decades culinary travel has become the fastest growing form of tourism, generating some of the highest levels of tourist spending per person. Culinary travel includes cooking schools, spas, educational and travel adventures, and individualized cooking and food travel. In 1998 Lucy Long defined culinary tourism as “the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of another [culture].” This includes the “consumption, preparation, and presentation of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered to belong to a culinary system not one’s own.” This description offers a blueprint to systematically study food tourism, and in the last few years several dozen books and articles have been written about culinary tourism by anthropologists, sociologists, and historians, as well as business school and hospitality consultants.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF TOURISM

Like any other cultural phenomena, anthropologists are interested in understanding the role played by tourism in various societies. To this end, John Urry has developed some useful concepts for studying tourists and their behavior. The first focuses on the “scapes” of tourist behavior, that is, both the geographical spaces where tourism happens and the iconographic symbols used to channel tourism. Within these *tourist scapes* there is a flow of people and resources—material, personal, and ideational—that anthropologists can study to understand how tourism produces and consumes real and symbolic capital. For example, by studying the kinds of food presented to tourists by local people we can identify the kinds of food locals think of as being culturally important.

A second concept developed by Urry is the “tourist gaze”—a perception of a place that differs from a local person’s perspective. Although tourists can readily identify the “leaning tower” as being in Pisa, they may not know anything else about Pisa or the Italian region of Tuscany. This tourist perspective is constructed and sustained through iconographic symbols reproduced in postcards, snapshots, stories, and personal memories. By analyzing these symbols anthropologists can understand what tourists and tourism agencies find appealing.

The castle (*il castello*) is located at the heart of the Spannocchia estate.



This system of tourist symbols also functions for cuisine. Just as the targeted gaze of a tourist can identify the tower of Pisa, so does the tourist in Tuscany “see” the grilled Florentine steak and the bowl of ribollita, while ignoring the less-photographed (and thus less-symbolic) elements of the local diet. Anthropologists, therefore, can study culinary tourism by understanding the food symbols important to each region and why they appeal to travelers.

Anthropologists are also interested in *why* people travel. Dean MacCannell suggests that tourism reveals aspects about our selves that are normally obscured in our post-industrial lives. Travel, he argues, can cause us to reexamine our identity through a search for our authentic selves and the places where we feel we can be who we really see ourselves as being. For MacCannell, authenticity is essential to the idea of tourism. Our tourist experiences must agree with our anticipation of them (as constructed via the *tourist scape*), and it is better if they appear to be spontaneous rather than staged experiences. For example, given the choice to attend a pre-paid, tour-group dinner at a banquet hall owned by a large hotel chain, or to have the same dinner cooked in a local family’s kitchen by the grandmother of the house, most tourists would probably opt

for the latter, more authentic-seeming example, even if the same dishes might be served at each event.

Travel can also serve as a spiritual journey and a means of transformation for tourists. Nelson Graburn asserts that travel expands our sense of self through learning or risk-taking. While traveling we are open to new possibilities because we find ourselves in places outside our normal constraints. For culinary tourists, this may explain why spas and cooking schools are so popular, because they teach new skills in locations far from everyday concerns and habits. As a result, tourists learn new and exotic food skills, and often feel that these simultaneously function as a means of self-improvement.

When studying these different aspects of tourism it becomes clear that local groups actively manipulate the *tourist scapes* to shape the *tourist gaze* and meet the tourists’ needs. Therefore, anthropologists who study tourism must also reexamine local perceptions of culture and appropriate symbolism. Tourism, as a cultural phenomenon, affects more than just local, regional, and national economies. It also re-imagines the places people choose to visit for both the travelers and the natives. In culinary tourism, this re-imagination can alter both the hosts’ and the guests’ beliefs about food, culinary

practices, and dietary intake, creating an ideal opportunity for anthropologists to study how food habits are maintained, exchanged, and valued.

THE SPANNOCCHIA FOUNDATION

As an anthropologist interested in culinary tourism, I recently visited a large farming estate in Tuscany to lead a culinary tourism program and to evaluate the site for future college-level educational programs. Owned by the Cinelli family since the 1920s, this estate has been a working agricultural property for hundreds of years.

As we turned into the drive, we were surrounded by forest, and in the distance we could see fields with horses, donkeys, and small groups of sheep. Approaching the old castle buildings at the heart of the estate, we saw a few Tuscan-bred Cinta Senese pigs with their distinctive white neck stripes. The estate dogs bounded out to greet us when we pulled into the castle courtyard, barking to alert the staff of our presence. The dogs sniffed and butted their heads against us and then ran off to chase each other in the sunlight. Through an open door we could see some winemaking equipment and, next to it, an outdoor wood-burning oven for baking bread. As romantic and elegant as the castle and estate seemed, our arrival through this back-door area reminded us that we were visiting a working farm. This was exciting. In this time of industrial food production it is rare to witness agricultural work up close—especially on a farm complete with its own ancient castle!

The estate is an entirely organic and almost self-sustaining enterprise, containing 1,100 acres of farmland, much of it in managed woodland which produces most of its heating fuel using forestry management techniques and a modern, high-efficiency wood-burning furnace. There are acres of wheat (including farro, or Italian emmer wheat), olive trees, grape vines, and garden produce, and an extensive animal husbandry program for such Tuscan-heritage breeds as Cinta Senese pigs, Monterufolino ponies, and Pomarancina sheep. As a result, the estate produces almost all of the food eaten by residents, interns, and guests, including the honey on the bread at breakfast, the pungent olive oil and salad greens at lunch, and the wild boar and apple stew served for dinner. Water is recycled using a grey water recovery system, and the estate is moving toward the adoption of sustainable (oil-based) fuels for its farm vehicles. This is all made possible by the intellectual and practical background of their sustainability paradigm, which is rooted in both modern ecological knowledge and the time-tested methods of the traditional environmental understanding of the Tuscan farmer.

From top to bottom: A donkey grazes on the estate grounds. Cinta Senese pigs enjoy wallowing in the mud. Aaron Preman works in the vineyard. The castle courtyard can appear otherworldly in the morning.





Above, on Wednesday nights the interns make pizza for everyone using ingredients from the farm. According to Rose Levine, an American intern from Philadelphia who was impressed with the educational components of the program, it is impossible to make your own food without becoming aware of the human connections that link the land to the food and the people. Right, pizza chefs Kate Heller and Courtney McLaughlin work hard on Wednesday pizza nights.



education course for local Tuscan school children, an artist-in-residence program, and the sustainable living education efforts of the foundation in the United States. According to Erin Cinelli, Executive Director of the Spannocchia Foundation, their primary goal is to provide opportunities for members of the Spannocchia community (guests, interns, foundation members, and staff) to connect their experience with sustainability at the Spannocchia estate with their experiences at home and in their relationships with the world in general.

For example, the agricultural program is designed to meet the needs of the estate and to teach sustainable land-management practices to interns who will, it is hoped, bring their knowledge back to their home countries. Working with the permanent staff, the interns perform all of the tasks on the farm and in the castle,

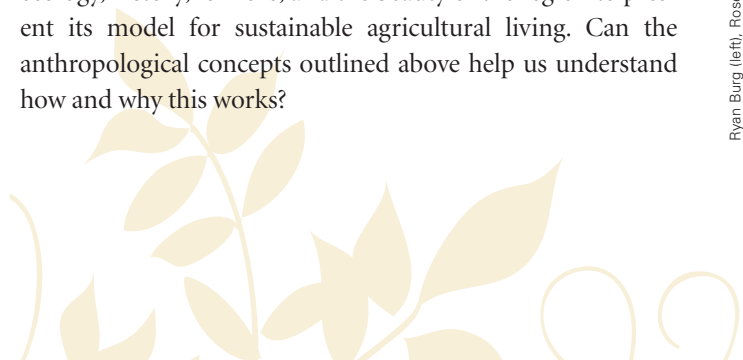
from pig farming and sheep-herding to vegetable gardening and food preparation. While the interns work hard, they also participate in enrichment exercises, including lessons in local ecology, history, the Italian language, and art.

Another example is provided by the agritourism endeavor, which rents estate vacation houses and rooms in the castle. Although its primary function is to support the farming and internship programs, visitors and guests are encouraged to do more than just relax on the estate. Programs include tours of the farm, product tasting, and educational classes taught by local instructors in tai chi, art,

and Tuscan cooking. Even those guests who prefer to lounge by the pool all afternoon, take a nap, and get up in time to enjoy a glass of wine before dinner, still end the day with a family-style meal with the interns. As a result, they share the local Tuscan cuisine—ribollita, braised venison, farro salad, and the delicious and ubiquitous *Torta della Nonna*—with some of the actual producers of their food and are thereby inspired to bring home some of the practices that come up during dinner conversations.

Spannocchia thus makes use of tourist interests in Tuscan ecology, history, folklore, and the beauty of the region to present its model for sustainable agricultural living. Can the anthropological concepts outlined above help us understand how and why this works?

Despite these plans, the Spannocchia estate is currently not financially self-sustaining. For the last ten years it has been dependent on grants, tourism revenue, and its affiliation with the Spannocchia Foundation—an American organization based in Portland, Maine, that encourages a sustainable agricultural lifestyle through several interlocking programs that also provide some of the estate's financial needs. These include the farming program, an internship program, an agritourism enterprise, and a variety of educational efforts such as a farm



MEETING EXPECTATIONS

The first step is to identify the *tourist scape* that Spannocchia uses to meet the expectations of the *tourist gaze*. This is clearly tied to the traditional Spannocchia estate and the services it provides, including meals, housing, and educational lessons in sustainability and farming for its guests. Protected by Italian law, the estate conforms to the imagined landscape of ancient, rural Italy—the background landscape of a Renaissance painting. With no permanent visible elements to indicate modernity, the image of Tuscany presented is a beautiful example of the perfect rural life as portrayed by such writers as Ruskin, Wharton, and Origo, and in the more recent best-sellers by Frances Mayes. These images are replicated in pictures, movies, and magazine articles about Tuscany and Tuscan food, making the average tourist expect a landscape where ancient ways of living are preserved. Even though Spannocchia is primarily striving to provide lessons in sustainability for today's world, it supports this idealized image as tourists perceive the estate as untouched and authentically rural. As a result, primed by visual imagery provided by poetry, prose, paintings, photos, and films, visitors to the estate accept it as authentic.

This authenticity is further supported by a lack of obvious visual staging. The farming and other services observed on the estate are real enterprises and not just staged for tourists. Guests and interns eat together family style and often are



Signora Loredana Betti, who teaches Tuscan cooking classes, has been described by Randall Stratton, the General Manager of Spannocchia, as “the only cook I know who has never produced a bad dish, ever!”

Paul Avis

LOREDANA BETTI'S RECIPE FOR RIBOLLITA

(SERVES 8-10)

INGREDIENTS

1 pound white dried cannellini beans
1/2 large loaf of day-old bread
1 small cabbage
3 cups string beans
3 zucchini
1 onion, chopped
3-4 stalks celery, chopped
1 small bunch basil, chopped
4 potatoes
3 cups peas
1 bunch spinach
4 carrots, chopped
3/4 cups olive oil
4 cups tomato puree
1 small can tomato paste

DIRECTIONS

Leave the cannellini beans submerged in a bowl of water to soak overnight. The next day, drain the beans and cook in 8-10 cups of water for about an hour, or until tender. Drain the cooked beans and reserve the cooking water.

Heat the olive oil in a large soup pot. Add the chopped onions, celery, carrots, and basil, and cook until the onions are translucent. Roughly chop the remaining vegetables and add them to the pot. Continue to heat on medium low for 10-15 minutes. Add the tomato sauce, tomato puree, a cup of water, and most of the drained cannellini beans.

Grind the remaining beans in some of the reserved cooking water, then add this bean paste to the soup. Simmer the soup for two hours on low heat. The longer it cooks, the better it tastes.

Cut the bread into very thin slices and toast in the oven. In a large serving bowl, put a layer of toasted bread, then cover with soup, then another layer of bread. Continue to layer until full.

Buon Appetito!

(Courtesy of Spannocchia Foundation: <http://www.spannocchia.org/>)

recipe



Randall Stratton provides guided walks around the castle and estate to explain not only the history of the property and foundation, but also the strategies used to enhance sustainability. Here, prosciutto is seen aging in one of their cellars.

joined by Spannocchia staff and members of the Cinelli family. Guests are not only able to query staff and interns about farm processes, recipes, and life on the estate, they also can freely observe farm activities, from the birth of baby pigs to the making of wine. As a result, what would normally be considered the back stage area from a tourist perspective dissolves into the foreground, creating authentic experiences for Spannocchia's guests. From the venerable farming landscape to the traditional dinners produced by Loredana and Graziella—whose families were tenant farmers on the property for generations—Spannocchia conforms to the expectations of the *tourist gaze*, embodying the imagined *tourist scape* for Tuscany.

IMAGINING AND TRANSFORMING SELVES

Next, the physical and functional realities of Spannocchia allow visitors to live a different kind of life for a time and thus assume a different identity. At the estate they can swap their current lives for a simpler one focused on a farming community and/or a grander one housed on an aristocratic estate. If everyday life is modern,

Interns and guests eat together family style each night.

tourists over several years. Asked to frame their experiences and impressions of travel and food, they answer by stating that Tuscan food is pure, simple, wholesome, and honest (i.e. authentic). They travel to Tuscany to learn how to live. As one woman wrote: “the food of the Tuscans is so good for you, so close to the land, so pure, so healthy, so simple in its perfection . . . if only I could live like this at home, with the Mediterranean diet and lifestyle, I'd be healthy and happy. This is the way to do it and we just don't get it. The Tuscans really do.” For this woman, going to Tuscany is a means for coming home to who she really is in her mind, an identity deeply connected to eating pure, healthy, and simple Tuscan food.



Janet Chrzan (top), Ryan Burg (bottom)

By offering the opportunity to eat such foods and to live this life, Spannocchia not only conforms to the idealized Tuscan *tourist scape*, it also captures the *tourist gaze* and attracts visitors who might be seeking more than just a vacation. Indeed, some come for a personal transformation where the vacation functions as a sacred journey to change the tourist for the better. This dovetails at Spannocchia with the foundation's aim to teach lessons about food and sustainability.

Obviously this transformation is explicit for the interns who live and work on the estate, actively seeking a transformative, learning experience. But even a short visit can result in change. As Erin Cinelli makes clear, "we try to provide examples that can be translated back to our guests' own backyard, like composting, recycling, eating local, seasonal, and organic produce, and appreciating the simple lifestyle that is not perpetually 'plugged in,' so that their experience at Spannocchia is continued after they leave our property."

While visitors must be open to such lessons, anyone choosing to visit Spannocchia probably is since they generally come to eat food grown and prepared on the estate, to walk in the hills, and to slow down and experience a different way of living. Whether or not they actively sought change, visitors are exposed to a living, practice-based education that has the potential of transforming guests. The number of individuals who called this place "magical" suggests that the foundation generally achieves the effect both Spannocchia and the tourists' desire.

QUESTIONS REMAIN

After observing Spannocchia questions do arise about the practicality of the foundation's mission. For instance, intern Rose Levine questions the economic exclusivity of their programs since both interns and guests are more likely to be drawn from the well-off who can afford foreign travel and no-income internships. Another concern is that the model of sustainability presented may simply reflect and reproduce current elite food preferences. This is particularly poignant since food intake in developed countries is becoming dichotomized, with the wealthy switching to local, sustainable, and organic food, while the less affluent eat much cheaper mass-produced and industrially farmed goods. Finally, there is also the possibility that short-term guests simply think that what happens at Spannocchia is a Tuscan ideal that reflects old-time living patterns and not modern possibilities.

Interviews with the Spannocchia staff and Cinelli family indicate that they are acutely aware of these issues and they spend considerable time proposing ways for members to bring the program home, metaphorically and practically. My own

observations indicate that while many elements of the system are not reproducible (for instance, in Pennsylvania), many actions such as gardening, eating locally, and recycling are possible. Furthermore, every person I have spoken with describes Spannocchia as the high point of their travel in Italy. Given the capacity of emotion to create shifts in identity, such deep feelings about experiences may promote the adoption of sustainable energy and food in everyday life, thus fulfilling the educational and transformational dreams of the staff, interns, and guests. 🏠

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For Further Reading

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