

Bringing the Mediterranean Back to Boston

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In my first semester of freshman year, I took a writing course on food. In this course, I learned not only how to write about food, but also got to explore some aspects of nutrition as well. Intrigued by this, I took an introductory nutrition course the following semester, which happened to be a prerequisite for Boston University's Padua Mediterranean Diet study abroad summer course. Several studies point to the Mediterranean way of life as one of the healthiest, preventing against cardiovascular disease and contributing to a longer life overall. What would be a cooler way to spend my summer than traveling to Italy to learn about how to sustain a healthy life? One of the main features of this course is the opportunity to live with a real Italian family and experience their day-to-day life, as well as the traditional three-course dinner. While I can't bring my host mom, Luisa, or the piazzas of Padua back to college with me, I've been reflecting on my experience and ways in which I can incorporate the Mediterranean Lifestyle into my life at Boston University.

Eat more plant-based, sustainably grown foods, and control portion sizes.



In Padua, fresh fruits and vegetables are everywhere. In an Italian cafe, you're likely to see not only sandwiches, croissants, and other little pastries, but oftentimes a basket of fresh and local lemons, zucchini, or tomatoes. I was really struck by this difference when I first arrived here. The Mediterranean culture places a major emphasis on a non-homogeneous, non-static diet. This means that you're more likely to find fruits and vegetables at the market that are in season rather than imported from other faraway countries. Not only is this a more sustainable diet, but also one that offers variability. What's also great is that because these fruits and veggies are in season and are grown locally,

they are much cheaper than in America! While walking through Piazza della Frutta, I found myself with little cash but a growing sense of hunger. So I bought a red pepper to munch on - only 36 cents!



Grains are also a major part of the Mediterranean diet. In America, we eat so many refined grains - Cheetos, chips, white pasta, Wonderbread - but in Italy, whole grains are much more abundant and accepted. Luisa, my host mom, always serves us whole wheat pasta, mixed with fresh eggplant, basil, and zucchini.



When I get back to BU, I want to try harder to incorporate more fruits and vegetables into my meals. Maybe for dinner, instead of eating a huge bowl of white pasta with alfredo sauce, I'll eat the whole grain pasta from the vegan station and make myself a salad with lots of vegetables. I'd like to even get in touch with Sargent Choice and make suggestions about having pre-made salads at the salad bar with grains other than the white pasta, like farro, teff, or sorghum. In class, Professor Quattromoni served us her homemade salads that were filled with ancient grains I'd never tried before, but were so delicious!

I'd also like to explore Mediterranean-style restaurants in Boston. I've had falafel from Saloniki (Greek) in Fenway before, which was very tasty, but I want to try other places like Piperi or Zest.

Controlling my portion sizes is something I need to be *much* more conscious of. At home, regardless of how hungry I am, I find myself loading my plate with as much pasta, veggies, or chicken I can fit on my plate. Even at American restaurants, our plates are loaded with food that we often can't even finish. Here in Italy, I have been exposed to smaller portion sizes. At a restaurant I ate at in Venice, I was shocked by the size of the plate in contrast with the amount of food arranged on it. My pasta - about the size of a fist - was placed in a small well in the center of a wide-rimmed white plate. After finishing the pasta, I was neither hungry for more nor stuffed to the point where I looked six months pregnant with spaghetti and pomodoro sauce. I was satiated. Maybe it's time I listen to my stomach more and rely less on my eyes.

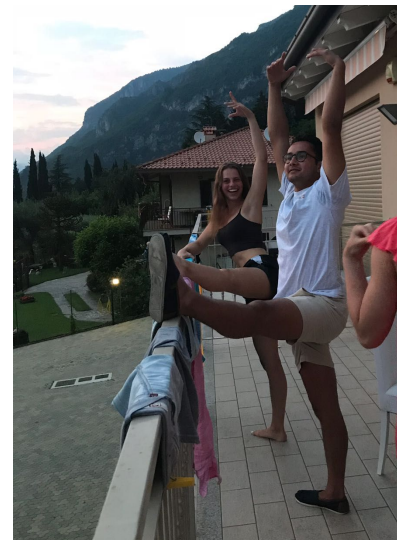
Focus on Natural Exercise.



Something else I noticed while in Italy is how much walking and bicycling the people do (this was such a shock to me that I almost got run over by a bicyclist as I stood gawking at how many there were). There are many places I walk to in Padua that I know people in America would normally drive to. We focus so much on sports and the gym as our main sources of exercise, when we don't even realize that we could improve our health just by changing how we get from one place to another. What's even better is how many people I see walking their dogs! I can't go five minutes walking around the city without stopping to admire or pet a furry friend.



When I get back to Boston, I'm going to try to take the T less and walk to class more. I find myself being lazy and waiting until the last minute so I can hop on the T, when instead I could get up just a bit earlier and take my time walking to class and burning some calories. Even at home in Rhode Island, I could bike or walk to the gym instead of driving there. I see my Dad do this a lot, and want to be more like him. If you think about it, biking to the gym makes a lot more sense; we are going to work out anyway, so why not warm up beforehand and save the gas for when we really need it?



Incorporate more ‘conviviality’ into my life.

As a fast-eating introvert, Italy’s four-hour meals and socializing were the biggest culture shocks for me. At first, after every dinner I ate with Luisa, I would rub my stomach in pain from stuffing myself with way too much food. Now, she always has to tell me to “mangia piano, Emma, piano,” or “eat slowly, Emma, slowly.” Not only is this probably an unhealthy way of eating, but it also prevents me from engaging with the people around me. I’m already someone

who tends to avoid lengthy conversation, so eating quickly and filling my mouth with food instead of words is not sociable.



Conviviality, or sociability, is an important part of the Mediterranean lifestyle.

Every day when I walk to class at 8:30am, people are already walking around the piazzas and chatting. In the evening, families and friends sit for hours on end

eating, and stay talking and laughing even after finishing their meals. And, with churches so prevalent in Italy, faith communities provide additional means of connecting with others. People are always gathering outside the Basilica of Saint Anthony to talk or buy and sell St. Anthony trinkets. Hardly ever do I see a group of people together, sitting in silence on their phones. In America, I see so many families out to eat, but many of the parents are on their phones. A few times, I’ve even seen 3 year-olds watching movies on an iPad - at the dinner table. When I am eating lunch between my classes in Boston, I often have my phone or computer out while I catch up on social media or study for an upcoming exam. We are so concerned with entertaining ourselves or being ‘productive’ that we leave little time to get to know and interact with others around us.



This past weekend, I stayed in an AirBnB with eight other people at Lake Como in Menaggio. Instead of going out to eat, we went to the local market and bought multiple boxes of pasta, jars of tomato sauce, cheese, prosciutto, and melon. Back at the BnB, we all had fun making lunch and dinner together, making do with the ingredients we had. I think these moments may have been my favorite so far. I got to know everyone so well as we made and ate dinner together outside, overlooking the lake and beautiful mountains. We danced around the kitchen while draping prosciutto over melon, and sang our favorite songs from the 90s while stuffing ourselves full of the delicious pasta we made together. But amidst all the fun, I snapped back

to reality for just a moment to reflect. I realized how different life was in America. Our lives are so much more fast-paced at home that we don’t often stop to take time to enjoy the food we’re eating and the people we’re with; that’s something I want to change in my own life at BU. I’d like to try to go to the farmer’s market near BU more

often. Although I won't have a kitchen in my suite next year, I could stock up on locally grown fresh fruits and veggies for snacks instead of grabbing something in the dining hall. However, when I'm home in the summer, I would love to have multiple-course meals that I cook with my best friends - and with foods all grown locally!

For me, this course was more than just a class, but a chance to live a different life. I got to experience first-hand a lifestyle in which food is not just something our bodies require, but rather a vehicle for amiability, good health, and a way to break up the day and take a breath. I learned that a good diet does not exclude, but instead can include everything while revolving around plant-based foods. I experienced the Italian way of natural transportation, and felt its benefits in my muscles and mood. I got to see how the culture of being *present* with people and not just being *around* people improved my feelings of happiness. I've learned that a happy and less stressful life is a healthy one. I can't wait to bring a little slice of Italy back to Commonwealth Ave.