

**Final Reflection Paper:
Turning South Tyrolean Food Traditions into Markets**

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Figure 1. At Brunnenburg, South Tirol. (Palmer, 2018).

MSFS 6060 Turning Traditions into Markets

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Introduction

On August 10-25, 2018, I was part of a small group of Green Mountain College MSFS students who descended upon South Tirol, Italy in a study abroad program aimed at observing the food and agricultural traditions and markets of this region. We were ensconced at the 13th century castle, farmhouse, and farm at Brunnenburg (Fig. 1), which is operated by the de Rachewiltz family, descendants of the poet Ezra Pound, who resided in the castle. Under the tutelage of our professors Philip Ackerman-Leist and John Van Hoesen, I was able to assimilate a deeper understanding of the unique food culture and traditions that exist in the South Tirol region.

Key Points of Learning

There were numerous points of learning for me during my program, “Turning Traditions into Markets.” The themes surrounding food from the South Tirol that stood out in particular included attitudes and behaviors, crops, traditional foods and recipes, and farming styles.

- **Attitudes and Behaviors.** Many sources have elucidated the cultural norms, attitudes and behaviors of the people in the South Tirol, but upon direct observation it was intriguing to witness the fiercely loyal sentiments that people in this region attach to their bioregion. While people of the region spoke German and enjoyed many traditional German foods, including sauerkraut, dumplings, pretzels, and sausages, South Tirol is technically located in Italy. However, people in South Tirol don’t seem to identify as German or Italian—they are essentially *Tirolean*, observing their own particular values, traditions, and cultures. In addition, Tiroleans have always—even today—been more cut off from the world, isolated by rugged mountains, winding steep paths, and snowy winters. I was surprised to observe that, though tourism is coming to South Tirol, it is of the local variety, consisting mostly of nearby Germans and Italians, rather than international tourists. In addition, I found it interesting to see that the spirit of ingenuity is alive and well in the region, as people focus on reusing every single thing possible, not wasting anything, and valuing commodities.



Figure 2. Local livestock in the rich pastures of South Tyrol. (Palmer, 2018).

- **Crops.** The rise of apple farming in South Tyrol has been well documented, and this was clearly on display as I traveled in the region, with views of vast farms covered in gray netting to protect the harvest. However, it was interesting to observe that other crops and livestock are of extreme value in the region, including pastures (Fig. 2) and hay to feed cattle (primarily for dairy products), pigs for the ubiquitous speck and sausages that form the primary source of animal protein, grains (especially rye and varieties of wheat) for the traditional breads that form an important source of the daily nutritional intake, and an array of fruits and vegetables that thrive in the warm, summer climate, including pears, figs, stone fruit, squash, herbs, greens, potatoes, and beans. We observed these plant foods growing in the farms at Brunnenburg, as well as in community gardens and other regional farms. In addition, we saw these products being sold at numerous produce stands, local food shops, and farmers markets, as well as on restaurant menus. Rarely did

I see imported foods in such venues; the South Tirolean food system supports the use of these locally produced foods, which were abundant in the region.



Figure 3. Traditional dishes include pastas, made with local grains. (Palmer, 2018).

- **Traditional Foods and Recipes.** One can read about South Tirolean foods, but eating them day in and day out is a much better way to learn about these traditions. Starting every day with the traditional Tirolean breads, schüttelbrot and paarlbrot, as well as other, rich, dark grain and seed breads, was a satisfying treat. Speck boards (though I didn't eat them myself) were a daily presence. And the plentiful knödel—a plump dumpling made of stale bread and other seasonal ingredients—was sheer comfort food, gracing every restaurant menu. Learning to make this simple recipe, flavored with nettles, was an excellent lesson in how to make something of nothing (i.e., leftover bread and weeds). It was intriguing seeing some of the Italian foods creep into the food culture, such as wonderful pasta dishes (Fig. 3) made of local grains, and pizza made with ancient grains and local foods, such as preserved meats and vegetables. The addition of foraged and

cultivated nettles, herbs, apples, pears, nuts, chestnuts, and grains (Fig. 4) into traditional dishes was an intriguing display of how to make the most of what was available in order to make nourishing, satisfying, and delicious foods that sustain the people year round—even in the harsh, isolated winters.



Figure 4. Local garden in South Tyrol. (Palmer, 2018).

- **Farming Styles.** The South Tirol is a lesson in old and new agricultural styles. One sees it all, from pastures at the tip-top of a mountain plateau being harvested by hand, to the ultra-modern trellises where apples are grown on “trees” that don’t even resemble a traditional, leafy tree. The use of pesticides in this region has been well documented and brought into question. Observing the proximity to farms and coastal breezes that waft pesticides from farm to farm highlights the issues of modern agriculture. Brunnenburg (Fig. 1, Fig. 5) is an excellent example of a biodiverse, sustainable farming system, with a mixture of crops (fruits, vegetables, grains), vines, and livestock coexisting together in a harmonious system. Disease-resistant varieties are planted, pesticides are avoided, nutrients (compost, manure) are returned to the soil, and the foods produced on the farm



Figure 5. Apples growing at Brunnenburg. (Palmer, 2018).

feed its inhabitants quite well year round. In fact, sampling the farm to table dinners made it clear just how well the fruits of the farm feed its inhabitants, as we sampled freshly harvested potatoes, freshly milled grains for breads, pesto made from wild herbs, roasted vegetables fresh from the farm, and wines, beer, and schnapps made on the property. It is clear that South Tyrol has one foot in its dedication to sustainable, biodiverse, traditional farming, and another foot in the future of modern farming, with the acceptance of pesticides, inputs, and monocultures—though the fight to balance these two directions has been waged.

Self-Assessment

I believe that I planned well for the study abroad program, reading a great deal of the materials provided to us in order to acquaint myself with the foods, traditions, culture, markets, and agriculture of the region. In addition, I did some research of my own to learn more about how I might best prepare for this learning opportunity. I believe I fully embraced and participated in everything this incredible program had to offer, from hiking in the Dolomites to working in the vineyards to cooking with local ingredients. I tried to cast off my American attitudes about traditions, culture, food, and agriculture in order to have an open mind about the ways in which South Tyrol did things really well. I brought back a deeper appreciation of the foodways and culture of this region, trying to absorb a bit of it into my own lifestyle, gardening, and eating habits. For example, a highlight for me was learning how to make South Tyrolean bread from a fourth-generation baker, and even bringing back the old sourdough starter from his bakery to make the bread at home. Sure enough, I am enjoying my first sample of sourdough bread (Fig. 6)—with flora by way of South Tyrol and a mix of some new microbes from California—as I write this assessment. I can't help but muse that my sourdough bread serves as a metaphor for how I have folded in the observations I've made at Tyrol into my own bioregion in order to better appreciate and maximize the cultural appreciation for my own foodways.



Figure 6. Sourdough bread made from a fourth-generation South Tirolean starter. (Palmer, 2018).