

BRA, ITALY

ONE BITE AT A TIME

BY JESSE DART

A PERSONAL JOURNEY THROUGH THE SLOW FOOD MOVEMENT & THE UNIVERSITY OF GASTRONOMIC SCIENCES

A little militant, a little socialist, a little crazy, Slow Food ticks all the right boxes for me. Starting as a protest in the 1980s against McDonald's opening in Italy, the organization has grown into something no one could have imagined. And in the small provincial town of Bra, about 45 minutes south of Turin, it shifted the conversation around food to one focused on traditions, taste and respect.

I arrived green to Slow Food. But in the year I spent studying at the University of Gastronomic Sciences, the school started by the organization, Bra and Italy and the school attacked me from all angles and helped me to understand what was really important in my life. Food, yes, but not just any food. Wine, sure, but not just as a social lubricant. Cheese, definitely, but not just as a sandwich component. I invested in myself more in that one year than all of the years previous, and the rituals I picked up along the way have stuck with me years later.



All photos by Jesse Dart



The “motivational test” for entrance was a series of prompts that wouldn’t be strange to find in a therapist’s office. It included questions like, How much time do you dedicate to meals? When vacationing, what do you not like to do? How would your family describe you to friends? and of course, State your favorite foods. I still remember my answer to that one: seafood, wine, tomatoes, oranges, bread. Unusual entrance questions for a university.

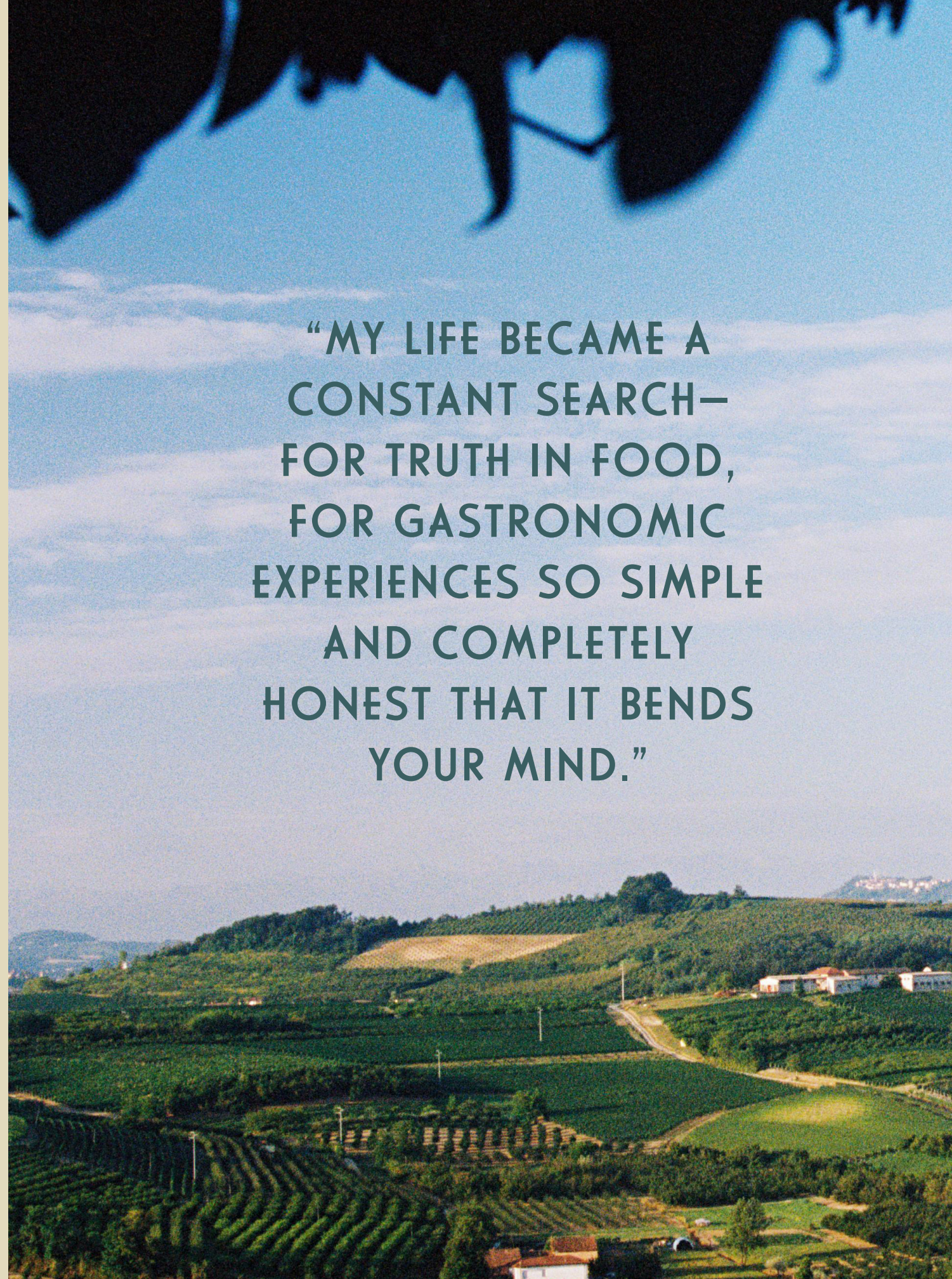
Fifteen of us from different parts of the world, all different ages, and with different backgrounds gained entry that year. Some single, some pining for lovers elsewhere, some with partners in tow, some old, some young, some on a sabbatical from work, from life, most of us trying to figure it all out. We all passed the entrance test and understood that we cared about something we couldn’t quite explain, and took solace in the fact that at least 14 others got it.

We barely knew each other the day we set out for Puglia, and yet we had been up since 3 a.m. and were punchy with the kind of tiredness that makes you feel jet-lagged, even though we didn’t change time zones. We lined up for caffè at the airport bar in Bari, while

Paolo, the bus driver for the week, loaded our bags into the mini-bus outside. At 7:30 a.m. we were on our way into the countryside of Puglia. When we arrived at the small farm we were greeted by a casaro with a glass of wine and a piece of mozzarella and burrata still flushed with the heat of fire. After eating this piece of magic, my life became a constant search—for truth in food, for gastronomic experiences so simple and completely honest that it bends your mind, tricks you into understanding that whatever you had thought about food before was just a gimmick, askew, a fraud. Everything changed.

That trip to Puglia was the first of five we took over the course of a year to different parts of Italy and Europe. Each one an extension of a lesson from the classroom in food production, farming, the business of food, food politics and especially taste. We didn’t only visit winemakers and cheese producers and organic farms and olive groves, we stopped into barrel cooperages in France and cork forests in Portugal. We had meals in Michelin-starred restaurants, numerous osterie, in farmhouses, on mountaintops, in a castle, in yards and by pools, and near the beach. Each meal a lesson.

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Back home in Bra, where we all lived, I experienced true seasonality for the first time ever. I could track the changes by what was available in the market from my fruit and veg lady, Rosanna. If she didn't have it, it wasn't time to eat it. If she was out of it, it was time to move on to something else. My body welcomed the change—it was as if for the first time I was giving it exactly what it needed throughout the year. I felt good.

Wine became a drink, not a drug. And it's the wine industry where I took the deepest dive, finding a combination of kooky characters, fantastic stories, people who participated in the seasons, farmers, business people, an international cohort of bon vivants and eccentrics who reveled in this liquid obsessively. I became one of them. What the university was teaching us was that every product has a prescribed way to understand it from a taste perspective. What I found is that understanding cheese and salumi helped me understand wine. And understanding wine helped me look at olive oil and chocolate in a new way. In Italy, I developed a palate, one that doesn't just seek out the best, because what's fun in that, but that can taste with appreciation what it took to create the thing. To not just be able to pick out faults, but to know what part of the process contributed to that fault. I didn't say no to anything. Even a glass of the most mundane wine was a chance to taste something unique. It all adds up. It all counts.





SLOW FOOD IS MORE THAN IT SOUNDS.

More than a group, club or organization. More than a philosophy. In Bra, still home to the movement's Italian and global HQ, it's an ingrained way of life that existed before the start. It's all around you. No one denies that the organization and subsequent university revitalized a somewhat sleepy provincial town. But it's my feeling that it's the students who benefit from the people of Bra (and Piedmont) because they care an incredible amount about their gastronomic traditions. A lesson that one has to absorb through daily life and interactions. And life, yes, life is slow in town, but that is part of it—to embrace the absence of the endless race you find elsewhere. I slowed down and found many loves there—a town, a region, numerous wines and cheeses, a woman, and eventually, a country that adopted me as one of its own.