

Honorary Degree for Alice Waters

Laudatio by Nicola Perullo

Dear friends, officials, students and colleagues, today we present a particularly special *laudatio*, the sixth since the university was founded. It is special not just, because it is the first, finally, to be dedicated to a woman, but also because this woman is a truly special person. I have spent a long time thinking about how to express the honorable justification—such is the task of a *laudatio* for an honorary degree, to present the justification for honoring—that inspired our small university to confer a degree in Gastronomic Sciences on Alice Waters.

After all, Alice Waters has already received many important recognitions around the world, including from institutions much larger and more famous than ours. This is because Alice Waters was, and recognizes, a pioneer. Moreover, this is why today she is, rightly, an icon. She has received not just honorary degrees and doctorates but also—to mention just a few other prestigious titles—the French Legion of Honor, an official recognition from the Smithsonian Institute and a place in the National Women’s Hall of Fame.

I was thinking a lot about what I could write for this speech of praise, something that would make sense and be in keeping with the person to whom it is addressed. At a certain point, I felt that all I could do was try to let go of the idea of a speech as a purely theoretical argument, to detach it from its rigid academic framework and instead locate it elsewhere, or at least hybridize it. Locate it where? In a field, in a garden. The image of the garden came to me spontaneously. First, because the garden is, for a philosopher, fundamental: from Eden, where everything started, to the garden of Epicurus, where philosophy was real life and a practice of living, a fusion of soul and beauty. From the modern philosophy of gardens, without forgetting the role of the garden in Zen thinking and in Western poetry, to the uncultivated wilderness sung about by Ralph Waldo Emerson and the agricultural fields of Wendell Berry. In addition, because the garden is one of the symbols of plant life, and therefore the most powerful symbol of the very possibilities of life. We have much to learn from the plant world. As American plant biologist Karl Niklas says, “This is a blue planet, but it is a green world.” Therefore, let us imagine we are in a garden: cared for, but not over-tended, full of flowers and fruit, but also plants, weeds, vegetables and roots. This is the place where we should celebrate Alice Waters. I would briefly explain why.

To begin with, we should ask ourselves, what are we doing in this garden? The garden is not just a place for esthetic contemplation. Alice Waters has taught us this. Nor is it a space entirely for resting. The garden is, literally, a school: In Greek, *skolé* was where one went to think freely and to share ideas with others—not a school for instruction, but a palestra or gymnasium of education. We are in the garden to

educate ourselves and therefore also to educate. Education not is instruction: Instruction is a way of knowing what is already in the world and the way in which it has been transmitted to us. Instruction is not very plant-like. It is hierarchical and animal: some teach and some learn, effectively adapting themselves and often replicating what the teacher has learned. Education, on the other hand, is a way of transforming the world, of moving it and making it evolve in different directions, including directions different from those we do not like. Education, unlike instruction, which follows the rules, is always in some way revolutionary, because those who participate in it make the rules together. Therefore, education is more plant-like, and the garden is the school, the gymnasium of education. The first to show this, with an unparalleled effectiveness, was Alice Waters. To clarify a strange syllogism—the garden is the school, the school is education, education is revolutionary, and the garden is revolutionary —let us take a step back. Let us start from this thought: “*If the people realized their need for beauty, a revolution would break out*”. This is a quote from the great psychoanalyst and philosopher James Hillman, found in an essay titled “Aesthetic response as political action”.

Esthetics, beauty, political action. Usually these concepts live far from each other, distant, sometimes even in opposition. Now, Hillman’s thinking helps us to bring them closer together. Hillman recovered an ancient tradition, found as much in the West as in the East, a tradition that later in modernity was gradually lost, surviving in a residual way at the margins of official knowledge and science. I am referring to the tradition that sees esthetics, ethics and politics as indissolubly linked, as interwoven. If in modern thinking, a separation between these spheres has taken place—a separation that happens, as much in the public arena as in individual life— in Greek thinking, instead, as is well known, *kalos kai agathos*, the beautiful is good. In other words that, which has the value of beauty, at the level of sensory gratification, also has the value of moral good.

The Latin word *bellum* comes from the diminutive *bonellum*, as shown in “The Great Theory of Beauty” (1972) by the Polish scholar Władysław Tatarkiewicz, proposing to consider the profound connection between beauty and good. This relation works both ways: what is good morally is also beautiful to the senses. Ludwig Wittgenstein also wanted to say something similar, when he wrote “Ethik und Ästhetik sind eins,” “Ethics and Aesthetics are one.”

However, we must specify that beauty, for the Greeks, is not just what we can see—it is, we would say today, multisensory, integral, and it is something that satisfies a more profound pleasure, which concerns the soul as a whole. We who deal with gastronomy have here a further possible enrichment: The beautiful is also the good, not just morally good, but also good in the sense of taste. Yet a further union, yet a further link between pleasure, knowledge and action.

Alice Waters has worked on the good and the beautiful, on pleasure, on knowledge and on action starting from food. These months I have been reading, with great pleasure, about her works and the initiatives

that she has come up with and promoted in almost 50 years of activity. It became clear to me that a unitary and obsessive thought guided all this (greats are great precisely because they are obsessed with one single thought that they develop as their life's work): reconstructing the unity of beauty, goodness and action. This is why I decided to consider the thought of Hillman's on political strength of beauty. I mentioned, in addition to that, those visions that, in the West and the East, propose interdependent and coherent relationships between beauty and politics, esthetics and ethics, feeling and thinking. James Hillman, in his writings, shows that the soul, which is the unification of intellect and emotion, desire and need, has a profound need of beauty, just as it needs social relations and politics. As Plato also stated, *Eros* is closely linked to both, to beauty and to social relations.

Between the end of the 1960s and the start of the 1970s, before anyone else, Alice Waters had a simple and brilliant insight that became her vocation and her life's task. Before anyone else. I remember that also the great Michael Pollan, the last recipient of an honorary degree from our university, two years ago, began his career as a gastronomic writer after being inspired by Alice Waters, as he himself has stated. Pollan went to Chez Panisse for the first time in 2001, and it was an illuminating experience. He found written on the menu the names of the farmers who had provided the ingredients, and most importantly of all a very simple dessert: a bowl of fresh fruit.

This essential minimalism helped him to understand the profound ecology of food, in other words food as cultural value. The extraordinary nature of the simple. The new esthetics of the beauty of the unrefined and every day. The incorruptible force of domestic care. Brilliant insights usually concern simple things. The genius manages to see in a new way what is in front of everyone's eyes, revitalizing it and giving it a different perspective. Here is food: something that concerns everyone, an ordinary and everyday element. Food is a powerful tool, perhaps even the ultimate tool, to help to reconstruct that unique fiber; the fiber of being and existing that all too often is broken and crushed by a calculating, analytical and mechanistic thinking. Waters understood the power and value of food undoubtedly thanks to her structured, humanist training: from the language and culture of France to the educational theory of Maria Montessori, from the political activism that was simmering during those years, up to the pivotal experience of travel, first in France and then around Europe. Alice discovered the power of food. On her return to Berkeley, together with other friends she decided to invent something simple and brilliant.

Everything started from a change in perspective, a change of perception. It does not seem reductive. Everything that is important and revolutionary always starts from a change in perspective. Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi, in the introduction to their *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision*, write:

"... the major problems of our time—energy, the environment, climate change, food security, financial security—cannot be understood in isolation. They are systemic problems, which means they are all

interconnected and interdependent. Ultimately, these problems must be seen as just different facets of one single crisis, which is largely a crisis of perception.”

I will read here the justification we proposed to the Italian Ministry for Education for this honorary degree:

Alice Waters studied French cultural studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where she took part in cultural and student protest movements in the 1960s, like the Free Speech Movement. Political activism has always underpinned her actions, even when she started to become interested in food. After lengthy travels in France, where she learned to recognize and appreciate local, fresh, artisanal food, she returned to California where she worked as a teacher. In 1971, she opened her restaurant Chez Panisse in Berkeley, a true pioneering outpost for organic food in the United States.

Waters also contributed to redefining the culinary culture that put values like simplicity and an ethical and esthetic sensibility over technique in a world dominated by men. In 1992, she received the James Beard Foundation Award for Best American Chef, the first time the prize had been given to a woman.

*Her attention to educational issues continued with the **Edible Schoolyard** and **Edible Education** projects, but also with a passionate political promotion of food quality: During the Obama administration, she successfully campaigned for an organic vegetable garden to be planted at the White House. The vice-president of Slow Food, in 2014 she received the National Humanities Medal for her work championing a holistic approach to eating and health.*

Let us return to the garden.

Chez Panisse, the restaurant opened in 1971 in a renovated two-story house in Berkeley, has always been more than just a restaurant: It has been a life project—of an integral life, in the sense foretold by Goethe and Schiller: an esthetic life, cognitive, ethical and social. So, political. We are not in a relationship, we are relationships, we are made up of relationships—the isolated individual does not exist. To realize an integral life that is full, worthy and satisfying, what the Greeks called *eudaimonia* (happiness, but not in the modern individualistic sense), requires tending and cultivating the community. Chez Panisse was a community that, through food, by means of and thanks to food, encouraged an all-round human flowering. So, a universal and revolutionary idea: recovering the union of the beautiful and the good and making it flower in the garden. Flowering: as you see, we are always in the middle of the fields; it is always a question of plants. It is no coincidence that from Aristotle to Dewey the metaphor for human evolution, evolution as the possibility of becoming fully human, each according to his or her own talents has been that of the field, of the garden. In Chez Panisse, the spiritual garden—art, politics, cultural activism, love, hospitality—is cultivated thanks to and through the material garden. The opposite is also true: The material garden—natural, fresh, seasonal food—feeds the spiritual garden. How many other restaurants in the world, in 1971, offered set menus based on what was in season and at the market?

Food is certainly an end but it is also a means to realizing those things without which there would not even be any more food. This means that in order to eat well, we need first – or, better, in the same line, accordingly - to practice the Good; in other words, simply, we need to cultivate the garden of the world, seeing the world—internal and external—as a garden to be tended with care so that plants and flowers grow and flourish. To say it again in contemporary terms, in our terms: Gastronomy must be eco-gastronomy. In the *oikos* of *gastros*, ethics and politics resonate: the *oikos* is the environment to be cared for, like a garden or a vegetable plot: it is the one and only that we all inhabit and we share with the other living beings on planet Earth. Gastronomy is thus inevitably also a *gasto-sophia* and a *gastro-philía*, in other words knowledge and love, intellect and passion. Everything together, everything united. I'll return to one point: Cooking, Alice Waters has always said, is a question of sensibility and attention, of care and compassion, for a reawakening of the feeling/thinking that comes before—and goes beyond—technique, skill, competence and professionalism. Before the technique and the competence and beyond them.

Moral life feeds on imagination in order to be effective. It is what communicators today call communicative effectiveness: storytelling. Communication has the same etymological roots as community: Communicating means, “doing something in common.” Communication is not the transmission of information from you to me; instead, it is a doing together, an understanding. In this sense, authentic education has to do with communication. Alice Waters is a great educator because she is a great communicator, and vice versa: In the garden, relationships are always two-way, reciprocal. However, to communicate one can start from either the poetry of words or the poetry of action. Alice Waters started from action: not just cooking, but also cultivating.

We must remember another fundamental thing that, even taken on its own, would be worth every academic honor. Along with her commitment to the development of farmers' markets and for many aspects of direct political action, in 1995 Alice Waters invented the *Edible Schoolyards*, the great educational project that she herself calls “the most important thing I have done in my life.” Of all of Waters' books, *Edible Schoolyard* is the one that struck me the most. If I had had to choose one work to justify this degree, I would have suggested this one. Among other things, it has a long introduction in which the story of this project is told. It is about the attempt—successful, if we look at what has happened in the subsequent 20 years around the world, with the creation of thousands of school gardens everywhere—to revitalize public education through food. It is a question of underlining the right to study and to school as education, not just instruction. The insight, once again simple and brilliant, is that food is a powerful tool, because it allows a real education, education as experience and as participation. An education for everyone: *food is universal and inclusive*. In public schools, the quality of food produced with care and attention acquires its own democratic significance: a democracy in which there is always something to be realized, a task, always one step further, and for this reason, a permanently revolutionary act.

Cultivating a food garden is an esthetic practice because it allows us to educate ourselves to feel with the world; it allows us to mark the rhythm and to match our action to the rhythms and ways linked to the weather, to the seasons—it makes us feel connected, linked. Cultivating a vegetable plot and a garden is an ethical and esthetic action that is based on responsibility, which is the capacity to respond and correspond (responsible means, literally, to be able to respond). Education is participation. It is doing something together: It is a project of permanent exhibition; it is being disposed to learn something new with others, in the moment. For this reason food from the garden is precious, because it is food that changes every season, every week and every day, reminding that the resources that are never unlimited and never given forever.

Education passes necessarily through experience, but not every experience is an educational experience. There are experiences and experiences. That is why the Edible Schoolyard project is an educational project: because it is an authentic experience, an esthetic and ethical practice. As such, it is a universal idea, as the subtitle of this book tells us.

Reading the *Edible Education* principles for the first time I remembered another great America, John Dewey, an incredible philosopher, educator and therefore also communicator. In *Experience and Education*, he writes that the task of the educator is to arrange things in such a way “that experiences which, while they do not repel the student, but rather engage his activities are, nevertheless, more than immediately enjoyable since they promote having desirable future experiences. Just as no man lives or dies to himself, so no experience lives and dies to itself. Wholly independent of desire or intent, every experience lives on in further experiences. Hence the central problem of an education based on experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences.”

When the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1987, something he said in his speech led to great discussion. He said, “Every new esthetic reality makes man's ethical reality more precise, for esthetics is the mother of ethics.” What does it mean?

Will beauty save the world, as Prince Myshkin claims in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*? In the end, nobody knows. There are different opinions. Albert Camus said that beauty does not make revolutions, but that a day will come when revolutions will have need of beauty. Here in Pollenzo, however, we know one thing with a good degree of certainty: The art of food—an art that starts from the material garden, from the field, and ends in the interior garden of the mind and the heart, with powerful and regenerative effects—helps to make us aware of the unity of everything. The art of food helps us to understand that sustainability is coherent only if it is the sustainability of everything, not just agriculture, or the economy. Sustainability does not exist in airtight compartments; the whole life, as an integral complex, must be sustainable. The art of food helps us to understand this. Therefore, Brodsky tells us here that the material

garden—made of flowers, fruits, herbs, vegetables, worms, and all the biotic reality—is the matrix and the mother of everything. Mater—matter—food and matter, the same root as mother. Indeed, Terra Madre.

We often talk, especially recently, in our small university/multiversity—in this small microcosm of ours which is linked essentially, and it could not be otherwise, to the macrocosm—of openness, of spreading and creating knowledge, of overcoming hierarchies and barriers. Once again, all this leads us back to the garden. The garden, cultivated or uncultivated as it might be, is where one most obviously develops networks, horizontal relationships, the “green democracy” of plants, as Stefano Mancuso calls it. We must take this paradigm seriously; make it our own, as a sustainable, and therefore happy, life project. A going towards and returning to a life that is all united, esthetic, cognitive, ethical and political. As Gaston Bachelard wrote, “The vegetal life, when it is inside of us, offers us the tranquility of the slow rhythm, its ample serene rhythm.”