

MAY 2022

# TAVOLE INSIGHTS

BY STUDENTS FOR STUDENTS.  
GET TO KNOW TAVOLE'S ACTIVITIES  
AND ITS "BEHIND THE SCENES"



## FROM STUDENTS TO STUDENTS

Dear students,

As many of you appreciated last month's interview, we thought of keeping the same format to give voice to this month protagonists.

This number is dedicated to all of the participative activities that have been carried out by students for students. We're lucky enough to be surrounded by people willing to dedicate time to share their passion with us. We thought letting them talk is the best way to fully grasp and value who they are and what they do. We need stories of people our age, who're finding their path and look like a more realistic model. Inspiration can also come from greater examples, like Dr. Johnny Drain, guru of innovative food and a real innovator, who shook the audience during his Tea Time Talk about fermentation and the future of food. You find his exclusive interview in this issue.

If I had to say what the fil rouge of these stories is, I would summarise it in "reconnect to your roots". In different ways, all of these people are trying to explore and empower their origins and food culture. And I think it is a definitely a valuable principle to take home. Wherever that is in the world.

Curious to know more about them? Let's see what these special people have to share.

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Don't forget to get in contact with us via email or Instagram (@tavoleaccademiche) for new ideas, feedbacks and suggestions.

# This past month highlights

## SOOJIN SILENT ART EXHIBITION

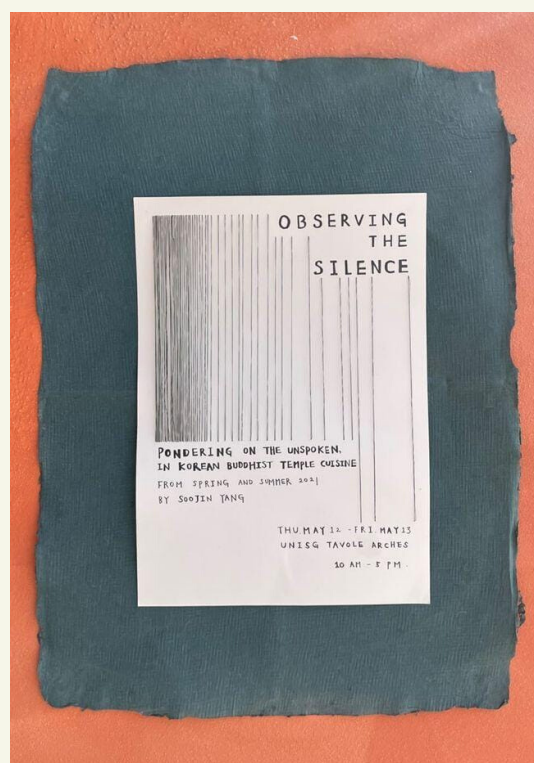
I was going to have lunch, when I saw papers on the walls spread all outside Tavole. I didn't know what was going on, but I immediately got it was art. I started looking at those watercolors and shapes and I just felt the energy behind them. As I went on looking at them I realised there was a story behind it and went searching for the author. That's how I met Soojin. Master Alumni from South Korea, I already followed her on Instagram without even knowing her in person, exactly because of her beautiful and unique artwork. This exhibition, specifically, was very powerful and meaningful, as it was the result of five months working at the Baegyangsa temple, a Seon Buddhist monastery in Korea that became famous all over the world since Chef Table made an episode about Jeong Kwan, the incredible nun cooking for the monks and visitors.

But this is Soojin's story and I thought the best way to grasp it was to hear it from her.

Also, we'll make an exception to our b&w pictures to give you a glimpse of her art..

**How would you describe your experience at the temple to someone who's completely far from that world?**

Living at the temple for five months was something unfamiliar and familiar at the same time. Perhaps, I felt comfortable as I was surrounded by people speaking my same language, after two and half years of living in Europe. Even though I had to adapt myself again into a new surroundings - an unique culture of the monastery, I felt like a home to some extent.





"Speaking of experience, I was surprised every single day at the life dynamic in the monastery. As it is an open space for the public, you will meet various visitors everyday and preparing meals for them was part of our job. I think what I learned there was actually a very basic mindset as a cook- how to serve meals to people. It was a constant challenge to prepare meals for someone three times a day and every day, but the nun never gave up and encouraged us to show kindness to people through food."

### How do you think those months impacted your way of thinking of food?

I believe that I became more passionate about food, but, at the same time, more scared about cooking for people. Following a nun's footsteps showed me how diverse Korean nature and Korean cuisine are. We kept ourselves busy pacing with nature. In spring, we tried not to miss any single wild plant and preserve them for the rest of the year. Our meal was always a collaboration between new lives and old (fermented) ones. Now, I feel much more weight about the idea of cooking for people. Before I went to the temple, I was considering becoming a cook and at that time, cooking was one way of expressing myself, my identity. But living at the temple challenged me with the difficulty of serving food for people without my ego, which had affected me to change my path slightly.

### Where did the need to express all of that through your art come from?

I believe that, in our life, one journey always leads to the other one. For example, two years of studying at the Unisg has led me to the temple.

And, for that next journey with Jeong Kwan, I somehow had to find a way to close the time with the nun. Five months of living at the temple, though, was an enormous amount of input, both mentally and physically, and I couldn't wind up properly, which made me not be able to move forward. Therefore, I would say that all those illustrations were my desperate attempt to carry on my life - to be able to flow again. And for me, drawing comes more naturally than saying with words.



## DUTCH SPRING IS SERVED, WITH HANNE

Hanne is a student from the Master in World Food Cultures and Mobility. She's also one of the winners of the Tavole Contest and the first one to actually cooked for us. We then wanted to learn more about her and her Dutch lunch.

**Hi, Hanne. You are about to graduate at Unisg, but what was your experience before coming to Unisg? What brought you here?**

I graduated in Environmental Studies in Amsterdam, where I already got a very holistic approach which is also typical to Unisg. We were discussing the different issues regarding climate and habitat preservation from multiple approaches, targeting future problems and searching for solutions. I at the same time started cooking with some friends and got really into food. I had a side job at the time in a café which quickly got me more and more involved as they gave me a lot of responsibilities but also the opportunity to experiment with different tasks. I ended up doing an internship in a bakery for six months through them and in the meantime I enrolled here. I came to Unisg as it kind of combined my passion for food and my previous studies, since it's a much similar approach, just focused on a more specific subject.

**So, how was it to cook at Tavole?**

I was nervous at first, I have to say.

I am not usually the kind of person who goes into the front and puts herself out there. I actually applied just thinking "Okay, let's see what happens", I thought it was going to involve way less of my initiative. I expected I would have just given the idea and input and discussed it with them and then they would lead and I'd simply follow. After the presentation I was like "Oh, so I have to make all of the decisions", but it was nice in the end. I had already understood that I would have appreciated it a lot when looking back. I arrived there on Monday and that was also a little bit scary because we were not 100% sure the white asparagus would have been there in time, or if there would have been any at all, as t's not easy to find here, but luckily it arrived. So that day I already had 60 reservations and the day afterwards we reached 90, which was amazing but meant a lot of added work on the second day. Especially peeling asparagus is such a fun activity! (laughs)

I really enjoyed how I could really use my agency, they asked me "What do you wanna do?" about everything. At the same time, though, I had the support of the team. They were moving around and having an eye on everything that needed to be done at the right time.

I really learned stuff, for example how to use a steam oven instead of boiling, which is way more convenient, efficient and saves lots of time.

It was also very interesting and useful to plan time: what to prepare in advance and what to cook at the moment. In general the environment was super chill.





### Why did you choose to cook white asparagus?

I was thinking about it and I believe it was partially because I was talking a lot with people also from Scandinavian countries or Germany about how much we miss that here in Italy. Also it's the product Dutch people are the most proud of. I envy and admire Italians for being so proud of their specialties and valuing them, even though its exaggeration means being super meticulous and obsessed with sticking to traditions. I was thinking how nobody knows the cuisine from the Netherlands and people always casually make jokes about it, not being exactly famous for its amazing gastronomy.

I worked with the Ark of Taste in the Netherlands to promote its delicacies, because when you ask around even to Dutch people they tell you they don't even exist. I wish we would acknowledge that there actually is a lot of history of food that has just been forgotten or ignored.

So white asparagus is a very good example of the valorization of something typical and seasonal. You don't really find it during the rest of the year and it only lasts for a few weeks, so when it's there everyone is like "Okay, I have to eat as much as possible" and you find it in every menu.

During the lockdown it became a thing for people to source it directly from the producers as they couldn't go to the restaurant. I think we really associate it with celebrating spring.



### What are your plans for the near future?

The idea is to write my thesis with the Embassy of the North Sea organization. They are doing a study with the Parliament of Things trying to give a voice to the North Sea in a political and social sense, with anthropologists, historians, artists, biologists etcetera collaborating. The interesting thing is that they do not include food studies so far, so I got in touch with them to do work on that and they seem very open. I think I'm gonna do ethnobiological research about the plants people use and notice on the coast and then to also develop experiences for non local people to explore those areas through foraging. I believe it could also work very well as a vehicle to share some environmentalist principles.



## WINE AND ARCHITECTURE

As you guys must have noticed, there's an installation about new wine cellars and architecture taking place next to Tavole. We talked with Pierluigi Piumatti, from Slow Food, who's the one who brought the exhibition to Unisg.

It was Roberto Bossi, architect and one of the chiefs of Casabella, who sponsored this exhibition about new Italian wine cellars designed by Italian architects who are not worldly known. The idea was to promote these realities that have been built in harmony with the wine-making landscape and for which the most modern technologies have been applied, in terms of sustainability.



**Nuove Cantine  
Italiane.  
Territori e  
Architetture.  
New Italian  
Wineries.  
Territories and  
Architectures.**

Electaarchitettura

The installation was inaugurated during Vinitaly in Verona and involved five different wine areas in Italy, in the regions of Sicily, Alto Adige and Piedmont, including Langhe, so l'Agenzia di Pollenzo also took part in the initiative. The main aim was to raise awareness around a new kind of architecture that respects the environment and what a big role it can play, especially in the wine sector, that couldn't exist without nature and should go hand in hand with its preservation. I believe these kind of realities could also promote enogastronomic tourism.

When they asked me to bring the exhibition to Pollenzo, I immediately accepted. I think it's the perfect place to grasp and study how architecture and winemaking can enhance each other.

A real intersectional approach that could stimulate and inspire the work of a gastronome.



## JOHNNY DRAIN: THE FUTURE OF FOOD

When you google his name and end up on his page, you cannot help thinking: "How many different things has this guy been doing?"

After a PhD in Material Sciences at Oxford, Johnny started working in the kitchen and is now a consultant for lots of the greatest restaurants and realities of the food industry. He's also co-founder of MOLD magazine and carrying out some super cool projects of his own.

He experiments a lot with cuisine and mainly studies how to use technologies, fermentation and innovative solutions to improve our food system.

During his Tea Time Talk he presented his current main project, aimed at finding more sustainable and accessible alternatives to some of our most beloved commodities, like tea, chocolate and coffee. The idea at "Win-win food labs" is to recreate their flavour profile, combining other raw materials and fermenting or transforming them in different ways to reproduce something very close.

The meeting went super deep into details of specific techniques and we students kept up the reputation of gastro-nerds, but still the atmosphere was super informal.

It then was pretty spontaneous to ask Drain if he could answer a few questions. What came out is a super spontaneous and dense discussion about our food system.



**Let's have a general introductory picture of how you moved from academia to the kitchen. What brought you down this path?**

It wasn't a surprise for me because I have always been interested in lots of different things, so when I was working in academia I already knew I wasn't going to spend my life like that. There were too many other itches I wanted to scratch, as we say in English. I always knew I wanted to work in music, film making or food. So when I started my PhD in Oxford, I chose to do it there rather than at the Imperial College of London, because even though it was an excellent science-based university, everyone there was kind of a science nerd. I like nerds—of course! I guess I am one—but I wanted to be surrounded by a network of people doing really different things, from anthropology to history or sociology. Everyday you would go to the canteen, sit with people and on Monday you could talk about the history of American presidents, Tuesday would be about mathematical functions and so on. It was perfect for me because I always loved learning about different topics and going out of my comfort zone.

When I finished I moved back in with my parents in Birmingham and there were about four 1 Michelin star restaurants, so I started working in two of those, in the bottom of the bottom position. They were both pretty good with me though and let me cook sometimes, but it was mainly useful for me to understand how an actual kitchen works. I have always loved cooking at home but that's a completely different thing. The time pressure, the shifts, even the name of things is different. I didn't know what a chinoise was because you just call it sieve at home. I then finally got in touch with Noma. They straddle between a restaurant, an academy and research and the Nordic Food Lab was kind of in the middle. So they were not weirded out by the fact that I had a PhD or that I knew also about chemistry and physics, they were like "Oh, that's very useful for us". So I stayed four months there doing this project about butter fermentation and ageing.

**Coming back to the present, what do you believe to be the pros and cons of fermentation being such a trend?**

First thing to say, fermentation is responsible for putting most of people's favourite food on a plate. Think of bread, chocolate, cheese, wine, vinegar. So there's this funny thing that it has always been there, just people didn't realise that food was fermented.

At the moment the internet is spreading certain techniques and people are transferring them, so practises that until a few years ago were only known and accessible in Japan, or whatever, are now available to anyone and this mashup has happened of applying a certain knowledge to completely new products and contests. The result is you very often get something delicious. So I think documenting and spreading knowledge is arguably the upside.

I suppose the downside, the danger of this whole hype is people start doing things just for the sake of doing it. It's quite common among those—mainly dudes! lol—in fermentation-niches to kojify everything just because it's cool and I think that's a bit pointless.

There's also the issue of appropriating knowledge, so taking techniques, products or microbes from a very specific community, tradition and place and using them for profit.

And suddenly the history, the narrative and the knowledge around that gets lost or detached from the product itself. If you look at our food system more in a broad perspective that is one of the main issues: the divorce between the production and the final consumer. And it looks like that's going to happen again with fermented products.

**Talking about niches, do you think innovative fermentation methods will remain a prerogative of a few fine-dining restaurants, or will it also spread among more simple every-day cuisines?**

I see fermentation as a tool kit. You have a box with tons of different techniques, microbes and can decide which of them to use and apply depending on the ingredients. So I think that broad tool kit will be used in any kind of restaurant, whether they are Michelin star or the mom and pop restaurant on the corner of the block where you live. The use they make of it will depend on the space and resources they have, because of course some of them do require more money or time or machineries. But there are some that are incredibly easy ways to preserve food at its optimum and often make it even more delicious. Think of kimchi or sauerkraut—any "simple" lacto ferments—you can make that in any kitchen, all you need is some veggies or fruits, salt and a container.





## **What are in your opinion the main pillars for a better future of food?**

The first main issue is the way most of our food is produced is monoculture. It is incredibly cheap to make these tons of cows or corn fields and it looks perfect on paper, but when you look at all of the externalities and the actual damages it is clear it is an absolutely terrible method.

So the first point would be to move away from this model and to embrace a poly-culture approach. More and more research is going into that and demonstrating that you can produce high yields from that approach. Then I would say reducing the distance between the final consumer and the producer.

At the moment we have lots of links in the chain, so when people buy a chicken breast they don't know anything about it: where it comes from and the harm that might have gone into producing that, from the lives of the animals to the conditions of the people working in that giant industrial chicken processing factory.

Another key issue is the homogenisation of global cultures and the destruction of ancestral, indigenous knowledge in the world. Seoul and London today look much more alike than they did twenty or a hundred years ago.

That's the direction we're going. In fifty years all of the big global megacities—think 20 million plus people each—will look and be more and more similar. And culture and practises of the people living within them will homogenise. We need to find ways to preserve and document the diversity of traditions and knowledge so that they don't get obliterated. Uniqueness is cool!

Same thing applies to biodiversity. The world consumes most of its calories on 10-15 products and that's insane. We live in a world that is crawling with billions of species and plants. Who wants to live in a world where you only eat twelve things?



## **You use social media and the internet in general a lot to share your work and you are co-founder of MOLD magazine. How do you think communication can help implement these aspects?**

I think it's really important to communicate. One of the reasons why lots of people have bad consuming habits is that there is not enough understanding of the impact and implications of food. So we need to inform on how this system is bad and what solutions we can find. You can't do that by preaching and condescending, being like "How can you eat meat, it's bad for the world, how dare you?", as people would just get annoyed and bored and not listen to you.

We also shouldn't forget a lot of them are not eating, for example, a burger because they want to, but because it's cheap and that's what they can afford, or/and because they don't have the time to cook, because they have two or three jobs and a family to care for.

So we have to talk to people in an effective way and that is what my passion is. And you can do it very powerfully through taste, I have this catch phrase "Hit them with the tasty" which means if you give someone something delicious they'll eat it and be curious. Kind of when you go around a friend's house and smell something and you then want the recipe.

That is a catchy way to talk to them and they're gonna ask you "What is that, how did you make it, why did you use that?", because we are made to respond very intuitively to delicious stuff, that's the power of food.

Also, food is very emotional. I was friends with a guy who could not eat or even look at aubergines, because an old girlfriend broke up with him while he was cutting it. There's this deep connection between memories and emotions that are triggered by food. If we can tap into those through serving delicious food then we can have a powerful impact on what the world grows and eats and how it thinks about and values food.

**Do you think through exposing children from a very young age to different foods we can modify their taste into liking and consuming more healthy and sustainable, even funky food in the future?**

The idea of what is and what is not funky is very personal and cultural. Lots of studies have shown that even just exposing children to food they are not familiar with can make them more liable to try and enjoy it.

So if I show you a broccoli, we touch it, try it, talk about it, then when you go to the canteen you'll be much more into trying broccoli dishes, they have done quite a lot of tests on school kids on that. But then it also comes down to very important things like how school canteens look like, what are the budgets, and what are they actually able to cook on a daily basis. It is a critical point, because lots of parents don't have the time or the capacity to prepare new or even just healthy food, or they simply were themselves those kids who didn't like broccoli.

So we have to try to circumnavigate that as a society by exposing people when they are young to lots of different foods, especially healthy funky food.

It's hard to change, as particularly if you only have two pounds to spend on your dinner, why would you go for something that looks unfamiliar to you, to take a risk not to like it and waste your money, when you can go for chicken nuggets or a burger or chips? And look, those things are delicious, because they've been designed to be delicious: they contain lots of fat and salt and texture, so they're very easy for us and our brains to enjoy them



**Let's come to the final question. What is your tip for a young gastronome to rock and shake the future of food?**

Oh, interesting, that's a good question. I think the idea is: there are lots of pockets of knowledge that are just untapped. My tip would be to go wherever the place or culture that you have sprung from, go back in there and explore what is in there in your food culture. Even in a place like Britain, where I grew up, where people assume there is no good food. Well, there definitely is a lot of bad stuff—tasteless vegetables in supermarkets and shitty sandwiches in service stations and high street stores—but also a lot of amazing ingredients and recipes and a really rich history of food. But lots of British people just don't know about it anymore, so when people tease them about their cuisine being terrible they are like "It is, isn't it?!"

They're not aware of what an incredible and unique way of making cheese "cheddaring" is, just to give an example.

So go back wherever your home is and ask questions, talk to your grandparents before they die and say "What would you eat as a kid? What was your favourite recipe? What was the most delicious berry you could pick off the tree this time of the year?"

The reason why I say that is because, if you look at most of the trends that have arisen in gastronomy in recent years, such as the Nordic movement or high-profile restaurants in Mexico and Peru, it's all been about the realisation of your patrimony and the breaking away from the idea of French or Italian food being canons that you have to follow, or the only gastronomic regimes that have "high" value. Instead, thankfully, we've seen people embracing the fact that there is delicious stuff in every part of the world and people with the knowledge and skill to transform it into delicious food living there. I think the idea of being proud and valuing what you have and where you come from is not only a trend and will carry on for the next generation.