

University of Gastronomic Sciences

Pollenzo, Italy

June 22, 2018

Thank you! Thank you, Professor Perullo. Thank you, Carlo Petrini—my mentor, and my hero. And thank you to the Rector and the Directors and the faculty. But, most of all, thank you to the students of the University for raising my hopes for the future!

As you all know, the University of Gastronomic Sciences is a singular institution. You will have an enormous advantage when you go out into the world, because you have been learning at a place that values the wisdom of farmers as deeply as the teachings of academics. You have engaged with books, but more importantly, you have put your hands in the earth. You have visited the ancient wineries of Georgia and the rice patties of China. You have connected with farmers and makers, distillers and cooks, all different kinds of people from dozens of countries who welcomed

you into their world. You have learned not just about feeding yourself, but about feeding communities. You leave this magnificent Savoy palace with a deep rooting in the values you will need to build a new food economy: stewardship of the land, nourishing both body and soul, and the power of community.

You have absorbed these values because they are the principles on which this institution was founded. The same values we need to live together on the planet—and they are the values that ought to be taught at every level of education, in every country, everywhere. Too often, instead of teaching children to be stewards, we teach them to be consumers. Fast food culture has found its way into too many hallowed halls and once-sacred spaces, maximizing profit for a few but forsaking the good of the larger community.

In public and private universities all over the United States, there are tremendous obstacles to making real food. Food that's good, clean, and fair is not a part of daily student life, let alone an

integral piece of a liberal arts education. Even a simple proposal to plant a garden on university property can get lost for years in the bureaucracy. Here, you have had the rare privilege of learning the power of food and all that surrounds it. As the largest industry in the world, food is a potent tool for building thriving local economies. It is the foundation of health. It is a language of love, a way to communicate across cultures that needs no translation.

And that is why I am so deeply honored by the degree I have just received. This is the first time I have received an honorary degree from an institution that embodies ALL the practices and principles I hold most dear. I can't wait to see the many beautiful ways you will use your education to spread these principles far and wide.

Let me give you an example of a graduate educated by Slow Food here in Italy who has gone on to have an outsize impact on the future of food in the United States: On one of my first visits, a young woman, Sarah Weiner, an American from St. Louis, Missouri,

picked me up from the airport. I hired Sarah as my assistant, and two years later, she helped mastermind Slow Food Nation, in San Francisco, in 2008. It was a massive event, at several locations around the city, that included a conference of experts (inspired by Carlo); a marketplace and tastings modeled after the Salone del Gusto; and a beautiful organic victory garden right in front of City Hall. 85,000 people descended on San Francisco to celebrate the values of good, clean and fair in what the New York Times would call “the Woodstock of the food movement.”

After the success of Slow Food Nation, Sarah founded the Good Food Awards. Every year, the Good Food Awards hosts an annual competition and marketplace for food producers in the United States—and bestows awards on those “who push their industries towards craftsmanship and sustainability.” The Good Food Awards are now in their ninth year. There are thousands of entries, in sixteen categories, from cheese to chocolate, including small food crafters from all fifty states. Every year when I attend the

awards ceremony, I am so moved by their dedication and passion, the way they are living the virtues of authenticity, community and connection. For many it is the first time they are being honored and celebrated for the joy and good they bring into the world. Their delight at being amongst likeminded people is palpable.

The new leaders of today's food movement will be people like Sarah—and people like you, who have drunk from the same fountain and have the confidence and the resourcefulness to accomplish something true and good. Each of you will go out and make a mark, and together all these pockets of good work will create a global transformation of food and farming.

Carlo knew so well when he created this university, it all begins with education. Over a hundred years ago, the great Italian educator, Maria Montessori, working with the children of the poorest of the poor, in Naples and in India, realized that exposure to the natural world is absolutely essential for the education of the senses. Today,

despite all our affluence, our children suffer from a form of sensory deprivation from a fast food culture. It is no less damaging to learning and good citizenship than extreme poverty.

Unless students are invited to explore nature, meet the producers of food, and learn first-hand where the food comes from, they will never become true co-producers. They will remain trapped in the rhythms of fast food culture, alienated from their senses and each other, consumers rather than citizens.

Fortunately, a curriculum that introduces students to the wonder of plants and soil and ecosystems, the delights of taste and smell and sharing at the table, can halt all of this. And introducing a food education at every level—putting the buying power of school cafeterias towards local, organic farms and ranches--would not only reverse the damage to children's minds and bodies, but also kickstart the transformation of regenerative agriculture.

This is what we are trying to make happen in the state of California. At The Edible Schoolyard Project, we have come up with a pledge, and we have begun to ask politicians and educators to sign it. It is a pledge with three parts. Number One, that every school, from kindergarten to twelfth grade, provide a free, sustainable school lunch to all its students. Number Two, that every school will buy its food directly from farmers and ranchers who take care of the land and take care of their workers. And number three, that every public school teach its students the values of nourishment, stewardship, and community.

Brillat-Savarin said, “The destiny of nations depends on how they nourish themselves.” Forty-two percent of American meals are eaten alone. Think about that. It is time for all students to be able to sit down together, and share a meal each day, from kindergarten right up to the halls of every university in the world.

My most fervent wish for all of you is that you will cherish the memories of the wonderful meals you have had here with fellow students, tutors and professors. That throughout your life you will take time from your good work to sit down with family and friends, to be revitalized by great food, laughter and camaraderie; and that when the time comes, you will joyfully bring your children to the table to share these most basic human values with them.

One of the founders of gastronomy, Auguste Escoffier, once said “Good food is the foundation of genuine happiness.” And as you have learned in your time here, it is also a solid foundation for meaningful lives and strong communities. Now it’s up to you to start laying the bricks. Just don’t forget to pause for lunch.