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FOOD JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2008 ATLANTIC MONTHLY

A new university in Italy aims to elevate gastronomy to an academic discipline—and put its students through a humbling workout.

BY CORBY KUMMER

# Slow Food, High Gear

"**V**uoi pedalare?" Do you want to pedal? That was the insinuating, irresistible question put to travelers on the month-long *Viaggio sul Po*, a bike trip 150 students at Slow Food's [University of Gastronomic Sciences](#) took across northern Italy last fall following the valley of the once-mighty Po. Many of the students had spent the previous year preparing for the trip, which was designed to explore what remains of the riverine culture. They filmed interviews with farmers and fishermen who remembered when the river provided much of the populace with its livelihood. They mapped the region and its specialties. They even commented on prototypes of their bike, a 1950s no-gear design made by the cult bike maker Abici and painted in cool colors.




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**SLIDESHOW: A SLOW FOOD TOUR OF THE PO VALLEY**  
 Images from Slow Food University's *Viaggio sul Po* bicycle trip.

The trip was also designed to unite an institution still in its growing phase. Like most initiatives dreamed up by Carlo Petrini, [Slow Food](#)'s founder, the university began as an audacious idea. As Slow Food matured and went global, Petrini realized that he would need to train future leaders—of the movement itself, of the food and tourism industries, and of the government ministries capable of putting into practice many of the changes Slow Food advocates. For a campus, he chose a gorgeous Romanesque-revival castle built in the 1830s by the Savoy royal family as a summer lodge and agricultural research center in Pollenzo, three miles from Bra, the cozy but active small city 45 minutes from Turin where Petrini was born and where Slow Food is headquartered.

In his stump speech Petrini often derides "idiots with spoons" on television who offer an endless succession of "recipes, recipes, recipes." Gastronomy is interdisciplinary, he insists, involving economics, environmental science, history, biology, and anthropology—and social justice, the ideal that got him started in politics in the 1970s and that remains (along with pure pleasure in food and eating) the bedrock of the movement he founded in 1989. The university would be consistent with Slow Food's guiding principles of Good, clean, and fair."

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Petrini was not the first to want to put gastronomy on a par with other liberal arts. In the United States, Julia Child sought to establish a school of gastronomy in California. That effort failed, but she eventually had the satisfaction of seeing Metropolitan College, a part of Boston University, become the first U.S. school to grant a master's degree in gastronomy (the first person to teach in the new program was Jacques Pepin, who returns often). Several universities have followed suit, but so far no American liberal-arts college offers an undergraduate degree in gastronomy. No European university did, either, until Petrini's audacious idea began to take shape.

Pollenzo's place on the food map was assured when Piedmont's (and perhaps Italy's) most prestigious restaurant—Guido, legendary for its *agnolotti*—decided to relocate in a corner tower of the restored castle complex, which includes a small hotel and conference center. Guido's opening caused as much of a stir among international food lovers as that of the university, which welcomed its first class of 60 students in October of 2004.

In theory the school is bilingual, with courses offered in English and Italian. But a working knowledge of Italian is helpful to follow most classes and simply to get by in town. Though the current student body comes from 28 countries, it includes few Americans, who have so far been ineligible for student loans (the university offers scholarships against the tuition of 19,000 euros and is now applying for U.S. accreditation). Americans do, however, enroll in significant numbers in the master's program introduced two years ago at another former royal retreat near Parma, in the heart of prosciutto and Parmigiano-Reggiano country. It offers year-long courses tailored to English-speaking students (I teach writing seminars there).

The feature that distinguishes Slow Food's university is travel, and lots of it. Hands-on observation was always a fundamental part of Petrini's plan. Tuition includes five trips a year, each five to 14 days long. Three work-study trips, or "stages," in Italy introduce students to artisanal and industrial producers who cure ham and sausage, roast coffee, make pasta, press olive oil, brew craft beer, and the like; two longer trips examine an entire region's products in greater depth. For undergraduates these "territorial stages" progress from Italy to other European countries to other continents.



ALBERTO CAPATTI, the dean of the University of Gastronomic Sciences, leading his troops

Part rolling publicity stunt, part serious study, the *Viaggio sul Po* was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for both the students (who were required to go) and the several faculty members who decided to pedal along for all or part of the 24-day tour. Sometimes teachers held classes in the afternoon, after the day's biking and visits, but the academic content was light. The logistics of constant packing and unpacking, not to mention the biking itself, ruled out a heavy course load.

In a few days of pedaling in 20-to-40-kilometer spurts, I learned more than I usually would in a week of driving around doing research on my own. I joined a group visit to a cooperative that processes and braids garlic, and watched a farmer supervise the planting of acres of crushed garlic bulbs on her family's farm. She led me into a garage-like shed where the new crop is slowly heated to dry for storage and then spun in drums to sort the heads by size. The scent of warm garlic was overpowering. It seemed to permeate my viscera, as if I had entered the world's largest Chinese restaurant.

On another day, we saw fields of the region's famous *Chioggia radicchio*, the red chicory named for a town south of Venice near the delta where the Po meets the Adriatic. Long a malarial swamp, the delta was drained in the 19th century; during the 1960s, methane drilling lowered the water table, allowing Adriatic saltwater to submerge entire farms and villages that had lived on rice cultivation. But the sandy soil—crossing the fields was like walking on a beach—is still good for certain vegetables, including *radicchio*. The heads look like any

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sprawling lettuce: only the core is red. We watched, surprised, as women standing on a mechanical harvester tossed the green leaves—fully half of each head—behind the rolling machine.

Although most of the fish that sustained the communities along the Po vanished with the postwar rise of heavy industry, some processing centers remain, and aquaculture farms raise fish that could once be found in the wild—including sturgeon, the ancient, scale-less relative of the shark, formerly fished for its compact, Dover sole-like meat but now raised only for its eggs. At one farm the owner easily netted a sturgeon, which he described as an amiably dumb creature, from a shallow concrete pool. Just two feet long, unlike the leviathans of the Caspian Sea (almost extinct because of overfishing), it looked like a friendly iguana. I wanted to take it home as a pet.

Much of the education was cultural, and fun. At many stops students were greeted with concerts, including one performed on 17th-century violins in Cremona, home of the world’s most coveted string instruments. Two weeks into the trip, Gérard Depardieu turned up to join students at the restaurant where, more than 30 years before, the crew filming *Novocento* had dined every night. He reminisced about getting drunk with Robert De Niro the night he learned he had been nominated for his first Oscar.

At lunch the day before the trip’s end, students stretched out in the late-fall sun. Petrini, who pedaled occasionally with the group (and always at its head), clapped a hand on the shoulder of Luigi Lepore, a master’s graduate who had spent 10 very busy months helping to coordinate the expedition. “Next time, the Nile,” he said. “Two and a half years. On camelback. You’re in charge of logistics.” Lepore went pale.

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*Corby Kummer* is an Atlantic senior editor.

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