

Luca Talamo

August 31, 2015

Basilicata Cultural Society of Canada

Scholarship Application

What defines a culture? Without overindulging in a semantical analysis, I would say that a culture is defined by interactions between people, both within itself and outside of itself. Spending many a weekend of my childhood with my parents in the multicultural downtown core of Toronto, I have come to realize that the single most important unifying trait amongst and between cultures is food.

Growing up in an Italian-Canadian household, the importance of good cuisine was always instilled in me. My father, whose parents were from the small town of Palazzo San Gervasio, spoils me on a nightly basis with Basilicata specialties such as *pepe e patate*, *fave e chicoria*, and of course the always-welcome dessert of ricotta cake infused with hints of citrus zest. Even our typical Saturday lunches of *pane e formaggio*, although simple, are always full of distinct Basilicata flavours. From the olive oil which we dunk our bread in to the *pecorino* cheese which brings out the best aromas of our fruit (and as my dad likes to joke about, his homemade wine), the savoury tastes of traditional Basilicata cuisine are certainly upheld in my household. Aside from pleasing my palate, these dishes bring me back to simpler time which I wish I knew. My dad, being raised on the best traditions of this time, has made it his obligation to pass them on to my brother and me. The fact that my *nonno* passed away before I was born and my *nonna* passed away when I was too young to know her well have only strengthened this sense of duty.

Six years ago, my dad's aspirations were realized in an entirely new way when he brought us to Italy. While making our way around, we stopped in Matera for two nights to visit the *sassi*. I was amazed by the fact that people have been living in the same cave dwellings for thousands of years. The way that houses, modern relative to the number of years which people have inhabited the area, were seamlessly interspersed throughout the cavernous rocks was definitely a testament to human ingenuity. While making our way throughout the town, we stumbled upon a family-run wine cellar whose owner was kind enough to give us a tour. To our astonishment, his family had been making wine to sell in local shops for hundreds of years. He gleamed with pride as he told us this, knowing that he had just introduced us foreigners to the simple way of living which brought him much happiness. From this moment, it was made apparent to me that the values of the area were ones of humble roots and familial in nature. Although it was only my first time in the region, I felt his sense of pride extend to me as I realized that my grandparents came from a town with traditions and beliefs not unlike this man's. It was the next day that I was able to experience this realization first-hand.

After a day in Matera, my parents decided to take us on a short trip to Palazzo San Gervasio. An hour of serene driving through grass-covered mountains and rolling farmlands brought us to a town precariously perched upon a hill. Befitting of the name Palazzo San Gervasio, this town of roughly six thousand people appeared to crown the surrounding landscape, indeed a triumphant palace in the sky. Most noticeable was the Chiesa Matrice di San Nicola which, the day being Sunday, seemed to take on its weekly role of bustling city centre. As we scraped our way through the narrow streets of the town, a task made even more cumbersome by the locals perched on their white lawn chairs lining the edges of their houses' façades, we came upon a flat roofed house with a waterfall of hanging beads where the door

should have been. My parents told me and my brother that this was my dad's cousin's house and that we were just dropping by to say hello. Little did I know that it would be much better than a simple hello. As soon as we walked in, we were greeted by about twenty different family members who had just come from church and were preparing for their canonical Sunday Italian feast. Although this was only my dad's third time there and mine and my brother's first, everyone treated us as if we had known them for our entire lives. The entire family was quick to invite us to join them and after a cordial reluctance to impose on my parents' part they thankfully obliged.

The table was full of local *salami*, *mortadella*, *pecorino*, and *tomatoes*, more than any I had ever seen in my life. I was given a plate full of enough for two people which I joyously but naïvely finished off, thinking that this was the entire meal. Feeling like I couldn't eat anymore I sat back and gave myself time to digest...and then the *lasagna* came out. As full as I was, I couldn't help myself from finishing off the freshly made pasta with the sweet home-grown tomato *sugo*. I even found enough room to ask for seconds. I thought to myself, "surely after this there can't be anything else", but I was sorely mistaken. I looked at the kitchen door to see my dad's cousin emerge with the main attraction, a massive stuffed *coniglio in sugo*. Although I was reluctant to try it at first, I was convinced by my dad and, to the chagrin of my now full and aching stomach, I devoured two servings of the hearty and succulent meal. It wasn't long before the table was full of *percoche*, peaches native to the area which could be mistaken for small melons due to their size. Their aromatic scent filled the air and I knew I had to try them. These scents were only to be outdone by the sweet and juicy flavour of the fruits themselves. To this day, I still compare all other fruits in quality to the *percoche* I had the pleasure of enjoying that meal.

Being young and unfamiliar with the language, I was lost in my own little world of food, but my dad seemed to be having the time of his life talking to his cousins. The old adage “eat, drink, and be merry” certainly applied to him that day as they were all enjoying the feast and recollecting my dad’s first time there when he was six years old. I was able to make out one such story which my dad had told me many times before, but somehow hearing it in the *palazzese* dialect gave it a fresh breath of life. While in the town for the summer, my dad had been told by his parents to raise a rabbit as a “pet”. At the end of summer, his rabbit disappeared. He couldn’t figure out what happened to it but on the same day he enjoyed an amazing meal of *coniglio in sugo* much like the one we were having. To this day, whenever I hear that story, I can’t help but laugh at my dad’s innocence. Nevertheless, it was amazing to see everyone congregated around the Sunday feast. In my mind, this heritage-filled meal helped bring us all together to enjoy one of my fondest memories of my trip to Italy and my life. Despite the language barriers, I was still able to communicate with my dad’s cousin’s children, mostly about how I was enjoying the food. Looking back, I now realize why many celebrations are centred around food. Aside from being a luxury for the palate, food breaks down barriers and unites people from all over the world. One need only look at the thanksgiving feasts between the pilgrims and Native Americans to realize this. I am thankful that I was lucky enough to learn of the power of this universal language through exposure to my Basilicata roots.

I wholeheartedly thank you for considering me for this scholarship and would like to assure you that, if I won, it would go to great use. This September I will begin my studies at the University of Toronto in the Life Sciences program. I hope to study quantum physics and biology so that I may eventually apply both of them to research in biomedical physics. After my undergraduate degree, I intend to pursue the university’s MD/PhD program, whereby I would

become a medical doctor while having the ability to research and teach at the university. Having at least ten years of schooling left, this scholarship would help fuel my lofty ambitions by helping relieve both me and my parents of the attached financial burden. In doing so, I would be one step closer to achieving my dream of a fulfilling life full of learning. Hopefully, once I have established myself with a family, I can afford my children the same luxury which my parents afforded me and bring them to see their roots.