



## LECTIO MAGISTRALIS

SARAH WEINER

Thank you Professor Cinotto. Family, friends, professors, students, Presidente Petrini - I couldn't be more honored to be here at this unique university, in this 2,000-year old Roman town of Pollentia, together with fifty graduates about to officially become gastronomes.

An interesting thing about the Romans is that they used two types of thinking to explain the world. There was logical thinking – logos in Latin; but also – mythos – mythical storytelling. They employed both ways of thinking in matters both big and small, believing that neither method on its own could express the full scope of the human experience.

In a nod to Pollenzo's founders, it seems fitting to frame this rite of passage with some mythos, and I'd like to offer a myth that comes from my own ancestors – a long line of Eastern European Jews.

This story comes from the Ukraine, and is about a much loved, wise old rabbi named Zusha. It is said that on his deathbed, Zusha's disciples came from near and far to gather by his side. In those final hours, one of them asked:

“Zusha, are you calm and at peace as you move towards the Gates of Heaven?”

To everyone's surprise, he replied: “I'm troubled, and worried that when I meet the creator I will be found lacking.”

The students were in disbelief. “But Zusha, you have led a virtuous life. You have shown the integrity of Abraham, the founder of our people; the courage of Moses, who led us out of slavery; and the wisdom of King David!”

The wise old Zusha **replied**: “Well, I'm not worried about how to reply if I'm asked why I wasn't more like Abraham, or more like Moses, or more like King David. The answer to that is simple. I had not the natural gifts given to these great men. What worries me is what to say if I am asked ‘Why were you not more like **Zusha**?’ To that I will have no reply.”

This wise man's final lesson is that we are here to bring the varied gifts and interests inside of us into concrete expression in the world. Collectively, to create biodiversity, **not** monoculture. As all of us students of Slow Food know, biodiversity is the key to resilience, adaptation, and even survival. This applies just as much to modes of thinking and creative expression as it does to the crops we plant in our fields. **There is no excuse for not using this life to become fully, courageously ourselves.**

Maybe there are a few of my fellow graduates who came to this university on a pre-charted path to take over a family food or wine business, which would be a perfectly logical and virtuous choice. But I imagine that for the majority of this graduating class, pursuing gastronomic sciences was a step away from the expectations of others. A step towards listening to and honoring what fascinates and brings them joy.

Amongst the fifty graduates here today, there are no doubt fifty different reasons for studying gastronomic sciences. Perhaps for one of you, it was the realization that a single ingredient like salt or potatoes can change the course of history. For another, a passion for foraging and desire to bring the magic of wildcrafted foods to more people. A third might be fascinated by the social transformations that happen over a meal.

Whatever it was that spoke to each of you, rather than listening to the numerous voices that surrounds all of us from childhood, often painting a narrow picture of what a life well lived looks like, you chose to take a big, bold step; to follow the thread of curiosity, and the joy that comes with it, to this university and this graduation day.

The bad news is, the career of a gastronome doesn't come with a roadmap. Becoming more yourself often offers less security, certainty and clarity than walking down a well-worn, conventional life path. But the good news is, each of these graduates has found what they are truly and uniquely drawn to, and was willing to wholeheartedly move towards it.



There is a tremendous power in the seemingly simple decision of stepping onto a trail carved by your own curiosity and joy. It is exactly what the world needs now: individuals courageous enough to try new things, champion new norms, and connect the dots in new ways.

A generation that brings to life new models of success, new fields of study and new types of careers by leaning into what they find *within* themselves, rather than emulating the same old paths have that have led us to a world where equality, stewardship, and regeneration seem like ever more distant dreams.

Forty years ago, when Carlo and his merry band of pasta protestors held their first gathering in defiance of the opening of a McDonald's at the Spanish Steps in Rome, they chose an apt name for their movement. In contrast to the uniformity and disposability of fast food, "Slow Food" made sense. But for me, there is another word that has always embodied what this movement is about more fully than "slow" or "food."

That word is joy.

It's the tears of happiness and resignation I cried on my first trip to Bra, when I was invited to interview for a Slow Food internship by two strangers that took under their wing a 22 year old American with very big dreams to change the way America eats; and very few qualifications. Tears that came from knowing I was about to leave behind the comfort and security of my country, my home, my family and friends – and that the voice inside of me would allow no other choice, already smitten by this land and these people, and their way of weaving joy and conviviality into everything they do.

It's the contagious exuberance of Carlo Petrini, his fiery passion perfectly balanced with a readiness to laugh at any moment, **that infuses a sense of possibility into everything he touches**, a spirit that seems to permeate the very bricks of this university around us.

It's the countless espresso breaks taken during long days spent making the impossible into reality, evenings with colleagues who quickly become friends. I'm sure each of you have vivid memories of these last few years, filled with plenty of hard work, but always laced with joy, conviviality, and deliciousness. That is the DNA of Slow Food, the greatest gift and deepest lesson the University of Gastronomic Sciences can impart.

As Professor Cinotto mentioned, living here in Italy many years ago I learned the language, but more importantly, I learned the practice of weaving joy and conviviality into the everyday. That has been my secret weapon again and again. None of the projects Professor Cinotto mentioned could have ever succeeded without it.

They came to life because hundreds of people with varied expertise and connections were magnetized by the life-affirming, buoyant energy of joy, saying 'heck yeah' to giving their time and resources. As my mentor Alice Waters likes to say, "without the right people, a good idea is just an idea."

Joy is critical to launching projects, but its power goes far beyond that.

Joy is the **magnet** that attracts the right collaborators, it is a **clue** to knowing when you are on the right path, and it is the **fuel** that keeps us going when times get hard.

In this era of culture wars, fake news and political ugliness, joy has one more super power. In a sea of contentiousness, joy is so surprising, so unlikely, that it breaks through and grabs peoples' attention with startling swiftness and power. The more serious the conversation, the more unexpected and powerful it becomes.

For a brilliant example of what joy can do in the highest stakes situations, look no further than the current race for President of the United States of America. For many years, joy has not been part of the conversation in American politics. That all changed when Kamala Harris was nominated for the position. Known for her big laugh and for regularly cooking Sunday night dinner for her family; joy began to emerge as a theme in her campaign early on. Many of her supporters, including former Presidents, her running mate, and her husband, began speaking at public appearances not only about her qualifications, but also about her joy. A headline in the New York Times last month summed it up perfectly: "Harris Used to Worry About Laughing. Now Joy is Fueling Her Campaign."

And it's working: not only have national polls shown that her party is gaining ground, but just last week, Harris pulled ahead in Pennsylvania, the state that is likely to determine the next president of the United States.



There are as many ways to spread joy as there are flavors of gelato. I'm sure each of the fifty graduates has their own particular way, but I'd love to share one of my preferred vehicles of joy, and how it has opened paths to new opportunities.

It's called chocolate.

When I have an important meeting or conference, I've found it's never a bad idea to stuff my purse with chocolate. And I'll tell you, it's very effective.

Through an unlikely series of events, I was once invited to a gathering of millionaires, celebrities and power brokers in the ski resort town of Aspen, Colorado. Never before and never since have I seen so many well heeled and well known people.

In every conceivable way, I was the least recognizable person there.

Amidst this intimidating group I knew I needed a strategy. So every time I met someone, I pulled a Good Food Award winning bar of chocolate from my purse. "This is what I do," I'd say, pointing to the little blue award winners seal, "Please keep it!"

By the second day, I was no longer an unknown in a sea of well-known faces. Rumors of the chocolate lady had spread far enough that when I found myself across the table from the founder of The Huffington Post, a news website with 25 million readers a month, before I could muster up the courage to introduce myself she leaned over said: "I know you. You're the girl with the chocolate in her purse, aren't you?"

For an introvert like me, it's tremendously helpful when potential new collaborators have a reason to seek you out rather than the other way around. At that same gathering I got to know Zeke Emanuel, a global expert on public health and a special advisor to President Obama, and, I discovered, a big fan of chocolate. It wasn't long before we became friends, and soon he agreed to be the master of ceremonies at the Good Food Awards, bringing a new level of gravitas to the growing project. And, while he was at the awards ceremony, he met Shawn Askinoisie, a lawyer turned award winning chocolate maker who invests his profits into building schools and infrastructure in Tanzania. It wasn't long before Zeke was on a flight to visit smallholder cocoa farmers in Africa, and raising tens of thousands of dollars for Shawn't projects there.

Chocolate is powerful stuff, and so is the joy it spreads. It has a way of cutting through differences and pretense, bringing us to that simple, open place where we feel our generosity and optimism, where we follow our best impulses, and where collaborations can truly take off.

Congratulations to all the graduates for finding and listening to the voice inside of you, for being willing to risk becoming more yourself and bringing what is uniquely you into the world. And congratulations on choosing an unusual but exactly right education for this moment in time. Use the knowledge, the friendships you have gained here well, and whatever you do, wherever you go, bring with you the joy of this place and this time. I promise it will always serve you well.

Thank you.