

Studying Roman Foodways—Cultural Immersion

More than ever, Rome is attracting visitors just for the food. The deliberate exchange of culinary culture via ethnogastrotourism—cooking classes and vacation packages catering directly to those interested in learning and exchanging ideas about culinary practices, lore, and traditions. Interest in these endeavors is, however, a double-edged sword in that traditions easily become commodities of romanticism, modeled and packaged for ready sale to a public eager for an “authentic” experience. The line between folklore and fakelore is willfully blurred, particularly when the economy is sluggish and foreign customers are clamoring for the goods.

One center a cut above and beyond many offerings for gastronomic cultural exchange in Rome is Gustolab International Institute for Food Studies. Gustolab aims specifically at structuring an educational environment that combines local community engagement and a broad range of cross-disciplinary courses within the ambit of culinary studies. From their base in Rome, students and researchers explore issues of agribusiness, consumption trends, the sociology and history of foodways, sustainability, waste, mobility, and nutrition, in addition to language courses specifically designed for those pursuing interests in Italian Food Studies. Rome in its ever-expanding role as a global megacity is an ideal laboratory from which to examine how these issues play out locally, and, in turn, how the same scenario is expressed globally. Part of the mission of the institute is to provide a scholarly and experiential foundation derived from both urban and rural Roman contexts, whose end is not intended as a means of comparison between “home and Rome,” but as an expedient to nurture and encourage a broad spectrum, critical vision of the interconnectedness of food studies issues in all of their manifestations.