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1. Summary:

In the United States, where the majority of accessible information is aimed towards convincing its audience to indulge in whatever opinion or product being presented, one ought to pause for a moment and reflect upon the question 'How do we access and understand the very core of our various different cultures?' After reflecting upon this question for the past several months, it would seem that one may be able to follow the path of food to deduce what the centrifugal thinking of an entire culture may be. By means of Michael Pollan's quest across the nation in Omnivore's Dilemma, Barbara Kingsolver's farming escapade in Animal, Vegetable, Mineral, and now, Elizabeth Gilbert's expedition in Eat, Pray, Love to enrich her soul via food in Italy, one is exposed to a plethora of intense emotional connects and disconnects to the food in which we consume; furthermore, it is truly evident throughout these sources that whatever sits at the core of one's culture is at least in some way reflected in the way in which they relate to food. In Gilbert's detailed account of her experiences of Italian society, it seems safe to say that Italy contains a culture which cultivates its daily lifestyle around food, and all the while emanates a deep seeded desire to continuously seek pleasure in all facets.

In Gilbert's detailed description of Italy, one is quickly whisked away to a place where the native language flows like honey from the lips, the food creates a canvas for personal expression, and the combination of the two creates a way of life that illuminates the importance of one embracing the Self into the equation of daily life. In her account of her first meal in Rome, Gilbert attests to her experience of walking home after her indulgence and

provides a moment of profound connection to herself that was indeed implied to have been the result of her delectable food. “I climbed the stairs to my apartment, lay down in my new bed and turned off the light. I waited to start crying or worrying, since that’s what usually happened to me with the lights off, but I actually felt OK. I felt fine. I felt the early symptoms of contentment. My weary body asked my weary mind: ‘Was this all you needed, then?’ There was no response. I was fast asleep.” (36) This passage so clearly expresses the possibility that food, when one slows down long enough to enjoy it, can indeed invoke a certain peace within the Self to nourish more than just the body, but the mind and heart as well.

It is undeniable that Gilbert instills this contagious sentiment that food is the key to understanding the Italian culture’s very central ideology—the continuous invitation of pleasure. This interpretation is not to insinuate that every minute detail of the Italian culture is dripping in pleasantries and perfections, but it is certainly the case that the way in which the people of this culture embrace their lives is certainly motivated by the recognition of how important pleasure is to one’s Self. She makes certain to illustrate the intense contrast between Italian culture and American culture, especially with this point of Italy being a pleasure seeking culture, and America seemingly a culture in need of permission from its industry giants to proceed with a pleasurable activity.

For me, though, a major obstacle in my pursuit of pleasure was my ingrained sense of Puritan guilt. Do I really deserve this pleasure? This is very American, too—the insecurity about whether we have earned our happiness. Planet advertising in America orbits completely around the need to convince the uncertain consumer that yes, you have actually warranted a special treat. This bud’s for you!...And then comes the reactionary binge. Followed by the remorse. Such advertising campaigns would probably not be as effective in the Italian culture, where people already know that they are entitled to enjoyment in this life. The reply in Italy to “You Deserve a Break Today” would probably be, *Yeah, no duh....*” (62)

What is incredible about this notion of pleasure is that it is so seemingly intertwined with the perception of food in Italy. The customs here seem to resonate in the flavors of the food as if the culture itself simmers in the pleasure of creating it, selling it, and of course, eating it. As food finds its way into the mouths of the Italians, the language which escapes from their lips seem to be a transformation of food into an eloquent stream of utterances that communicate rich experiences.

As Gilbert accentuates the incredible pleasure of both eating and speaking Italian, she also adds a certain sensuality to the experiences she has with food. She undeniably possesses an ability to use language to portray an incredibly intimate interaction with the food found in this country. Her description of the grapes at a small vegetable stand is full of such vivid imagery and connection when she expresses that the "...champagne colored grapes with skins [are] as tight as a showgirl's leotard." (63) Another instance of this intimation is when she has found the "best pizza in the world" and says, "I love my pizza so much, in fact, that I have come to believe in my delirium that my pizza might actually love me, in return. I am having a relationship with my pizza, almost an affair." (79) Her relationship to Italian food and Italian language almost seems to burst with a certain fervor that is typically unrelated to both of these components of our own Western culture. "The mushrooms here are like big thick sexy tongues, and the prosciutto drapes over pizzas like a fine lace veil draping over a fancy lady's hat." (98) All the while her love for the vernacular of this magical place also instills a similar passion. "I can speak this language! The kid thinks I like him, but it's the words I am flirting with. My God—I have decanted myself! I have uncorked my tongue, and Italian is pouring forth!" (99) This incredible journey of language and food brings about a certain recognition that sustenance in

life is made up of both of these things, and that it can be through the beauty of words that one may prepare the muscles of the tongue to taste the aesthetic component of the food that is set before them.

2. Evaluation:

It is quite clear that Elizabeth Gilbert is speaking from a very internal and subjective place while describing her experience of the incredible Italian culture that surrounds her. As she finds herself in a pivotal life moment after her divorce, she is in search of an internal healing, and quietude. Guided by this internal longing, she journeys through this exquisite slow food nation and provides an account of how her experiences in Italy have influenced her within. It is important to note the rhythm and tempo of her experiences of the food and language and how they seem so calm and savored. This reminded me of previous discussions we have had in regards to the idea of a connected slow food movement versus an alienated fast food industrial nation. This idea of true connection to food cultivates a certain relationship to the Self that could be indeed said to recognize the power of food and its intrinsic ability to provide a connection to an inner world that resembles one of spirituality and divinity. I was quite fondly reminded of the excerpts from *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* where Bynum discussed the incredible divine connection and passion that the women had to food, especially that of the Eucharist.

“It frequently happened at that time that, when the priest received the holy communion at the altar, as the custom was, she, in the intensity of her desire, received with her mouth at the self same moment the most sacred pledge of the host of the Savior (brought, we believe, by a ministering angel) and discerned it with the sense of taste and even chewed it with her teeth.” (117)

Although the experiences of Gilbert in Italy are not necessarily correlated to a particular orthodox religion, she does indeed encapsulate the importance of treating food with

recognition of its powerful ability to transcend one's mentality to a place that is wholly other than one's Self.

3. Wider Relevance:

This course has had at its center this constant question of how the studies of both humanities and religious studies are able to contribute to the discussion of sustainability. What one must further examine in this case is in what ways Gilbert is presenting information that does indeed contribute to furthering this discussion, and a logical conclusion seems to be that her account of embracing the aesthetics of the Italian culture through food, art and language and their deeply embedded roots in the Italian culture, necessitates a certain recognition of future generations to also be able to indulge in such luxuries, i.e. sustainability. Even the artwork of Rome depicts this connection.

"In the center of this fountain is a frolicking bronze family. Dad is a faun and Mom is a regular human woman. They have a baby who enjoys eating grapes. Mom and Dad are in a strange position—facing each other, grabbing each other's wrists, both of them leaning back. It's hard to tell whether they are yanking against each other in strife or swinging around merrily, but there's lots of energy there. Either way, Junior sits perched atop their wrists, right between them, unaffected by their merriment or strife, munching on his bunch of grapes."(37)

This imagery seems to encompass exactly what we ought to be striving for in regards to sustainability. Whether we go through strife or merriment, we must be conscientious to the needs of our children, and we must center our decisions around preserving the option for them to sit gaily amongst us, enjoying the sweet indulgences of life. So perhaps what Gilbert has depicted through her experiences in Italy that the more we connect our culture through the aesthetics food, language or art, the closer we become to sustaining the world for our future generations. More specifically, if we integrate food into the same sacred category as art or language finds its way into, our cultures will perhaps begin to recognize the importance of

sustainable food production and a slowing down to embrace its presence. There becomes a sacred connection that presents itself via food, which in turn cultivates a constant awareness for those who are to come after our own time has expired.