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Truffle Hunting for Health

By: Jena Wood MS, RD, LDN

Truffle hunting, vineyard pruning, coffee tasting, creating traditional Mediterranean recipes and tending to goats are not activities you typically find on the itinerary for a dietitian's education. But the more I reflect on the experiences I had during a 5-week field study in Umbria, Italy while completing my Master of Science in Community Nutrition from West Chester University, I realize they are among the most vital experiences I've had in my entire education.

Now, as a professional Registered Dietitian at a West Chester supermarket, I am able to bring my experiences from Umbria to West Chester daily through my cooking classes, culinary demonstrations, and consultations.

The bulk of my ethnographic research took place on the fertile soil of a legume farm and vineyard overlooking Lake Trasimeno. Although my Italian language skills aren't strong, I diligently took notes from the caring farmer who demonstrated true passion



Jena Wood at Di Filippo, a biodynamic vineyard outside of Assisi, Italy

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for preserving Italian culture and sharing his traditions with anyone who would listen. When the Tuscan sun became too overbearing to work in the field, we headed to the kitchen to create classic Umbrian dishes like *torta al testo*. This deceptively simple flatbread is steeped in historical significance. In Umbria during the 1500s, the reigning Pope raised the tax on salt, making daily cooking a costly task. To rebel, the Umbrian people chose to forego salt in their bread and still do today. The farmer's family also shared family recipes and techniques for homemade pasta, *fagiolini* (beans), jams, and even spreads made from lard—all foods deemed taboo according to the latest diet trends. But creating these meals with purpose and care on the land they were grown gave these foods a new perspective. Everything was used or repurposed, and nothing was taken for granted. Food is undoubtedly meant to nourish, but it truly does so much more. Experiencing this holistic view of food was refreshing and a reminder for myself—we need to eat to live, but living to eat is okay too.

After my field study, which is offered annually through a partnership between The Umbra Institute and West Chester University, I realized how much more inclusive, hands-on, and culturally competent my education and nutrition practice could be. No two cultures or people eat alike, and they rightly shouldn't. I strive to create a "one size doesn't fit all" approach to how I interact with my customers, clients, and students. The most significant lesson I learned from my trip is that it's never too late to get back in touch with your eating habits and facilitate a culture of mindful eating, but the sooner we experience this the better. Thinking of my time in Italy, I try to notice the minute details in my customers' health and food history, to better help them make the most meaningful dietary changes.

There is a famous proverb: Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; show him how to catch a fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. In my career, I hope to continue facilitating experiential learning for my clients—showing them 'where the fish came from, how to catch it, and why we eat it.' This will undoubtedly create a ripple effect in that proverbial and fertile lake.



Jena Wood attending a plant-based foods cooking class at The Umbra Institute, Perugia, Italy

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