

Forum Synergies scholarship 2025 - Final Report

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Host Institution: Castel di Potentino, Tuscany, Italy

Scholarship Programme: Forum-Synergies

Tutor/Mentor: Charlotte Horton, Founder and Director

Period: 22.09.2025 - 04.10.2025



Executive Summary

My two-week traineeship at Castello di Potentino represents far more than a conventional agricultural internship. It constituted an immersive educational experience that bridged historical preservation, sustainable agricultural practice, contemporary cultural enterprise and reflective inquiry into gender dynamics in rural and professional contexts. During this period, I gained practical hands-on knowledge in viticulture, olive oil production and estate management while simultaneously engaging with the broader intellectual and philosophical mission that animates Castello di Potentino as a unique cultural institution. Through mentorship of Charlotte Horton, whose pioneering work in winemaking and estate restoration has garnered international recognition, I developed a nuanced understanding of how tradition and innovation can coexist and how individual vision and resilience can transform the trajectory of rural communities.

Part I: The Setting and Historical Context

The Landscape and Geography

Castello di Potentino is situated in the Monte Amiata region of southern Tuscany, one of the most geologically significant and least commercialized areas in the province. The Amiata itself is an extinct volcano whose mineral-rich volcanic soils have, for centuries, provided ideal conditions for viticulture and olive cultivation. The castle lies in a "secret valley" - a remote corner of Tuscany characterized by unspoilt countryside, ancient olive groves and terraced vineyards that have shaped the region's agricultural identity for over a millennium.

Its remoteness, far from being a liability, has preserved the area's authenticity and allowed Castello di Potentino to develop as a working estate rather than purely as a heritage monument. The landscape surrounding the castle - with its forests and historic pathways - tells the story of centuries of human settlement, agricultural labor and resilience in the face of economic and social change.



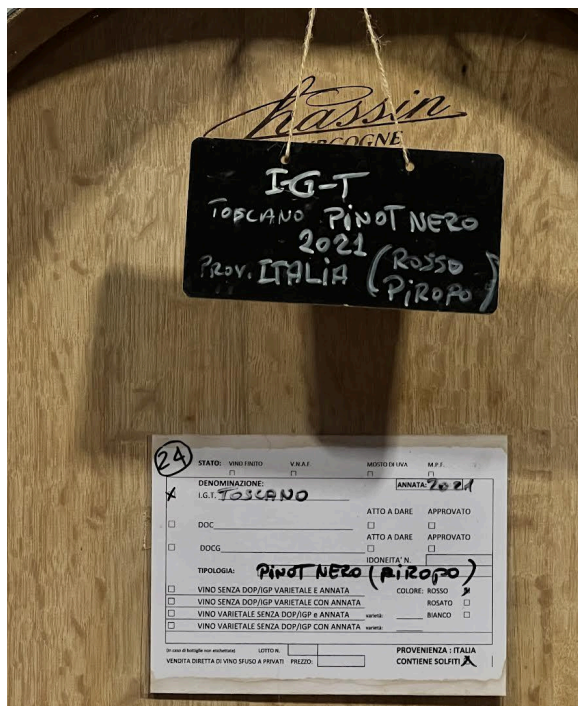
Part II: The Contemporary Mission and Philosophical Foundation

A Living Estate, Not a Monument

What distinguishes Castello di Potentino from many other restored Tuscan properties is that it functions as a genuinely living, working agricultural estate rather than as a static heritage monument. The estate operates on several interconnected levels. At its core, it remains an active farm, producing wine, olive oil, vegetables and maintaining livestock. The viticultural enterprise is sophisticated and seriously undertaken, yielding award-winning wines under the Potentino label. The kitchen gardens provide seasonal produce for residents and guests, reinforcing principles of food sovereignty and sustainability. This agricultural foundation is not merely decorative, it is philosophically central to the estate's identity.

Simultaneously, Castello di Potentino has established itself as an intellectual and cultural hub. The castle regularly hosts scientific expeditions, university groups, artists, writers and researchers. These visitors come to study sustainable land management, wine production, or ecology. The estate also organizes documentary festivals, food and wine events and cultural conferences. In this respect, Potentino functions as a bridge between academic knowledge systems and practical agricultural expertise - a place where theoretical understanding encounters embodied experience.

The Philosophy of Integration



The underlying philosophy at Castello di Potentino rests on the conviction that agriculture, culture and intellectual life need not be separated, rather, they can be mutually enriching. Charlotte articulates this through her commitment to "the sustainability of how we inhabit a place and relate to it physically and mentally." This formulation encompasses environmental sustainability, economic viability, cultural continuity and psychological wellbeing.

This integrated approach reflects a critique of modern fragmentation - the tendency to separate consumption from production, culture from agriculture, leisure from labor. At Potentino, eating and drinking are understood as intrinsically connected to growing food and wine with care and intention.

The communal meals shared by residents, staff, guests and visitors reinforce this philosophy. They are not mere dining events, they are rituals that acknowledge the labor embedded in every plate and glass and that affirm the human connections that make community life possible.

Part III: Charlotte Horton - Visionary Leadership and Female Pioneer in Agriculture

Women in Agriculture: Breaking Barriers, Changing Narratives

Charlotte Horton is the animating force behind Castello di Potentino's transformation and ongoing mission. With over two decades of experience in winemaking and estate management, she has established herself as one of the most accomplished and respected figures in contemporary Tuscan viticulture.

One of the most intellectually significant aspects of my traineeship involved extended conversations with Charlotte about the particular challenges and opportunities facing women in agriculture, viticulture and rural estate management. These discussions revealed complex, persistent gender dynamics that often remain invisible in mainstream narratives about rural life and wine production.

Charlotte articulated how, despite her extensive technical knowledge, international reputation and demonstrable success in establishing and managing a sophisticated agricultural enterprise, she has faced consistent skepticism and underestimation from male colleagues and local Italian communities. In Italian cultural contexts particularly, women's authority in viticulture is often questioned or minimized. Men are frequently presumed to possess greater technical expertise, deeper understanding of winemaking processes, or more legitimate claims to agricultural knowledge. This gender bias operates subtly - through doubts about decision-making capacity, assumptions that a woman's involvement is secondary or supportive rather than primary and visionary.



Her story offers several important insights for contemporary discussions about gender equity in agriculture and rural professions. First, it demonstrates that women's underrepresentation in these fields is not attributable to lack of aptitude, interest, or capability, but rather reflects structural barriers, cultural biases and institutional practices that systematically advantage men. Furthermore, her example suggests that movements toward gender equity in agriculture and viticulture require not only individual women challenging stereotypes but also systemic changes in how agricultural knowledge is valued, how expertise is recognized and how leadership opportunities are distributed.

Part IV: My Lived Experience - Learning Through Labor

Winemaking and Post-Production Work

Wine production is the cultural heartbeat of Castello di Potentino. During my traineeship, I was integrated into various stages of the winemaking process, providing hands-on support and developing practical understanding of how grapes are transformed into finished products.

My most consistent involvement centered on post-production activities. After fermentation, when wines are ready for distribution, the equipment and spaces require meticulous cleaning and maintenance. I participated in washing and sterilizing barrels, tanks and production tools - work that is physically demanding and requires attention to detail. These tasks, while perhaps seeming peripheral to the "glamorous" aspects of winemaking, are absolutely essential to wine quality. Bacterial contamination, residual sediment, or inadequate sanitation can compromise an entire vintage. Through this work, I understood viscerally how wine production depends on countless unglamorous, labor-intensive steps that never appear on elegant labels or tasting notes.



I also participated in the labeling of finished wine bottles - a process that seemed straightforward until I engaged in it directly. Applying labels at a consistent angle, ensuring they adhere properly, maintaining quality control to catch any imperfections or misalignments requires focus and dexterity. Watching a single bottle move through multiple stages of labeling, packaging and quality control made me appreciate the integration of craft precision with industrial efficiency that characterizes contemporary small-batch wine production.

Through conversations with Charlotte and other team members, I learned about fermentation and storage methodologies - both traditional approaches that have been refined over centuries and contemporary scientific understanding of yeast, temperature control and oak aging. Charlotte explained her philosophy regarding which wines benefit from extended barrel aging (developing complexity and mellow tannins) versus those best released younger to preserve freshness and fruit-forward characteristics. These decisions require knowledge that is simultaneously technical and intuitive, rooted in accumulated experience and sensory expertise.

Agricultural Work: Gardens, Orchards, and Land Stewardship



The food production systems at Castello di Potentino exemplify an approach to agriculture fundamentally different from industrial monoculture. The kitchen gardens produce seasonal vegetables - tomatoes, zucchini, leafy greens, herbs - that provide nutrition for residents and guests. The work of maintaining these gardens involves understanding soil health, seasonal cycles, pest management, water needs and the particular characteristics of different plant varieties.

I participated in planting vegetables, learning the proper spacing, depth, and soil preparation that different species require. I watered plants during dry periods, worked with soil maintenance and helped prepare garden beds for new plantings. This work connected me viscerally to seasonal rhythms that are often abstracted or invisible in urban contexts.

Understanding this temporal reality - that food production is ultimately subject to natural cycles that humans can influence but not entirely control - provides an important corrective to the sense of unlimited consumer choice that industrial agriculture creates.

The olive groves represent a longer temporal scale. The work of maintaining these groves - cutting and clearing grass around the trees to protect soil health and facilitate harvesting, pruning branches to promote new growth, preparing trees for the annual harvest - connects contemporary labor to generations of previous stewardship. When cutting grass around an ancient olive tree, one is participating in a practice that has been repeated thousands of times in this same location across centuries.



Animal Care and the Rhythms of Farm Life

The livestock at Castello di Potentino - primarily chickens, though the estate also includes dogs are integral to the property's functioning and ethos. I participated in daily feeding and egg collection, tasks that seem simple but that actually embody important principles about human-animal relationships and food production.

Feeding the chickens required learning their habits, understanding their nutritional needs, recognizing individual animals within the flock and ensuring they had shelter and protection. Collecting eggs daily meant visiting the chickens regularly, observing their condition and wellbeing and recognizing egg production patterns that might signal health problems. This repeated, intimate contact with animals creates a relational awareness quite different from the abstracted relationship consumers have with poultry in industrial food systems. The chickens at Potentino are not anonymous units in a production process, they are recognized individuals whose wellbeing matters.

This practice reflects a philosophical stance about food production that acknowledges the reality of animal death in food systems while insisting on humane treatment and recognition during animals' lives. It represents a middle path between industrial agriculture's systematic deindividuation of animals and contemporary urban vegetarian/vegan perspectives that sometimes abstract away from the material realities of food production altogether.

Communal Domestic Work

Perhaps unexpectedly, some of my most educationally valuable experiences involved communal cooking and household maintenance. Meals at Castello di Potentino are social events that affirm community bonds and celebrate the estate's agricultural production. I participated in meal preparation - chopping vegetables from the garden, preparing pasta, cooking sauces, setting tables. This work was intertwined with conversation, laughter and the transmission of practical knowledge about cooking techniques, seasonal ingredients and the aesthetic and nutritional dimensions of food.

Household maintenance - cleaning, organizing, general tidying - might seem marginal to agricultural education, but in the context of a working estate where residents, guests, researchers and workers overlap, maintaining functional and welcoming spaces is essential to community life.



Part V: Broader Reflections and Educational Insights

The Integration of Theory and Practice

One of my most significant realizations during this traineeship was how Castello di Potentino functions as a site where theoretical knowledge and practical expertise continually inform and enrich one another. The scientific expeditions, university groups and artist residencies that visit the castle bring sophisticated intellectual frameworks - about ecology, history, aesthetics, rural sustainability. These perspectives encounter the embodied, practical knowledge of people who work daily with the land, plants, animals and buildings. Neither form of knowledge supersedes the other, instead, they create productive tensions and mutual enrichments.

This integration has immediate practical significance. Understanding the biochemistry of fermentation allows for more intentional decision-making about temperature control and timing. Historical knowledge about the castle's evolution through centuries informs restoration choices. Ecological expertise supports decisions about land management and biodiversity. Yet practical experience grounds these theoretical frameworks in material reality and constrains them to feasibility. Theory without practice becomes abstraction, practice without theory remains local and limited in scope.

Sustainability Beyond Environmental Discourse



The concept of sustainability, much invoked in contemporary environmental discourse, often remains somewhat abstract. At Castello di Potentino, sustainability emerges as a concrete, daily practice. The estate produces much of its own food, sources materials locally when possible, maintains long-term relationships with workers and communities and prioritizes soil health and biodiversity. These practices are driven not primarily by environmental ideology but by practical recognition that such approaches work - they produce excellent products, maintain community relationships and preserve the possibility of continued production across generations.

This distinction is important. Rather than sustainability being imposed as an external requirement or moral imperative, it emerges from the logic of how the estate actually functions. Small-scale producers cannot externalize environmental costs the way industrial operations can, they must live with the consequences of their practices. This creates inherent incentives toward sustainability that larger, more abstracted operations lack.

Gender, Labor and Recognition

My interview with Charlotte and my observations of daily work at the castle deepened my understanding of how gender shapes experiences of labor, authority and recognition. The physical, intellectual and managerial work required to operate an estate like Castello di Potentino is substantial and multifaceted. Yet because much of this work is historically associated with women (cooking, household management, animal care) or is performed by women in a male-dominated field (viticulture, land management), it often receives less recognition or prestige than comparable work in other contexts.

Charlotte's insistence on full recognition for her knowledge and achievements is not merely personal assertion, it is a necessary correction to systemic patterns of undervaluing women's contributions. Her example illustrates that gender equity requires not only removing formal barriers but also transforming cultural narratives about whose expertise counts, whose leadership is recognized and whose vision shapes institutional directions.

The Question of Scalability and Alternatives

A question that emerged during my time at Potentino concerns the relationship between models like this estate and the broader systems of food production and rural land use that characterize the contemporary world. Castello di Potentino functions effectively, produces excellent products, supports a multi-generational community and maintains environmental and cultural values - yet it operates at a small scale, requires significant intellectual and financial resources to establish and maintain and depends on particular historical circumstances and individual commitment.

This raises genuine questions about scalability. Small-scale, integrated estates like Potentino achieve their environmental and social benefits partly through their smallness, which allows for attentive management and relationship-based decision-making. The tension between these models seems structurally inherent rather than easily resolvable through better policies or technologies.

Yet I also came to appreciate that examples like Castello di Potentino serve important functions beyond their direct material production. They demonstrate possibilities - they show that alternative ways of organizing agricultural labor, of relating to land and of integrating culture and production are feasible. They provide spaces where people can experience and learn these alternatives. They contribute to broader cultural conversations about what we value and what kinds of futures we want to create.



Part VI: Personal Development and Future Directions

Skills and Knowledge Gained

This traineeship provided me with concrete practical skills in viticulture, olive oil production, garden management and estate operations. I developed competence in winemaking equipment, understanding of fermentation processes, experience with seasonal agricultural cycles and familiarity with the various systems that maintain a functioning estate. These skills have direct applicability to agricultural work, estate management, or food production enterprises.

Beyond technical skills, I developed a deeper understanding of sustainable agricultural practices, integrated land management and the possibilities for food production systems. I gained insight into how historical preservation and contemporary functionality can be integrated. I learned practical knowledge about community organization, multi-generational teamwork and the creation of spaces where diverse people can work together effectively. Moreover, I developed a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in rural and professional contexts, informed by direct observation and extended conversations with someone whose lived experience encompasses these complexities.



My traineeship at Castello di Potentino has provided both a foundation for potential future work in agricultural enterprises, estate management or food production and a deeper platform for thinking about broader questions of sustainability, gender equity, community organization and the integration of culture and economics. I am considering whether further formal education in viticulture, sustainable agriculture, or related fields might deepen these initial explorations. I am also reflecting on how the insights gained here about alternative organizational models and gender dynamics might inform my engagement with other professional and community contexts.

Conclusion

My two weeks at Castello di Potentino constituted far more than a conventional agricultural traineeship. I was integrated into a genuine working community, participated in the daily rhythms and activities that sustain an integrated agricultural and cultural enterprise and engaged with individuals whose life work exemplifies the possibility of alternative ways of organizing labor, inhabiting places and creating meaning.

Most profoundly, my conversations with Charlotte Horton and my observations of daily life at the castle provided concrete, lived understanding of how gender shapes experiences of

professional authority, labor and recognition, how women pioneer in traditionally male-dominated fields navigate persistent biases and how individual commitment, strategic intelligence and refusal to accept limiting narratives can gradually transform systems and create possibilities for those who follow.

I leave Castello di Potentino with practical skills, deeper understanding of agricultural systems and sustainable practices, intellectual insights about alternative organizational models and renewed conviction that another world - built on principles of integration, care, sustainability and equity - is not merely theoretically possible but actually being created through the committed work of individuals and communities willing to pursue long-term transformation.

I am profoundly grateful to Charlotte Horton, to the team at Castello di Potentino and to the Forum-Synergies scholarship programme for making this transformative experience possible.

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