

From Industrial Agriculture to Community Culture

Interview with Grazia Mammuccini

The Tuscan government was the first region of Italy to pass a law to protect local agricultural varieties and breeds from extinction. This has helped revive not only the agriculture and ecology of Tuscany but also its economy, culture and cuisine. ARSIA, the Regional Agency for Development and Innovation in Agriculture and Forestry, has played a central part in this transformation. There are two planks to its conservation policy: one is setting up a regional seed bank, located in the botanical gardens of Lucca; the other is establishing a network of "farmer guardians." Maria Grazia Mammuccini is director of ARSIA, Tuscany.

SGI Quarterly: Can you describe what your agency does?

Grazia Mammuccini: The Regional Agency for Development and Innovation in Agriculture and Forestry (ARSIA) is a technical and scientific agency for the region of Tuscany, which encourages links between scientists and researchers, farmers and rural communities. In the last 15 years, we have changed farming in the region from industrial to local agriculture, based on biodiversity.

One of the positive steps toward this was the law to ensure the protection and development of the natural heritage of local breeds and varieties, which the region of Tuscany passed in two phases, in 1997 and 2004.

With this law, which was overseen by ARSIA, we have identified 690 different local varieties, of which 568 are at risk of becoming extinct. This was a major undertaking for us, because farmers and local communities were able to come to us and say, "We have these varieties, come and monitor them." If they had an identifiable variety, we could add them onto the list. We could conserve the different species and start cultivating them again. So we restarted the idea of farmer guardians, who maintain all the varieties, plant them and then collect them to keep them going, giving the seeds to the local seed bank.

We started to work on the land, getting to know the different species and to cultivate them not only for the seed bank but also for sale and consumption. Then we had to establish markets to sell these varieties which are not adapted to global markets: as there is a reduced quantity of yield, it has to be sold locally. So we also started farmers' markets; shops for farmers to sell their products locally, and now, after 10 years of hard work, the situation in the region has really changed.



A farmers' market: Tuscany has moved toward a direct sale system whereby farmers make direct contact with consumers at markets or in shops. This "short chain" system of selling means that the farmers set the value of their own products while allowing consumers to assess the quality for themselves and become reacquainted with farm culture. [Carla Lazzaratto]

SGIQ: What was the reaction of the farmers when you started this program?

GM: It was not easy. From the farmers' point of view, they risked not having the means to make the changes, so the intervention of a publicly funded institution was vital. If the public institution keeps going, however, the small businesses will follow the strategies for themselves. We encourage the participation of young people and women. They are very motivated for economic reasons--they can find a means of work--as well as for ethical reasons, to develop a good way of life. So we have helped a lot, by activating the network. Through the network people exchange ideas and information and help each other out. We give them a hand, whilst alone they cannot do it. Right now, the small farmers are benefiting from biodiversity.

SGIQ: How do you maintain the seed bank?

GM: Each year we package the seeds and put them in a refrigerator to keep them at the same temperature. Then the farmer guardians come to us to take the seeds and sow them. Now the bank of local seeds is in the process of becoming a network, in which scientific institutions as well as farmers are involved. We also have



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tree growers--olive farmers and vineyard keepers and a network of tree keepers, which, in addition to the seed banks, makes up the total bank for local strains and varieties in Tuscany. Now we have nine sections of the bank.

SGIQ: Are you connected with similar projects in other parts of the world?

GM: We started this idea in 1997, without knowing about the work of Dr. Vandana Shiva, but in 2000 we started to collaborate with her. Up until then we had thought of preserving biodiversity for scientific ends, but, with her example, we realized that by giving back seeds to agriculture, a local government institution can completely change agriculture.

Regional Revival

SGIQ: How would this also change the culture and cuisine of the region?

GM: Because seeds are the origin of so many things, you have to actually change the economy of the region, in the sense that we have scientifically researched the local products, the local strains and varieties. Biodiversity is not just cultivation; it is also culture and tradition--local understanding which is tied to that product. Maintaining biodiversity means looking after the plants and the animals too; and all the knowledge of how to cook them, to conserve them and to give them their own cultural dimension. This has helped many local regions rediscover their own identity, many of them through a local product. From culture comes traditions, festivals, family knowledge. The change in agriculture has helped to regenerate links at a local level.

SGIQ: So it's like a renaissance?

GM: With a system of industrial agriculture, rural culture seems useless because all the understanding comes from technology, not from the rural population; but with the reintroduction of biodiversity, local populations have reclaimed their own. There is a very fruitful exchange between science and local knowledge, which is highly appropriate to the challenges of sustainability. It was vital for Tuscany to make this change because 80 percent of farms in Tuscany are small farms. Without this type of farming our farms would disappear in a few years.

SGIQ: Have the scientists also learned something?

GM: They have discovered the value of their own activity; they can see immediate results because their work has done something important for local communities and for the heritage of the region; this collaboration is mutually rewarding.



Maria Grazia Mammuccini lives in Montevarchi, Italy. She was previously vice president of the Commission of Agriculture and is now the director of ARSIA, Tuscany (www.arsia.toscana.it), and with her husband she runs an organic farm.