Saint Martin’s Gala and Mario Batali: A Recipe for Success

One School’s Appetite for Service and Stewardship

Our Tradition of Sustainability, from Farm to Fork
Feeling at Home...Miles Away

by Stephen Parker, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Physics

Faith, reason, service, community... these are four core themes we talk a lot about here at Saint Martin’s. Within these themes, there lies a value that is critical within the Benedictine tradition: hospitality.

Imagine my delight this summer when I left home and encountered inspirational hospitality, the kind that would make any Benedictine monk proud, thousands of miles away in the country of Japan.

Each year, just after commencement, two faculty or staff members lead a small group of Saint Martin’s students to Japan for a two-week Japanese Cultural Exchange Tour (JCET). Last May, I had the good fortune of joining Sarah Younkin, Saint Martin’s cultural and exchange programs manager, and students Anna Minor ’12, Joseph Patti ’12 and Tinaca Talaber ’14 for the 2011 tour.

The annual trip includes visits to Saint Martin’s three sister schools in Japan: Mukogawa Women’s University in Nishinomiya (near Kobe), Okazaki Women’s Junior College in Okazaki (near Nagoya) and Retaku University in Chiba (near Tokyo). Students from all three of these Japanese institutions regularly come to our University, taking advantage of summer programs or spending either a semester or an entire year on campus taking classes. Although these institutions are not Benedictine, their spirit of hospitality fully resonates with the philosophy of welcome that we, the Saint Martin’s faculty, staff and students, share with our monks on campus.

Japanese hospitality is something that must be experienced to be understood. It is so deeply rooted in the culture, not even a devastating earthquake and tsunami can shake its foundation. After the tragic natural disasters hit northeastern Japan on March 11, we wondered if our trip, scheduled to begin on May 18, would be cancelled. The three sister schools assured us that it would be safe for us to visit and that they were looking forward to us coming. True to their word, the communities of all three schools welcomed us with open arms. The students in our group loved the chance to renew old friendships with former students from Saint Martin’s as well as forge new relationships with our Japanese hosts.

For all the members of our group, the homestays were a highlight. The hospitality our hosts showed was exceptional, and the families did an excellent job of providing us a glimpse into Japanese culture. We found that even the simplest things, such as a trip to the grocery store, ended up being fascinating experiences. Later in the summer, I had the privilege of hosting Kozue Mori, the Mukogawa student with whom I had stayed, when she came to the United States for vacation. It was an absolute joy for me to be able to return the hospitality that she and her family had shown me while in Japan.

One of the hallmarks of the Benedictine tradition of hospitality is food and drink. I would be remiss if I didn’t talk about one of our favorite parts of the trip, the food! While in Japan, we sampled a wide variety of traditional cuisine, including dried squid, sushi, takoyaki, shabushabu, tempura, sukiyaki, sashimi, ramen... the list could go on and on. Early on, I learned a Japanese word that I found most useful during my visit: oishii. Basically, this translates to “yummy, I like it!” Kozue and her family had taught this to me, excited that I was willing to try so many different things during my stay with them. They kept waiting for me to wrinkle up my nose and show them my “I-don’t-like-it” face, but everything was oishii to me!

Before traveling to Japan, I learned that I would unknowingly do something that would be a horrible insult to our hosts. Luckily, we didn’t leave Saint Martin’s unprepared. Fumie Hashimoto, Ph.D., professor of education and director of the MED program at Saint Martin’s, conducted a pre-trip series of classes for the group. As a result of these classes, I knew not to stick my chopsticks in my rice during my meal or<footer>to put on my house slippers when entering the house. Fumie also taught us some simple phrases to use while in Japan. (Did you know that if you quickly say, “Don’t touch my moustache,” it will sound to most Japanese ears like the phrase for “you’re welcome”?) That is, of course, unless the person with whom you are talking has a strong background in English. I did once get the response, between bursts of laughter, “But I didn’t touch your moustache!” I am sure my Japanese hosts would have forgiven any faux pas we made, but it was helpful to reserve advanced training.

During my stay with the families, I had the “travel bug” ever since college. During my undergraduate years, I spent a study-abroad term in London, England, where I had the opportunity to take a Shakespeare class (then the plays performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company), take an art history class (then view the actual paintings in the London museums), and travel extensively throughout Europe. During my graduate studies, I conducted doctoral research work at the Synchrotron Radiation Source in Daresbury, England, and the Fritz Haber Institute in Berlin, Germany. These experiences set me up for a smooth transition into a post-doctoral position as an assistant professor at Danmarks Tekniske Universitet in Kongens Lyngby, Denmark, where I lived for three years. I enjoyed my time overseas so much that I very nearly ended up staying in Denmark permanently. The JCET trip represented my first visit to Asia, and it has further expanded my experience abroad and reinvigorated my quest to see more of the world. A question I have been asking myself these days is, “Where will I be able to go next?”

As a physicist, I have a great passion for my discipline. Teaching physics here at Saint Martin’s allows me to share that passion with the students in my classes. As a faculty member at Saint Martin’s, I have that I have that same passion for my school, and I was blessed to be given the opportunity to help lead the JCET program and share that passion with our Japanese friends. The friendships I made during my visit will last a lifetime, and I look forward to returning the hospitality we were shown to the Japanese students who come to Saint Martin’s University in the future.