Interview with Dr. Sonia Massari

I'm Sonia Massari. I'm the director of Gustolab International Institute for Food Studies, which was the first center in Italy dedicated to food studies. It was created 10 years ago. This is when we founded Gustolab International. And I can say that I'm an expert on food system design and the use of the design in the food field.

Well actually I think I started to be interested in this topic when I started my PhD and I started my research. And my research was about the ICT, so the Information Communication Technology, and how digital technology can change the way how the people eat, and can change the relationship between human beings and food. So when I started, I had no idea where to find information about this. There was no bibliography. There was no literature on this. It was almost 10 years ago. And I decided to go back to the history. I decided to go back to 2,000 years ago to check what kind of technology we were using 2,000 years ago.

They were not digital, but they were of course impacting on the way and how the people were producing and eating. So after my study, I realized that there are also technology that are not able to change the way people eating. And so they're not changing habits, why this is possible. And after studying analogical technology and digital technology, I realized that the cultural values are actually the difference. And so, the ending of my thesis was actually a kind of guideline, a list of guidelines for engineering, because my application was in engineer, to teach to engineers how to include cultural values in their technology to really impact on the life of the people.

This was, in a way, revolutionary. In engineering, they don't use the word 'culture'. They actually have no idea what does it mean culture. And this became for me very important because, in design, the cultural aspect is real important. When we design stuff, we have to think about cognitively how the people act, and so what kind of values we wanna use to change the behaviors of the people. So, together those became the basic of my knowledge in food. And because I was designing curriculum for food studies program, I thought the cultural values had to be the main focus all of the program, doesn't matter if they were nutrition students, doesn't matter if they were agriculture students, doesn't matter if they were technician. They need to know what does it mean food as a cultural product. And this has to be an exploration.

It's not easy to find it. Most of the time, people are very superficial. They just see what they have in front. But they are not able to go inside of the human values. And when I'm saying human values, I'm really thinking about values that can be general like love, friendship, I used to say the sustainability is part of this, because it's so hard to be defined. Sustainability, what does it mean? It's a human values, but what does it mean to sustain something, to sustain life? So when you think about to sustain life, okay, that's something that I wanna learn. I wanna do.

So what does it mean? I think it means that food is the object and is the media of every activity, relation to food. So what does it mean? That it's your focus, but it's also the way how you do something. And it's super hard to be defined. I believe there are four layers. I'm going to repeat this. So there are four layers for me. There's the genetic layers, the historical and cultural layers, the under genetic. The under genetic means that you eat differently during your life. When you're a baby, you're children, you eat differently than when you're adult or a senior. And there's the micro genetic, which is the most interesting part in which you have to use all those food patterns and you have to come out with a choice.

Or if you're in a restaurant or if you're in a bar, you have to choose which panino or which dish you wanna take. What is so strong on you that decide for you which one you want? Those are all values. Or better, those are all scenarios in which you create your values. I strongly believe there are individual, collective, and institutional values, the kind of values that we need to adjust in. The individuals are the ones that they really like to work as a designer, because they are not easily standard. And so you can

really work on emerging behaviors, emerging thinking, emerging scenarios, I really like this.

Collective and institutional are the ones that we know more. Institutional are the ones that the institution wants you to learn about it. So let's say American culture literally does have some food values, if you talk about food. Italian culture does have other food values. Collectives are stronger, because are made by the people. So in Italy specifically, we do have a very strong regional and town values, something that it is so district. But also people who do, specifically now in food, do organize movement and stuff like that, those are very collective values. Means that people need to get to get together to be stronger in what they think and to make their ideas more valuable for others, or at least to be accepted by others.

Let me give you an example as a design and what I'm teaching to my students as a food designer. I'm teaching them to the fact that we don't invent anything. And specifically, after 50 years of strong marketing, we learned how to invent or design values. But we don't design values. The value's already there. We just exalt them. So for example, I use this maybe controversial example, but all the animals choose their food for this month because they smell good. Or maybe the smell is not good, but for them means quality and means food that it could be edible. Why do human beings are not choosing their food anymore for smell? They're choosing for price or for the aesthetics. The animals don't care about price and aesthetics. Actually, they don't know what it is.

So, and this is my controversial point every time, what happen if we are able to invent for our cell phone, I don't have a cell phone here, an application that help us to choose the food in a market because it does have a good smell. So I'm exalting the smell value, or at least what does it mean smell for the people, how does the smell make my relation with food stronger? And then, you will be able to choose that apple because it does have a good smell or a better smell or a good quality smell. You will not buy this apple because it cost less. You will not buy the apple because it looks good. You will change completely the market because people will buy their food for different reason.

So what does it mean? I use it as a technology just to exalt something that was already there, something that we knew already, the fact that you can create a relation with your food for something that you know. But you don't know how to use it anymore, because the value of the smell was not considered so important. And the students, I actually also invented an app that's called Pig App, because it looks like a pig and you manage yourself like a pig.

And most of the people are very shocked, like "Whey we have to go back on this?" I say, "You're not going back. You're just exalting something that you do have. And we give you a value that you forgot totally, but then they realize, and they say, "Oh my gosh this is a new instruments that can now be to find quality food. And I can survive and I can be healthy and I can be safe, and I will have good food in my hand. Maybe it will cost less, but doesn't matter. I'm more interested on the quality of food, and I found another parameter to get good food."

So this is an example of what does it mean cultural values and values, and specifically how you can design new relation between you and the food. Also with new technology, it can be also not a digital technology, doesn't matter. But I think this is a good example. Another point, let me give you also the other example, which is about food delivery. Everybody wants to do food delivery now. They believe that the value of the food delivery is the fast food, the fact of having food in your house in a fast way. And it's just prepared. So you have not to work and cook, which is something that in terms of cultural values, for most of the people nowadays is not important. So they'd really like the food delivered. My point is what happen in which you do a food delivery in which you buy or you take the food from your neighborhood, people that you don't know anymore. You live in a big house with ten families where you don't chat with them anymore. And so there is a new system of food delivery, and you can buy food from them. And maybe they're from Bangladesh, from Syria ...

So you know also the culture. And then you will have prepared food, fast food, but from people that you didn't socialize before. What is the value of this? And people told me, "I can discover new culture and new food." I say, "No. You will discover your neighborhood. You will re-create relation. You will actually find friends. And maybe you will find your husband, who knows, your future people around." This is the values that you have to exalt.

Most of the time, people don't see what is the real values that we are looking for, and they just see the superficial one, like the fact of having food in a fast way from people who living closer. And by the way, the app does work now. Ten years ago, it was very shocking. Now, it does work. So it means that the people need something, but it was not just prepared food from Syrian people, was prepared food by your neighborhood. And in the time that you open the door, this is very no digital but is very analogical, you make your relation again with the people.

And so for 10 years, I can tell you, most of the new technology in food was intelligent, to bring people back to their house because they felt people had to re-create relation with their house, and with the comfortable zone in the house. But all the services provided were just keeping the people alone in their house without any relation, without any socialization. What does it mean to bring people back to their house? It means to bring them there, but then to create a socialization life.

We are on the first generation of food delivery, for example. In the United States, we're going to the fifth. And the point is that the restaurants are disappearing. This is what the people are forcing. Restaurants started as socialization place. If they was to disappear, what will happen? We discussed this in a workshop, which was how we will live in 2050? Will we be happy or not? That was the other question. We will have all of those service around, but do we really want envision an happiness in our life? And the point was when the restaurants will disappear, we need to create space in which people will socialize. They will come with their food, but they have to socialize.

So there is no way to skip this side. When you think about cultural values, means really that you need environment scenarios and also devices and technology to help people to create and to exalt values that they do have already. I'm not really feeling that we have to work so much to search them. We have just to help the people to understand what are the values for then creating systems around this. I really believe in a world in which there are sustainable natives, which is something that I use to present in all my conferences. People say, "What does it mean?"

Let's say, digital natives are people who are born in a world full of technology and full of digital technology. They don't have any effort. They just part of the system. They just jumped in iPods or in any digital technology and they're fine. What does it mean 'sustainable natives'? Means people who are born in an environment in which they don't need health food to be sustainable.

From the beginning, I think I was find the digital ... The fact that the digital natives are people who are getting to a digital world without any effort. They are just part of the system. How we can get sustainable natives? So people that are part of the system are feeling part of the system, something that we're not, so culturally they believe on the sustainability as a value. So for me, if you would design all the services, all the systems around, in a sustainable way ... As a food designer, we do have search for stability, then the people will be sustainable natives. They don't have any effort on be part of this.

So how we can do this? Including those very strong values in this. For example, last Friday, I was in north of Italy. I don't know if you know that Trieste in the north is the capital of the coffee. And I had to think about a workshop on coffee, which is something that is not like bread. You can survive without coffee. Okay? But I strongly push my students to think about what are the values behind coffee. And they would say, "Values? Come on. We're talking about coffee. It's like wine. There's no values then." I say, "No, there are values. You have to find it."

And if you want to innovate this sector, we need to find the values that are really strong for the people so we can exalt those through coffee. The funny part was that we had 10 ideas that they had of the workshop, something that you were not foreseeing this in the beginning. Also, the people were super surprised. It was like oh my gosh, I can't believe it. But we were down back on, what does it mean quality of coffee for the people? But best, what does it mean what we call the piacere?

Piacere, it's a word that I don't know in English how to ... I'm sorry, how the piacere can be translated, because piacere, there's a passion, well being, cultural ... for all of those words together. So they try to say the piacere of the coffee. And when you get a break and you take your coffee, you've got this kind of feeling of the piacere, but they couldn't define it. They were

great on saying how the break should be, but they couldn't say what does it mean to feel well like the piacere at that time. So we started those.

For three hours it was like, okay, think about it. When you drink a coffee, how do you feel? When you get your break, how do you feel? When you interact with your coworkers, how do you feel? What is messy? What you don't like? We came out with this. And at the end, the point was that they found that they needed to be alone with their coffee to really get the passion, which was not socializing. But they liked this. And they said, "Okay, this is the values we wanna take. We want .. it's like to get the perfume, it's like to get your smell of coffee aroma."

And they invented this. They also invented the perfume of coffee for every time of the day. They found the way of creating new space, new work space, in which the value of the people and the human beings are exalted. They invented a new break. The break is not like part of the daily work, but it has to be part of yourself. So they included the yoga. They included a lot of stuff in. And the coffee was part of this. They realized that it is not just relaxing the point. This is what we think it is important, just relax. It's not true. You can be relaxed through other stuff, using passion, using-

I think the real world is this, the value of the piacere was very hard for them to be using. And they came out after one year a master on coffee. And they were very surprised to say, "We never thought about this. They told us how to sell coffee. They told us how to drink coffee. They told us what does it mean production of coffee. But nobody was stopping and say what is the value of the coffee for the people and how this can become something important for."

If you think about most of the food products, you have to do it. And of course, most of those are used in the marketing in a different way. But then if you really make this values for ... That's just something else I'm used to say, most of the startups that are now be launched are not surviving. Why? Because they don't have strong values on there. They just like got very short goals and most of those are not based on values of the people and what the people really need.

I was very impressed about the Japanese culture and the fact that the gender, the women, did have power. And this was impacting on the community organization. Or better, the community organize around, so how the power and the different power and the different costs were defined.

The way how we think about the fact that we have to wake up in the morning for a reason really is giving us a direction in the way how we have to produce stuff and devices. For me, that was very exciting and a very good challenge. It was like how we can actually create something around our body and to give a new value to the body, 'cause people don't have any relation between the person and the body. We don't know enough about the body.

But then, when I was back to Sardinia, and Sardinia is very close to Italy of course, I had to see and to exalt the fact that Sardinian are very traditional people. And what does it mean to be traditional? Means to come back to the past, and to live like the people in the past. I don't think we are ready to this. And we don't want it. Most of the time now, when we talk about sustainability, people are thinking that we have to go back to the past and living like 70 years ago.

And when you think about new technology again, 'cause this was my focus, people were super stressed. You should know that people, with my thesis, were saying for five years, "We hope the world she's defining will never happen because this is scary." But this is not true. You can use the technology, but helping the people to come back to the values of 70 years ago, this is the point. It was much easier to exalt the values 70 years ago. And in Sardinia, I believe, the fact that those values were very transparent, very visible, very touchable, it makes their life not easier, but at least simple. And in a way, those values were visible to everybody and they were sharable, because visible and part of the collective values I was mentioning before.

I think in the Sardinia environment, what was very interesting for me was the fact that were less institutional values and individual values and more collective values. And in this way, I thought, "Okay, this is matching perfectly with food." I can tell you, I didn't study so much the nutrition in the Sardinia area, but I was very interested about the collective networks that were making those areas special. You should know that a lot of Sardinian young people from Sardinia are leaving from Sardinia. So they have to go ... they have to come to Italy or they have to go abroad for studying, for getting a career. But they're back and they're bringing back their life, which I think is a way to renew the area. This is what otherwise will die, if the people will leave from an area that is not so rich, let's say, in terms of resource and in terms of career. You can't do everything there. You have to move it. The fact that the people are coming back and they're just giving and feeding the traditional community, I think this is amazing.

I really believe they create the perfect balance. I'm a little bit concerned. And I didn't study so much about the Costa Rica area and stuff like that, I think but I'm not sure, that the values there are so far away from what we do. I'm feeling closer to Japan and of course Sardinia because as Italian, than the values that were listed in Costa Rica for example. I think they're more American. And I believe they were very ... In a way, they were interpreted using the American keys. And so, in this way, I'm a little bit controversial. I just saw those three because I was interest about US area, Sardinia because it's Italian, Japanese because it's very close.

You should know that Japanese food culture and Italian food culture are very similar in a way, because they are very culturally defined. In a way, I believe, we are closer to Japan than France, in a way how we define our also culinary arts and cuisine. There's a lot of history in ... there's a lot of structured ages that are related to politically and historical what happened in our country.

The value that I believe are in common between the two cultures, the Japanese culture and the Italian culture, are first of all the family, which is on the top of the pyramid, let's say. I think the proudness of the territory. I don't know if this is the right sentence I would like to use. But I believe the fact of bringing the trewa. The trewa is a word used only for wine, for example, but it's perfect to define what does it mean territory for us. Means really the people in the history ... in the life of the people there, the history of the family who are living in a territory. This is really what we

are both proud of. And we pretend to teach other people about it, same for Japan, same for Italy. The idea of using cuisine and culinary arts as the same word, which means something different from United States or other countries.

Cuisine does have very historical roots. Culinary arts does have a evolution approach. And we use both as synonymous, the same things for us. So I think this is interesting. And the fact of having a lot of problem with innovation also, if you believe in Italy to be very novative. We do have still a lot of limitation and limits in this, both in Japan. In one thing we are very different, in the value of sustainability. In Japan, I believe, they are very new on this. And they just realized recently what does it mean.

But because they do have a very ... But they do have a very strong values of social sustainability, something that we don't know we do have but we do. We don't consider the social sustainability as a key point. We are more interested on economical sustainability and as well environmental sustainability, but I believe we are just moving on and we are realizing this, definitely families.

Let me give you something that came out by three research we did, so something that also I do have scientific basis for, not using only my opinion because otherwise I will have so many opinions on. I think in the past 10 years I've seen from my students something come out in a strong way from perspective like allergies or also idea of food that are defining a status symbol of the people relation with food, specifically in the Western country, that is very unusual. But I think, coming out from the past three research I did recently in two years, one is about food waste for example.

We did the research on food waste in the United States and here. When we asked people here, people were saying that we're not wasting, never. Also producer, restaurants, owners. In a way, there was more awareness in the United States, at least the people were saying, "Yeah. We were. We are wasting a lot. This is a problem. We have to figure out a way of solving the problem."

But then I think, when we started asking, "What does it mean to waste for you?" That was the most interesting part of the research, which was not about how much waste, how we can solve the waste. But what does it mean wasting? And not only food, wasting time, wasting resources, wasting people, wasting life, powerness, this kind of things. This is interesting. People don't have a perception, Italy, United States, everywhere, on what does it mean wasting? And the fact that wasting time may be in a way it is related to work, but when you think about more generally about life, they're struggling. They don't know what does it mean. I think the way of wasting ... the value of wasting, we work on this with my students too. What does it mean waste? It's very interesting. I think it is something that has to be research and then how this is impacting on the way of the people give values to the things. Tangible things and abstract things are the same one thing.

Another research was about artists on our shops for example. In Rome, the artists on our shops are disappearing. With the artists on the shops are disappearing, the artisans, they are disappearing. The community around the artisans, they are disappearing. The smell, the food around those artisan stuff, people don't understand that this is a cultural heritage. And people are ... We ask the people, "What does it mean cultural heritage?" That was another big messy situation.

People couldn't define cultural heritage. Back to the United States, we ask them, "What does it mean cultural heritage?" It's so intangible. No. The point is that when we started those artists on our shops areas, the final result of the article was the fact that what was missed really was the healthy lifestyle of the neighborhood, to something that was not related to health, artists on our shops, stuff like that, but because there was a relation between who was selling, who was buying, something that in a big mall doesn't exist anymore. It was interesting because we started with interview to those people.

And the people said, "When I'm selling stuff, I'm teaching also them how to cook, how to portion, to make portion and stuff." This is something that disappear in the mall. So we went back to the mall in Italy and in the United States, we did the research about Mediterranean diet. How much you know about Mediterranean diet for example? We came out to find other people, it's not true that if they go to specific mall like World Food or they go to Italy, this kind of mall, they know more. It's not true. They

know less because they really trust the mall so much that they don't search and they don't study. They are not knowledgeable people, they just trust the mall.

I think this is very strong interest of the values because your health is in the hand of the mall and the commercialization of the food. You don't use any more the socialization. You don't trust anymore the people who are giving you the information. So the farmer market in a way are solving or finding a solution, and that's what we realized through the data we collected. Farmer market, people coming from the farm and telling you this is where the food comes from ...

I'm joking because one of the article I presented in the past conference was about the fact that the kids in the United States think that chocolate come from the brown milk. And then, the point is ... oh, brown cow with brown milk, that was the connection. I think the point is not only to bring people to see where the food come from. You have to re-create the relation. You don't need to bring the people from the city to the countryside to be able to show. It's important. But then you have to re-create relationship in this. And those relationship are also in the city, in the distribution.

There are so many relationship in the distribution, which were shortcutted by the systems. And through those new food delivery, we call it Kilometer Zero, so something that is very short in the supply chain, you are trying to solve the problem. But you are not re-creating relationship. Now I do have one of the students, one of the interns, that has to search how much the people are socializing through food delivery. So the guy that is coming to you with Kilometer Zero food, does he give you healthy information or something that really help you in this? No. And the past documentary we did with the students was, "Is food still social?" That was the question.

And so they said in the past, in agriculture, people were very social. Is it true that Urban Gardening are socialization area, where people really speak and they share knowledge about how and knowledge about sustainability? They went there. It's not true. Everybody does have his own garden, is preparing all the stuff, and they bring their stuff and they go home. The point is cultivating stuff. It's not to socialize with other

people and share ideas. Then it was when you went to the restaurants in the past, you were chatting a lot with waitress and owners about health also. This is good for you. This is not. That's what you have to eat.

Nowadays, are we going to interact with the people in the restaurants? Not anymore. So this is going to impart on our health too. And third point was about the kids. In the school and stuff before, it seems like there was no education in food, there was in a way, because the food was produced there, prepared there ... We're talking about 100 years ago. Okay? Nowadays, people thinks that here in Italy we are really taken care of. Forget it. We don't. We have just processed food in the school too. And we have to do this in a fast way in a cafeteria. So this is going to impact on the health too.

So the ending of this story was, yeah, food is still social food. But maybe is more social on internet than outside of internet, which is crazy and scary at the same time because we're always talking about social food, social food, but then what does it mean in terms of knowledge? I believe the point is knowledge, how much we think we need to know about it. From the economical point of view, I believe the 80s and 90s are the example of the fact that we needed to find stuff to symbol and to standardize the food, the food and everything like mass food, mass commercialization, mass everything was because we needed this in eighties/nineties.

If you think about nowadays, when we need to personalize everything, to personalize your phone, your stuff, your clothes, your food, means that we are going to a completely different direction. I believe the question is more why we change it and what happened? Because we could be in the mass age still. I don't think we are still in the mass age now. We are going to the opposite side I believe. Honestly, I believe in this. And the point is why ... I use the food studies approach. Why food studies started? Why did people started to study food in 2000/2001?

And how they started? They started including two classes in the nutrition department, history of food and food culture, which was revolution, our revolution in the curriculum. Nutrition people and dietician never study history of food and culture of food before. The idea was you have to study nutrients. You have to study chemistry. You have to study physics and body, but not the history and the culture of food. That was the beginning

of the food studies. And I used to say, "Why this started in the United States and not in Italy or in Europe, where we believe we are more concerned about food and the food culture?" It was because people were struggling, they were scared, they were super scared.

It was 2001/2002, Supersize Me came out, Food Inc, book like my compiled book came out. And people were like say, "Why we are eating in this way?" And if this was happening in Italy, and people were going to the government and say, "Hey, you have to do something." In the United States, they went to their academia. And they say, "Hey, you have to tell us why in the past 50 years, we were producing in this way, eating in this way, and buying this way." And this was the beginning of the food studies, to study the reason why we were eating in that way. You should know that in Italy, there is no Food Studies department or any degree on food studies yet. We don't have it. We are still separate, the subject is. The agriculture, the communication, the economies ... They are all separate.

The thing that unite us is ... was to see food from all of those perspective and understanding why the system was bringing people in a no healthy no sustainable system. And this is why all of those food studies programs started everywhere in the United States in every universities. And now we are starting to, in Europe, to capture those information and to offer our program. The point is are we really interested in understanding why , or are we interesting to solve it? And this is why I believe, and I strongly believe, the design approach, the problem solving approach and the design system approach, has to be included in the Food Studies curriculum.

Every time you observe, you analyze, you collect data, after that you have to find a solution and new system. So this is why the design approach and the design courses has to be included in. You should know that for 10 years, people were thinking about digital technology, also in this environment, as the nightmare or like, "Oh, they're coming. And they just destroy our great food system." We should restart it. Reurbanitize is where the people who didn't want to use technology, but re-create new cities, would all fashion systems, which was ... is this really what we wanted? Is this really the solution? But for them, the fact of bringing old values in the new environment was the solution. It's not true. You have just to come out with the values that are strongly important for the people.

If the value are be speed, or not having time, or not wasting time, work on this and create on a sustainable approach on this. You have just to think about the value around and then creating something that is sustainable for you. I used to say that has to be economical sustainable, environmental sustainable, social sustainable, and sensorian sustainable. No people think about sensorial sustainability, which is something that it is related to our five senses. If you're able to create something that also make you happy through the five senses, you are on the right direction. This, I believe, in terms of also longevity and well being and stay well and happiness, it is something that we have not to forget. The five senses, most of the time, are not considered as sustainability approach.