WHEN FOOD IS NO LONGER AN ABSTRACT COMMODITY

"The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world." Rabindranath Tagore

How can we better use our bodies in order to connect with nature and the nourishment Earth offers? Forum Synergies trainee Alexandra Mitrică spent a flavourful five-week mentorship with innovative SLU students and alumni at Alnarps Agroecology Farm near Malmo in summer 2026, where she explored how family heritage, curiosity and academia can bind together a richer human-Earth relationship.

There is so much beauty everywhere. These are my daily words as I begin my internship at Alnarps Agroecology Farm. In the people, in the crops, in the food we produce, cook and eat together, everywhere at the farm.

There is a type of knowledge that lives only in the hands, passed down not through explanation but through repetition, doing something so many times that the body starts to remember what the mind cannot fully account for. Alnarp Farm's work builds on this kind of knowledge, soil worked in the hands and by repetition becoming an extended part of the body of the community.

Having worked in both corporate, public and NGO systems, I decided last year to give up my teaching position in rural Transylvania and prepare for yet another shift. I grew really tired of the public educational system, especially when it comes to serving vulnerable communities. I felt my abilities were misused/misplaced, captive in a cycle that feeds on misaligned and sometimes redundant learning methods. I also sensed a deep longing for better understanding the bigger picture, my own roots and what I can do here and now: both my maternal and paternal grandparents were farmers, me and my siblings standing as first generation born in the city. I experienced a few summer holidays in the village, but missed being involved in the actual farm work due to a diverse range of reasons: land grabbing during communism and challenges with getting it back, me being the youngest of the family therefore a bit overprotected, family misconceptions (historical shame of being a simple land worker), family conflicts (including land grabbing within the family) etc.

My planned escape had to be delayed for a few months due to health reasons, so the odds decided 2026 is the year for a change. I managed to access a scholarship with Forum Synergies (a small NGO facilitating young people's access to a rural experience outside their own country) and set myself to use their hosts suggestions not just for one experience, but for two, both actors dedicated to sustainable rural development. Therefore in May 2026 I had my first three-week volunteering experience at a lovely Tuscan castle, where wine and olive oil is produced at a small scale, interest and action being invested in preserving the valley biodiversity and its unique heritage.

Castello di Potentino has a robust volunteering programme operating for the past 20 years through word of mouth, majority of volunteers returning to the place, to volunteer again or as simple visitors/guests. Potentino's charm lies in its gorgeous landscape, one millennium old built heritage, an extraordinary Etruscan legacy, all really well preserved and kindly shared by the castle's owners and purveyor of fine knowledge, Charlotte Horton with remote support of her brother, Alexander Greene.

My second placement, this time using the full FS scholarship for my time spent in Malmo, Sweden, was with Alnarps Agroecology Farm (AAF), a small, community-market farm near Lomma shoreline.

Attracting European interns, volunteers (locals and internationals based nearby) and even tourists, organizing lectures every Friday in an effort to transparentize their model and educate, Alnarps is far from the average farm.

To the human eye, AAF looks nothing like a farm. No tractors or heavy machines, no big fields, no back and forth or animals to make you think of an actual farm. I saw first-time visitors unimpressed with how the place looks and even questioning what Alnarps farm really was about. I also met a local who remembered there was nothing on this piece of land as he was growing up. And there he was: not only looking at all the veggies, herbs and flowers, but actually enjoying a farm to table lunch with produce from a piece of land there was nothing on for decades.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is what brings the farm closer to the local community and financial stability. From June through November, the farm supplies vegetables and herbs to 85 families who subscribed for a weekly share at the beginning of the season. CSA preparations and pick ups are the most intense and heartwarming weekly event: one can experience first hand employees' and interns' excitement and energetic rhythm as well as consumers' curiosity, gratitude and joy of belonging to a group of people who are trying to eat healthier and in sync with the land. From the gym couple to the single mum or the electric car owner interested in sustainability, these individuals are at the core of AAFs efforts and hopes.

What caught my attention or the bold, gorgeous and the ugly:

- Conviviality as core principle at Potentino's, which means all volunteers eat together at least two meals a day, ensuring everyone feels included and well fed
- Mineral crystals on the soils surface at Potentino, small diamonds that are everywhere in the soil, invisible to the inexperienced eye
- Challenges and opportunities faced by women in agriculture: women’s under-representation 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.

- The art of gathering and hosting people, some for their first time at the location, at Alnarp's farm. People might say that location helps, being on the outskirts of Malmo, others will point out the small half hectare the farm is renting from Swedish University of Agricultural Studies (SLU) was a deserted plot of land, unused for decades prior to the farm being constituted by a small group of SLU students.
- Events being put together with a lot of attention and care, through innovative chefs and recipes, a solid group of volunteers helping out and a general state of being in service to others. *What price can be set for all this?*
- Lectures held at the farm on Agroecology, How to run a community farm, Politics of agriculture, a workshop on Climate change - all at an in-depth level, with debates, contributions and a general state of get into action
- The vulnerability of being a community-run initiative: AAF can only afford to hire 5 part-time team members, while the workload is so much bigger. On a related note, a NON European employee of the farm will have to leave Sweden soon due to a new national salary threshold making her unable to continue at Alnarps, despite having a second job (with night shifts).
- Surviving a very hot summer in Europe, while spending August in Sweden was a bit of a blessing - working the soil equaled an act of resistance in times of big European wildfires and general realisation we are living in climate breakdown. Keeping my hands busy in the soil and eating its produce has been a refuge and absolute feast for an European in August 2026.
- Learning through collaboration, shared knowledge, trial and error, by listening carefully to both people and land.
- The old and the new: Potentino castle with its millennial heritage being revived by a perceptive family and shared with so many other people, AAF, a new social startup, created out of frustration for the limited access to land through a collaboration with SLU, renting land from them and hosting interns and researchers from various European projects (Erasmus, Together, Living Labs)
- The bold activism: While policies favor industrial farming, making it difficult for agroecological farms to sustain themselves long-term, these stakeholders, both Potentino and AAF, are invested in their local community and area, getting involved in highly sensitive matters (i.e. ensuring locals understand and safeguard the area from Tuscan Geothermal Expansion)

I only spent a few weeks at Potentino and Alnarps, but left in a state of grace, acknowledging a lot more is to be understood, shared and felt.
There is so much beauty everywhere.