I’m like a chameleon. Having been influenced by international experiences all my life, one of the things I pride myself on is my ability to adapt and change with my surroundings. The reason I chose to get a business degree rather than a degree in international education (which is ultimately the field I want to end up in) is because I believe the versatility of an MBA degree and the mission of this program will better aid me in my future endeavors. Consequently, one of the most fascinating experiences I’ve had in Italy was when I discovered an Italian product that was my opposite. Enter my weekend in Modena, Italy, the land of balsamic vinegar.

Located in the Modenese countryside, Villa San Donnino is one of the oldest acetaia in Modena with one of the most fascinating stories I’ve ever heard. Historically, the villa belonged to the San Donnino family. When Umberto, the grandfather of the current owner, purchased the villa in 1947, he was surprised to find old barrels of balsamic vinegar left behind in the attic. Deciding to honor the San Donnino family, he continued the tradition of making traditional balsamic vinegar. It wasn’t until two generations later with current owner Davide Lonardi that this family tradition became a successful family business.

(Fun fact #1: The villa was used to film a scene in Novecento, a 1976 Italian historical drama film directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, featuring Robert De Niro and many other international stars!)

Having majored in Anthropology and cultural studies, I felt seriously out of place in the MBA classroom. I mean, what is business analytics? What is financial reporting? What is all this stuff I’ve never learned about before? But here, in this historical villa, I expected to feel at ease. In fact, the anthropologist in me was wildly intrigued by the villa’s deep and rich history, as well as the story of the Lonardi family. However, I’ve noticed that the education I’m receiving here at CIMBA has definitely started to influence the way I view certain things (i.e. the evolution of this heritage and tradition into a thriving family business.) It was fascinating to see how each generation built upon what essentially started off as a hobby for the San Donnino family.

(Fun fact #2: Those old barrels of balsamic vinegar found in the attic in 1947 are still being used in production today. The oldest dates back to 1512. So if you purchase a bottle of traditional balsamic vinegar from Villa San Donnino, you’re literally able to taste the past. This explains why a liter of this stuff can cost up to $4,000!)
Because adaptability and versatility is such a big part of who I am, learning about this tradition-turned business stumped me. How is it that this product with such a deep-rooted process from the past, one that has largely remained the same, is able to survive in this day and age, especially when there are so many people who don’t even know about it? If there’s one thing I’ve learned so far in class, it’s that businesses that don’t change will die. For example, one of the reasons why Apple is so successful is because it keeps putting out new products, or rather, newer versions of the same product. Still, it’s a form of change in their products. Villa San Donnino has no such option. Because the regulations for the production of traditional balsamic vinegar are so strict and rigid, the product and the process of production has remained unchanged to this day.

One thing that has changed, however, is the marketing of the production. When Umberto decided to continue the tradition of making balsamic vinegar, he was mainly thinking about his family. When Umberto’s son took over, he expanded the business side of the operations. But it wasn’t until this current generation, run by Davide, that the business was able to expand even more, specifically targeting consumers outside of Italy. Davide’s goal is to educate more and more people about traditional balsamic vinegar through the use of media, social media, and word-of-mouth.

(Fun fact #3: Davide is proud of the fact that his modest villa has reached the ears of beloved celebrities like Actor Pierce Brosnan and Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg. Both separately made trips to the villa for a taste of tradition.)

However, is this enough? What does the future hold for this family-run farm whose process will continue to remain unchanged? What is the future like for traditional balsamic vinegar when most people have only heard of regular balsamic vinegar? And most importantly, what other skills and knowledge will I gain through CIMBA that will continue to influence, shape, and serve as an extra pair of lenses with which I can view the world.