I feel incredibly lucky to have been given the opportunity to pioneer a program in Seville over the last academic year. As the first agricultural student to participate in the MCP Seville abroad program I was the only non-Spanish student at a technical agrarian school 20 minutes outside of the city. This allowed me to fully immerse in the academic and social culture of the area without getting sucked into isolating American cliques. I participated in a program that created artificial wetlands to purify agricultural waste-waters, a laboratory studying the chemical process of bruising across different Olive varieties, as well as field trips to dairy farms, vineyards, Iberian swine farms, orange orchards and many more. I took classes in organic livestock production, viticulture, olive and olive oil production, vegetable production, integrated pest management, rural anthropology, and waste-water management.

Southern Spain, especially the Iberian Peninsula is an incredibly fertile and productive agricultural region. It is internationally renowned for its Sevilla oranges, Manzanilla olives and pure olive oil, Manchego sheep cheese, acorn-fed black Iberian ham, wine, and Pedro Ximenez Sherry. Agricultural lands surround the cities and many urban people commute to work on farms, processing plants, agro-tourism or in agricultural value addition. Much at odds with what I am
accustomed to at Cornell, at the agrarian school outside of Seville I was hard-pressed to find a single student studying any aspect of agriculture that did not have farmers as parents or other direct relatives or who had not grown up working on a farm. In my year there I got the sense that the modern cultural esteem of farmers is shifting but is very much mired (particularly among young people without agricultural connection) in the pre-modern view of agricultural producers as uneducated or otherwise unsavory characters not owing much respect. For the older generation who grew up on farms this is not true but it still stands that there is not the same neo-agricultural wave that we are currently experiencing in the US by which many young people are becoming first generation farmers and the emphasis on local and organic agriculture is creating a “groovy” and young image for many farmers. From talking to students at the university it seems that this is also the trend in much of Northern Europe and even in Northern Spain but down in Southern Spain, Southern Italy and Greece the times have not changed and most farmers continue to be legacy farmers in their late 50s and 60s.

This is one of the reason that I found studying agriculture in an European country to be particularly enlightening. In much of the International Agriculture and Rural Development discipline at Cornell there is an extremely heightened focus on the developing world, almost to the exclusion of other areas. Occasionally in classes we have touched on the United States and the food justice issues or environmental issues associated with agribusiness and large-scale mechanized agriculture but it is very rare that Europe is mentioned in any regard other than as a “wealthy northern power” or that we take time to focus on the agricultural practices there. Studying in Seville I learned a lot about agricultural policy in the European Union, from its origins to the most recent Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which directly informed my conception and understanding of the global agricultural sector as well as the institutional and
inherent inequalities between the developing and developed world. I also learned about the lasting colonial ties between many European countries and their previous colonies as well as agricultural and social aid programs (including exclusive trade agreements) in place in those developing countries with the hopes of assuaging some of the damages caused to the agricultural and social sectors by colonizing Europeans. In studying Europe’s agricultural present and past, I was given a more holistic understanding of the foundation for today’s agricultural regimes and the history which granted power to the powers that be.

In the months before coming to Cornell that I spent hiking through the South American Andes, talking to and studying farmers, a spark was lit inside of me. I knew that after spending time in the university gaining knowledge on agricultural practices and research I wanted to return to South and Central America and work with those same farmers to better their yields and hopefully their livelihoods. Studying abroad in Spain did a lot to further that ambition. After an entire year of speaking solely in Spanish I am not only fluent but have added immensely to my agrarian vocabulary. I have learned so much about the global functioning of agriculture and feel much more a part of the global community and prepared to stand up and engage in global dialogues surrounding the future of agriculture, a future only possible through a comprehensive understanding of the past. I feel more comfortable participating in professional group settings in Spanish and functioning as part of a team, working towards the same goal, a skill which I hope to apply a lot in my future career. I was informed about many possibilities for graduate school in the European Union and am applying to various masters programs there in Agroecology for after my graduation from Cornell. I feel emboldened and confident when approaching foreign situations. I feel as though I have grown to understand some universal language that allows us to connect with people from all different cultures and all walks of life. A language that enables us
as global citizens to empathize and react to situations and conditions outside of our empirical knowledge. Ultimately I feel as though my year abroad did what any time outside of one’s social and cultural comfort zone should aim to do: it changed me. It opened my eyes to the extensive iceberg that lay beneath the surface of the water, an iceberg of which hitherto fore I had only seen the small, protruding tip.