

EXTRA CREDIT

A SUMMER & WINTER SESSIONS PODCAST

Episode 8 Transcript

00:00:02 Introduction

Welcome to Extra Credit, hosted by the Rutgers University Office of Summer and Winter Sessions. Listen to hear from students as they share their experiences at Rutgers and some tips on how to navigate a condensed semester. Also gain the perspective of professors and learn more about the courses they teach.

00:00:18 Kylie

Thanks for being here today. Could you start by introducing yourself and just, you know, telling us a little bit about yourself?

00:00:26 Xenia Morin

Hi everyone, my name is Xenia Morin and I am an associate teaching professor in the Department of Plant Biology at Rutgers University.

00:00:33 Xenia Morin

I also serve as the undergraduate program director for the Agriculture and Food Systems Program.

00:00:41 Kylie

Awesome, so I hear you're teaching the summer course. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

00:00:46 Xenia Morin

Oh absolutely. So, the course is called Introduction to Agriculture and Food Systems, and it is a 200 level course that is designed to be open to everybody. Students from high school through retirement have taken this course and I seek to get you more curious about the food system. We're all a part of the food system because we eat and we're really trying to give you the story behind the food system through this course.

00:01:17 Kylie

Awesome, so can you walk me through the process developing this course? So, like you said, we are all the food system and-

00:01:25 Kylie

And I mean, it sounds like you have a really diverse audience. You know, like students and people who've graduated and are coming back.

00:01:34 Kylie

So, what do you think is the like- what's the most important thing that you think students get out of this course?

00:01:41 Xenia Morin

Well, there are a lot of important things. One is they become more aware of what it takes to produce food and gain a greater appreciation of all the people who are producing food and delivering food to us. So we go from the field all the way through to food waste and everything in between.

00:02:01 Xenia Morin

What I want students to get out of the course is to be curious, and that this course is a start and it doesn't- and not a destination. Part of my job in developing this course is to get you to ask questions and seek out answers.

00:02:19 Xenia Morin

And so one of the first questions I ask in this course is “why do you eat what you eat?”

00:02:25 Xenia Morin

And most people haven't thought about that question. So, by asking questions by helping them to read and listen to videos and podcasts, they're able to start to synthesize and realize the complexity of our food system.

00:02:44 Kylie

Well, I've never thought of it like that, like why do I eat what I eat? I feel like it's just like it's been introduced to me as a child. And you know, like that's what I know. Uhm yeah, that's actually really interesting, wow.

00:02:59 Kylie

Huh, yeah, like that's- crazy like I, I've never thought of. I've never seen it through that perspective. You know, like why do I eat like this? Like is it like health? Do I enjoy it? Is it just because that's what I've eaten since my parents are, like, put it in front of me, you know?

00:03:19 Kylie

Yeah, that's really interesting.

00:03:20 Xenia Morin

And this course talks a lot about the food system, but we also talk about agriculture, agriculture more broadly and we talk about fisheries as well, so we're not just land based and what's going in your mouth. I have one special unit that explores the global, uh, production of T shirts starting from a cotton field all the way through to the workers and the trade routes and the equipment that it goes through.

00:03:49 Xenia Morin

So, we want, again, we want to surprise people and part of this course is sharing some surprises to make them rethink what they know about agriculture and food.

00:03:59 Xenia Morin

The other piece about this course is about sustainability. Right now, our food systems and our agricultural systems are not sustainable.

00:04:08 Xenia Morin

They're doing damage to the planet, and we need to change that, and so we start asking the question. Are there examples out there where people are changing the food system, and what can we learn about it?

00:04:22 Kylie

Yeah, that's really interesting. I think you hear that that's like a big topic now, definitely about, you know, food and there's becoming the issue of like we're not like- people are saying we're not going to have enough, and so, yeah, that's definitely something to, definitely something to consider. I need to be part of the solution.

00:04:39 Xenia Morin

Exactly and that, and I think, that's the goal of most of the faculty here is we want you to get curious. We want you to go and figure things out. We want you to explore and learn what it's going to take to think differently and think more broadly.

00:04:55 Kylie

Yeah, exactly with something as important as you know, food like it's essential to- it's like food, shelter, water, you know. Like top three things.

00:05:04 Xenia Morin

The other thing I will say about this summer course is now that we're a year into this pandemic. COVID-19 has disrupted global supply chains and local supply chains, and I know that people became anxious and concerned about what food was available in the grocery stores.

00:05:24 Xenia Morin

Some people started eating more locally and going to their farmers market. And so, I think in this year people have become more aware of food and this course is one that will help people understand more about why there were disruptions and how the food system is changing and recovering after COVID.

00:05:43 Kylie

I mean, yeah, I- people lost their minds when toilet paper wasn't on the shelves for, I mean weeks at a time and so then I remember too like going into the store, like my local grocery store and just like things like strawberries like, they were not on the shelf, you know, and like they like, like green beans and you

know, like a lot of like lettuce like leafy products. I'm- they're still, you know, like there's a shortage right now in my grocery store too. And I would say at least like a couple of grocery stores in my area.

00:06:12 Kylie

And yeah, I mean, it's definitely makes you think you know, and maybe this can be the kind of like silver lining like you know before there where there is no turning point.

00:06:22 Kylie

So yeah, it definitely makes you think. Little scary but necessary.

00:06:28 Xenia Morin

Well, we don't want you to be scared. We want you to be a part of the solution. Like you said before, that knowledge is power in this case.

00:06:34 Kylie

I think too like the- it makes it real and that's needed if, for us to find a solution you know like it, it can't just be a theory, it has to be. It has to be real. And then that's I think- it makes, uh, it's a starting point, you know so.

00:06:51 Kylie

Yeah, so how did you become interested in all of this? Like how did you get involved?

00:06:57 Xenia Morin

My interest in the food system, uh, was always there um, but it became most evident to me when I started having a family.

00:07:08 Xenia Morin

Uh, when you get pregnant, you start thinking much more about the food that you eat and then when you're responsible for feeding a newborn and a toddler, you start rethinking things as well.

00:07:21 Xenia Morin

And so, for me, I wanted my academic life to connect to my real life because I was finding out that people were saying, well, what should I be feeding my children?

00:07:30 Xenia Morin

Now I have a background. I was trained as a biochemist in plant biochemistry as an undergrad. I got really interested in how photosynthesis just made all of this happen, right? Without the energy of the sun, we wouldn't have plants, without plants, we wouldn't have food. And so, I wanted to think more deeply about the food system and how the world was going to feed itself. It was very clear to me that that was a long-term problem and a long-term question.

00:08:01 Xenia Morin

And so come around 2002, 2003 I started working on the beginnings of this course. And this course has gone through various iterations. The current course I developed at Rutgers about six years ago, and each- each semester I tweak it a little bit to be current with whatever is going on, so I've integrated COVID-19 into my course, but I, I really wanted a foundation for everybody to understand how we created the food system that we have. I'm a strong believer that we can't change a system if we don't know how we got here.

00:08:43 Xenia Morin

So, looking at the history of agriculture and food systems in the country, it's woven in here. But also, we want to say, well, what are the next steps? And so by reflecting on my own interest in need and my curiosity, I've put this together.

00:09:01 Xenia Morin

And I love interdisciplinary work where you learn a little about this and that and you ask about business, and you ask about biology, and you ask about sociology and public health.

00:09:14 Xenia Morin

All those things are reflected in this course, so that that's why I say it's a course that's open to everyone. No one is going to know all of this stuff.

00:09:23 Xenia Morin

And so, it's a chance to start to broaden your interest in your knowledge. So, it's been a- it's been a journey, but it's been a journey driven by my curiosity and I'm trying to share that with everybody else.

00:09:37 Kylie

That's outstanding, yeah, I think people don't realize how interconnected it is, like, how much overlap there is, you know. I know in my like personal journey, I got diagnosed with a food allergy like in my early 20s. And to me- like I had to look at every single label because I couldn't eat a lot, I couldn't eat some stuff and so yeah, it definitely makes you think and then-

00:10:03 Xenia Morin

Yeah, and again that that food allergy is something that comes from my family as well, so growing up, different family members couldn't eat different things because of food allergies.

00:10:15 Xenia Morin

So, food has already always been there, but more is something to be a little bit cautious of, because it will it make you sick? And we know today in America that some of the leading killers are due to foods that we're eating, and the diets that we've created.

00:10:35 Xenia Morin

So, my hope is that some people may rethink what it is that they're eating and then go pursue more nutritional information from experts like dietitians and others to help them, uh, lead a healthier life as well.

00:10:51 Kylie

I also think it's interesting too how there's like all these perspectives of people in other countries, in like England and South America.

00:10:58 Kylie

And they're just like why, why are Americans eating this? You know. And like you get to see, like, hey, like Americans love this and this is banned in my country like my government will not let me eat this.

00:11:10 Xenia Morin

So, Kylie, you've got a great question there, and so the other part of my course is that students do a research paper, and they choose a research question that's of interest to you.

00:11:21 Xenia Morin

So, if you were in my course, I would say is that something you want to learn more about, and I'd say that's the great start for a research project.

00:11:30 Xenia Morin

And I would help teach you where to find those resources in our library and how to use our library resources to put together an argument about whether we should be changing our food system and whether the Europeans and the UK have it right, and if so, what would that look like. And so, I, I think it's great that you've got that question.

00:11:53 Kylie

I have a lot of questions about like food, you know, like-

00:11:57 Xenia Morin

And I find that that's true of a lot of people. And I don't have all the answers, but what I want to do is help you figure out how you can find the answers and distinguish between those things that are fads or marketing and those things that are based on research and experimentation.

00:12:17 Kylie

I'm not looking for someone to have all the answers. I'm looking for someone to be yes, you know. Like to validate that my concern is the concern of many, not just me, and that you know it- it can be me. It can be Joe Schmo, you know whoever, but then you know, individually, together we can kind of start these conversations and look forward 'cause again, like this is going to be an issue for my lifetime. For, you know, younger generations and so it's, I think it's very important that we have these conversations now before there's a point of no return.

00:12:52 Xenia Morin

And I'm a member of the Institute for Food, Nutrition and Health at Rutgers University. And our overarching goal is to create a healthy New Jersey and a healthy nation.

00:13:04 Xenia Morin

And so, uhm, again, we're biased as an educational institution. We believe that education is power. Knowledge is power. And we are here to critique what is out there and not just to say, here's the only way to do it, because there are many ways. But we want you to have the tools and the understanding of where to find information that you feel that you can rely on and build into your own lifestyle.

00:13:32 Kylie

Right, right.

00:13:34 Kylie

So how do you envision the future of sustainable agriculture? Food systems, like climate change, that kind of thing. Do you have- it might not be, again, this is the one solution, but do you have like an ideal vision?

00:13:49 Xenia Morin

I think what we all hope is that everyone will have access to nutritious, healthy food that's affordable and convenient.

00:14:00 Xenia Morin

And that the farmers and the people that produce our food and cook our food, or handle our food, also have a standard of living, that is where they are paid a living wage. And so, we want to make sure that the conversation isn't just about one part of the food system, it's across a broader range.

00:14:25 Xenia Morin

We know that more plant-based food is healthier for you and that we are often eating way too much meat.

00:14:34 Xenia Morin

For instance, we are looking at fisheries and how to sustain our fisheries. Climate change is going to force fish to migrate to new areas, so we need to protect those fisheries so that they can produce enough fish without overfishing.

00:14:51 Xenia Morin

So, it's multifactorial. It- it's going to take a lot of different experimentation. It's also going to depend on people being willing to try new things. You'll hear terms like regenerative agriculture. That's just a term for good agricultural practices where we, you know, protect the soil and we make sure that we value the soil where we're doing land based growing.

00:15:20 Xenia Morin

But I also see indoor cultivation, our- our new vertical farms and other things, being integrated into the landscape. There we have a challenge that it takes lots of energy.

00:15:32 Xenia Morin

So, we got to figure out how to do it with less energy, but the nice thing about that setup is we can do it with much less water.

00:15:41 Xenia Morin

And we can get the healthier greens like hydroponics, so that you could get it closer to your house or to your department or your grocery store.

00:15:52 Xenia Morin

And so again, that convenience and that ability to move food. So, you'll see more regional focus on food.

00:16:01 Xenia Morin

But we also need resilience. When hurricanes come through and devastate an area... if they were only to rely on local food, they would have a problem, so we still need trade. We still need the ability to move food around. The other part of the future of food in my mind is that we come to value it right now. Right now, food is cheap.

00:16:22 Xenia Morin

And it's so cheap that we don't worry so much when we throw food away. We need to rethink that in every piece of food, there's water, there's energy. And there's effort. And so, what I'd like to see is an improvement in our value of food.

00:16:39 Xenia Morin

And certainly, there are people that don't have enough food and they're food insecure. I want to make sure that we have no food insecure people in this country as well.

00:16:50 Xenia Morin

And that they have access to that healthy nutrition. So, for me there are multiple goals. There isn't just one single silver bullet, we need to think about a lot of our challenges and address them each individually as well.

00:17:05 Kylie

Right, yeah, I think that's a great point. I think all the things that you, you know, mentioned are important and I think too that it's a list and I think that the more you check off, the easier the things at the bottom of the list will become.

00:17:18 Kylie

You know 'cause again, it's all- It's all weaved together. So, what are things that people can do now to help with climate change and reducing their carbon footprint?

00:17:30 Xenia Morin

Climate change is going to be a part of our future, and it's going to disrupt our food systems. So, it's important to make some connections.

00:17:41 Xenia Morin

Some of the food that we demand, particularly meat, has led to deforestation in different parts of the world.

00:17:50 Xenia Morin

So, one of the things that you can do is if you eat meat every day, choose a day that you don't have meat.

00:17:57 Xenia Morin

Meatless Monday is out there. Some people have heard about that, but you don't have to choose Monday. You can choose another day of the week.

00:18:04 Xenia Morin

But start developing recipes and start exploring for foods that don't have meat if you haven't done that before.

00:18:14 Xenia Morin

We know also that plant-based foods, beans and rice are good substitutes, say for proteins. So, if you are going to produce protein also think about what foods you're replacing it with.

00:18:30 Xenia Morin

It isn't about just eating pasta, for instance, as much as pasta is great, you want a variety of food and some people talk about eating from the rainbow, having different colors of food on your plate. And so, for a lot of people you know they're not wild about vegetables or they're not wild about certain kinds of food.

00:18:51 Xenia Morin

And my question is, have you played around with recipes or are there different things that you're doing? The other thing is to do a little bit more planning before you go to the grocery store.

00:19:03 Xenia Morin

Our grocery stores are designed for a lot of impulse buying. And that means that often you come home with more food than you're going to eat, and some of that food ends up in the trash.

00:19:15 Xenia Morin

The biggest thing that you can do is try to reduce the amount of food waste that you're creating. And sometimes it's, oh I'm going off and I'm going to a restaurant and so you have a meal at home that you didn't cook. Well, can you still cook it and freeze it, or is there a different way that you can store it?

00:19:36 Xenia Morin

Or can you eat it the next day and then put off shopping by a day? So, thinking more about what you're buying, the quantities you're buying. A lot of big box stores want you to buy big, big things and you eat like half of it. So, what happens to the other half? There are places that will accept donations of different kinds of food. So, can you donate it? Can you share it with a family member or a friend?

00:20:03 Xenia Morin

Can you put it in the freezer until the time that you need it? Those are different things that you can do.

00:20:10 Kylie

Yeah, that's awesome. I will recommend garlic for anyone who needs a good vegetable recipe. Just put some garlic in there.

00:20:19 Xenia Morin

And there's some fabulous garlic out there, no question about it. You know, many of us don't have good cooking skills. We didn't learn the cooking skills growing up, so you know, watch a YouTube video.

00:20:32 Xenia Morin

Uhm, go do a cooking demonstration. Chat with people who like to cook and ask them if they can teach you, you know, some new cooking recipes 'cause we all get in food ruts. Or subscribe to a magazine that has different recipes that you can try. So, my advice is get a little bit more adventurous.

00:20:53 Xenia Morin

Try different things. We tend to do it eating out, but because we've been home in the pandemic, now is a great time to build some of those cooking skills and get more adventurous about the food likes and dislikes that you may have.

00:21:09 Kylie

Yeah, I learned to cook from my grandmother, who was like amazing in the kitchen, you know, and so that's where I got the garlic secret.

00:21:17 Kylie

She just throws it in there. And then I'm like, OK, but that's the- she cooked food that I grew up on. So I know that I like it. You know, I know that you know she's the expert in this. She's been feeding me since I was an infant. So you know I just watched her one day and I was like so dumb I don't really know how to cook chicken. Can you help?

00:21:36 Kylie

And also, how do you cook string beans and spinach and like this recipe you made that's been in my family for generations?

00:21:43 Kylie

I want to know how to cook this and she was like OK, great. And then she would just give me like, this what you need and I would go over and we would make it together. But yeah, that's how I got involved.

00:21:53 Xenia Morin

And if there's a wonderful chef in your family, seek them out.

00:21:58 Xenia Morin

Go and spend time cooking with them. Not only will you get the food, but you understand more, where it comes from, you may get family stories.

00:22:07 Xenia Morin

There's memories associated. You were talking about, you know, you've been fed since an infant, so I'm sure there's some really wonderful food memories. And in this course we'll ask you to think about some of those food memories as well, because they helped to shape how we eat as an adult.

00:22:23 Kylie

Yeah, I mean definitely. It definitely does. So, you said that you had a huge variety of students in your course, and with that kind of variety, how do you promote good communication in a remote environment?

00:22:35 Xenia Morin

I'm teaching this course asynchronously because I want it to be compatible with people who may have a family at home who are working or taking other courses.

00:22:48 Xenia Morin

So, we have discussion threads where there are questions and answers and so students then respond to each other through that.

00:22:56 Xenia Morin

I use something called Flipgrid. Flipgrid is, uh, short videos and so that they can see each other and it's important for me to see them as well.

00:23:06 Xenia Morin

So, the Flipgrid can be recorded on your computer or your smartphone, and again, there's a prompt. One example is we have a food tasting.

00:23:17 Xenia Morin

And I ask students to do the food tasting and share it through Flipgrid. And so, they get to choose which foods they're going to do, and I want them to compare. So, in the fall I would bring in apple slices or different types of apples, but I've had students do different kinds of olives, different kinds of cheeses, and they share that with each other through Flipgrid.

00:23:41 Xenia Morin

I didn't want that to be a discussion thread, for instance. I have office hours and I try to set those up so people can log in and talk with me so, I make myself available during the summer and if other students come in then we can have smaller conversations. But those are optional, but the, the discussion thread and the Flipgrid are my main communication tools.

00:24:09 Xenia Morin

Uh, our Canvas website has the different materials. I send out announcements, but they'll see different things within our Canvas site as well.

00:24:22 Kylie

I really like, like it's like show and tell, but you know, like college level with food, you know that's really. That's like ingenious. That sounds really fun. Cause I already have a lot of opinions on cheese and olives just like, the different variety of different kind.

00:24:37 Xenia Morin

But it could be any kind of fruit, like citrus. And so, have you ever seen anyone like try a grapefruit and then try a Mandarin orange and then a navel orange?

00:24:46 Xenia Morin

And maybe even try a lemon or a lime. Part of the goal there is to engage all of the senses. I asked them what does it look like?

00:24:55 Xenia Morin

What does it taste like? What is, you know, what is the mouthfeel? What are the different senses that you need to engage?

00:25:02 Xenia Morin

But I also have them look at the packaging and so if it comes packaged what's on the package, those kind of things.

00:25:09 Kylie

I mean that's amazing yeah wow. Well I mean it sounds like a lot of journey of discovery of food which is great. And yeah, just in sharing, in general, so thank you for you know coming and allowing us a little in depth look in your summer course. And yeah, thanks for thanks for stopping by.

00:25:27 Xenia Morin

Thank you very much for this opportunity and I hope I can see you or others in my class. Whether it's this summer or at another time in down the line. Thank you.

00:25:41 Outro

Thanks for listening and we'll catch you next time on Extra Credit.