

Food Consciousness and the Radical Potential of Eco-Gastronomy: The Story of Terra Madre and Slow Food

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The Slow Food Organization and its biennial event, Terra Madre, have established themselves as a benchmark of inspiration for a radically new relationship between people, agriculture and food. Originating in the 1980s as a response to the increasing power of conventional food production systems, Slow Food has blossomed into a network with membership around the world.

In October 2006, the second Terra Madre event was held in Turin, Italy. Farmers, educators, chefs and interested 'food communities' attended. Topics included producer networks, the relationship of cooks and educational centres, agroecology and market access. Delegates addressed seed and animal diversity, agro-biodiversity education and the economics of agrifood resources, locally and internationally.

The perception of gastronomy as an elitist endeavor is off the mark from what this organization and Terra Madre aim to accomplish. Their goals involve placing the cultural, spiritual and community significance of food at the centre of the debate over the prevailing international food system. The Slow Food network is also highly decentralized. Members are organized into local 'convivia' around the globe, each working to address specific issues and needs regarding food and agriculture. The concept requires a political conscience and active engagement in one's community, considering the status quo for what, how and where foods are available. These principles are charged with urgency on central themes of our times: from ecosystems sustainability to our social, physical and psychic health.

The origins of Slow Food in Italy

In the late 1980s, McDonald's, the world's leading food service provider, with more than 30,000 restaurants in over 120 countries serving 46 million customers each day was planning to open a new franchise in the heart of one of the most historic centres of downtown Rome, the Piazza di Spagna, (or Spanish Steps), (Jones et al, 2003). This key moment in time served as the final straw that broke to camel's back and unleashed the founding of the Slow Food Movement.

The movement had been shaping years before. The man who would go on to become its leader was Carlo Petrini, a sociology student who grew up in the Piedmont area of Northern Italy. The Piedmont region, with Turin as its capital, had a long tradition of working class

consciousness and socialist values, inspired by the writings of Antonio Gramsci, and fostered in the solidarity between industrial workers and small landholders and farmers. By 1980, Petrini had opened a restaurant serving local 'peasant' foods at reasonable prices. This was part of his motivation to establish a gastronomical branch of the ARCI (*Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana*), a national network of social clubs closely tied to the Italian Community Party (Stille, 2001).

By 1987, Carlo Petrini had published a guide to Italian wine, *Gambero Rosso* (the Red Shrimp), as a supplement to the Communist newspaper, *Il Manifesto*. Now Italy's authoritative food and wine guide, *Gambero Rosso* is published under the auspices of the Slow Food movement. (Pietrykopwski, 312:2004)

Therefore, by the time McDonalds was planning to open at the Piazza di Spagna, a nascent organization was ready to articulate itself. In December 1989, Slow Food was officially born.

As of 2007, the Slow Food movement now claims membership in excess of 80,000 in over 100 countries worldwide. It has emerged as a resistance movement to fast food, and all the effects an industrialized agriculture and food processing imply on the environment, public health and communities around the world. In this spirit, the movement is closely associated with the other major movement that is highly critical of the advent and impact of industrialized agriculture, the organic agriculture movement.

The Slow Food movement aims to preserve agricultural biodiversity, culinary traditions and cultures and is against the standardization and homogenization of flavours and the loss of unique cultures that include; animal husbandry, agro-ecological knowledge and food preparation techniques.

Carlo Petrini states that 'anyone who thinks of themselves as a food lover but does not have any environmental awareness is naïve, whereas an ecologist who does not enjoy the pleasures of culture certainly has a sadder life.' (Ecologist, 2004).

It is important to note the particular rise of the Slow Food movement in Italy and Europe. The anti-globalization movement has been developing for well over a decade, and the question of food and agriculture has always been a major issue of concern for the politically and ecologically active in Europe. World trade agreements have been a major source of contention for activists and strong confrontations and manifestations against the WTO are a clear example of this. European farmers have been particularly vocal and organized around the issues dealing with the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Concerns with the safety of GMOs and the outbreaks of BSE and other animal health concerns have mobilized a new awareness of the dangers and shortcomings of the industrial agricultural model. Organic agricultural products have become broadly popular in Europe.

Each country has manifested their protests against globalized food systems in their own way, from the French version of anti-globalization manifested by Jose Bove and his organization, Confederation Paysanne, wreaking a McDonalds, to the more subtle style of the Slow Food movement originating in Italy.

At the end of the Second World War, the average European family spent around a third of their income on food. Today they spend about 15 percent, compared to approximately 10 percent in North America. In Italy, food constitutes about 18 percent of the family budget, and according to a Slow Food survey, a large majority of Italians say they would be willing to pay up to 20 percent more for food in order to guarantee its quality (Stille, 2001).

The tradition of food quality in Italy is particularly strong, and initially was an essentially gastronomic intention, by the mid-1990s had taken on an explicitly political agenda. Petrini stated, ‘we want to extend the kind of attention that environmentalism has dedicated to the panda and the tiger to domesticated plants and animals.’ (Stille, 2001).

The resonance of these goals, including the emphasis on natural, biodiverse, small-scale, natural and organic farming practices, charged the organization with a relevance and importance that has given its leaders a great deal of authority in the food debate.

At the European level, with increasing political motivations, Slow Food opened an office in Brussels, at the capital of the European Union. They are actively involved in lobbying agriculture and trade policy. Slow Food is also active at the United Nations in New York, where they organize food trade fairs, and aim to find markets for traditional food producers (Stille, 2001).

Slow Food is an increasingly strong advocate for small, artisan farmers and food producers. In 1999, Slow Food started a petition in Italy that succeeded in gaining exemptions for thousands of artisan food makers so that they would not have to conform to uniform hygiene standards imposed on all European food producers using a system invented by US space agency NASA. The standards would have imposed costly burdens of reporting, and bureaucratic complexity, including new equipment costs on countless small farmers (Stille, 2001).

A cynical criticism of the movement has questioned the degree to which the organization can really exert any significant degree of influence beyond a narrow spectrum of well educated people able to shop at specialty and organic food stores and restaurants.

The mission of Slow Food to rebuild a renewed relationship between people and their food

By the 1990s, with the advent of broad-based neoliberal globalization, the agri-food industry was one of the most marked points of conflict over what kind of economic food system would dominate. The Slow Food movement supports community economic development and predominately organizes itself into *convivia*, or food communities, with the premise that locally motivated people will be best suited to defend their food and agricultural traditions.

The Slow Food movement finds particular closeness with the origins of the organic agriculture sector because both aim to promote the benefits of incorporating a broad diversity of crops and livestock into production methods. Slow Food sees consumers as ‘co-

producers', since people are actively involved in the maintenance of certain foods to maintain diversity through their consumption habits.

Both the organic and Slow Food movement realize that the market is generally dominated by mass-scale, processed foods with centralized distribution networks. However, it is important to note that the organic sector has gone through some major changes in the last decade.

A study conducted at Michigan State University, shows that the top 25 food processors in North America have either acquired organic food processing companies, or have introduced a line of their own. As of November 2006; Pepsi, Tyson Foods, Dole, ConAgra, Cargill, Kraft, Heinz, Unilever, Coca-Cola, General Mills, Campbell's and Kellogg's all had either bought an organic food processing company, or opened a branch of their own (Howard, 2006). This consolidation of the organic sector to a large extent, especially in the prepared foods division of the movement is an important point to consider in relation to the principles of the Slow Food movement, which, being based on highly diverse, localized manifestations of uniquely local products, would make this difficult to standardize. Therefore the Slow Food movement contains the same spirit that describes the earliest organic agriculture movement.

To understand this better, analysing the role that the consumer plays in the social economics of the Slow Food movement is central.

Consumption and consumer habits are shaped not only by income but by loyalties, culture and traditions. People are informed and educated by a series of factors when they purchase products, especially their food. It was Pierre Bourdieu who emphasized an individual's cultural capital as the ability to discern an object's style, color and texture, in this case the quality of a product (Bourdieu, 1984). Slow Food puts a great deal of importance on the value of taste education, because it is seen as the ability to discern quality, flavour and character.

Taste education is criticized as elitist and questioned whether this can be compatible with a politics of socially conscious consumption. (Pietrykowski, 309:2004)

The argument of the Slow Food movement is that taste education is the front line defender of quality and character in the relationship of people with nature and their food culture. Slow Food is consciously working to bring the consumer and their dinner closer to their farmer-producer and in the process have a major impact on redeveloping the sustainability of food systems and communities (Pietrykowski, 310:2004).

For a Slow Food economy to be realized, an element of social trust and loyalty need to be strengthened. Loyalty is a defense against the fluctuations of markets, prices and supply. This step is fundamental and requires the education of consumers to understand their role in the cycle of a local or regional economy. These hallmarks of a strong social economy serve as buffers against the co-optation by industrial partners that is intending to taken over the organic agricultural sector (Pietrykowski, 317:2004). Slow Food therefore navigates through the twin elements of desire for quality and taste, and the resistance to the homogenizing, soulless standards of the industrial food model.

These principles mentioned above form the foundations of the Slow Food movement; education of taste, defending the right to material pleasure and conviviality through linking producers and consumers, and preserving the survival of endangered agricultural products and practices (Pietrykowski, 311:2004).

The last principle has since 1996, taken on a particularly political advocacy capacity through the creation of the Foundation for Biodiversity. The Foundation was established by the Slow Food movement in partnership with the regional government of Tuscany. It is a non-profit organization and supports the Ark of Taste project, and its working arm, the Presidia. This unique effort by Slow Food has garnered the attention of many in the food industry, from farmers to food processors to chefs. Michael Pollan, a food writer in the United States wrote 'the Slow Food movement understands that every set of genes on its Ark of Taste encodes not only a set of biological traits but a set of cultural practices, as well, and in some cases a way of life.' (Pollan, 2003: 76).

On the organization of the Slow Food movement

The basis upon which the Foundation for Biodiversity works so well is the way in which Slow Food as a movement is organized.¹ A central feature of this is the *convivia*. These are local chapters of the organization, based in cities and towns around the world with the goal of uniting people locally who are motivated by the philosophy of Slow Food. Today there are more than 850 Slow Food *convivia* around the world.² These branches serve as front line advocates of the philosophy. The *convivia* organize events on taste education, and promote slow food projects. Each *convivia* has a leader who is responsible for promoting local artisans, local farmers, and local flavors through regional events such as *Taste Workshops*, wine tastings, and farmer's markets.

A *convivium* works to link producers and consumers closer together while finding the diversity of products that can define the region, and considering which food products are endangered. This work then leads to the most prominent and clearly articulated branch of the Slow Food movement mentioned above, the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity.

Within this foundation, the Ark of Taste is a growing body of collected products from around the world, recognized in collaboration with local *convivia*, that are in some way either endangered, or highly unique and particular to an area of the world. These products range from alcoholic drinks to cheeses, prepared meats, fish, animal breeds, cooking and baking techniques, fruits and vegetables. Slow Food has worked to catalogue the incredible diversity of these products, but this has not been enough to ensure their survival. As a result the role of the Presidia is to work with local food communities to advocate for the survival of their food products against international standardization. Just some of the statistics of the foundation include;

¹ Visit website for further detailed information: http://www.slowfood.com/welcome_eng.lasso

² See more on *convivium*: http://www.slowfood.com/about_us/eng/start_convivium.lasso

- 75% of European food product diversity has been lost since 1900
- 93% of American food product diversity has been lost in the same time period
- 33% of livestock varieties have disappeared or are near disappearing
- 30,000 vegetable varieties have become extinct in the last century, and one more is lost every six hours.³

As a result of these trends the Foundation sees its mission charged with urgency. The Presidia assists with small projects in attempts to support artisan producers of endangered products. Sometimes this only requires bringing together existing producers and organizing their marketing and production standards, while in other instances, when a product is threatened towards extinction, actual advocacy and work with local, regional and national governments may be a part of it.⁴ Ultimately, the aim of the Presidia is to restore these products to their economic viability as food products and traditions. To show the economic benefits to local and regional economies, the Bocconi University of Economics and Business in Milan, Italy conducted a study of the Presidia in Italy to show the measurable economic benefit of these projects.⁵

The Presidia works in collaboration on projects such as the Bocconi study, or it collaborates with local groups realizing the value and commercial potential of reviving a product. This is manifested in all things from seed banks for rare fruits and vegetables to cooperatives of local animal breeds. A particular project of the Presidia in relation to protecting an endangered species of cattle is exemplary.

The case of the Piedmontese cow

In the late 1990s and at the turn of the millennium, a series of mad cow disease outbreaks across Europe sharply increased the awareness of consumers in their meat purchasing habits. In the region of Piedmont, a particular breed of cattle has been highly valued for its cheese and high quality meat. However, the numbers of Piedmontese cows have decreased significantly in recent years in comparison to the high productivity of Holstein cattle. Piedmontese cattle raised for meat also take 18 months to reach market weight compared to 14 months for more standard breeds. The numbers of Piedmontese cattle had been falling until Slow Food established a Presidia in its name, and organized a consortium of 16 Piedmontese cattle farmers. Instead of expanding their herds and following efficiency standards, Slow Food developed a strict set of animal husbandry protocols based on natural and organic methods to produce high-quality beef. With beef consumption in Italy down because of distrust in conventional meat industry procedures, butchers and consumers came looking for high-quality standards, and demand for Piedmontese beef has been high. (Stille, 2001)

³ Statistics on Food Biodiversity, <http://www.slowfoodfoundation.com/eng/presidi/lista.lasso>

⁴ See Presidia project descriptions: <http://www.slowfoodfoundation.com/eng/presidi/lista.lasso>

⁵ See Bocconi study, *Italian version only*, 'A cura di: Magda Antonioli Corigliano e Giovanni Vigano, con la collaborazione di: Cristina Mottironi, *I Presidi Slow Food: da iniziativa culturale ad attivita imprenditoriale*, Bocconi, Milano, Ottobre 2002. Link: <http://www.slowfoodfoundation.com/eng/presidi/economici.lasso>

Examples such as this are an important testament to the detailed work that takes place on a daily basis in the mission that Slow Food is aiming to accomplish, a world where food diversity can thrive. In the Canadian example we have our own set of recognized products that have made it to the Ark of Taste. Currently these are the Canadienne cow, Herring Spawn on Kelp, the Montreal Melon and Red Fife Wheat.⁶ These products are noted for their particular adaptation to Canadian climate, geography and cultural history. By first recognizing these products as an important part of a Canadian culinary and food tradition, and recognizing their rarity, it serves as a starting point as to how these products can also be preserved.

The work of the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity and the project of the Ark of Taste, as demonstrated above is actively involved in a social, cultural and political process of food consciousness raising. The sustainability of the natural world that can support these diverse traditions is never far from the thinking of the organization. More recently, the responsibility of educating and training the next generation of food experts has become manifested through an post-secondary institution of advanced learning.

Officially founded in 2003, and accepting its first group of students in 2004, the University of Gastronomic Sciences established campuses in the Italian regions of Piedmont and Emilia-Romagna. The goal is to facilitate an international research and training center to renew farming methods, foster a biodiverse agriculture and maintain an ‘organic relationship between gastronomy and agricultural science.’⁷

Courses include; agroecology, gastronomy, culinary history, sensory evaluation, history and geography of agricultural food systems, food technology, anthropology of food, semiotics, nutrition and dietetics, sociology of consumption, catering systems and food tourism (Pietrykowski, 312-313:2004). The extensiveness of this educational effort has placed the Slow Food organization in a prominent place as a leading example of a new relationship between agriculture, food and human societies.

One of the culminating moments for the organization came in 2004 when the first Terra Madre event was held. This event served as a major benchmark in the development of the organization when nearly 5,000 delegates representing 1,200 food communities from across the planet met in Turin, Italy.

The Terra Madre conference is the biggest bi-annual event that Slow Food organizes. It serves as an opportunity to share the major issues and commonalities confronting and challenging a sustainable and diverse agriculture.

Some of the quotes from the famous speakers at the 2004 event include:⁸

⁶ See more information about Canadian Slow Food products:

http://www.slowfoodfoundation.com/eng/arca/lista.lasso?lista=si&id_nazione=38&sf_arca_tipologia=

⁷ See the website of the University of Gastronomic Sciences for more information:

<http://www.unisg.it/eng/chisiamo.php>

⁸ Please see Terra Madre 2004 website for complete transcripts of speeches:

<http://terramadre2004.org/eng/discorsi.lasso>

The extraordinary wonder of all this knowledge and know-how must not be threatened by the logic of productivity, by the manipulation of genes, by the profit motive of a privileged few, by lack of respect for the environment, by the exploitation of workers. The battle that we are waging to defend the biodiversity of the planet from vegetable species to animal breeds—is a battle for civilization. The right to own land and seeds is a sacrosanct right for all the world's vegetable growers. The pesticide and GMO multinationals are implementing policies incompatible with the environment, stressing mother earth, humbling the food sovereignty of peoples and jeopardizing the freedom of farmers and growers.

Carlo Petrini

The problem, perhaps, is that techniques such as inter-cropping, agroforestry, green manuring, composting and biological pest control offer less prospect of commercial gain to those who have money to invest. The hundreds of millions of people who would gain are the much-derided practitioners of so-called “peasant agriculture”, who have very little money, but who are the long-term guardians of biodiversity....Fast food may appear to be cheap food, and in the literal sense it often is. But that is because huge social and environmental costs are being excluded from the calculations. Any analysis of the real costs would have to look at such things as the rise in food-borne illnesses, the advent of new pathogens such as E. coli 0157, antibiotic resistance from the overuse of drugs in animal feed, extensive water pollution from intensive agricultural systems, and many other factors. These costs are not reflected in the price of fast food, but that doesn't mean that our society isn't paying them.....On this theme it does seem to me that the other great food movement with which I am associated, the organic movement, has so much in common with the Slow Food Movement and this communality of purpose and direction ought to be a source of co-operation and, also of course, celebration!

HRH Prince of Wales

Consider the facts: Every day, one in three American children eats at a fast food restaurant. Fewer than one in five sits down and eats a family meal around a common table. And yet the family meal — especially when it consists of food a family has cooked itself — instills in us the most basic human values: courtesy, civility, honesty, generosity. The family meal is an everyday ritual enactment of our deepest humanity. Its repetition requires us to acknowledge that actions have consequences, that survival requires cooperation, and that people and nature are interdependent. Helping to prepare and share the family meal demonstrates to children that food is beautiful and that beauty merits attention and care. When we are children, we absorb such lessons without thinking, as if by osmosis. However, when our children eat fast food, they absorb a very different set of messages, also by osmosis. The

insidious, irresistible voice of consumerism says: Food should be cheap. Resources are infinite. It is okay to waste. Speed is a virtue. The seasons do not matter and neither does where you live in the world.....I believe that the destiny of humankind in the twenty-first century will depend most of all on how people choose to nourish themselves. And if we can educate the senses, and break down the wall of ignorance between farmers and eaters, I am convinced — because I have seen it with my own eyes time and again — people will inevitably choose the sustainable way, which is always the most delicious alternative.

Alice Waters

Our bodies are rebelling. We cannot afford the burden: it is a very costly burden. It is now time to go to the really low-cost agriculture which is an agriculture in which we use our intelligence and bio-diversity to feed ourselves. But before we feed ourselves, the earth.

Vandana Shiva

At the 2006 edition of Terra Madre, the focus was on three main components; i.) Networks; specifically, strengthening the network of food communities, chefs and university researchers, while improving their communications, ii.) Market Access; finding new outlets for small-scale producers and distribution through associations and cooperatives, and iii.) Agro-ecology; promoting an agriculture that respects the environment.⁹ This last point on promoting and supporting an environmentally sustainable agriculture within the Slow Food organization pervades a great deal of their work.

Parallels between the Slow Food movement and the organic agriculture movement

In Italy, where the Slow Food movement originated, we also see that the certified organic agriculture production methods are well established and growing. Italy is 6th in countries with the highest percentage of land area under organic management with over 6% organic.¹⁰ Canada is approximately at 2% of all land area under organic management.

Slow Food continues to work with organic organizations around the world to address the specific details around maintaining crop varieties, production techniques and traditional agricultural knowledge. In Peru for example, the local Slow Food Presidium carried out a partnership with the Peruvian organic association ANPE (Asociacion Nacional de Productores Ecologicos). The goals of the project are to establish quality standards and dedicated growing systems, while developing a wider market for five varieties of unique Andean potatoes.¹¹

⁹ See further details on Terra Madre 2006: <http://www.terramadre2006.org/terramadre/eng/temi.lasso>

¹⁰ Willer Helga and Minou Youssefi (eds.), *The World of Organic Agriculture 2006: Statistics and Emerging Trends*, IFOAM Publication, 8th, revised edition, February 2006.

¹¹ See the story of Slow Food's work with an organic growers association in Peru: <http://www.slowfoodfoundation.com/eng/presidi/dettaglio.lasso?cod=264>

Slow Food Canada has been particularly connected to the organic movement in this country. A Slow Food event was held in Stratford, Ontario and sponsored by the Stratford Northwestern Secondary School. The event was entitled; Nourishing the Future: Food and Youth. The event supported local organic farmers as well as renowned chefs from across S.Ontario. The event was organized by Paul Finkelstein, who works at the school with Slow Food principles and organic agricultural farmers in the Stratford area. He established the Culinary Arts Program at the high school and it is considered one of the best in the world.¹²

The examples of effective cross-pollination of ideas and efforts between the Slow Food movement and the organic movement are numerous. Particularly with an established organizational system such as the Presidia and the Ark of Taste, agricultural biodiversity becomes a priority by means of supporting the production and marketing of traditional, specialty products. These Presidia products are often best produced under organic management techniques because they ‘take into consideration not only cultural-historical aspects and biodiversity, but also environmental problems and small-scale economies, proposing agronomic and livestock practices that are not aggressive to the natural environment.’¹³

But the Slow Food movement has actually added something particular to the organic movement that is a reaffirmation of local traditions and food systems. Because so much of the work of Slow Food is founded in defense of location-specific traditions, crops, animal varieties and production techniques, it is less susceptible to the trend that has pervaded a certain branch of the organic agricultural sector, namely the consolidation of large, organic industrial farms, particularly in California. This lesson is particularly valid for the path that we take in Canada and Ontario as well.

The organic sector has become a specific niche market, albeit a growing one, with a certain degree of contradictions (Pollan, 2001). As some sectors of organics come to increasingly dominate the field, such as the entry of Wal-Mart into the field, the idea seems increasingly true that ‘time and time again attempts to commodify organic meanings have contributed to a material circumstance that undermines these very meanings, leaving little option for those who wish to profit from these meanings other than to remake them.’ (Guthman, 306:2002).

The Slow Food movement is aiming to addressing the contradictions innate to modern living; namely the cross roads between the pace of living and working life, the reality of dual-family incomes and the resulting compression of time dedicated to cooking. This is happening amidst awareness that the globalization of the food system is severely affecting our social, environmental and psychological health in the process. (Jones et al, 303:2003)

¹² See more information about Slow Food Canada: <http://gremolata.com/slowfoodyouth.htm>

¹³ Scialabba, Nadia El-Hage, Cristina Grandi and Christina Henatsch, Organic Agriculture and Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, FAO Corporate Document Repository, FAO, Rome, Link: <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/005/AC784E/ac784e-03.htm>

The question will be, can the Slow Food movement, paired with the best of the organic movement deal with the hard realities of the modern world and its infrastructure. How this alternative develops will remain the greatest challenge.

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