

Cooking Up Change

The Slow Food Movement wants the world to become more conscious about what it eats—one roasted potato at a time.



IN MODESTO, CALIFORNIA, plates of chartreuse, yellow, and purple tomatoes elicit “oohs” and “aaahs.” In New York City, a family gathers around a feast featuring the flavorful Narragansett turkey, a rare heritage breed. In Iowa City, people stroll from restaurant to restaurant on a “culinary walk,” sampling specialties made with regional ingredients. From coast to

coast, people are rediscovering sensual delights and the importance of eating seasonally and locally, thanks to Slow Food, an international organization passionate about adding flavor to our lives.

Started in 1989 in reaction to the opening of a McDonald's near Rome's Spanish Steps, Slow Food has become a global movement of more than 65,000

Braised Root Vegetables

people in 45 countries. "We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life," reads the Slow Food International Manifesto. "Our defense should begin at the table with Slow Food. Let us rediscover the flavors and savors of regional cooking." From its original gastronomic mission, the organization's scope has widened to include more social and ecological issues. Members are devoted to learning about food and flavor, supporting local farmers and sustainable agriculture, preserving rare and endangered foods, and promoting a lifestyle that cultivates time for food preparation and sharing the pleasures of eating with family and friends. In short, Slow Food wants the world to become more conscious about what it eats.

"Slowness is a quality we all need in life," says Erika Lesser, director of programming for Slow Food USA, headquartered in New York City. "To be conscious—even in a small way—is valuable because food is integral to our lives.

Unfortunately, we have lost touch with how food helps define us as a community. Most people have little sense about how it is grown and transported—or even how fabulous fresh foods taste," she laments. "Yet this information helps us understand the connection between personal health and the well-being of our communities and planet."

Becoming food savvy requires a measure of mindfulness, since food's origins are often obscure. "Milk doesn't come from a carton, it comes from a cow," Lesser points out. "Tracing food to its source informs your choices—you find out that it's more ethical to eat food grown locally without genetic engineering, pesticides, additives, or preservatives."

Slow Food USA operates under the assumption that "fast life"—manifested by industrialized, standardized food supplies and degradation of farmland—endangers our reverence for food, the acuity of our palates, and human dignity and culture. By slowing down and becoming

mindful of food's flavor and origins, we will be better nourished—body and soul.

To spread that message, local chapters, called "convivia," have sprouted up in cities and rural areas alike so food lovers can develop their palates and learn about regional cooking traditions and foods, including heirloom varieties of fruits and vegetables, handcrafted wine and beer, farmhouse cheeses, and other artisanal products. But Slow Food is more than a gourmet club. The organization is committed to raising food awareness among restaurateurs, the general public, and children. Food tastings and sit-down dinners—where prandial pleasure is admittedly important—generally include an educational component to give attendees a glimpse into the politics, economics, and history of the food they're enjoying.

"Slow Food is more than just a feel-good movement," explains Allen Katz, the leader of the New York City convivium. "We step up to the table to explain to the people why culturally, envi-

ronmentally, and socially, it's imperative to support local farmers—the people who help protect the land, safeguard biodiversity, preserve our national food heritage, and provide fresh food." As a national forum for these ideas, Slow Food USA publishes a member newsletter, *The Snail*, which raises food issues of global importance and invites experts to write on topics such as improving animal welfare standards, biotechnology, and defending local cultures. The book *Slow Food* by founder Carlo Petrini (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2001) introduces readers to the ideas and tenets of this international organization with a compilation of essays on taste, tradition, and the pleasures—and even some of the politics—of food.

Reading, Writing, and Radishes

MRS. MCCUE'S fourth graders are giggling and "baaa-ing" as they mix sheep manure into the soil of their school garden at Denver's Bromwell Elementary.

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They have just learned from Slow Food member Matt Jones how compost enriches the ground to make it better for growing the vegetables and herbs they'll plant, tend, harvest, and eat.

Denver is one of the first areas in the nation where Slow Food has started its School Garden project, modeled after Berkeley chef Alice Waters's successful Edible Schoolyard program. With the help of school administrators, teachers, parents, and students, Slow Food members planted gardens at Bromwell and Whittier Elementary schools last spring, and in 2003 they hope to grow their seed-to-table program in more schools. This fall, kids from the two schools shared the collective fruits of their labors at a "harvest dinner" in which a local chef oversaw the cooking. "The kids are learning where

"Kids are learning where their food comes from and tasting the benefits of fresh, organic vegetables."

their food comes from and tasting the benefits of raising fresh, organic vegetables," Jones says proudly. "You can see the joy in their faces when they get their hands in the dirt. And they've developed the pride of ownership from planting and weeding their plots."

Slow Food Denver is gradually creating a curricular tie-in to school gardens that includes botany, environmental studies, and health sciences. Besides developing green thumbs, the children get firsthand history lessons. For instance, while planting "The Three Sisters"—corn, beans, and squash—in Native American-style mounds, children also study the tribal significance of these staple foods.

Another of Slow Food's educational programs, The Ark USA, is devoted to promoting unique, hard-to-find local foods that are at risk of disappearing. What Noah's floating zoo did for the animal kingdom, The Ark of Taste does for food by raising awareness of special local products so people in those regions can seek them out, buy them, and help continue

their legacy. For example, The Ark USA hopes to boost sales of Dry Monterey Jack cheese by publicizing it on its Web site and in *The Snail*. The heritage of this unique dairy creation dates back to the era of World War I, when Italian grating-cheeses became scarce in America due to trade embargoes. As a substitute, Northern California cheese makers began drying and aging local Monterey Jack. Today, with Parmesan cheese readily available, Dry Jack is more rare, with only two producers remaining to preserve this slice of cheese-making history.

The Power of Your Plate

MEMBERS OF Slow Food are slowly leading a quiet revolution, cooked up around kitchen tables. Much of the social change they work toward—fighting corporatized food as well as defending the small food producers—is accomplished through the consumer-and-farmer outreach programs that help put money back into the pockets of small farmers. For instance, the national Slow Turkey Project provides a commercial market for four rare breeds of turkey and gives farmers a guaranteed source of income. It works this way: Early in the year, people pay in advance for a holiday turkey so the Slow Food poultry farmers benefit from the income while they're raising the free-range birds.

Politics is on the plate for farmer advocate and attorney Therese Tuttle of Modesto, California. "Being a fifth-generation Californian, I'm devastated by the loss of agriculture in the Central Valley," she says. "Sadly, farmers are a dying breed. I work to educate people about patronizing local organic farmers so they can make a living and continue producing flavorful, healthy, and sustainably grown food." Not surprisingly, Tuttle chartered a Slow Food convivium in which 75 percent of the board members are farmers. A number of the group's events bring the public and farmers face-to-face. Like other Slow Food chapters nationwide, they organize conferences and marketplaces

that feature foods from regional producers where chefs, restaurateurs, grocery store owners, school food-service workers, and the public come to sample.

As a result of disseminating the Slow Food message, Tuttle has noticed significant changes in her community, including more organic farmers at the farmers' market, wider acceptance by local farmers of organic growing methods, and increased membership in the local California Certified Organic Farmers organization.

There's also greater demand for local and organic products since several Modesto restaurants began featuring local farm foods and grocery stores created displays highlighting regional specialties. "In the long run, buying local is the only thing that will help our farmers," says Tuttle. "Most crops grown in this area are also produced in South America, and since NAFTA, we have seen a huge increase in cheap foreign imports. To displace them, we need a strong demand for and willingness to pay more for local, organic products."

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What you put on your plate is a conscious and political act with environmental and economic ramifications, yet Slow Foodies are quick to remind you that they also stand for a saner, slower lifestyle that values good food and good company. Just because there are battles to fight doesn't mean the Modesto convivium will enjoy tasting Wally Condon's eight varieties of South American potatoes or the Cakes' heirloom tomatoes any less. Slow Food champions the often overlooked, gentle graces of the table. "Our organization helps people reconnect with food's infinite cultural and sensory attributes," says Tuttle. "Food is such an inherent part of a joyous, healthy life. We can all use a reminder that reaffirms the wonder of growing and eating food." ■

To learn more about Slow Food, find a convivium in your area, or order a Slow Turkey, check www.slowfoodusa.org or call (212) 965-5640. Laurel Kallenbach is a freelance writer based in Boulder, Colorado.