



SLOW FOOD: PUTTING A FACE ON FOOD

BY LEAH KOLT

WHEN A FAST-FOOD restaurant opened in 1986 on the historic Spanish steps in Rome, Carlo Petrini was shocked.

Afraid it might signal the death of quality food, local heritage and the culture of eating he loves, he created the antidote – Slow Food International.

Designed to promote the food traditions that are part of the cultural identity of Italy and most other countries, the movement has spread around the globe over the past 20 years, with 140 “convivia” now carrying out the slow food mission in the

try to help him preserve this artisan knowledge,” Francis said.

One way Petrini has attracted support is hosting the mother of all “foodie” conferences in Turin, Italy. Called “Terra Madre,” the international event is held every other year.

In 2006, over 8,000 food producers, educators, and chefs from 150 countries attended, including Francis and San Luis Obispo chef Maegen Loring. Another attendee was Nora Pouillon, the mother of Cal Poly soils science alum Alexis Pouillon. Ms. Pouillon started the first certified organic restaurant – Restaurant

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United States, including a chapter in San Luis Obispo.

Petrini believes that eating is more than just feeding our bodies, according to the founder of Cal Poly’s Sustainable Agriculture Resource Consortium (SARC), Hunter Francis.

“Petrini considers eating a cultural act that ideally includes a pleasurable social experience around the table. Moreover, he knows how our food choices impact the way food is grown. Hoping to protect the endangered wealth of traditional farming knowledge, he looks for allies in universities and the food indus-

Nora – in the United States, in Washington, D.C.

Yak cheese from Tibet, heirloom wheat from Canada, infused herbal teas from Belarus and Ojibwa wild rice were among the myriad exotic offerings to catch their attention at an immense foods market called Salone del Gusto, held next to the conference.

“I kept going back to the Irish cheeses,” Loring said longingly, “especially one made from cow’s milk with flecks of seaweed. I could close my eyes and smell the wind from the bluffs and taste the grass in it.”





Also providing a feast for the eyes, the conference included an exhibit of food art, such as an oriental dragon made of yellow winter squash.

Acquiring new perspectives and insights into food practices was yet another benefit to the food advocates in attendance. “We learned that the use of veal in dishes – not very ‘PC’ here – originated as a way to make use of the meat of male calves that small farmers just couldn’t sustain. And rose or blush wine actually began as a by-product of red wine production,” Loring explained.

Keeping the old ways alive is a major accomplishment of the movement. By the 1970s, artisan cheese making in the United States was virtually dead, Loring said. In the 80s, there were fewer than a dozen people making cheeses in small batches. Now there are hundreds, including many who trained at Cal Poly’s annual cheese-making short course.

The movement helps support cottage industries around the world too, such as the camel-milk cheese makers in Northwest Africa, red rice growers in Madagascar, mulberry gatherers in Tajikistan, and more than 1,500 other small food communities around the globe.

And in Switzerland, it helps preserve charming folkways, as well. “All the cows in Switzerland are free range, and the women are the cow callers. It’s not a yodel but more of an operatic singing. It was so haunting, it brought tears to everyone’s eyes,” Loring recalled.

Although big agriculture helps feed the world, the proponents of slow food hope that the small, indigenous ways won’t be lost. “Some things are meant to stay small and be cherished,” Loring said. □

UPCOMING SLOW FOOD EVENTS

Although the next Terre Madre won’t be held until Oct. 2008, don’t worry if this article has you hankering for Herat raisins from Afghanistan or Kabompo organic honey from Zambia. Many events are planned around California that will feature local and regional delicacies.

- SARC’s own annual fundraiser in October will include leading voices in the sustainable agriculture movement and samplings of many artisanal and “local-board” treats – foods made with ingredients in season and grown within 100 miles. For more information, go to www.sarc.calpoly.edu.
- In May 2008 the Slow Food Nation conference will be held in San Francisco, “sort of a Terra Madre U.S.,” where the emphasis will be on heritage foods from the West Coast, according to Francis.
- For a list of other upcoming events around the country, go to <http://slowfoodusa.org/events/index.html>.

LINKS TO RELATED FOOD INITIATIVES AT CAL POLY AND AROUND THE WORLD

SARC at Cal Poly	www.sarc.calpoly.edu
Cal Poly Organic Farm	www.calpolyorgfarm.com
Central Coast Grown	www.CentralCoastGrown.org
Center for Urban Agriculture, Goleta, Ca.	www.fairviewgardens.org
Slow Food USA.	www.slowfoodusa.org
Slow Food	www.slowfood.com
Terra Madre	www.terramadre2006.org
Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems	www.fao.org/sd
Restaurant Nora	www.noras.com