

The beginnings of Slow Food

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There is a deceptively simple story told about the origins of Slow Food: the founder of Slow Food, Carlo Petrini, was walking down the Spanish Steps in Rome with, depending how you hear it, either Dario Fo or Italo Calvino, or some other justly-lauded man of letters in the Italian intellectual pantheon, when, to their horror, in front of them they spied the golden arched symbol of a certain fast-food company. Enraged that such an example of American globalization and culinary homogenization should come to desecrate the Spanish Steps – surely an iconic representation of Rome and Italian identity in general—it was resolved upon the spot to start a Slow Food movement that would fight encroachment of mass-marketed, flavorless, international and globalized food stuffs into Italian dietary patterns. A protest was held—in a very Italian manner – with protesters slowly eating dishes of pasta in front of the offending fast food restaurant and the rest is history.

The story is more complex, of course; there is an enormous amount of myth-making in Slow Food. What was to become Slow Food started in the 1970s among a group of leftist intellectuals. At the time, international understanding of Italian food and wine often was reduced to red sauce and bad Chianti, and the early proponents wished to elevate and preserve the status of Italian food products. Behind this was the observation that much of Italy's food and agricultural patrimony was being displaced by new forms of food distribution, utilization, and consumption. Stefano Bonilli, Carlo Petrini, and others created an organization called Arcigola (ARCI stands for "Recreational Association of Italian Communists," while gola is a word relating to gluttony in Italian slang) designed to promote Piedmontese food and wine through definition, development, and protection of clear regional "territories" based on the French notion of *terroir*. The roots of this movement were deep within the Italian Communist party (Parasecoli, 2003; Petrini, 2002: 2-15). It was hoped that the revival and invigoration of regional Italian cultures might produce increased economic opportunities for more "proletarian" farmers, wine makers, restaurateurs, and food producers.

In 1989 a group of self-selected delegates from the newly created "Slow Food" organization convened in Italy to further define the future of the society. Since the focus was to be the local environment and economy, the new association was divided into regionally-based *convivia* (from the Latin word "*convivium*" meaning banquet, and used in the Roman and Medieval periods to indicate a gathering of people for fellowship and eating). In this, Slow Food borrows from the ancient Greek and Roman tradition of the symposium and *convivium*, or the gathering of like-minded scholars and gentlemen for singing, poetry-making, academic discussion, eating, drinking and general debauchery.

Philosophically, Slow Food is rooted in a notion of consumers' rights; this mirrors an understanding of how citizenship, as embedded within political processes and political

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action theory, has shifted from the "citizen" as participant, to "citizen" as producer, to "citizen" as consumer (Miller, 1995). This focus belies an underlying leitmotif of Slow Food in general, that the embattled (and perhaps embittered) citizen-eater-as-consumer has lost effective rights to participate in a community of gastronomic true choice due to the hegemonic control of the food industry. Slow Food participants frequently speak of the effort to find, purchase, and use comestibles not controlled by large, non-local or non-sustainable food concerns. Participation in Slow Food is perceived by members to be an example of direct resistance to the "tyranny of the market" à la Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1999), although the words they use are more emblematic of a harried chef or hostess searching for ideal and elite ingredients than those of the academic sensibilities of French political theorists. Indeed, it can be argued that the name alone signals this opposition and perceived resistance to that which is manufactured and pre-prepared. However, the identity of assaulted eater relates to what is on the plate, as well as the processes that brought the meal to the table. There is a deep and abiding sense within members' discourse that the land is being destroyed by industrial farming practices, that small scale food production is being driven out of business, that food folkways are disappearing and that the universe of choice in taste is being steadily reduced by national and international-level globalization processes that create homogenous products, propose homogenous lives and livelihoods, and define the human endeavor as a process of globalized mass culture. In these models, to support Slow Food is to perform 21st-century consumption as a citizen whose sole political power seems to be active resistance to the onslaught of processed, big-money corporate food homogeneity.

The cultural shift in self-identity from leftist ideological warrior to gourmandizing foodie has been chronicled recently by Parasecoli for Italy (Parasecoli, 2003) and by Warren Belasco and Patric Kuh for the United States (Belasco, 1989; Kuh, 2001). Among many progressives it is accepted wisdom that processed and/or industrial food is bad tasting, bad for the environment, and bad for you. Whether this actually causes alteration in food habits may be questionable, but it is telling that many academic communities have local farmers' markets, food co-ops, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms. Recently published books such as *Fast Food Nation* (Schlosser, 2001), *Food Politics*, and *Safe Food* (Nestle, 2002 and 2003) have served to fuel this increased awareness and distrust of the corporate food system, as have highly-publicized outbreaks of food-borne illnesses caused by *Listeria*, *E. coli*, BSE and other microbes the proliferation of which is enabled by long range transit and lack of quality oversight. In a more positive vein, Gary Paul Nabhan's *Coming Home to Eat: the Pleasures and Politics of Local Food* (Nabhan, 2002) illustrates that local identity and local eating can indeed be accomplished, although at the price of giving up many foods Americans often think of as staples.

It has become increasingly obvious that knowing the producer and the process may help to mitigate, if not the absolute risk, at least the perceptions of risk attached to eating. Awareness of opacity in sourcing has also become a fashionable way to demonstrate the identity-making process of food choice. In homage to Bourdieu, one could argue that performing the 'habitus' of being a critically-engaged cultural actor requires an appropriate distrust and rejection of corporate food agencies in favor of the local, sustainable, and (the current hot sound bite) 'fair traded' food sources. All of this folds neatly into the Slow Food ideology, making many academic, upper-middle class, professional communities hotbeds of Slow Food membership and activity, both in the US and abroad.

The uber-principle of Slow Food is the right to pleasure - a belief which reifies the consumer-rights motif. Slow Food adherents believe that true pleasure is to be found in the flavors, cuisines and practices of food and that the increased pleasure derived from eating good-tasting, sustainable local food would convince consumers of its value. It is also thought that pleasure allows for balanced, sensible, and healthful eating; training the palate to appreciate the tastes of a ripe tomato in relation to the sugared flavors of a bottle of ketchup will improve dietary patterns because healthful foods are also good tasting -- an idea supported by nutrition research (see Ochs, Pontecorvo and Fasulo, 1996; Westenhoefer and Pudel, 1993). That health can be linked to pleasure has been known for a long time; a quote from an anonymous 4th century BC Greek physician writing on health, food, and music illustrates nearly the same sentiment: "The tongue tastes food as if it were music, distinguishing sweet and sharp, discord and concord, in all that it encounters. When the tongue is attuned there is pleasure in music, when it is out of tune there is agony!" (quoted in Dalby, 1996:13). But the eater - the consumer - must have the palate developed to taste the high and the low, the sweet and the sharp. According to the manifesto of Slow Food, the tongue raised on the salty-sweet-fatty complex so well described by Sidney Mintz (Mintz: 1996: 106-124) is a tongue unable to distinguish pleasure removed from satiety. Hence, the consumer must recognize his lack of knowledge, develop his palate, and maintain a lifestyle which promotes his gustatory pleasure. The first step is recognition, as understood in the Slow Food Manifesto.

The Official Manifesto and its meanings

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The official manifesto arose out of the 1989 meeting of Slow Food advocates. (See Gaytán, this issue, pg104-106).

Here the phrase "slow food" is used ritually and rhythmically to create a connection with a frameworked belief system that stands in opposition to a (not very well defined) process or entity called "Fast Life." Thus it causes the reader to conceptualize Slow Food as a linked series of positive value-statements which

evoke strong emotional responses. The phrases “guaranteed sensual pleasure,” “truly progressive answer,” “real culture,” and “rediscover the flavors and savors” stand in stark contrast with “enslaved by speed,” “succumbed to the same insidious virus,” “species in danger of extinction,” and “contagion of the multitude.” This binary mental system forces one to divide all creation into “fast” or “slow,” good or bad. The Manifesto thus creates an ideational Slow Food metaphor that is conceptually and morally whole because it supports cultural frameworks considered appropriate and positive. Oddly enough, it also evokes one of the strongest metaphors in Western thought - that of germ theory and the attendant fear of an uncontrollable penetration by disease of the sacred, seemingly inviolable self. . . the potentially whole and fulfilled self represented “naturally” by “real culture.” In response, “our defense should begin at the table with Slow Food.” Slow Food thus creates itself as both a metaphor for the integral origin-self and as the succoring remedy provided by the house-call of the old-fashioned wise doctor of a rural condotta. It further states that Slow Food “is now the only truly progressive answer,” thus ignoring or invalidating all other food policy initiatives and causing members to feel that they stand alone, unique and profoundly empowered, as the singular and only organization which will fix the food system. It is probable, however, that even without the strong language of the Manifesto the phrase slow food would resonate among most hearers, given that terms such as “fast-paced” and “fast food” have become powerful clichés with which to describe modern life; Slow Food stands oppositional in its stated allegiance to a more leisurely, gracious, and sensually-pleasurable imagined past.

Given this loose definition, members use the phrase “slow food” to mean all that is positive to people, societies, and the globe – ecologically and spiritually. And while the organization’s website and the many books available from Slow Food writers and members use the word(s) endlessly, celebrating it with mantra-like rhythmic repetition, the meanings of “slow” to the organization are probably as legion as the members themselves. Even Patrick Martins, the former USA Executive Director, acknowledges that Slow Food has become a symbol as imprecise as “organic.” For Martins, it means “local, fresh, and sustainable,” and he contends that the organization is the only one that “will revolutionize the food system” (Martins interview, 11/28/2003). His statement overlooks the thousands of local organic farmers, responsible and passionate restaurateurs, committed food purveyors, and organizers of food co-ops, CSAs, farmers’ markets, and food buying clubs that sprung up all over Europe and North America during the 1970s and beyond. I have had similar conversations with other members who have come to believe that all “sustainable” food activity is a Slow Food endeavor. Such globalized thinking lends the “Slow Food Movement” the appearance of enormous social power, even though the overall organization is not terribly large nor terribly active within the food policy world.

Is Slow Food a movement, or is it an artfully -named organization situated at the right place and at the right time to participate in an already healthy, flourishing, and naturally-occurring social process? Independent of chicken or egg philosophizing, this set of ideas and attitudes obviously resonates widely, despite the inherent contradictions in the manifesto, the movement, and its stated goals. The first discontinuity is between the right to pleasure and the preservation of a sustainable system; many of the individual food items seen as pleasurable can be rather rare and in danger of over-harvest, such as wild salmon. While the official goals of the Slow Food organization do not argue for the over-use of the salmon, simply creating increased awareness of it as a consumable Slow Food builds market demand that could lead to eventual species collapse. Similarly, the more ecologically-minded elements of Slow Food may find themselves at odds with convivia activities that seem to emphasize pleasure over ecosystem preservation, such as \$150 per person wine and food dinners, foie gras tasting seminars, and lessons on the best wines to pair with truffles.

The cost of the various dinners—on top of the \$60/year membership fee—brings up another troubling inconsistency in Slow Food: a movement so dedicated to bringing taste education and food availability to the population at large sets fees in excess of the masses' capacity to belong. True, when Slow Food supports local farm markets it is indeed helping to sustain systems that can benefit poorer non-members, but the organization's emphasis on food, wine and travel favors a membership drawn solely from the professional middle classes and above (see Bourdieu, 1984). Still, the association does have potential for positive and progressive social action, and in order to understand how that might come about it is necessary to examine its organizational structure, agendas and goals.

The Organization of Slow Food

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The organization of Slow Food is very simple, and provides both strengths and weaknesses. Almost all action occurs on the local level and leadership is voluntary; the only recompense chairs receive is subsidized events, subsidized or free participation in national and international meetings, and (in some cases) travel expenses. The chair links the local convivia to the central organization by reporting on events and proposed programs, and it is on the local level where, ideally, most effective food system change occurs through voluntary member action. The National and International offices are not set up to conduct program implementation; they focus almost solely on publishing, public relations, and the planning of media events to raise awareness of Slow Food.

On the local level convivia plan a wide variety of events depending on the desires of local chairs and members. Chefs are eager to cook for Slow Food members, and plan menus and dish-

es designed to show off their skills and mastery of local, seasonal ingredients. Slow Food functions both as an eating club and as a more committed community stakeholder, because in addition to fostering local and direct economic connections many convivia hold subscription-dinners as fundraisers for local food not-for-profit organizations. For many members, activities and interests probably end at that point. That is, while most are committed in principle to sustainability and food-production equity, their primary interest is in meeting other interesting food-lovers, learning about the local area's food resources, and having really wonderful meals with congenial people.

Given the fun and gluttony of these local activities, it is appropriate to examine how the organization proposes to fulfill the rather high-flown rhetoric of the Manifesto and change the food system. Slow Food is not seeking to bring the food behemoths to their knees; it could never, at this point, compete with a global food system that promotes and sustains Cargill and McDonald's. What Slow Food can do is protect and promote local and sustainable systems of ecology, agronomy, and gastronomy by building viable local markets. Slow Food members believe that when people are able to taste enjoyable food, learn about its production and appreciate the social and economic ties between producer and consumer, they are more likely to purchase these foods, thereby preserving the farms and enterprises that produce them, as well as the regional livelihoods that create local cultures and societies.

From the beginning, Slow Food recognized that simply to be aware of local food industries was not enough to save them, and the organization began to chronicle local foodways, especially those facing extinction due to competition with global production, in an effort to preserve biodiversity within the food system. Biodiversity, within the loose definitions of Slow Food, could be understood to mean the actual biological substrata and ecological systems as well as the human systems that produce particular forms of food webs and products. Like the phrase "slow food," members tend to use biodiversity to mean a variety of concepts, largely untethered to the more established biological science definitions. The establishment of the Ark of Taste project to identify endangered foodways quickly led to a realization that in addition to listing imperiled food items, Slow Food somehow had to make them economically viable. So from the Ark arose the Presidia, which seek to form local markets for endangered foods and foodways.

The Heritage Turkey project is one such endeavor. Here in the United States, the native turkey had, by the late nineteenth century, developed into many differing breeds. But by the 1970s producers had focused upon just one variety, the Large White. Today, over 270 Million turkeys are produced each year, 90% of them the Large White, and it has been bred to produce a breast so large that the bird can not stand up or breed without assistance. However, a handful of farmers and breeders have worked hard to keep some of the older varieties available, and

starting in 2001 Slow Food teamed up with the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy to support farmers, create markets, and increase the availability of the rarer breeds, such as the American Bronze, the Bourbon Red, the Jersey Buff, and the Narragansett Turkey. The turkeys are far more flavorful, they can be raised organically and free range (the Large White can not survive farmyard conditions because of overbreeding); but the downside is that they have not been bred to bulk up quickly so they require much more feed and several more months to reach slaughter weight. In 2003, over 10,000 birds were sold at a mean price (excluding shipping) of \$4 per pound (Patrick Martins interview, 11/28/2003). It is hoped that each year more poultry farmers will agree to raise and sell the heritage birds locally, making more turkeys available at a lower price. In this activity, Slow Food serves as an information broker between producer and consumer as well as a guarantor who can vouch for the methods of farming and the quality of the product. And this is probably Slow Food's greatest strength: the ability to rely on those networked connections to create and sustain eco-friendly markets.

Another example of an economic-development project is the recently-created American Raw Milk Farmstead Cheese Consortium, a group dedicated to bringing raw-milk cheeses to the attention of the American public and to argue for the right for raw-milk cheeses to be sold. "Slow Food feels that American raw milk cheeses will continue to grow in appreciation and popularity, just as US wines have over the past 20 years. Raw, farmstead milk reflects the character of the land where it is produced, and there is enormous potential for this country's artisans to create cheeses that are as unique and varied as the American landscape" (http://www.slowfoodusa.org/press/farmstead_release.html). Here, Slow Food is attempting to build a market – to create an openly nostalgic product (amply demonstrated by the use of words such as "artisans," "farmstead," "character," and "American landscape") with explicit philosophical ties to the native and regional cheese industries of Europe – the very cheeses that the European *convivia* seek to preserve. In acting in this manner Slow Food provides a market for a new and growing industry and embeds it within the same structures of practice and status that provide salience to items iconic of terroir and perceived "traditional" forms of production in European economic systems. Slow Food thus uses these cultural processes to grant legitimacy to an emerging market, but one that offers tantalizing links to the "artisanal and authentic." It is a potentially effective marketing tool – and a powerful means by which to create and maintain opportunities for the financial persistence of farmers and cheese makers while providing the public with a wider range of food choices.

Slow Food Taste Education

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Slow Food's other mandate is taste education. If a movement is to be based on consumer choice and preference, the public must understand the quality and flavor differentials between locally grown seasonal foods and corporate "Franken-foods." The Taste Education platform theoretically provides education on every level, including a recently launched Slow Food University in Italy that offers a Masters program in Italian cooking. In Italy, Slow Food sponsors school-based taste education workshops modeled on the French system "Week of Taste" (Le Semaine du Gout). In the USA the National Slow Food Education Committee (from which I have recently resigned) has members drawn from a variety of SF regions and is supposed to promote local and national educational efforts using the schoolyard garden as a central teaching paradigm. Currently, nine *convivia* are reported to be *initiating school garden projects, and the alliance with the Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley has provided invaluable professional experience.* In addition, *convivia* across America are encouraged to provide short taste and garden lessons in schools, in classroom and after-school settings. However, almost no resources are provided to local *convivia* from the National office for these endeavors, so they remain locally designed and directed activities.

To illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the SF USA education program, I will describe the project which caused me to be asked to join the Education Committee; it also exemplifies what Slow Food would like to see happen in every school. I am working with the University of Pennsylvania's Urban Nutrition Initiative (UNI) to help coordinate the creation of a food education curriculum for middle and high-school students. We have already implemented this program in a local high school, as well as in the UNI JobCorps Summer School. It now operates both in the classroom and as a peer-education program that trains high school students to teach cooking and food culture lessons to younger grades (K-5). We are hoping to have the completed and tested modules available on the UNI website (<http://www.urbannutrition.org/>). UNI volunteers and employees, staff and students from University of Pennsylvania, and members from the Philadelphia convivium of Slow Food have contributed to its creation, and we hope that other interested individuals or groups create additional modules.

My desire to create such a program arose out of experience teaching nutrition and nutritional anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, and from working with teens in West Philadelphia. I realized that many young people – both in inner-city areas and at the University – were unable to identify, choose and cook many common vegetables. Consequently, they ate very few, even as they worried about their nutritional intakes. The goals of most nutritional educational programs are valid ones; they encourage students to increase intakes of vegetables, fruits and fiber, while decreasing intakes of fats,

sugars, and salt. As Marion Nestle says of nutrition education, the goal and the answer to dietary problems for the average person in America is “eat more vegetables” (Nestle, personal communication, March 2003). That message and others such as “eat adequate protein,” “drink enough fluid,” and portion control information, form the core of most nutrition education efforts. But schools frequently use the empty-vessel paradigm in applying academic knowledge, hypothesizing that new knowledge leads to behavioral change. However, behavior is not solely knowledge-based; it is determined by practice, and we ignore that when we teach the biology of nutrition in order to affect dietary change (see Buchanan, 2004 for a more complete discussion of practice-based educational processes). In the UNI program, we use the concept of “cuisine” as an organizing principle for the curriculum, where “cuisine” can be understood to be all aspects of production, processing, consumption, and disposal that contribute to the construction of food systems, as well as the belief systems and cultural understandings that determine appropriate food use in differing human societies. Our system builds upon a tripartite model which links a vegetable (from the garden) to a culture, to a tertiary lesson in how the overall food system works – from genetics to distribution to waste management politics. Additional modules provide lessons in vegetable prep-work, in nutrition, and in the principles of taste and texture. Tasty recipes are provided, and positive messages are emphasized. Our overall outcome goal is increased intake of whole vegetables and fruits.

At University City High School it is working. During the first classroom lesson, the students refused to even try fresh tomatoes. Each lesson subsequent, they became more adventurous, and are asking questions that clearly indicate that they are linking and understanding the various lessons. During one lesson they ate greens cooked in an African style, served on enjera bread, after learning about the history of Eritrea and Ethiopia and what folate does in the body. I even gave them a short lesson on Haile Selassie, Rastafarianism, and the origin of the term “jah” so popular in rap music. During the summer school session, our food education peer counselors spend hours each day in the garden, kitchen and classroom, learning every step of vegetable production and use from seed and cuisine to setting a table and eating politely. In the summer and fall of 2003 and 2004, the high school students brought these lessons to a local elementary school, where fifth graders learned a weekly lesson about a vegetable and created a take-home booklet with games, recipes, and garden and food information.

The Slow Food National office is anxious for convivia all over the United States to adopt programs like this (and like that of the Edible Schoolyard) for local school districts, and indeed, SF USA counts the UNI program as one of the Slow Food garden projects. However, here is the caveat: it's NOT a Slow Food program, it is a UNI program. It was developed by UNI personnel, University of Pennsylvania students and staff, and a couple

of local Slow Food Philadelphia members relying upon UNI's incredible capacity for devising hands-on, profoundly powerful teaching methods. The input of local Slow Food members was minimal. They were excited about the project, many wanted to contribute, but only a very few (and very committed) members actually did the considerable amount of work needed to launch even a single classroom lesson. Without UNI this curriculum project never would have happened; Slow Food lacks access to school districts and lacks the infrastructure to even propose inclusion of such a program. Using volunteer labor, Slow Food lacks the capacity to implement such a program. Furthermore, no organization – governmental or non – would ever provide grant money to an organization that lacks the professional infrastructure to manage money and programs. So Slow Food USA, acting alone, unless radically re-organized, will never be able to implement any of the truly ambitious programs in education identified as core to the "taste education" mandate. This represents a very deep disconnect between what Slow Food says it wants to do and the organization's capacity to implement programs. This disconnect – and the national office's refusal to acknowledge it – was my reason for resigning from the Education Committee. SF USA talks about creating projects and touts "successes," yet most of these endeavors, like the UNI Food Education program and the Edible Schoolyard, are designed, maintained, and paid for by other organizations or local convivia acting virtually alone. The national office of Slow Food USA can claim little credit for these local initiatives, and at this time it does not have the infrastructure or resources to replicate these programs.

Slow Food: a view from the trenches, or "to where?"

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As is probably apparent by now, I have ambivalent feelings about Slow Food. I've been a member of the organization for several years, and enjoy the local activities. In fact, at the local level Slow Food has the potential to be a very positive force for progressive region-based economic change as well. However, as a member of the national education committee, I have had an opportunity to witness Slow Food USA's operation on a larger scale, and have some concerns about the future.

My first concern is that Slow Food often lacks specific action plans to accomplish its goals, because much of the membership and leadership is amateur—very enthusiastic but often inexperienced in marketing, food policy and education. No amount of public relations work will ever create and nurture a market for a Presidia product if there is no effective business plan or market development strategy, and no amount of enthusiasm will ensure the preservation of artisanal products if the sole action-resource base is volunteer labor. Someone has to do the really hard, dull work – constructing and maintaining interactive websites, con-

tacting potential workers and making sure they accomplish their tasks, and ensuring that the outcome goals are carefully monitored and measured to establish the success of the project. In short, an experienced administrative core is required, and at this time there is very little money available on either the local or national level—the New York National Office can afford to employ only four full time workers. Volunteer labor is simply and unequivocally unable to sustain major programs without a capable and well-funded administrative base.

I am also concerned that the structures that would allow individual members to take control of local and regional activities are not yet in place. The culture of the organization is becoming increasingly centralized as the national office re-asserts its control over committees and local initiatives. One example of membership and local needs being subsumed by National/International programming is the Terra Madre program, an enormously expensive endeavor designed to transport thousands of farmers and food producers from all over the world to Italy for a three-day conference culminating in a 5,000 person photo-op with Carlo Petrini. Terra Madre was agreed upon by SF USA national leadership at the International Congress without consulting local members. That the Terra Madre project could divert funds from local endeavors was not even acknowledged, nor was the curious fiscal reality that the project was expected to cost over a third of the entire (current) operating budget of Slow Food USA. While technically those funds would be separate to the organizational structure, raising them would surely divert attention and donations from local endeavors.

Another worry—and a sign of a “top-down” focus—is the increasing number of contracts signed by SF national with food corporations who wish to gain access to the Slow Food membership base. For instance, I recently received an invitation to purchase a \$75 ticket for a crawfish boil to be held in New York City. For this event, a half-ton of Louisiana crawfish was to be driven to New York for an evening of dining on “mud bugs” and Abita Beer and where members could meet the CEO of Tabasco, Inc. Similarly, do the recently-signed financial connections with corporations such as Mondavi, Whole Foods, and Bushmills represent what members want, and if so, do they belong in the mandate to support the local, sustainable, and endangered? Will the “Not for Profit” Slow Food USA become an organization which sells member names and access to for-profit food corporations?

I am also worried that SF USA will be unable to shift power from the leaders to the members. For example, while *The Snail* always provides information about local convivia activities, it also tends to have the same writers, mostly linked to National and International organizational structures, contributing to each issue. Furthermore, on occasion large amounts of space are devoted to photographs of National-level staff and leaders – the 2003 Issue 3 had nine pages of photos of people engaging in food activities at the National Leadership Congress at Shelburne Farms. Granted, Shelburne Farms is a very photogenic place,

but providing readers with multiple snapshots of leadership activities with labels as archly obscure as “Deborah and Alice” (for a close-up of Deborah Madison and Alice Waters, two well-known food activists and Slow Food National-level leaders), leaves the ordinary reader potentially feeling rather uninvolved, confused and disempowered.

This top-down approach is further illustrated by the website’s explanation of the duties of the convivium chair, who “organizes food and wine events and initiatives, creates moments of conviviality, raises the profile of products and promotes local artisans and wine cellars. He also organizes tasting courses and Taste Workshops and promulgates new food and wine developments and knowledge of the products and cuisines of other areas. In short, he educates in matters of taste” (http://www.slowfood.com/eng/sf_ita_mondo/sf_ita_mondo.lasso). This clearly identifies the chair as the only person who legitimately organizes activities and educational endeavors for the local membership. However, I will argue that real progressive change in the food system – that which Slow Food advocates – can occur only when individual members are brought into the power structure to create networking systems and events that benefit the local and regional food landscape. Until that happens, Slow Food might be viewed by many observers as little more than a gourmandizing fan club for celebrity food personalities and their followers.

The emphasis on high-profile chefs and food writers parallels current popular culture trends in the United States. Food has become such a locus of cultural action and awareness that even reputable magazines such as *Gourmet* now pose chefs as rock stars for cover art. This sense of breathless worship is matched in much of the Slow Food literature itself, which presents attractive pictures of well-known chefs at fundraisers or recipes for dishes from elite restaurants such as Daniel (Kummer, 2002). There is also a strong focus on rarified consumption, as paeans to specific, often obscure and expensive wines and foods are common in the journal. Rather than driving food system change such exposure may simply reify a hedonistic image of Slow Food as a celebrity-obsessed, upscale eating society.

On the more positive side, many voluntary activities on the local and National level do fulfill Ark of Taste and Presidia mandates. Barbara Bowman, an International Counselor and a Sonoma County convivium leader, provides an example of local action with international consequences – and an example of how Slow Food can motivate members in the Northern or “developed” world to provide avenues of regional food development – using appropriate technology – in less-rich areas of the globe. Her convivium and several others have partnered with a woman-run chicken co-op in Pachay, Guatemala. The Mayan women’s co-op, called AMIDI (Asociación Mujeres Indígenas para el Desarrollo Integral), raises chickens and sells eggs to benefit the incomes and dietary intakes of families recovering from war, loss of land, and ethnic violence. The egg project

gives the women an opportunity to create community solidarity while simultaneously re-building the local economy. In 2002 AMIDI received the Slow Food Award for Biodiversity which provided 10,000 euros – a sum sufficient to buy the land on which the village water source was located. Through connections with a local NGO foundation they built a new well; the first pipes constructed brought water directly to the chicken houses. This year, the convivia were able to expand support through fundraising to send 20 children from the village to school; in Guatemala, schooling is not free and often costs as much or more per child as the annual household income of a Mayan family. By providing these modest sums the convivia are contributing to ongoing community development with appropriate technology, culturally-meaningful social change, and child education. Furthermore, the SF members have no intention of expanding beyond the capacity of the convivia to raise money necessary for the education of the village children. As such, this project provides a model of convivium action at a level that is possible for voluntary members to support annually.

Similarly, Marsha Weiner, a Regional Governor, hopes Slow Food becomes more involved on every level with the political issues that determine local food availability, such as farm policy, taxation, and nationwide nutrition policy programs. The need for farm policy reform is critical in the United States; recently my local newspaper carried an article about yet another farm sold for development – this one to Wal-Mart, a company with a notable history of labor problems (*Philadelphia Inquirer* November 30, 2003: B1). Unfortunately, the farmer's sons chose not to become farmers, and nearing retirement, he sold his greatest asset – the land on which his farm was situated. I'd like to see Slow Food work on the local and national levels to raise awareness of farmland loss and to organize for change that would allow farmers to realize profits while communities retain open space. Perhaps Slow Food could work with other concerned organizations to devise banking structures to allow equitable loans and land transfer to support and nurture regional farming systems, even in urban areas. California's "Keeping PACE" program might provide a model for such an endeavor. However, at this time there seems to be little awareness of land-use issues among SF USA leaders or members, nor is there any attempt to use the membership base to agitate for political change.

Since Slow Food has positioned itself as a consumer and producer advocate, it is essential that the organization reach out to non-members to raise awareness of specific products and specific regional markets and producers, similar to the FoodRoutes (<http://www.foodroutes.org/>) "Buy Local Buy Fresh" (<http://www.buylocalpa.org>) and Local Harvest (<http://www.localharvest.org/>) campaigns. If local residents can log on to a website to search for markets which sell locally-produced, grass-fed beef, etc., those producers are more likely to have a *steady and reliable income*. The creation of such websites would require continued commitment of convivia to manage in-

formation about the products – to conduct inspections, create producer profiles, and monitor producer activities once the website is functional. This kind of action must occur on the local level, as guaranteeing appropriate transparency in the food system requires constant vigilance. Consequently, such a system would demand local commitment of time and resources as well as national support for local information-technology management. One such example is that of the Prairieland Convivium (Illinois) headed by Laurence Mate; the convivium has formed a partnership with the Farm-Direct Central Illinois Farmer to Consumer Directory in order to highlight local farmers' products. http://www.aces.uiuc.edu/asap/resources/farmdirect/farm_direct_main.htm

If Slow Food's primary asset is, as Carlo Petrini argues, the networks it has built between citizens, farmers, food producers and other members of the food system, then Slow Food USA's greatest opportunity for meeting its mandates is to rely upon and expand those links by shifting organizational structures and values away from support of national-level public relations initiatives and into the sophisticated management of its networked system. Slow Food has the opportunity, through name recognition and use of internet and standard informational sources, to create a space for public dialogue and action that can alert citizens to the weaknesses of the current food system, mobilize for political action, and facilitate, through direct local economic networks, the implementation of progressive food system change.

To return to the very beginning of this paper, I would like to pose a question, one that relates to the public discourse that surrounds and often defines Slow Food. Namely, is Slow Food a movement? To answer, I will state that I hope not, because as a diffuse "movement" it becomes too abstract to effect change, and members stop caring and become complacent. I think that the overuse of the phrase "Slow Food Movement" indicates that the phrase is absorbing the mental and verbal projections of people who don't understand what food system sustainability means, because if they did they would know that numerous organizations have been working toward many of the same goals using many of the same techniques for decades. They would understand that the sentiments that add members are secondary to a great national displeasure with the state of our food and agricultural systems, and an underlying nagging sense that food doesn't taste as good as it used to. They would know that many citizens are worried about the rapid loss of local food security and the near impossibility of maintaining a living as an independent farmer. The phrase "slow food" strikes a chord among the public not because it is the name of an organization but because it reflects a series of desires, interests and concerns that began with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, led to action on every level from international to local through creation of food co-ops, CSAs, food banks, and food policy action groups, and continues to build through widespread consumer agitation and action. So

if there is a movement it is not necessarily linked to the organization Slow Food but is embedded in older "forms of resistance" as well as newer sites of citizen and consumer collective action. Working with other groups of concerned citizens, the members of Slow Food could have the capacity to foster the voluntary zeal and action that can lead to food system change, even though it is an enormous amount of work. However, I know that Slow Food will never be the only or even primary group affecting such change; hopefully it will evolve to understand this, and to work progressively, honestly, and meaningfully with other food policy groups. I think that when that happens, Slow Food will live up to its potential, but that will only occur if it can change the culture of Slow Food to allow for true grassroots control of the process.

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