

Welcome to the New Delicious

Terra Madre, the second international slow food conference, mounts a global counterforce to change how the world eats

By Lynn Peemoeller

United by a passionate hunger for delicious and sustainable food, 4,803 farmers, breeders, fishermen and artisan food producers from 1,583 food communities and 150 nations; 953 cooks; 411 professors and representatives from 225 universities; 2,320 observers and guides and 776 volunteers came to the second Terra Madre world meeting of food communities last October in Turin, Italy. This gustatory love fest was hosted by Slow Food International, the ³eco-gastronomic² organization that works through ³virtuous globalization² to counteract fast food culture and the disappearance of local food traditions.

The cavernous arena that housed the 2006 Winter Olympics was transformed by Slow Food into a world village where solutions were suggested, information was presented and conviviality prevailed. Italian President Giorgio Napolitano lent his support at the opening ceremony where he shared the stage with Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini and representatives from each participating nation.

An impassioned Petrini invoked a ³Slow Food Revolution,² emphasizing local food economies as the main course of our future, and speaking urgently of the resurgence of the natural economy over the capital economy. ³We will never produce good food if we stress the environment and rape it of its resources,² he declared. ³The Slow Food principles are that food must be good, clean and fair.²

For Slow Food, this bi-annual event was an opportunity to strengthen networks of food communities, to re-focus on agro-ecology<agriculture that respects the environment>and to collectively rise in preservation of native food traditions. The committed community illuminated the power of small producers and cast an optimistic light on the otherwise dark side of the global food system. Critical issues like GMO contamination, dependence on foreign aid and the universal distribution challenges of small-scale producers were some of the more spirited discussions. A dogged ³can-do² attitude was pervasive, and revolution was in the air.

The program featured a dizzying array of topics ranging from detailed discussions of cheese, rice, beer, coffee and spices to big picture presentations that addressed the preservation of genetic resources in plant and animal species, healthy soil, traditional agricultural systems and the economics of market access.

Amidst the organized chaos, a spontaneous marketplace emerged. Foodies haggled in Euros over exotic edibles and crafts from all over the world. Thai farmers set up colorful chilies and rice next to crafts people from Kyrgyzstan hawking traditional ethnic headgear. In the Salone de Gusto, or ³Hall of Taste² next door, delegates sold ³Presidia² or protected delicacies like yak cheese from Tibet, and Mullet Botarga, dried fish eggs from Mauritania.

It became clear over the three-day conference that the Slow Food movement is finally beginning to emerge as a new global counterforce for change in the way the world eats. And on the supply side, it's helping farmers confidently face-off with goliaths of the global food economy like Monsanto, while challenging consumers to preserve eroding local food traditions.

For developing countries like India, Slow Food has become a powerful organizing tool. Leaders like Vandana Shiva in the biodiversity movement are outspoken against the impact global seed companies like Monsanto have on biodiversity and local agriculture. Shiva's mantra resonates: ³Every seed saved is a seed of freedom for every farmer.² Terra Madre enabled her to lead a delegation of Indian farmers to Italy to learn about alternatives to the global model, and more importantly, to become inspired by the international kinship of people struggling against persistent threats to their cultural traditions.

The Slow Food idea of eco-gastronomy, a concept for our times, reminds us of the interconnectedness of food and the land from which it comes, and the balance between the pleasures of eating and the principles of eating responsibly. Here in the birthplace of McDonalds and Dairy Queen, Slow Food is resonating across the urban landscape, with Slow Food Nation, a domestic version of Terra Madre, planned for May 2008 in San Francisco. When Alice Waters calls Slow Food a ³counterculture,² this isn't just cagey provocateur-ism; food is political, and never more so than today.

At Terra Madre, far-flung food communities teetering between old world traditions and new world conveniences learned they are not alone. They learned that food problems are universal, and that solutions lie in joining forces. When cattle farmers from Africa and Illinois join in solidarity with honey producers from Tasmania and Zambia, when seed savers from India and native peoples of North America unite to fight GMO contamination, they're planting the seeds for a Slow Food revolution.

Lynn Peemoeller is a food systems planner, urban farmer and Program Director for Sustain USA. Wherever there is good food (like at Terra Madre) there is Peemoeller.