

The Slow Food movement

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"Our enjoyment of food is based on an understanding of where and how it is grown, crafted and ripened. Slow Food campaigns to sustain quality agriculture, and to maintain the biodiversity of our food supply."

The *Slow Food* movement was founded in Italy in a spontaneous reaction to the opening of the first McDonalds restaurant in 1988. The founders, Carlo Petrini and Piero Sardo, were more shocked by what they regarded as the violation of the historic facade of the *Piazza di Spagna* in Rome, than by the arrival of the most high profile symbol of the fast food industry. This anecdote gets to the heart of the *Slow Food* movement: endowing food with cultural dignity.

Slow Food's first objective was to create awareness. *Osterie d'Italia*, their first publication, was a guide to local restaurants specializing in the type of traditional Italian food that was in danger of disappearing. *Slow Food* focused on the ingredients that gave these dishes their special character. "How can you enjoy a good *brassato al barolo*", it asked, "if real, classic *barolo* wine has become extinct and the right quality meat has disappeared?"

In 1996, *Slow Food* started an ambitious project called the *Ark of Taste* and began cataloguing and re-launching traditional Italian food products like *Lardo di Collonata* (lard), *Ventricina del Vastese* (salami), Sicilian *Ragusano* (cheese), and *Pan di Alta Mura* (bread). *Slow Food* volunteers started to set up guilds or "presidia" for each *Ark* product. These *presidia* brought together local craftsmen and producers working, or willing to work, in the traditional way. *Slow Food* helped by drawing up regulations for the *presidia* that guaranteed the authenticity of their product and assured customers that they were being produced in ecological and sustainable ways. Brochures were made and tastings and fairs held where producers and potential retailers could meet. *Slow Food* found that local and regional authorities were often willing to support these grass roots initiatives. There are now over 150 *presidia* in Italy - not just for processed foods, but increasingly for endangered breeds and crops like the red apples from Monti Sibillini, *Maremmana* cattle, *Noli* anchovies, and *Corno di Carmagnola* paprika.

In 2000, the *Ark of Taste* was introduced into other European countries and there are now also *presidia* in Japan, Peru, India,

Madagascar, Mexico and the USA. Two *presidia* have also been founded in the Netherlands: one for *Texelse Schapenkaas* (Texel sheep cheese) and one for *Boeren-Goudse Oplegkaas* (Aged Farmhouse Gouda cheese). The revival of traditional cheese making on the small island of Texel, for example, is helping to preserve traditional sheep breeding. Sheep have a specific ecological function on Texel and help to preserve the unique pasture vegetation and landscape that has developed on its sandy and saline soils. Similar close ties between food culture and biodiversity are found in many *presidia* products.

The *Ark of Taste* is making painstaking inventories of rare local breeds, vegetables and fruits but many old varieties are hard to trace and get back into cultivation. Therefore, there are *presidia* that focus on preserving a whole range of species, like the *Fruta Andina* in Peru and the *Criollo* maize varieties in Mexico. The aim of *Slow Food* is to use market mechanisms and consumer choice to protect rare species by selling them as cultural delicacies rather preserving them as botanical relics.

Another major new project to focus attention on the hidden heroes of the *Slow Food* movement is the *Award for Biodiversity*. Each year, over 600 journalists, scientists and professionals worldwide are asked to nominate persons or initiatives working to protect and promote agrobiodiversity. In 2001, the *Amal Cooperative* in Morocco won a special award for encouraging rural women to produce the exquisite Argan oil, thus safeguarding their livelihoods and the future of the local Argan tree. Another award winner was the New Zealander Graham Harris who has been revitalizing forgotten Maori potato varieties.

In 2004, an ambitious event will take place in Northern Italy. "Terra Madre" has invited thousands of farmers and artisan food-makers from all over the world to meet and discuss their problems and ideas. These range from how to produce quality mustard oil in India and market rare local vegetables to finding ways to get national authorities to give more support to *Slow Food* initiatives.

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The Ark of Taste is active all over the world.

Photo: Author