
Turning the Tables

Tracing the slow-food movement back to its feisty Italian roots.

by DANIELLE PERGAMENT
photo by TODD HIDO



Like so many other aspects of modern life, slow food can trace its roots to McDonald's. It was 1986, and the world's largest fast-food chain had just opened its 9,007th location—at the Piazza di Spagna in Rome. This was a square with a fountain that dated back to 1627, nestled at the base of a staircase, the biggest in Europe, built in 1723, beside which John Keats died in 1821. This was a square where you could now buy a Big Mac for a few hundred lire.

The big opening was not exactly celebrated by certain factions of the old country. Carlo Petrini, a journalist from northwest Italy, was particularly incensed. On the day the restaurant opened near the Spanish Steps, he was among the crowd outside chanting “We don't want fast food! We want slow food!” It was the beginning of a movement.

“The McDonald's issue is just an episode,” says the now 60-year-old Italian, explaining that it wasn't just the creepy rictus of Ronald McDonald that inspired him. Shortly after the Spanish Steps incident, Petrini went home to Piedmont and stopped to have dinner in one of his favorite osterias. “There is a traditional dish called *peperonata*,” he says. “But when I went back, the peppers were tasteless. The owner said these peppers came from the Netherlands—grown in hydro-culture, perfectly uniform, and shipped thirty to a box. We have wonderful peppers in Piedmont! But now farmers stopped growing them because the Dutch ones were cheaper.”

It got worse. “I asked the owner what the farmers in Piedmont grow in their greenhouses, if not peppers and he said, ‘tulips,’” recalls Petrini. “Tulips! We

take peppers from the Netherlands and send tulips to Amsterdam!" This is what Petrini calls "the crazy logic of making food travel all over the world," the result of which is a system in which Kraft, KFC, and the like have pushed small, organic, and environmentally sound food production to the brink of extinction. "We are losing the knowledge of small farmers because big industry and big distribution rule. This type of food production kills the environment and the farming way of life. If food production kills the environment, where are we? We are the environment."

This December marked the twentieth anniversary of Slow Food International, founded at the signing of the Slow Food Manifesto in Paris. Today, the organization, which, was "founded upon this concept of eco-gastronomy—a recognition of the strong connections between plate and planet," has more than 100,000 members in 132 countries. To celebrate, Slow Food anointed December 10 "Terra Madre Day," a day "to celebrate food that is good, clean, and fair."

Long before hybrid cars and farmers' markets were ubiquitous, Slow Food International was promoting the idea of eating locally, but its charter, which calls for a wholesale revolution in how we grow and distribute our food, hardly stops at handpicked Piedmont peppers. And despite the success of the movement—from the expansion of the Terra Madre global network to the organization's own University of Gastronomic Sciences in Bra, Italy—there is still confusion about it.

"We're not promoting a set of values," says Joshua Viertel, the president of Slow Food USA. "All we're saying is that you should eat what you value. I don't have a problem eating meat, but it has to come from a farmer I know, a farmer who raises his cows in a responsible, healthy, dignified way. The way animals live in factory farms or [the problem of] the growing dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico"—8,500 square miles so decimated by the industrial waste from the Mississippi River that all marine life there suffocates and dies—"no one's values can accommodate that."

Viertel, who studied philosophy and literature at Harvard, says, "Slow Food is the brand, but I like to see it in lower case so it's beyond the eye roll." For him, the transformation to slowness happened when he left academia to work as a shepherd and grape-picker in Sicily. "I was with people who ate food that they knew," he says. "They had pride in their traditions and I realized that so many problems in the world could be solved with food. Our food culture in the U.S.—the real culture of clambakes and church suppers—is something to be proud of, but we're not exporting those. We're exporting fast food, and as soon as we do, we export health crises, diabetes, and heart troubles along with it."

Viertel is a fast talker who likes to speak in statistics—and very troubling ones: "It takes fifty-five calories of fossil fuel to make one calorie of meat" or "it takes eight hundred gallons of water to produce one hamburger." Perhaps most sobering of all, he points out that the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, which spent four years appraising conditions of the world's ecosystems, identified the global food-production system as the primary cause of pollution, loss of biodiversity, and the planet's destruction.

Despite all this, Viertel remains optimistic. "This past year there were seven million new gardens [planted]," he says. "Seed sales were up 35 percent nationally—I think people saw the First Lady put an organic garden at the White House and were inspired. True, we've never had it worse, but we've never had more opportunities. Agriculture is ten thousand years old, and we've done all this damage in the last sixty years." Meanwhile, the fast-food world has hardly suffered since Petrini started his campaign 20 years ago: McDonald's sales were up 8 percent in 2008.

The other day, I stopped by the place that started it all. The McDonald's at the Piazza di Spagna is as authentic a product of Rome as Las Vegas's Venetian casino is of Venice: fake cobblestones, faux Roman columns, "marble" plaques, even bottles of alarmingly green liquid meant to look like olive oil. Sixteen cash registers strong, the place was populated with young Italian teenagers munching down cheeseburgers, fries, and *bocconcini di pollo* (Chicken McNuggets). Business was booming.

For Petrini, Slow Food—with capital letters—has always been about a lot more than what we eat. "People seem more keen on spending great amounts on status symbols such as cell phones and fashion items instead of being concerned with their health," he says. "Fast food is chosen because it is cheap and time saving." Then his Italianness really comes out. "But it takes only ten minutes to prepare a simple pasta—a few drops of good oil and a bit of parmigiano. What is better than that?"

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