

Talking Slow Food

INGRID PARONICH

Bra, Cuneo, Italy; Email: iparonich@gmail.com

Responses

Please consider writing a response to this paper in the WePaste forum for JASTE 2.1 (www.wepaste.org).

Introduction

Founded by Carlo Petrini in Bra in 1986, *Slow Food* became an international association in 1989 in order to counteract fast food, the disappearance of local food traditions and people's dwindling interest in the food that they eat. When Slow Food was born, its first belief was recognizing the importance of the pleasure of food, but the recipe developed by Carlo Petrini and other Slow Food members adds another ingredient to the pursuit of pleasure; namely, *responsibility*.

The organization's activities were developed from the idea that the current and predominant model of industrial food production in the Western world is unsustainable and that it is the cause of many widespread and alarming consequences. Slow Food has since streamlined its focus and expanded its activities to actively support producers demonstrating a small-scale, sustainable and local food production model.

What is Slow Food's core philosophy and how do they link ideas and activities?

Why does Slow Food engage in its activities?

Food is essential. The food system affects our daily lives; it impacts our health, our environment and our communities. Today, both the industrial and local food systems occupy our lives simultaneously and have presented us with dilemmas when choosing how and what to consume.

The industrial model of production, which has overlapped the local system to become the standard model, is dependent on high levels of inputs that are needed to control growing on a massive scale. These inputs, chemical fertilizers and pesticides among others, are proven to damage the environment as well as negatively affect the quality of life for agricultural workers and rural communities and lead to public health problems and chronic disease. Industrialized agriculture, due to its reliance on economies of scale to reduce production costs, often leads to the compromising of local, regional, or even global ecosystems through fertilizer runoff, pollution, and greenhouse gas emission.

The need to reduce production costs in an increasingly global market can cause production of foods to be moved to areas where economic costs (labor, taxes, etc.) are lower or environmental regulations are more lax, which are usually further from consumer markets. It allows processors and retailers to be drivers of the system instead of the farmers, and most importantly it has disconnected those who produce our food from those who consume it.

One of Slow Food's key values is to re-establish this connection through its activities. In light of the inadequacies and damaging effects of the industrial food system, Slow Food has chosen to support through its activities the principles of a local food system. A local system of food production integrates health,

nutrition and agriculture with social responsibility, puts priority on diverse ecological systems and minimal or no chemical use, and emphasizes the preservation of skills and knowledge. Local food is fresher, requires less transportation and packaging, and ensures the survival of indigenous breeds and species and traditional production methods. They contrast industrial food systems by operating with reduced food transportation, a system that is promoted for its environmental benefits, which leads to a shorter food supply chain. As a result, relationships that are developed in local food systems emerge from face-to-face interactions, potentially leading to a stronger sense of trust and social connectedness between actors. Also, this gives the producer and the consumer a better knowledge of and more control over how their food is produced.

Good, Clean and Fair: A Manifesto for Quality

Slow Food has encapsulated the values of the local food system into three key principles that represent its core philosophy and that drive all of its initiatives. Slow Food says that the food it likes has to be Good, Clean and Fair. That is:

- **Good:** meaning that our food should be of the highest quality, taste good and give us pleasure to eat it. The right to pleasure remains the keystone of Slow Food's philosophy.
- **Clean:** meaning that our food should be produced in a way that is not harmful to the environment, animal welfare or human health .
- **Fair:** meaning that the system by which our food is produced should be economically and socially fair to all those who labor in it, including accessible prices for consumers and fair compensation for producers.

In order to achieve a sustainable food system these core values must be present consistently throughout all of Slow Food's activities and projects. The organization's philosophy envisions a world where everyone has access to Good, Clean and Fair foods.

Co-Producer & Food Community

In the process of developing its projects and initiatives, Slow Food has re-conceptualized some terms that needed to be looked at differently, in a way that is more fitting for a sustainable model of food production.

Consumption, for example, is a key factor in understanding the problems in the food system. The industrial food system has caused a disconnection between the producer and the consumer due to the scale and level of technology involved in production. The consumer is removed from the realities of food production, but the purchasing choices of the consumer still influence the supply. Slow Food understands that a consumer who is educated and cares about who produces his or her food and how it is produced, and actively supports those producers, is in fact a part of and a partner in the production process. S/he is no longer someone who just consumes, h/she is a Co-Producer because through his/her choices s/he is able to influence the way production is conducted. This term is indeed used to emphasize and promote the importance of the link between producers and consumers in creating a sustainable food system.

Secondly, the organization understands the interconnection between the social, cultural and economic facets of food in a specific local community. Within these communities, a new idea of local economy* based on sustainable agriculture, tradition and culture occurs. The centrality of the food leads to a kind of economy that is more stable and not subject to the sometimes unpredictable forces of the market. The term Food Community is used to emphasize the central role that food plays in establishing strong community

relations and to promote a kind of economy that is sustainable and viable in both developed and developing contexts.

Linking Philosophy and Activity

In order to carry through the Good, Clean and Fair principles into real life, Slow Food has constructed the organization to operate within four main branches of activity. These four branches each contribute directly to promoting and supporting a local and sustainable food system, educating consumers of all ages and protecting biodiversity with different types of projects, initiatives and campaigns. They are the following:

1. *Networks*

Slow Food has established worldwide networks made up of food communities and various groups committed to changing the way food is produced and distributed. By bringing together these diverse players, Slow Food's projects aim at shortening the food supply chain — that is, the distance between production and consumption — and providing for the exchange of ideas and information based on sustainable food production.

The building blocks of the Slow Food Network are volunteer groups of people who have organized in their respective communities and gather regularly to build relationships with local producers, campaign to protect traditional foods, organize tastings and seminars, promote taste education and other projects in schools and to enjoy and appreciate the pleasure and conviviality of sharing meals prepared with local food. The organization refers to such a group of people as a Convivium — stemming from the Latin word *Cum Vivere*, meaning 'to live with' — and uses the term to represent a local Slow Food chapter. A Convivium is essential to bringing about Slow Food's philosophy, as it organizes like-minded people in a food community to actively support and apply the Good, Clean, and Fair principles. There are now more than 100,000 members in over 1300 Convivia (plural of Convivium) in 132 countries worldwide working together to educate and promote a local and sustainable food system.

Furthermore, in 2004, Slow Food launched an international network for people involved in food related activities. This network consists of food producers and various types of representatives from food communities such as cooks, academics, and young people who actively support a local and sustainable model of food production. The network gives voice and visibility to farmers, breeders, fishermen, and artisan producers and mobilizes them to counteract the dynamics of the industrial food system that endangers their work. It brings them together with educational and research institutions, cooks, consumers, and activists. This network was named after Mother Earth, Terra Madre. Terra Madre has three levels of activity. It is:

- *a network*: of 5000 food producers from 1600 food communities, 1000 cooks and 574 academics from 150 countries that is growing daily
- *a project*: actively supporting small-scale, sustainable, local economies by supporting their products as well as their production activities
- *an event*: a bi-annual meeting that facilitates the meeting of global food communities in informal get-togethers and formal seminars to exchange views and to discover and solve common issues related to food production.

Through the Terra Madre network, Slow Food is working to help communities around the world regain control of their local food system. Recently, the network has been decentralized to include specific regional

networks and meetings in countries all over the world such as Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Brazil, India and Kenya, with more projects forthcoming.

2. *Education*

Slow Food seeks to create a broad cultural shift in the relationships that people have with food by developing different educational activities and projects that are based on taste education. The organization believes that the way to educate people about local and seasonal cuisines, traditional products, vegetable species and animal breeds is to combine pleasure with responsibility. After all, one of their founding philosophies is the human right to pleasure.

Slow Food views learning as a reciprocal process; when a group of people becomes mutually involved in an educational activity or program about food they spontaneously begin to form a community. One of the most important aspects of taste education is imparting that knowledge to younger generations. The industrial food system has disconnected youth from knowledge about food, how it is made and where it comes from. Slow Food in Italy has been recognized by the Italian Ministry of Education as an official training body in the field of food and sensory education. Through the following educational activities and programs Slow Food is working towards imparting a better and broader understanding of food and its production to adults and children: since the 1998/1999 school year, Slow Food has provided training courses by creating a textbook manual for teachers in schools at all levels who then share their knowledge with children and parents in Taste Education programs. In this way Slow Food stimulates community based learning activities and proposes a different type of mentality to the young generation about their relationship with food and how the act of eating can influence values and choices.

In 2001, Slow Food USA led the first School Gardens Project. Convivium members decided to build vegetable gardens on school grounds where children could grow their own food, develop gardening skills, and learn through their senses about Good, Clean and Fair foods. The program grew to include after-school cooking programs and farm tours. Today there are 110 Convivium School Gardens in Italy and 54 in the rest of the world. In this way, Slow Food teaches children about how their food is grown, about using organic farming methods, and how to appreciate the sensory qualities of food. This also encourages the passing on of food knowledge from one generation to the next.

Slow Food has also created a cycle of food and sensory education for adults that are available to members called Taste Workshops. The organization created these programs in order to stimulate curiosity, impart objective knowledge about food and promote responsible consumer choice making. The workshops take place at Convivia, as well as at Slow Food's annual commercial events, where they are open to the general public. After completing 15 of these courses a Convivium, members obtain a Master of Food. In this way, Slow Food trains adults to understand and appreciate the level of quality and taste Good, Clean and Fair foods possess and how that relates to a local and sustainable food system. Slow Food carries through its philosophy by implementing these types of educational programs based on the taste education of local and Good, Clean, and Fair foods.

3. *Biodiversity*

The problem encountered with the term biodiversity is that, even if the definition of the word is known, most of us do not connect it to food or food related issues. Today, less than thirty species of plants provide food for more than 95% of the world's population. The industrial food system produces the same varieties of foods on a massive scale, which is leading to the homogenization of our food supply. Diverse and indigenous crops, once bountiful, are being wiped out by the sheer dominance of these commodity foods in the marketplace. Slow Food has developed certain activities in order to reconnect the public's

understanding of biodiversity with food. They have implemented different programs and projects to help preserve and protect the dwindling species of animals and plants in our food system.

When Slow Food decided to establish the Foundation for Biodiversity, it was thinking of an operative body that develops projects focused on defending food traditions, protecting biodiversity, and promoting sustainable agriculture. These projects take place all around the world, but especially in developing countries.

One initiative of the Foundation for Biodiversity was launched to rediscover, catalogue and promote foods that are at risk of extinction. These foods are closely linked to specific communities and cultures but also have productive and commercial potential. Slow Food brought together a commission of people made up of researchers, scientists and food experts and developed these criteria for the products that would be included in the catalogue. The foods must be:

- of outstanding quality in terms of taste
- linked to a specific geographical area
- made by small scale artisan producers
- sustainable farming methods
- in danger of extinction

This documentation work serves as a resource for all those interested in discovering and reviving the wealth of food treasures in the world. The project is called The Ark of Taste. Today the Ark of Taste catalogue lists more than 800 unique foods that are threatened by industrial standardization, from 50 countries around the world. The Ark of Taste led to the next main initiative for protecting biodiversity — there needed to be an operational arm to this catalogue of information. In order to take this concept one step further, Slow Food created a way to recognize and label specific artisan food products that are produced on a small-scale and that incorporate Good, Clean, and Fair principles. These products have a historical, social, and cultural significance to a geographic area and are usually on the verge of extinction. They decided to label a product that fits this description as a Presidium. With the Presidium label, Slow Food helps to preserve biodiversity and traditional processing methods, stabilize production techniques, establish stringent production standards and guarantee a viable economic future for the foods in question. Each Presidium builds the capacity of a group of producers and helps them to find local and international markets. To date, more than 300 Presidia (plural of Presidium) have been created around the world, involving over 10,000 small-scale farmers.

The most recent project of the Foundation for Biodiversity is to take the concept of a farmers' market to a global level and establish such markets in different places around the world. In these markets, producers sell products that are seasonable and local, produced according to Good, Clean and Fair principles, and that are priced reasonably and transparently. Slow Food has established the Earth Markets, as they are termed, in order to revive local economies, strengthen local food networks, shorten the food chain and revitalize local production of regional specialties in order to protect biodiversity. Slow Food offers training and technical support to national Slow Food offices for the management of the markets.

4. *Connecting Producers with Co-Producers*

Slow Food has created commercial events in order to showcase Good, Clean and Fair products and to support the economic and financial success of small-scale artisan producers. It is the real-life application of the Slow Food philosophy where producers gain recognition and exposure and consumers are educated by using their purchasing power to support them. These events also tie in the educational aspect by including Taste Workshops and topical lectures and conferences on food related issues. The events range from neighborhood dinners organized by Convivia to international fairs.

In 1996, Slow Food began a commercial fair where the small-scale quality producers within the Terra Madre network could connect with consumers in search of quality food. It is the ideal place to promote taste education, inform the public about the current issues concerning the food system and create a market of Good, Clean and Fair products for purchase. This fair is called the **Salone del Gusto** (Hall of Taste). The event was the precursor to the **Terra Madre** network, which naturally emerged from the Salone in 2004, and was created to educate people on the activities of the Terra Madre networks. The event is working to connect producers and co-producers in order to achieve the economic success of small-scale, quality food producers. In past editions, it included a market with 188 stands and 432 stalls selling food products from dozens of countries, taste education workshops, and conferences about world food issues.

Furthermore, every other year, Slow Food holds two events that are dedicated to highlighting specific foods, their producers and the current issues surrounding those foods. Since Terra Madre and Salone del Gusto are held bi-annually in pair years, these events happen in the odd years so that there is never an interruption in Slow Food's activities.

- **Cheese** is an international festival for quality cheese producers. It provides an opportunity not only for the producers and the consumers to connect but also to turn the public's attention to important issues, like, for example, the legal battles facing the producers of raw milk cheese. Slow Food realizes its philosophies through the Cheese event by providing a venue for small-scale, Good, Clean and Fair producers to be recognized and to achieve financial viability as well as by including taste workshops, lectures and conferences in order to educate the public on the importance of the issues surrounding sustainable cheese production.
- **Slow Fish** is an international event focused on sustainable fishing. It brings together fishermen, chefs, academics, communities and the general public in discussion, tasting and education regarding issues related to fishing and fish consumption. Slow Food aims to inform and educate people about the loss of biodiversity in our seas and at the same time offer producers using ecologically sustainable fishing methods a market to be recognized and financially supported.

Summarizing all these concepts in few words, we could say that Slow Food is an international organization that promotes a wider understanding of the food system and its relation to our health, our communities, and our environment. It links pleasure and food with awareness and responsibility. The organization's activities seek to connect like-minded people through worldwide networks such as Terra Madre, spread the education of taste and its importance with projects like the School Gardens, protect biodiversity in our food supply and traditional production skills at risk of being lost with projects like Presidia, and connect producers with co-producers through events and initiatives such as Cheese and Slow Fish.

For further information please visit www.slowfood.com

