

Slow Food: What Worked for the Tortoise May Work for the Snail By Katy Budge

In today's world, convenience and cost-cutting reign supreme, especially when it comes to food. We've become used to one-stop shopping, to having tomatoes available year round, and to paying rock bottom prices for substandard products. We've given up caring who produced our food, how it was processed, where it was grown, and even when it was harvested. We want to eat on-the-go and we don't care where we go to eat.

Amid the din of this hustle and bustle, there is a burgeoning movement aimed at returning to the days when the only tomatoes available were those picked at the peak of summer ripeness, when you knew your grocer and your grocer knew the farmer, when a meal with family and friends came out of the oven instead of a microwave. That movement is called Slow Food, and it has arrived on the Central Coast.

It's not an oversimplification to say that Slow Food got its start because of fast food. Founder Carlo Petrini launched the movement in 1986 as a direct response to the opening of a McDonalds in Rome's Piazza Spagna. He wanted consumers to realize they had choices, to understand that food mattered, and to appreciate the pleasures of sitting down and sharing a meal. He wanted people to rebuild a relationship with one of life's basic building blocks – the food they eat.

Clearly, the Slow Food movement – whose logo is that of a snail -- was an idea whose time had come. By 1989, the Constitution for the International Slow Food Movement was signed in Paris by over 20 visiting delegations from around the world. Today, there are approximately 750 Slow Food convivia (chapters) in over 100 countries and the number of members and supporters has topped 80,000. The heart of the movement is still arguably in Europe, especially Italy, but Slow Food USA has experienced significant growth, jumping from only 500 members five years ago to some 13,000 members today. Nationwide, there are now 135 convivia, including six chapters on the Central Coast: Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Ojai, Ventura, and two in Santa Barbara.

Slow Food is guided by an overarching set of principles that embrace biodiversity, sustainability, local food producers, cultural traditions, seasonal eating, and the importance of shared meals with family and friends. Although the international and national organizations provide significant support to the local convivia, each convivium is largely free to do what they wish as long as they operate within those general concepts. Often, the emphasis is on education, though the "target audiences" vary greatly. One convivium is taking the message about sustainable and local foods to lower income families in their community; another has challenged some of its members to see whether it's possible to eat fresh, locally grown foods on a federal food stamp allotment; and some are involved in legislative activism.

Sometimes, education just happens, as was the case during a strawberry jam workshop sponsored by one of the Santa Barbara convivia. The event started with everyone picking their own berries in the field, an experience that seems simple enough, but convivium leader Laurence Hauben noted that, after spending the morning bent over

picking fruit, “They all said they would never again complain about the price of strawberries.”

Many convivia, including some on the Central Coast, are also taking the Slow Food message directly to schools and children. The San Luis Obispo convivium is working to raise funds for the new garden project at a local elementary school, one of the Santa Barbara chapters has donated money to several public schools for their gardens, and the Ojai group helps provide funding to put fresh salad bars in the area’s local schools. As Hauben noted, “if we can introduce young children to what a strawberry or a carrot is supposed to taste like, we will have done a great deal.”

Of course, Slow Food is also hoping to teach adults those same lessons, and to reconnect them with not only the concept of eating seasonally, but also the bounty of food that’s available, especially here on the Central Coast. As Mary Blehm, leader of the Ventura group, remembered, “When I first started our convivium, I was astounded that so many people were ignorant as to what an agricultural community we live in and what we produce here.”

To that end, local convivia have organized visits to family farms, farmers’ markets, and local restaurants, but there are also a number of hands-on events designed to retain the memory of cooking techniques as well. For example, the San Luis Obispo convivium had a workshops on canning and pickling, a Salvadoran woman taught tamale making to one of the Santa Barbara chapters, the Ventura group made gelatos and sorbettos with fresh fruit last summer, and the Buon Appetito Santa Barbara convivium asked a local resident to share his Sicilian heritage in a cooking class and a meal that had “the best tiramisu you’ve ever tasted,” said leader Janice Cook Knight.

Other popular events are the themed potluck dinners that celebrate a local food product, such as the Ojai convivium’s tangerine dinner where “we had eight different tangerines – including the Ojai Pixie – and three different types of blood oranges that we tasted,” explained leader Sims Brannon. The ensuing potluck featured all manner of tangerine-based recipes, including Buffalo wings tossed in a tangerine glaze.

The Ojai Pixie tangerine, Blenheim apricot, Meyer lemon, Monterey Jack cheese, and Red Abalone are among several local foodstuffs that have been included in Slow Food’s “Ark of Taste”, a project that got its start in 1996. (Piquito beans may soon join the list as well.) There is a nomination process that each food product goes through, but essentially, the idea is to bring attention to products that are threatened by large-scale, unsustainable commercial food production, and thereby preserve those products. Among the most successful Ark projects has been the Heritage Turkey Project, which has almost single-handedly saved several species of turkeys from sure extinction. (see sidebar for more information.)

Some critics of Slow Food are quick to point out that many people can’t afford abalone or Heritage turkeys, and have dismissed the movement as just another snobby “foodie” trend. However, that’s certainly not how most Slow Food members view the organization or their involvement in it. For example, Hauben explained that for her, Slow Food is about “rediscovering conviviality, not necessarily around expensive, high end foods, but

around what I call ‘real foods’ -- foods that are grown locally and have evolved with the culture of a region, that have historical relevance, that are in season, tasty, and good for us.”

She also added that “Slow Food has an enormous mission to accomplish in the United States, because the U.S. sets the tone for a lot of what happens in the rest of the world. If we can slow down here, and learn to appreciate the beauty of a ripe peach, if we can learn to embrace simple sensual pleasures as a key part of human happiness, and to respect the land and the people who tend it, Slow Food will have accomplished a tremendous healing in our society.”

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