

FOOD FROM THE HEART

Terra Madre Slow Food Event

A bison rancher from Alberta. A pistachio grower from Afghanistan. A rose petal jam maker from Bulgaria. An oyster gatherer from Portugal. A taro farmer from Kenya....

By Janet Wallace

I was amongst this diverse group of people last fall in Italy. Five thousand of us from 150 countries gathered together for Terra Madre, a Slow Food event that literally means "Mother Earth."

At Terra Madre, there were people from around the globe. Some wore saris, others wore batik dresses, some wore felt hats and others wore jeans. Skin colour ranged from the palest white to ebony black with a beautiful range of shades in between. Many languages were spoken. Although

our backgrounds differed, we were united in our passion about the food we produced.

We all grew or made "slow food." The term was coined to mean the opposite of fast food. More specifically, it refers to deli-

cious food that is made of high quality ingredients that are grown in an environmentally sustainable way. The food also reflects cultural traditions. Slow food is simply good food – food that is good for our bodies, our communities and our planet.

Many of the people at Terra Madre talked about the history of the foods they grew and made. Often foods were local in a way that is almost alien to the North American mindset: a certain strain of bean grown only in a small valley in Italy; smoked pork from a rare breed of pigs raised in orchards in a hamlet in France; cheese made in yurts from the milk of reindeer in a Russian village; flour made from the hand-ground seeds of water lilies gathered from a lake in Kenya.

Along with seeds and recipes, traditions have been passed down from generation to generation. The lineage of the food and the strong link between food and community leads to cultural pride. A traditional food is not something to be picked up at the drive-through and eaten while driving. The food is savoured.



When I hear people talk about food in the context of health, the discussion almost always revolves around the nutritional aspect of food – its sodium content, the amount of vitamins it contains, the amount and type of fat. Yet eating isn't simply the process of ingesting ingredients; eating is (or can be) a great pleasure in life. And finding joy in the everyday aspects of life is essential to our health and vitality.

The meals and the ingredients of slow food are embedded in culture. In our multicultural country, our cuisine reflects the commingling of traditions from around the world. Traditions are evolving as our nation changes. We are fortunate to be eating at a time when, not only can we prepare the meals we grew up with, but we can also turn to cookbooks and to our neighbours to find recipes from around the world. After all, this is the true tradition of cooking. For example, tomatoes were brought to Italy only a few centuries ago yet now are an essential part of Italian cuisine. The wheat we use for our daily bread was originally grown in the highlands of Ethiopia. Throughout human history, explorers have travelled the planet in search of spices and foods.

We don't need to be farmers or chefs to make slow food. And we don't have to be rich to eat it. Bringing slow food into your life can be simple and affordable.

The first step to appreciating slow food is to use good ingredients. This doesn't necessarily mean expensive ones. Buying raw high quality ingredients is often much cheaper than buying prepared foods that are less nutritious and less appetizing. For example, a vinaigrette made from olive oil and wine vinegar (or even balsamic vinegar) can be healthier, better tasting and cheaper than a bottled salad dressing made with hydrogenated fats and lots of sugar and salt. Buying produce at a farmers' market can sometimes be cheaper than at grocery stores, and you can enjoy meeting the people who grow your food.

As much as possible, buy locally grown organic food. Or better yet, grow it. One way to reduce costs is to eat in season. For example, use winter crops like squash, beets, potatoes, Jerusalem artichokes and cabbage in the winter. In the spring,


indulge in as many greens as you can eat. Summer is when tomatoes, peppers and zucchini are at their prime and in the autumn we are blessed with a great bounty and diversity of fresh food.

The wonderful aspect of gleaning recipes from around the world is that they can be adapted to locally grown ingredients. A challenge of eating local food in season is that the diet can become boring, but not if recipes and some condiments from other cuisines are used. For example, I have recently had kale in an omelette, in a stir-fry, in a curry and under a peanut sauce in gado gado. It doesn't take long for me to be bored with plain steamed kale, but with these different treatments, I can eat it several times a week.

If you have the freezer space or canning skill, you can buy food at the height of the harvest, then freeze or can it so you can savour it throughout the year. I feel incredibly rich when I have a bounty of organic food stored away in the form of bottled tomatoes in the pantry and berries, peas, kale and meat in the freezer.

The second key to making slow food is to take the time to cook. Slow food doesn't mean slaving over the stove for hours. When you have fresh high quality ingredients, it is amazing how little preparation is sometimes needed.

The third step is to enjoy the food. Turn off the TV and radio while you eat. If you have a family, try to arrange to eat together as often as you can. If you are alone, eating a nice dinner can still be a great pleasure. Sharing food is another wonderful way to enjoy food and community; consider inviting friends and neighbours over for dinner.

The point of Terra Madre was for food producers from around the world to meet and connect. Through dialogue and the basic act of eating together, we can create a better world. You don't have to go away to do this...it can start in your own kitchen. 

Janet Wallace enjoys growing, cooking and eating organic food. She also enjoys her job of editing The Canadian Organic Grower (www.cog.ca).