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SLOW FOOD FOR THOUGHT

“Come to the Table” was the motto of Slow Food Nation ’08, and over the Labor Day weekend roughly 60,000 people heeded the call, gathering in San Francisco to eat organic food, meet local farmers and listen to panel discussions about the future of sustainable agriculture. The plaza in front of City Hall was transformed into a fruit and vegetable garden flanked by an outdoor market. An exhibition space at Fort Mason, near the waterfront, featured “taste pavilions” with artisanal foods and meals prepared by well-known chefs. Measured solely by attendance, the first get-together of this kind in the United States was an unqualified success. The crowds were large, the lines were long and almost all the events were sold out. The food and the weather were terrific. Among the many vegans and carnivores, the cheese lovers, wine connoisseurs, raw milk advocates, biodynamic farmers, locavores and chocolatiers, a consensus emerged that what had previously been considered a slogan—“slow food”—was now a genuine social movement. Largely missing, however, was a group of people who will ultimately determine whether this movement gains importance beyond the Bay Area: the workers who harvest, process and serve the food we eat.

The idea of slow food has its origins in the Northern Italian counterculture of the 1970s. While American hippies were forming communes and going back to the land, some of their socialist counterparts in Italy were embracing the traditional music, food and agriculture of life in the rural Piedmont region. Carlo Petrini, a brilliant and charismatic journalist, became the leading spokesman for the notion that there is nothing contradictory about championing pleasure and working for change. After staging a protest at a new McDonald’s near Rome’s Spanish Steps, Petrini and his allies issued a Slow Food Manifesto in 1987. “We are enslaved by speed,” it declared, “and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life.” Two years later, the manifesto was endorsed by delegates from fifteen countries, as the destructiveness of a mechanized, industrialized food system became increasingly clear. Today, Slow Food International has about 85,000 members in more than 100 countries.

At the heart of Petrini’s Slow Food philosophy is a set of fundamental values that aim to distance its celebration of pleasure from mindless decadence. According to the Slow Food movement’s leading writers and intellectuals discussed the harms that distance trucking of livestock, the jet fuel that brings strawberries and the workers who harvest, process and serve the food we eat. According to Holden, ten calories of fossil fuel energy are now required to produce each calorie of food. The rising prices of basic inputs—such as the natural gas necessary to produce fertilizers, the petroleum that allows long-distance trucking of livestock, the jet fuel that brings strawberries from New Zealand—will force a return to more traditional farm-
ing methods. Vandana Shiva, a passionate defender of India’s small farmers and opponent of genetically modified foods, argued that free trade was actually “forced trade,” imposing the needs of multinational agribusiness upon Third World economies. And Michael Pollan, author, most recently, of In Defense of Food, explained how the latest US farm bill is really a “food bill,” providing subsidies to the manufacture of unhealthy, processed foods while maintaining high prices for healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables. Most panelists, including myself, signed an admirable twelve-point Declaration for Healthy Food and Agriculture.

The handful of labor activists at the gathering put the larger, theoretical critiques in the right perspective. José Padilla, executive director of California Rural Legal Assistance, displayed four photographs of farmworker housing in San Diego County—wooden shacks draped with plastic garbage bags. He read the names of farmworkers who have died on the job this year from heatstroke. And he gave a grim account of routine sexual harassment in the fields. Greg Asbed and Lucas Benitez, representing the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, described some of the terrible conditions in Florida agriculture, challenging the audience to care as much about human rights as they already seemed to care about animal rights. And at a sparsely attended session far from the crowds in the main auditorium, Saru Jayaraman, co-director of the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, made an eloquent plea on behalf of the 13 million restaurant workers in the United States. Jayaraman spoke about workers who could never hope to afford the meals they prepare and serve, who toil long hours for low wages, who rarely get sick pay or vacations.

Legendary chef Alice Waters has for years been the driving force behind Slow Food USA. In addition to having remarkably good taste, Waters has a passion for social justice deeply embedded in her bones. While other famous chefs have used their names to promote frozen dinners, open restaurant outlets in airports and build gourmet empires, she has focused her energy on bringing nutritional education and healthy food to children in America’s public schools.

The first Slow Food Nation partly fulfilled Waters’s broad agenda. It earned high marks for the good and the clean but next time could do a hell of a lot better with the fair. At the moment, the majority of Americans—ordinary working people, the poor, people of color—do not have a seat at this table. The movement for sustainable agriculture has to reckon with the simple fact that it will never be sustainable without these people. Indeed, without them it runs the risk of degenerating into a hedonistic narcissism for the few. Wendell Berry—the great poet and novelist whose book The Unsettling of America, more than any other, inspired the current assault on the fast food mentality—says that “eating is an agricultural act.” That means we are all co-producers, choosing a certain set of values with every bite. Does it matter whether an heirloom tomato is local and organic if it was harvested with slave labor? That was the question I asked the audience at Slow Food Nation. The answer is obvious, and it’s one that this movement needs to address.

Eric Schlosser is the author of the bestseller Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal and Reefer Madness.

Revisiting New Orleans

Facing warmer oceans, more frequent hurricanes, dubious levees and depleted wetlands, New Orleans depends more than ever on the changing winds of weather and politics. Yet even though this year marks the first presidential election since more than 80 percent of the city went underwater, it took Gustav to make Katrina a campaign issue.

The Katrina disaster and recovery earned just glancing mentions in the prime-time speeches at the Democratic National Convention in Denver. The Republican convention was retooled in Gustav’s wake, but had the hurricane fizzled the Republicans would certainly have accorded Katrina even less attention than the Democrats. John McCain repeatedly sets himself apart from George W. Bush’s handling of the tragedy, yet three years ago he was a mirror image of the detached Presi-