



IT'S ONLY FITTING that the Slow Food movement began in Italy, birthplace of the world's most beloved culinary genre, and home to a citizenry with an arguably unparalleled appreciation for the act of dining. Founded in 1986 by food journalist Carlo Petrini initially as a protest against fast food, the Slow Food movement has spread its seeds worldwide. With upwards of 83,000 official members and branches in 122 countries, it works on a variety of food-related issues, warning people about the risks of eating fast foods and lobbying against genetic engineering and pesticide use.

But at its core, Slow Food encourages the consumption and celebration of locally produced foods, making it both logical and inevitable that the movement would find some fertile ground in Niagara.

Renée Girard is leader of the recently formed Pelham chapter, or convivium, from the Latin for “feast” or “banquet”. Slow “foodies” consider themselves co-producers, not consumers, because by learning about the source of their food and by supporting the livelihood of producers, they are in essence a part of the production process. This allows them to connect the dots between our dinner, the economy and the environment — known in the Slow Food community as eco-gastronomy.

“Food is very important but it does more than nourish, it’s the basis of our community and economy,” Girard asserts. This connection between local agriculture and economics is particularly palpable in Niagara where access to locally grown products often goes unnoticed. “Why would you buy a peach from the southern United States when your neighbour is producing it? It’s crazy, look at what is around you.”

The Niagara convivium was established in April 2007 following a conference on sustainable agriculture. “Lively discussions on the opportunities and challenges faced by farmers, food producers, chefs and consumers inspired a group of individuals to launch a Slow Food Niagara convivium,” explains Karen LaVigne, who co-leads the Niagara group. Its goal is to “[promote an] awareness and appreciation of Niagara’s bounty through public events, educational workshops and toured tastings.”

That this movement might throw off an aroma of pretense or elitism is a notion that Girard flatly rejects. “People think it’s elitist but it’s not. It’s for everyone. . . it’s about being able to eat well every day. We should enjoy cooking, it’s not a chore, it can be really simple,” she says. LaVigne agrees.

“Our events and activities have been structured to appeal to a broad audience of consumers and not just a gourmet elite.” As for the higher cost of organic food, Girard reasons that we should focus on quality over quantity and take into consideration the wider implications of our choices. “Often people want a deal for food, so they don’t want to pay for quality. But this is no help to our economy or health.”

In the heart of Pelham another slow-food disciple, Jan Campbell-Luxton, is working to improve his community’s perspective on food. A chef with a degree in comparative development studies, Campbell-Luxton is proprietor of de la terre café and bakery in Fonhill. “Every time you buy food you are making a choice about the kind of world you want to live in,” he reasons.

He initiated Dig In Pelham, a year-long not-for-profit community kitchen gardening project. In partnership with Slow Food, Dig In wants to nourish local residents — particularly youth — with knowledge about healthy eating and the distance their food travels, while strengthening connections between local farmers and urban residents. The enterprise will culminate in autumn with a weekend of cooking and preserving seminars, tastings and a public feast in Pelham Town Square.

Campbell-Luxton is also teaming up with a Welland food co-op that works to help Niagara-area farmers earn a fair price. In a region that prides itself on its unique ecosystem and fertile farmland, it would be counterintuitive to ignore the connection between arable land and urban space. “There are few points of intersection between growers and consumers, because people are so separated from their suppliers of food,” he says. “If we don’t have people growing our food, we have a real problem.”

Inside the appropriately named “de la terre”, French for “from the earth”, you can see the tenets of Slow Food in action. Bread — the dense, nourishing, toothsome, European variety — is the cornerstone of Campbell-Luxton’s business. It is carefully hand-formed daily and made from organic wheat, rye and spelt flours and sourdough starter. As a result, his loaves appeal to people with bread sensitivities as the appropriate fermentation process allows for easier digestion. The same approach is taken to the delicate pastries, and the café also serves breakfast and lunch using organic and locally sourced ingredients as much as possible.

Meanwhile, at Pan Café in St. Catharines, owner Alexandra Hlinyanszky shares in the Slow Food philosophy that food should be good, clean and fair. Her dishes are all-natural, organic and composed of locally produced ingredients wherever possible (including bread from de la terre). Hlinyanszky acknowledges the limitations of her endeavour. Coffee and olives, for example, are not local. Instead, she stresses that balance is key. “It’s not about extremes, extremes would alienate us. It’s about enlightening people.”

Hlinyanszky is particularly insistent that good food should appeal to a variety of tastes and her menu stands in evidence of this: the Old Grilled Cheese Sandwich and Classic Macaroni and Cheese share space with the popular Brekkie Rice Bowl and Miso Salad. “Part of the vision [for Pan] is accessibility,” she explains. “There is something for everyone.”

But are all of these ventures indicative of a larger change happening in Niagara? “I think people are interested,” Campbell-Luxton purports. The business cards of local food suppliers he keeps on display, for example, are constantly running out. “People are desperate for honesty and integrity in the way things are made and sold to them,” he contends. Girard agrees and speaks of her own community as an example of the shift. “It’s not the same as it was six years ago,” she says, listing such Slow Food-conscious businesses as Chez Fromage and Zest Restaurant as evidence of this. “Fonthill is getting to be more food aware.”

Altogether, the Slow Food movement is really a recipe for simplicity and self-awareness, not just in our food choices or in the way we eat, but also in the way we live. In truth, there is nothing new here: Cooking from scratch, sharing meals as a family and getting enjoyment out of food again. The basics, really. NM

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Jan Campbell-Luxton and Alexandra Hlinyanszky inside Pan Café on St. Paul Street, St. Catharines. He is the owner of de la terre café and bakery in Fonthill and has initiated Dig In Pelham, a not-for-profit community kitchen gardening project. She is the owner of Pan Café and creates all-natural, organic and locally-produced dishes.
Photograph by David Haskell