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Slow Food: Italy Conquers the world in 2009

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TURIN--For the next week Turin will be the World Capital of Food – Slow Food, something halfway between a gastronomic movement and a political statement. Be careful, because FOOD will be the big issue of 2009, not just the issue of financial recovery. More than 1,652 "food communities" from 153 countries (including Turkey) will try to teach more people to eat "good, clean and fair" and to fight for preservation of the original producers of the food -- shepherds, fishermen, local farmers. Up to 250,000 people may converge in the next few days on the old automotive city, also known for its rich royal history and the Church where the revered Shroud of Jesus Christ is kept.

You can recognize this "subversive" movement---in fact nearly a religion -- by the people who wear a "Snail" on their lapel and try to promote eco-cities and original tastes. It was started in 1986 when a bearded food guru, named Carlo Petrini, organized a demonstration in front of a projected McDonald's restaurant at Rome's swank Piazza di Spagna Spagna, leading his followers with bowls of "penne" pasta as weapons of mass protest. This Gandhi-like gesture enshrined him as one Italy's international icons, along with opera tenor Pavarotti or actress Sofia Loren.

By now, the Slow Food movement has over 100,000 card carrying members, including Prince Charles ("I consider him the patron of the movement, our spiritual guide," says Petrini), and has become politically active, lobbying the European Union on trade and agricultural policy and working to save endangered foods. Petrini, President and founder of the movement, has been proclaimed in 2004 by Time Magazine one of the 50 most influential people in the World.

He has also come to Turkey and planted the seeds for some of the 850 "convivia" world wide chapters, each of which is responsible for promoting local farmers and local flavors through regional events such as Taste Workshops, wine tasting and farmers markets. When Petrini came to Istanbul, a year ago, we sat down with him to taste Corvus wine from Bozcaada, apricots from the area of Iğdir, planted by Haydar Alagoz and some sweets by Veli Gulas, a 60-year-old honey producer who has produced honey in the Anzer area near the Black Sea since the age of 35. There were also some Turkish cheese producers producing genuine sheep's cheese and several other winners of The Slow Food Prize, which aims to encourage the preservation of original products. In short, Turkey is active in the Slow Food movement with all sorts of products.

In fact, I was so euphoric after that tasting that I didn't notice I was being pick-pocketed as I walked down Istiklal Street on Beyoğlu after that four-hour (yes, slow!) dinner.

Turkey will also be honored in Turin in one of the several hundred workshops, "A splash in the Med," which is a tour of Mediterranean with fragrances and fruits, herbs and seeds used to distill liqueurs. There will be Arak from Lebanon, Ouzo from Bayanini on the island of Lesbos, and of course Raki from Turkey.

Listen to what "Carlin," as Petrini is affectionately called, has to say:

"In the past 50 years food has gone out of your daily life. An agricultural society has become a post-industrial society. This has brought about double thinking: I eat, but I don't know what I am eating. I don't

know how it was made or where it has come from."

And more:

"Eating is no longer about Love, but about consuming fuel. A woman cooks some food and no one smiles at her to say thank you. Neither is there any fascination with food. In Mediterranean Europe there is still that fascination, still the conviviality, the ritual. The most important thing about eating is to enjoy the moment of affection between family members or friends or work colleagues. A civilization that loses its ritual becomes poor. It is especially important for children to learn again how to experience communal eating"

Few people might disagree, with this or the mantra "good, clean, fair", and protecting "at risk" specialties. But then you get controversial ... when you start talking about paying more for food and shunning the large supermarkets. In some countries like the U.S. and U.K., the Slow Food movement may still be the preserve of pricey farmers' markets and delicatessen and so the preserve of the middle and upper class. In fact, it may be considered elitist.

Where did we hear this word -- elitist? It was applied to Barack Obama who gets accused of eating arugola (Roca) salads and light fare instead of cheese steak and fried chicken nuggets, or cheese-drooping pizza. It was the conservatives who were attacking him. Well, in fact Petrini is a member of the 45 main leaders of Italy's Democratic Party, which is in the opposition to Premier Silvio Berlusconi and who also uses food as a weapon.

Berlusconi too conducts much of his political and government meetings over food cooked by his private chef in one of his half dozen homes. He also gobbles mozzarella cheese to show that the garbage crisis in Naples has been vanquished and that you are safe if you go to Napoli.

So food will indeed become a major battleground in 2009 both domestically in the country of food, Italy, and worldwide. That is because Italy is hosting the G-8 meeting next year and one of the themes will revolve around food and sustaining the world population, the high and fluctuating prices of commodities. This has been announced as one of the governments priorities as it is preparing for the G-8 meeting in La Maddalena, Sardinia.

It's also not for nothing that the United Nations has located three food agencies in Rome (FAO, World Food Program and IFAD) and Italy beat Finland to locate the European Food Agency in Parma (yes the ham, the birthplace of Parmesan and the headquarters of Barilla Pasta).

To win that honor of the location in Parma a few years ago, Berlusconi created a diplomatic incident by insulting the Finns with a quip asking what Finland knew about Parma ham or cheese.

But back to Turin: Even U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon is getting into the act by addressing the meeting with a teleconference video message and some major political figures will be visiting "Salone Del Gusto," and Terra Madre, another fair which encourages a return to the earth. A few other spinoffs of the movement have also been enjoying great success, "Slow Fish" in Genoa (where Turkish fish roe or bottarga was one of the stars) and the Slow Cities Movement which allows you to join if you do NOT have a Fast Food place within your city limits and you observe certain eco-sensitive parameters such a bicycle paths, no nuclear, more electric cars and so on.

Finally the event will sanction the rebirth of Turin into the World Food Capital after its career as a nondescript industrial city, and its rebirth in 2006 as the host of the 2006 Winter Olympics. One of its symbols, spawned by the Slow Food Movement is Eataly, a giant three story warehouse which calls itself the biggest wine and food center of the world, amid nine restaurants, rows of truffles, artichokes and choicefoods, barrels of wine and wheels of cheese from all over Italy. Branches have already started in Milan and Tokyo. It has been standing room only every day, every night. Tourists come on buses from far and near.

So the question facing us as we start gazing into the crystal ball of 2009 is: will the coming frugality in food and return to the land become a full fledged political and social movement, beyond a gastronomic gang? Will

food and politics become as explosive as nuclear crises and financial doldrums? From the crowds that have deluged this Eataly and the people watching what they eat, and the hundreds streaming into Turin, it looks that way from here.

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