



## LAVERY CULINARY GROUP

### **Slow Food 2019**

By Bryan Lavery

Simply put, Slow Food is the opposite of fast food, a movement away from eating and living on the run. It is about preparing food with fresh ingredients instead of buying prepared or packaged foods. It is about opting for taste over convenience, buying local in order to support small scale producers like farmers, growers, artisanal bakers and cheesemakers, craft wineries and breweries and farm to table restaurants.

It is the belief that indigenous culinary traditions and the remaining vestiges of small farm Canada, are at risk to succumb to the countervailing forces of fast food and our increasingly time-deprived lifestyles. Slow Food is learning to taste again and enjoying a return to the dinner table. Mostly, it is about consciously embracing life at a slower pace.

My own journey to understand and adopt the Slow Food philosophy was a circuitous one. Today, where you choose to shop and eat has become something of a political statement. It seems near impossible to be an ethical cook and a student of gastronomy without becoming something of a culinary historian, food activist and “buy local” enthusiast along the way. Studies indicate that 58% of millennials believe the food you buy and where you buy it have become a reflection of your personal values.

It was 20 years ago when I first encountered the Slow Food movement. I was in Italy, taking cooking classes and being wined and dined by the Italian Trade Commission in the region of Emilia-Romagna. One of the master chefs and educators was not only a staunch advocate of Slow Food but one of its early adopters. I realized I had unwittingly been a proponent of the Slow Food philosophy for many years. What I did not know was there was an organized worldwide cultural movement afoot.

The Slow Food symbol is a small snail. The movement was originally conceived in Italy in 1986 as a response to McDonald's wanting to open a location close to the Spanish Steps in Rome. Italian food journalist and Slow Food founder, Carlo Petrini, decided they had gone too far. Today, Slow Food can now boast over 1 million supporters, 100,000 members in 160 countries organized into local conviva or chapters.

Slow Food International website states, “The Ark of Taste travels the world collecting small-scale quality productions that belong to the cultures, history and traditions of the entire planet: an extraordinary heritage of fruits, vegetables, animal breeds, cheeses, breads, sweets and cured meats. The Ark was created to point out the existence of these products, draw attention to the risk of their extinction within a few generations, invites everyone to take action to help protect them. In some cases this might be by buying and consuming them, in others by telling their story and supporting their producers, and in others, such as the case of endangered wild species, this might mean eating less or none of them in order to preserve them and favor their reproduction. There are 4,930 Ark of Taste products, 40 of them in Canada.

For many years it has been impossible for me to cook without considering the source of the food products that I am using and the responsibility that entails. Twenty-five years ago I was employed in Chandler’s Ford in England when what at first appeared to be a cryptic veterinary problem evolved into an epidemic affecting 120,000 cattle. Conflicting reports about Mad Cow disease’s relationship to Creutzfeldt- Jakob disease in humans had created a frenzy of mistrust, panic and speculation. Overnight, beef hanging in the windows and in the counters of local butcher shops on the high streets disappeared. Restaurants immediately removed beef from their menus.

This was the beginning of the “mad cow crisis”, a scandal that eroded consumer confidence and forced me to consider how naïve I had been not to question our society’s irresponsible quest for productivity at whatever cost. It was then that I began to question the safety of our food supplies. Returning to Ontario, the tainted water crisis in Walkerton did little to bolster my feelings about health and safety, given what appeared to be a lack of ethical and moral concerns in a wealthy province that had learned to take too much for granted. Today, when I think of the heartbreaking travesty of the Flint, Michigan water scandal my blood boils.

My awareness increased and I became more politicized while attending the Ontario Vegetable conference to write a story for my column in the London Free Press. Expressing my concerns about the potential risks that might be caused by the genetic engineering of plants, and the fact that there were virtually no labelling requirements for genetically altered food in Canada, I wondered about long term health effects and whether these “new genetically-altered fooda” might be allergenic, toxic or even cause birth defects. My concern was that given the fact that genetic engineering uses live organisms from plants, animals and bacteria to hybridize plants for the production of foods and chemicals, what were the long term health effects? Ethical concerns seemed to pale compared to the potential health and safety issues that needed to be explored. Delegates at the conference expressed the advantages of biotechnology and voiced their consensus that biogenetics are safe. They pointed to the environmental benefits of gene-spliced canolas that have been engineered to be herbicide resistant. “What is more environmentally-friendly, genetically modified corn or corn that needs to be sprayed seven times with pesticides?” they asked. Well, modified canola oils have been at the centre of international controversies for years, one would be stupid to ignore the financial benefits this kind of genetic engineering offers to agribusiness. The use of biotechnologies presents us with a harvest of questions that still need to be answered. Here in Ontario, Slow Food’s mantra continues to gain relevance to a much wider audience. What I have learnt and believe is that we are all responsible at a

personal level to make sure that regulatory agencies are accountable for the health and safety concerns.

By promoting taste education programs, Slow Food works towards safeguarding terroir and advancing awareness of local customs and time-honoured techniques while opposing the deterioration of the environment. Slow Food is anything that employs ingredients raised and carefully tended and the taste of where it originates. More importantly, it bears the stamp of the hands of the people that prepare it. Slow Food celebrates the benefits of making good food and conviviality part of everyday life. It is the continuous awakening to the opportunities to oppose the cult of speed and convenience that defines much of our contemporary existence.