

The European fight against Fast Food: the Italian Slow Food movement



Carlo Petrini describes himself as a professional gourmet, which is about the last thing you would guess. For a start he's thin, almost scrawny. Sixty now, with a sparse grey beard and blazing blue eyes that are always crinkling into a smile, he has lived all his life in the northern Italian town of Bra, in Piedmont. (...) Petrini is the founder, prophet and guiding light of the Slow Food Movement, which he brought into being exactly 20 years ago. Today it girdles the earth and has tens of thousands of members, but Slow Food began as an informal talking shop for young foodies in Bra, who assembled in out-of-the-way pubs and trattorias around the town to eat what was provided and drink the local wine. (...) The process was in a sense one of dramatic enrichment: the consumption of meat in Italian households exploded, from 22kg per person per year in 1960 to 62kg in 1975; vastly increased quantities of cheese, eggs, fresh fruit, sugar and coffee were added to the traditional diet of rice or pasta augmented by milk, wine and little else. Life for the ordinary Italian was becoming much more interesting.

But at the same time, and with equally blinding speed, a lot of things were going out of the window. "The umbilical cord that had once connected the worlds of farmer and consumer was cut," Petrini noted. "Today hardly anyone buys their wine directly from their trusted wine maker, or goes to the farm to buy eggs and a chicken or a rabbit; hardly anybody knows the baker who makes their bread, the charcutier who slaughters the pigs and cures the meat, the man who churns the milk of his sheep or goats to make cheese." Not long ago the local grocer's shop and the pub, as well as being sources of food, were places for the exchange of information and knowledge, where customers did their shopping and eating informed by the wise words of people who were closely in touch with the sources of supply. But all these fonts of food wisdom were being swept away by modernisation, in the form of supermarkets and fast food.

Two events in 1986 convinced Petrini that Italy was at crisis point. One was the opening of a branch of McDonald's in Piazza di Spagna, in the heart of Rome. The other was the death of 19 people and the poisoning of hundreds of others by cheap wine cut with methanol.

The arrival of America's most famous hamburger chain was greeted, in Italy as in France and elsewhere, by angry demonstrations. But Petrini believed that protest was futile. The militant French farmer José Bové might drive his tractor to the site of a new McDonald's and sabotage it, citing the motto: "Where the hamburger is planted, Roquefort dies." But while Petrini agreed with the sentiment, he disagreed with the reaction. "We don't wish to adopt a strategy of open conflict with the multinationals," he said. Instead he and his colleagues set about creating resistance to fast food by building awareness of the wealth of traditional food that was at risk.

"The strategy of penetration of McDonald's in Italy," Petrini wrote, "brought its own antidote." In other countries McDonald's began setting up shop in the provinces. In Italy on the other hand the chain began from the metropolitan centres, "appealing to a public that was already Americanised" – with the result that out in the provinces, people saw the danger and began to wake up to the fact that the foods and pubs they held so dear might soon be at risk. And so it was that exactly 20 years ago, on 10 December 1989, the Slow Food Manifesto

was released in a Paris theatre. It was a call to arms for gourmets everywhere. "Against the universal madness of the Fast Life," the Manifesto declared, "we need to choose the defence of tranquil material pleasure. Against those, and there are many of them, who confuse efficiency with frenzy, we propose the vaccine of a sufficient portion of assured sensual pleasure, to be practiced in slow and prolonged enjoyment ... " Slow Food launched courses to put consumers in touch with the producers of the food and wine they enjoyed, recreating the umbilical cord that was cut when supermarkets invaded the market place. He established "presidii", a steadily growing catalogue of foods or animal breeds that were at risk of extinction. In 1996 he launched the "Salone del Gusto", a huge showcase for foods of excellence from all over the world; the second edition, held in a former Fiat factory on the outskirts of Turin in 1998, was arguably the decisive moment in the Slow Food Movement's history, when it became clear that it had global appeal. (...)

From producer to plate: What is Slow Food?

Slow Food – Petrini's term – is used to signal awareness of a food's origin, on the part of the producer and "co-producer", the movement's name for the consumer. Slow Food shies away from the word "consumer" because "by being informed about how our food is produced and actively supporting those who produce it, we become a part of and a partner in the production process".

Promoted by members of the organisation, the term stipulates that the food should "taste good, that it should be produced in a clean way which fully respects the environment, human health and animal welfare" and that "food producers are paid a fair wage".

Slow Food is necessarily regional, promoting and protecting local produce. Its aim: "To counteract fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people's dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how food choices affect the rest of the world."

Now in its 20th year, the growth of the Slow Food movement remains steady, consisting of more than 100,000 members in over 132 countries worldwide.

Padcraig ALLEN, « Carlo Petrini, the slow food gourmet who started a revolution » in *The Independant*, 2 April 2014.

Questions: (At least 5 lines for each answer.)

- 1) Introduce the source and define what is slow food.
- 2) Why did Carlo Petrini decide to react against fast food ?
- 3) How is the success of the Slow Food movement ?
- 4) How should be the farmers and consummers according to the Slow Food ?
- 5) So, what is the geographical consequence of Slow Food on a territory ?