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Slow Pleasures

You Are What You Eat

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Photo by Lori Eanes

Diane Del Signore is poking around amid the 100 berry bushes and 25 fruit trees in her backyard orchard, looking for eggs. The six chickens that cluck, peck and scratch up little mounds of soil in this, their daytime hangout, routinely lay in the most unlikely spots. “They each produce an egg about every 29 hours, so we get four or five a day, but you have to search for them,” she says as she bends to retrieve one from its hiding place in the undergrowth.

After collecting the eggs, Del Signore heads for her vegetable garden. For dinner, she picks individual leaves from her thriving lettuces for a salad for four, some plump red tomatoes, a fat summer squash she’s been watching grow larger by the day and a bulb of

garlic to go in with the rubbery blue-green kale her husband will toss in the wok as his contribution to the meal. Whenever they're planning to eat in, Del Signore chooses what is ripe, ready, tempting and growing in the four raised beds that she seeds with seasonal delights. When daughters Adrienne, 14, and Maddy, 11, have friends to visit, Del Signore sends them all out to harvest what they fancy. "What's interesting is, the children might start off by saying they don't eat something like kale. But you get them involved, picking and cooking it, and they can't get enough," she says. "It's when kids don't know about food, what things are and how to prepare them, that they end up eating the plastic stuff."

When you hear there is a herd of goats in Del Signore's life and that she is a CSA, or Community Supported Agriculture, member, you might imagine she and her family live on a farm, or at least off in some rural area.

In fact, the stylishly dressed Stanford MBA and marketing consultant, married to a Charles Schwab senior vice president—the man she calls "the farmhand" and relies on to do the heavier labor, such as reinforcing the chicken coop against a marauding skunk—resides in a regular house with a landscaped yard that fits discreetly into its upscale residential neighborhood in the Oakland Hills. Her lifestyle choices and penchant for food that is fresh, local, supports the environment, promotes good health and is eaten around the table in the company of family and friends are the upshot of her Italian-American roots.



"I grew up in southwestern Pennsylvania. My father is half Italian. Weekends in our home focused on food. My dad was a forager. On a Saturday morning he'd average 10 markets and farm stalls—different ones for meat, fish, what he regarded as the best apples and so forth. He would set off early to do the rounds. Often I'd go with him. When we got home, there'd be lots of cooking, talking and eating. Food

and conviviality were strong family values."

Five years ago she learned about the International Slow Food Movement from its vice president, Alice Waters. Del Signore had gone to hear Waters, the longtime guru of fresh, local, seasonal and sustainable, talk about the Edible Schoolyard program she began in Berkeley in 1995. Its core focus, akin to that of her Chez Panisse Foundation, established in 1996, is taking practices and values embodied by Slow Food into Berkeley schools.

When Del Signore learned about the Slow Food-movement with its snail emblem, symbolizing slow and calm, "I thought, that's how I was brought up; it's how we live; it's my food philosophy—food that tastes good, that's healthy, that you sit down as a family to share, and that supports and respects farmers and the environment." She already belonged to a CSA, where consumers buy a share in a farm's production and, in return, receive weekly boxes of organic, seasonal produce. She joined the Slow Food East Bay

convivium, as Slow calls its chapters (from conviviality. Get it?)—one of about 150 dotted around the United States.

So—What Is Slow Food?

It's a lifestyle, a philosophy, an ideal, a political movement. It's caring about the world—and people we know and don't know. It's about good health and making choices that nurture our families, friends, the environment and our bodies with our choices. It's an appreciation of interconnectedness expressed in the theory that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil sets off a tornado in Texas. Close to home, it's Oakland restaurants such as Dopo on Piedmont Avenue, Oliveto Cafe and Restaurant in Rockridge and Pizzaiolo on Telegraph in Temescal: Eateries where chefs know where, and who, their produce comes from; who are guided by the flavors of the seasons; and who prepare fresh, delicious fare that delights the senses—all in keeping with Slow-Food principles.

Slow, in action, can be as simple as buying from farmers markets and, in so doing, supporting the men and women who grow thoughtfully, with minimal impact, in a sustainable way. Or taking the time to make a sandwich with bread bought from an artisan baker rather than grabbing and gobbling an instant fix filled with unpronounceable additives that are unrecognizable as food.

The movement had its origins in Italy, the name spawned by a protest against the opening of a McDonald's near the Spanish Steps in Rome. The Slow Manifesto, drawn up at the 1989 Founding Conference of the International Slow Food Movement for the Defense of the Right to Pleasure, is strong in its opposition to “the universal folly of the Fast Life;” “the multitude who mistake frenzy for efficiency;” our “enslavement by speed” ... that “forces us to eat Fast Foods”—and similar life-choice concerns that are even more pervasive here and now than they were there and then.

Inseparable from its Right to Pleasure principle, Slow Food, at its core, is a reality-based response to the breakdown of community and family life, the exploitation and degradation of the environment, spiraling ill-health directly related to bad food choices, the worst aspects of indiscriminate globalization and other pressing political issues. The movement's founder is Carlo Petrini, author of *Slow Food—The Case for Taste and Slow Food Nation*.



Slow and Heady in the East Bay

Rockridge resident and retired Superior Court judge David Lee is a co-leader of Slow Food's 115-member-strong East Bay convivium, with Berkeley gynecologist Scott Gale.

Lee and his wife, Mari, joined in 2000, drawn by both the activism and the side that for many people—supporters and detractors alike—defines Slow: “the instant gratification part,” which involves “getting together to eat and drink and have convivial experiences.”

One 2007 event, a joint venture with Bella Berkeley, a second East Bay convivium (there are four), saw Slow members gather at Tilden Park to roast a lamb and an heirloom (old-style) Duroc pig (they predate factory pigs) in a Caja China roasting box. The group drank biodynamically grown wine. Members contributed to a potluck of salads, hors d’oeuvres and antipasto made from ingredients grown within 100 miles of Oakland.

It was Slow’s defense of the pleasures of eating, blended with its activist orientation, that attracted Lee. “I’m pretty passionate about both ecology and food,” he explains. “My wife and I serve dozens of meals a year to friends and family. And, we went solar and generate our own electricity.”

He and his wife both volunteer and contribute to a number of causes. He likes that the annual Slow Food dues (\$60 individual; \$75 a couple), plus money raised from donations and fundraisers, go to Slow Food’s U.S. and international education projects, and support the movement’s many grassroots ventures. For example, he says, Slow Food International is helping vanilla farmers in Mexico learn distribution practices that eliminate the middleman.

“As my wife said, we thought global warming was something our grandchildren would have to deal with. But it’s all become so much more immediate. We need to be concerned and doing something now.”

What About the Children?

“Health problems like obesity and diabetes, widening disparities across the world and environmental issues like global warming show that the current system, defined by speed, abundance and waste, can no longer sustain itself,” Petrini said in October 2006.

He was speaking in Turin, Italy, at Slow Food International’s second Terra Madre, an activist extravaganza attended by 4,803 farmers, breeders, fishermen and artisan food producers from 150 countries, plus 953 chefs and several hundred other foodies. Delegates gathered to network and share solutions aimed at keeping small-scale agriculture and sustainable food production alive. Terra Madre producers and invited chefs showcased their cuisine at Salone del Gusto, a giant artisanal food fair held at the same time.

Among the East Bay contingent were Chez Panisse’s Alice Waters, Cal journalism professor and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* author Michael Pollan and Oakland-based chef-educator Ann Cooper, director of nutritional services for the Berkeley Unified School District’s School Lunch Initiative.

“Terra Madre was every chef’s dream,” says Cooper. “There was networking, lots of talks and educational forums, seminars, tastings, roundtables, really cool food and people interested in food and sustainability.”



Cooper’s job requires her to provide 4,000 seasonal, sustainable, nutritious and tasty lunches each day plus 2,000 breakfasts and 2,000 snacks to students at 16 Berkeley schools, where she is in charge of cooking and gardening classes. On side trips to Rome and France, Cooper got to visit schools and see their lunch programs. “We’re way worse here,” she laments. “In Rome they provide 186,000 meals a day, organic, prepared on site, served family style. Our problem is, we don’t have a food culture or cherish food, while they do.”

“Children [in the U.S.] get bombarded by big companies to the tune of around \$20 million a year steering them to non-nutrient food,” says Cooper, whose salary is sponsored by the Chez Panisse Foundation. The school lunch initiative project, by introducing children to real food—tastes, sustainability, the relationship between the planet, people and produce—is a Slow Food–focused antidote to fast-food propaganda and lifestyle.

Cooper recommends farmers markets as an accessible way for parents to teach children about food. “Letting them taste the different peaches, for example, and meet the farmers—the relationships, the tastes, the essence of the experience—these are what Slow Food is about.”

Berkeley schools have benefited from Alice Waters’ involvement. While Oakland has lagged, things are looking up.

Kirsten Schwind, programs coordinator for Oakland-based Bay Localize, an activist environmental group committed to a green economy, says her organization is striving to end hunger through making available fresh, healthy, tasty, local produce—food consistent with the principles of Slow—within a wider framework than the food bank model where people give food that is then redistributed to the poor. To address the challenge of the city, the nonprofit has looked aloft. “Our research has shown us that leafy greens—theoretically, enough to support the needs of neighborhoods—can be grown hydroponically, on city roofs. Of course, this is dependent on the structural integrity of the roof.”

Bay Localize recently partnered with the Oakland Food Connection, a nonprofit geared to supporting quality of life among Oakland’s low-income residents through nutrition education and access to locally produced foods using sustainable practices. The collaboration resulted in the creation of a rooftop vegetable garden at an East Oakland

middle school. Similar projects are in the pipeline, motivated by studies that show kids become more health- and earth-conscious when nutrition and edible gardening is taught at school.

“As I see it,” says Schwind, “Oakland is where Slow Food meets social justice, and what’s happening here, with the focus on ending hunger with locally produced food, is Oakland’s response to the Slow-Food movement.”

Urban Chick

“When we came to California in 1982, we were eating fresh, but not seasonally,” says Diane Del Signore. “We enjoyed the bounty of it all and bought whatever looked good and tasted good. Except usually it doesn’t taste so good when it’s out of season.”

After a friend introduced her to the CSA concept, “we pretty quickly started eating seasonally, which introduced us to things we had never tried—like rutabega, parsnips and a variety of greens.”

The herd of goats in Del Signore’s life, part of daughter Maddy’s 4-H Club project, live in a secure area a few minutes drive from the house. Participating children do goat chores. Under the Gigs for Goats scheme, people rent the animals to clear their yards of weeds and bramble. In the cards is breeding the goats and making goat cheese, says Del Signore, who encourages her children’s involvement for the hands-on environmental lessons they learn.

Slow, for Del Signore, is a supportive social movement connecting like-minded people who get together, socialize and learn new things about food. She also sees it as an umbrella for activism—her membership and support of, for example, the Community Alliance with Family Farmers, or CAFF, a nonprofit that compliments Slow with its farm-to-school nutrition education program and support of family-scale agriculture, small local farmers and social justice.

Del Signore also has a dream. In it, every Oakland and Berkeley resident has a couple of chickens that provide their families with eggs. “Oakland and Berkeley don’t allow people to have roosters, but you can have chickens,” she points out. The “city chickens” concept is happening in New York and Seattle, and she is spearheading a movement here. “My sense is that the more touch points people have with their food and where it comes from,” she says, “the more interested they are in eating seasonally, healthily and locally.”