



Slow Food Nation celebrates good, clean and fair food

Aaron French
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THERE HAS hardly been a time in recent history when food has played so prominently on everyone's minds. It's in the news every day -- food prices are rising, grain is being used to make fuel, rice is being hoarded. At the same time, sales of organic and artisan foods continue to rise; schools and corporations are updating their food service programs; and interest in farming as a way of life is increasing across the country.

It is in this greater context that the largest food festival in American history will launch this weekend in San Francisco. Called Slow Food Nation, it is the first-ever comprehensive import from the Italian Slow Food movement that started in the 1980s.

The Slow Food Nation festival is grand in scope -- almost overwhelming. Events include food tastings, lectures, presentations, poetry and dance performances, farm tours, cooking demonstrations and a music festival. One wonders, when reading the schedule, what lies at the heart of the incredibly diverse offerings.

Slow Food Nation's Executive Director Anya Fernald explains: "We really felt that if it wasn't big and inclusive enough, it wouldn't have the power to impact the change in America that we need at this time."

Fernald, along with Slow Food Nation founder Alice Waters, wanted to make sure that the festival was relevant on a larger scale and that it would be more than a simple weekend of tasty fun.

"This is the beginning of a delicious revolution," Waters says.

Fernald is a veteran of the Italian Slow Food movement, whose biennial Salone del Gusto and Terra Madre food festivals attract more than 150,000 participants. Slow Food Nation organizers hope attendance at the San Francisco event will be about a third of that - - about 50,000.

The target audience, they say, is as broad as the schedule -- hard-core foodies will rub shoulders with their favorite food producers; farmers will have a chance to discuss issues with food justice activists; and everyone will have a chance to eat. Even the slogan, "Come to the Table," reflects their inclusive ideals.

To achieve this goal, Slow Food Nation established itself as an umbrella under which a wide range of stakeholders in the food system could gather. For example, in creating a schedule of 46

Slow Dinners designed to "illuminate the connection between food and community," they took a hands-off approach -- simply serving to partner restaurants and local nonprofit organizations focused on various aspects of the food system.

For example, Alameda's Pappo restaurant partnered with the Alameda Point Collaborative, promoting a dialogue about food, health and nutrition in an urban setting. These events create, in effect, 46 satellite locations for people to gather around delicious food, connect with like-minded people, and discuss the issues that are important to them.

The majority of Slow Food Nation events will be held in two locations-- San Francisco's Civic Center Plaza and Fort Mason Center. For those on a budget, Civic Center Plaza is the place to go. In the center of the plaza is the Victory Garden, a beautifully designed edible art project that serves as the anchor for a bustling marketplace of sustainable food vendors. Throughout the weekend, a free stage will feature a variety of dance, music, poetry, and theatre performances.

But the heart of the Slow Food Nation weekend will be found several blocks away, at Fort Mason Center, home to 15 Taste Pavilions. A collection of food demonstration and tasting centers, the Taste Pavilions will showcase a wide range of American food and drink -- from heirloom hams to handmade ice cream. Admission is \$65 for adults (\$45 for 21 and under) for a four-hour lunch or dinner tasting experience.

Taste participant Paul Bertolli of Fra' Mani Salumi is excited to be a part of the festival.

"For us," Bertolli says, "it's about trying to present some not so mainstream products, using interesting breeds of pork." Bertolli speaks passionately about "exalting the pork," expressing the central Slow Food ideal of letting the ingredients speak for themselves.

Tea Pavilion curator Alice Cravens likes to use her drink of choice for a different purpose -- relaxation. Cravens planned her Tea Pavilion as a small oasis where participants can reduce their stimulation and "connect to themselves through the tea."

"It's a subtle thing, it's not overpowering," Cravens says.

While the food and drink served in the Taste Pavilions was selected with an eye on tradition, the architecture is designed to be cutting-edge. All of these experiential food centers will be housed in modern architectural structures that are equal parts building, art and cultural statement -- a Pickle Pavilion with a ceiling canopy made from suspended Mason jar lids, a Cheese Pavilion designed with old milk crates supporting a living roof, and an outside Bread Pavilion greeting visitors with the aroma of five separate ovens baking at full speed.

Also tucked into the Taste Pavilions is the Green Kitchen, featuring a table, a mortar and pestle, a knife and a frying pan. This simple setup will underline a star-studded lineup of chef demonstrations, including the likes of chef Charlie Trotter, author Deborah Madison, Corey Lee and Peter Jacobson from the French Laundry, and Chez Panisse's Cal Peternell and David Tanis, to name just a few.

Lee of The French Laundry is excited to play a part in Slow Food Nation.

"The two key points for me are its influence in keeping traditions and heritage intact, as well as in helping us discover our cultural identities through food," he says.

The ultimate goal of the entire weekend, organizers say, is to change the food system to reflect the Slow Food values of good, clean, and fair. To that end, the Slow Food Nation festival will also host a large conference for food system leaders, organized in partnership with the nonprofit Roots of Change. The objective of the Friday conference, called "Changemakers Day," is lofty. The plan is to discuss and promote ways to shift California to a completely sustainable food system by the year 2030.

Roots of Change president Michael Dimock believes that such a goal is definitely achievable.

"I think the current issues that have emerged around energy, food prices and water are going to create a powerful context in which change can emerge," he says. "We are clearly on the road to achieving our initial five-year goals."

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The Slow Food Nation marketplace and Victory Garden can be toured free. The hub of activity is at Civic Center Plaza, 355 McAllister St., San Francisco.

For tickets to the Slow Food Nation Taste Pavilions at Fort Mason Center, San Francisco, contact 866-558-4253 or tickets.slowfoodnation.org.