



food, culture and taking it slowly

The following article is taken from a paper presented at a recent National Trust Conference which examined the importance of social and cultural elements in defining the significance of a place. Well known food writer and ambassador for 'real food' in Australia, Joanna Savill, talks here about the Slow Food movement, and the cultural – and gastronomic! – importance of preserving traditional ways of growing and using food.

It began in Italy in 1980 with a group of friends... lefties actually, members of the ASSOCIAZIONE RICREATIVA CULTURALE ITALIANA or ARCI – a kind of local cooperative and think tank (if lefties have such things) in a small town in Piedmont in northern Italy.

Their gripe – as good revolutionaries – was that revolutions were all very well but why did the food always have to be so bad?

Initially forming the Libera e Benemerita Associazione Amici del Barolo (Free and Meritorious Association of Friends of Barolo wine), these wine-loving radicals got increasingly inspired. (Might have been all the wine.)

In 1986 they created a branch of Arci called ArciGola – playing on the word for 'gullet' and putting a new emphasis on the pleasures of the table and their importance in social and cultural life.

It was the year of Chernobyl and its devastating effect not only on the people and landscape of Ukraine but also on the environment beyond. And on the food supply. It was also the year that 19 people died in a

small Piedmontese town from drinking wine laced with ethanol.

And it was the year they opened a MacDonald's just by the Spanish Steps in Rome.

Plenty of fodder for revolutionaries with taste buds.

By 1989 the International Slow Food movement was founded in Paris. Its manifesto stated everyone has a fundamental right to pleasure and consequently the responsibility to protect the heritage of food, tradition and culture that makes this pleasure possible.

In 2007 the Slow Food movement has around 80,000 members world wide and stages a number of incredible annual and biennial events, including the momentous Terra Madre meeting (held last October) of some 5000 farmers, chefs and food producers from the First to the Third Worlds. There is an 'ark' or presidium to protect endangered food species and artisan traditions and consumers have been told that their buying decisions will affect the future of food in their towns and cities, and on this planet. Slow Food founder Carlo

Petrini – with his inimitable talent for coining clever phrases – has likened us all to farmers. 'We are all,' he says, 'co-producers of food.'

So what does this have to do with Australia, a country that has little – one might argue – in the way of food traditions but no shortage of MacDonald's franchises?

With around a dozen convivia (branches) around the country and several national and state-level events under its belt, there's plenty for Australian Slow Food members to consider. More than just a dining club, it's about forming networks between farmers and consumers – Carlo Petrini's producers and co-producers – learning about our land and its limitations (the importance of sustainable farming cannot be ignored at this environmental crossroads – Petrini talks of the link between 'planet and plate') and looking to preserve local, regional and national foods and food practices that are threatened with extinction.

from left: summer tomatoes – treasured by all who value the special taste of food lovingly grown and locally produced. photo: Christopher Shain | hand made bread and sausages. Fairfaxphotos.



Our cultural and culinary legacy – will it survive?

Our ethnic neighbourhoods – the shops and businesses that grew up around a church or a community hall like the Greeks of Marrickville, the Portuguese of Petersham, the Lebanese of Redfern – are mutating. Areas like Leichhardt or Carlton in Melbourne – nominally our Little Italies – are struggling to retain their cultural and culinary identity in the face of rising rents, gentrification and changing populations.

I'm constantly asked where to eat good Italian in Leichhardt... Where indeed? With demographic and economic change, the old ways, the old dishes are being lost. The flip side is to see the children of a Roman butcher friend of mine – once despairing that his trade and skills would not survive to the next generation – deciding to get involved in the family business after all since non-Italian foodies made artisan meats and smallgoods fashionable. The old butchery's now a fancy new deli with imported olive oils and pasta and Pino's kids have all done a barristas' course.

I wonder what future there is for the ladies in conical hats who sell the excess from their home herb gardens on the streets of Cabramatta... (I'm talking about lemongrass and coriander here... in case you're not sure!). Will Vietnamatta also ultimately gentrify? Will the super fresh veggies and noodle shop culture get lost as the next generation gets Aussiefied and finishes their degrees in law, medicine and accountancy? Or will the food tourists who head to the south-western suburbs for pho (noodle soup) fixes on the weekend ultimately assist in ensuring the survival of this cultural and culinary legacy?

Does it really matter? The history of food is one of evolution and fusion, cross-fertilisation, commercial interests, greed for profits as well as flavour. Some things get lost and others are created. But food is about who we are and what we connect to. And keeping those links is important... even if we work on it very... slowly.

Journalist, TV presenter, former international current affairs reporter and linguist, Joanna Savill describes herself as a 'food traveller' with a particular fascination with 'world food'. As co-creator/presenter of the acclaimed TV series, The Food Lovers' Guide to Australia, Joanna has become an authority on Australia's cultural, and culinary, diversity. She is also an ambassador for 'real food' – highlighting the work of chefs and home cooks, growers and producers across the country. She is a regular contributor to the Sydney Morning Herald's 'Good Living' section and is halfway to completing a Masters in Gastronomy from Adelaide University.

Australia has four food products on the Slow Food ark – from the bunya nut of southern Queensland to a pure meat sausage brought to rural Victoria in the 1940s by immigrants from the Ticino region of southern Switzerland. At last year's Taste of Slow event held at the picturesquely Italianate Abbotsford convent in Melbourne, members of Slow Food Victoria set up their own little display of endangered and forgotten food species – including the CWA sponge, 'real' butter and dry-aged, grass-fed beef. All Aussie. All part of who we are and little beacons on a dimming culinary landscape.

There's a lot to be said about Australian food and its future. There's a lot to be said about its past too (which includes CWA sponges and grass-fed beef). Our migrant communities know that food is culture, history, heritage and identity. It's more than just nostalgia for another way of life and an era when people had 'time' to hunt, gather, grow and cook their evening meal. Eating is about family and sharing, breaking bread and forming bonds. It's about cultural tolerance, connections with people and place and soil.

Our cities are largely divorced from the source of their food. Food activists – members of Slow and otherwise – are working to prevent the erosion of city-based farms and market gardens in the face of growing urbanisation. At the pointy end of food consumption, city dwellers flock to weekend markets to buy direct from farmers (hopefully!). Elderly Greeks, Italians and Vietnamese still cultivate their veggie patches and fill their cellars with summer tomatoes. The rest of the population rushes in and out of the supermarket, spending more time and money at the cash register than at the stove cooking something quick, simple, nutritious and cheap.

It all points to increasing polarisation. While some of the population knows where its food is coming from, lots of the population is eating lots of bad, cheap, processed food. It's not a class thing or even a socio-economic thing. It's not even a cultural phenomenon. It's a state of mind, an affinity with food as an expression of something more than just something yummy to eat.