In a regular pilgrimage, Slow Food members follow the path toward ethical eating to Turin

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By Virginia Phillips

TURIN, Italy -- For Slow Food enthusiasts every two years, all roads lead to this Piedmont city.

In Turin, the center of a legendary regional cuisine, about 8,000 people took part late last month in talks and tastings. The point of Slow Food's global gathering was, as it has been since the first meeting in 1996, to reclaim markets for locally grown food and artisan producers all over the world.

Pittsburgh was represented by three small-scale farmers, two promoters of artisanal foods and two leaders of the Pittsburgh Slow Food organization. (Full disclosure: I am a regional governor for Slow Food, and was one of the leaders attending the conference.)

Alexandra Sofis, who divides her time between apartments in New York and the South Hills, makes her living finding audiences for specialty foods from both sides of the Atlantic. At the conference, she hopes to meet producers of the kind of food she sells, as well as some of heavy hitters of the Slow Foods movement.

Ms. Sofis is a big fan of Slow Food spokesman Michael Pollan, author of "The Omnivore's Dilemma," and of Chez Panisse restaurant owner Alice Waters, who is often credited with popularizing the group's ideas in America, and ultimately changing the way America eats. Waters is Slow Food's international vice president.

Slow Food was founded in 1986 by Italian food and wine journalist Carlo Petrini as a protest against fast food and its destruction of traditional food cultures after McDonald's opened a restaurant on Rome's historic Spanish Steps. The group's 80,000 members worldwide support growing and eating of endangered foods and of sustainably produced food that preserves the health of the land, the health of
In a regular pilgrimage, Slow Food members follow the path toward ethical eating to Turin those eating it, and the health and economic interests of those growing and selling it.

Before the conference ends, Ms. Sofis will have elicited from Mr. Pollan a willingness to bend an elbow with Slow Food Pittsburgh when he comes to town in March for a lecture (www.pittsburghlectures.org), and one of her colleagues will have collared Ms. Waters.

A second nonfarmer from Pittsburgh is Amy Rosenfield, owner of Mon Aimee Chocolat in the Strip District, here with her parents, Mark and Phyllis Rosenfield. Turin is Mecca for premium chocolate. The Rosenfields will do business here.

A third, Susan Barclay, Mellon banker by day and Slow Food leader and farm market booster by avocation, is here to learn about promoting regional food.

But what really got us nonfarmers on the way to Turin was to cheer on Slow Food Pittsburgh's three farmer delegates.

Barb Kline and Randa Shannon own Mildred's Daughters Farm, a five-acre urban property in Stanton Heights. They supply organic produce to Farmers@Firehouse and to the farm's veggie subscribers. Mindy Schwartz of Garden Dreams in Wilkinsburg farms several reclaimed vacant lots. The three teach urban organic farming and operate programs through their foundation, Grow Pittsburgh. They recently launched a school garden project with the Pittsburgh city schools, using start-up funding from the Fisher Foundation. They will share their expertise here.

The action in Turin happens in two venues. The Terra Madre, or Mother Earth, meeting gathers 7,000 farmers from five continents in Turin's former Olympic skating rink. Like members of a United Nations of agriculture, delegates listen through earphones that render happenings into seven languages. Topics range from protecting the diversity of plants and animals in the environment, to keeping regional food cultures alive by creating new markets.

This second edition of Terra Madre -- the first was held in 2004 -- invited 1,000 chefs, in the hope that they could link farmers and the eating public. Academicians, some 400 of them, with nearly half from North American universities, are new to the mix, too.

The second venue is a parking lot away in the former Fiat factory. It houses a food show called Salone del Gusto, the Salon of Taste. The four-day exhibit, first held in 1996, draws more than 170,000 people and showcases 700 producers of food.

There are crowded acres of artisan-made temptation for sampling and sale: Tibetan yak cheese, rhododendron honey, cured Romanian beef brisket, French Banyul wine vinegar, wild rice harvested by the Anishinaabeg indigenous people in Minnesota, Apulian pastries, Madagascar vanilla, teff grain from Chad, British oysters and Lapland smoked reindeer, along with all the iconic cured meats, cheeses, pastas, chocolate, coffee, cannoli and gelati of Italy. Tribal delegates in robes sell obscure products next to vendors handing out samples of dollar-a-drip olive oils.

The food show has paid the bills to bring farmers from far corners of both hemispheres. Organizers believe that to create markets for endangered foods, the public must first learn about them.
Ten years ago, three quarters of Salone vendors were merchants. Only 25 percent were the artisan food producers themselves. Today, that ratio is reversed. Seventy-five percent are producers who wouldn't survive in more commercial markets. Merchants and farmers alike support the Slow Food mantra: The food should be good, clean, and produced sustainably and fairly.

"Emphasizing the ethics," says Carlo Petrini, "could have hurt attendance. But that never happened. People have said they want more culture of food.

"Locally grown food is not an outdated idea."

Political foment is palpable. On the Terra Madre conference floor, a headline speaker is Indian scientist and ecologist Vandana Shiva, one of the world's leading critics of globalization. Her topic is local control of agriculture.

Ninety-five percent of seeds, she said, are controlled through seed registration and patenting by Monsanto.

"We do not need regulation of local food for local consumption. ... Local communities have known for thousands of years how to keep their food supply safe."

It's all about the seeds

In the Turin countryside, the Pittsburgh farmers are staying in a convent with a garden, an hour's bus ride from the conference. Hospitality is warm and the food is good, but oddly vegetable-free.

"We are dying for vegetables," Ms. Kline says, "but we do have a sliver of moon over the lake out our window, and we are sharing the place with three lively New Orleans shrimping couples that Slow Food USA set back on their feet after Katrina."

By day, the hot topic on the farmer side of the conference is the shrinking stock of seed varieties and seeds modified to produce only one crop. Many companies now patent their seeds, prohibiting farmers from saving seed from one crop to the next.

"We learned Europe is 80 percent non-GMO, Poland entirely GMO-free," said Barb Kline, referring to "genetically modified organisms" -- plants or animals whose DNA has been altered by corporations to create desirable traits by adding the DNA of other plants or animals. "I would tell our customers to buy seeds only from a company like Harvest Moon with a safe-seed guarantee. We may as well give up on corn. I'm sorry, if you're buying corn, you are probably eating GMO.

"This is the importance of the Terra Madre seed initiative (rights of farmers to save, share, use and improve seeds). But you don't have to buy seeds. Groups can make seed banks, my friend's grandmother's lima beans, for example -- the best I've ever tasted, with its own wonderful story attached.
In a regular pilgrimage, Slow Food members follow the path toward ethical eating to Turin. This is the most useful thing I'm taking home."

Delegates' sometimes-an-guished stories made Randa Shannon weep and think hard about "how interwoven food and culture are. Preserving the taste is preserving the culture." Her personal thrust will be to "preserve the specificity of the taste of our own region -- things we may take for granted, like McConnells' (Farm) peaches or Barb's mother's mother's rhubarb."

Ms. Kline says, "I felt honored and humble to be a tiny but important part of this huge, powerful thing. Seven thousand people doing things on a local level ... and all of them talking about the next generation," adds Ms. Shannon.

Ms. Kline concludes, "The more I hear, I see more and more depth in the Slow Food currency. It is an eating club. But there is much more underneath."

**Bumping into Alice**

For Mindy Schwartz, of Garden Dreams, the question is, "How do I take this energy and engage people and send them in this direction?"

She happens upon Alice Waters, who is looking at baskets in the market area before the closing ceremony. Ms. Schwartz had an earlier conversation with Ms. Waters' charitable foundation director. They discussed the famous Chez Panisse Edible Schoolyard, a program teaching children to grow and appreciate healthful food.

This emboldens Ms. Schwartz to ask Ms. Waters a question. Is Pittsburgh, as rumored, in the running to be named a site for an Edible Schoolyard? Berkeley is the first; New Orleans has just been named the second.

Ms. Waters puts her hands on Ms. Schwartz's shoulders, looks in her face and begins: "You must be willing to transform the life of every child."

"I'm there!" erupts Ms. Schwartz, and explains the Grow Pittsburgh/Pittsburgh schools project. The remainder of Ms. Waters' answer, encouraging if not final, floats Ms. Schwartz's boat. A dialogue is under way.

Ms. Schwartz is not the only one as high on contacts made as a Piedmont truffle-hunting dog.

Ms. Sofis is thrilled to be spending relaxed time with global clients she must usually chase by e-mail or phone. She's being spoon-fed bitter orange preserves by the top guy for Prince Charles' Duchy line of organic confections. Duchy proceeds benefit the prince's charitable foundations.

"Everyone here gives so graciously. They really take pride in giving us an experience. There is never an order form in sight. It is not like American food shows, where if you don't have a buyer's badge, no one has time for you."
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She remembers a remark by Vandana Shiva: "If you give bad food, you sin. The highest karma is producing an abundance of good food and giving it generously."

What will Amy Rosenfield remember? It's the chocolate, of course. "I can still smell those Piedmont hazelnuts being ground for Guido Gobino's gianduja. (Gianduja, a silky mix of roasted hazelnuts and chocolate, is Turin's signature chocolate. Gobino is one of Italy's top chocolatiers.)"

"Some of these companies are eight generations old. They're using Old World methods to make products that compete in this world of food conglomerates. Whether it's premium chocolate, raw milk cheese or lardo (delicately flavored cured pork fat), these handcrafters have the drive and passion to stay small and create the best. And 2,000 wines by the glass at Salone. And white truffles in the town most known for them! And so much more!"

**Slow Food Nation**

And why doesn't the United States have a Salone? Funny you should ask. Slow Food USA announced in Turin that the first national celebration of American food, Slow Food Nation, will take place May 1-4, 2008, in San Francisco.

The planning, organized by Slow Food USA, is being anchored by Alice Waters and Michael Pollan.

At the conference, events will illustrate how food and agriculture form a complex global tapestry of cultural, political and environmental issues. Activities will educate through taste, talks, forums and films. They will teach people the importance of preserving traditional foods and production techniques, and alert them to the broader implications of their eating choices.

A marketplace of more than 200 farmers and artisans from across the country will showcase the range of traditional American foods.

"The notion that pleasure and politics exist in the same room can be hard to swallow," said Mr. Pollan. "Slow Food Nation will be an opportunity to shine light on the food and policy questions Slow Food is grappling with."

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