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Alice Waters' New Crusade

Slow Food Nation Gains Momentum

By SHEPHERD BLISS

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Slow Food Nation leader Alice Waters--founder of Berkeley's famous Chez Panisse Restaurant and author of eight food books--spoke at the small town (8000 people) Sebastopol Farmers' Market in Northern California August 3. She was interviewed about the August 29-31 SFN celebration to happen around San Francisco by KRCB public radio host Michelle Anna Jordan for her "Mouthful" program to run that evening.

"We want to lift a loud voice to change our food system," Waters responded when asked about SFN, where over 50,000 people are expected. "We need to change the ways we grow, distribute, and eat food, which needs to be good, clean, and fair. Things are at a crisis point with respect to health and the environment."

Waters described how the lawn in front of San Francisco's Civic Center, one of the sites for SFN, has been replaced with a victory garden. "We have been talking about a vegetable garden on the White House lawn. This would be a way to talk about stewardship and nourishment. Thomas Jefferson had such a garden."

"A big message of Slow Food Nation is that we all need to be planting gardens," Waters noted. Addressing global climate change issues, she commented, "We need to have more greenhouses in the future, whether it gets too hot or too cold."

"How we eat can change the world," Waters has said elsewhere. By combining fresh produce from local farms with European cuisine, Waters helped create a food revolution and transform eating habit. At the Sebastopol market she also signed copies of her newest book "The Art of Simple Food."

Waters helped kick-off the Gravenstein Apple Month, which has been declared by both the Sebastopol City Council and the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors. This is the time of year in this semi-rural area where one gets invitations such as the following: "If you want to help grind up large quantities of Gravenstein apples to make fresh juice, drink lots of juice, join a pot luck BBQ lunch, and get covered in apple pulp=come on over!"

"Gravensteins are a tasty apple that got left behind," Waters explained. The delicious "Grav" apple is at risk of becoming an endangered species. "Save the Gravensteins!" bumper stickers made by Slow Food and Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) are popping up around the country. Slow Food has accepted the Sebastopol Grav as one of the traditional foods to which it gives attention to protect it from extinction.

SFN's "Come to the Table" call has garnered significant media attention. The New York Times (July 23) and San Francisco Chronicle (June 30) have each published long articles about the gathering that has a budget of some \$2 million dollars. Some of its public events have already sold out.

Its main events are a Food for Thought speaker series, taste pavilions, a marketplace showcasing 60 local farmers and artisans, and the victory garden. Live music will be performed across town at the Ft. Mason meadow, an appropriate place to make "swords into plowshares." Special events include dinners, art, journeys, and hikes. Some are free, whereas others require tickets.

Slow Food was started by the Italian Carlo Petrini in 1986 to protest McDonald's and its fast food culture. It advocates traditional agriculture and food preparation and consumption, which differ from how many in the U.S. deal with food. SFN is the first such large gathering in the U.S.; it is modeled after events in Europe that have drawn thousands to Terra Madre gatherings.

The speaker series includes some of the leading voices in the growing global sustainable agriculture and food movement, such as Petrini, physicist Vandana Shiva of India, Kentucky author and farmer Wendell Berry, University of California at Berkeley professor and author Michael Pollan, author Raj Patel, Native American leader Winona LaDuke, "Fast Food Nation" author Eric Schlosser, and the Land Institute's Wes Jackson of Kansas.

Their topics include "The World Food Crisis," "Building a New Food System," "Re-Localizing Food," "Climate Change and Food," and "Edible Education." Award-winning short films and documentaries will also be shown.

The "New, Fair Food System," as an example, will feature "activists who campaign on behalf of farm workers and meatpacking workers." It will focus on "how do you create a system in which eating well and treating people well are inextricably linked?"

A Call to Participate went out for a Youth Food Movement "to empower networks of students and young farmers, cooks, artisans, activists and eaters." Among those attending will be members of Sonoma State University's Slow Food Club, including its president, Robin Temple, a psychology student. While pruning on a local farm one day in late July Temple described some of his group's plans, "We will speak in classes during the last week of August to inform students of the event. We will make a film of the youth program there that will be shown at the October Terra Madre gathering in Italy. We have been working to get Michael Pollan and some of the other key speakers to come to campus."

"Slow food is the opposite of fast food. It is food that comes from local, sustainable farms," Temple writes in the SSU campus newspaper. "We intend to raise awareness about the profound effects of our food choices on the environment, on our health and on issues of social justice," he adds.

Some have criticized Slow Food for being elitist and catering to an older crowd that can afford better food and attend its sometimes-expensive dinners and gatherings. Temple represents a younger generation in the Slow Food Movement raising various challenges. "The current industrial model will soon fail for its heavy dependency on homogeneity and petroleum. As such, slow food is about survival," asserts Temple.

The Youth Food Movement invitation contends that "good, clean and fair food is a universal right." The youth gathering starts with an overnight retreat August 27 at a teaching farm on the California coast north of San Francisco, includes meeting at an art gallery that seeks to "build community through food and art," and concludes with an Eat-In at Dolores Park "on a long, 200-person table for a meal curated by Outstanding in the Field."

By-invitation-only events include a Changemakers Day and a National Congress. Around 600 participants will attend the August 29 Changemakers Day "designed for our nation's food system leaders." It will include "26 dynamic presentations on topics ranging from the viability of rare breeds to the nuts and bolts of engaging our isolated urban and rural communities in the sustainable food movement." It seeks "to inspire leaders to knit new and diverse networks" and "lay the groundwork for more concrete, inclusive and effective collaboration in the sustainable food and farming movement," according to its website www.slowfoodnation.org.

The organizers expect "the clash of ideas, critical thinking from incisive minds, and inspiring dialog." The Changemakers Day emerged from a February Town Hall meeting composed of people from SFN and Roots of Change, a San Francisco co-sponsor of SFN.

Panels include the following: "Rising Seas, Shrinking Catch;" "Triple-Bottom Line," referring to social, environmental, and financial return to investors; "Preserving the Land Base;" "Ensuring Diversity;" "Nutrition for All: Improving Community Health;" "Rich Diet, Poor Communities;" "Going Local;" "Help Wanted: 50 Million New Farmers;" and "Reframing the Slow Food Conversation" to work more for social justice.

"I'll be a panelist on Changemakers Day," explained Steve Schwartz, while selling mushrooms from his New Carpati Farm at the Sebastopol Farmers' Market. "More people are thinking about what they eat these days. Passing by McDonalds my four-year-old says, 'That's junk food. It's bad for you.'"

Watching Schwartz and other farmers at the market talk about their crops, one can see that they are creating food-based relationships. "I'm proud to be a small part of this movement with a vision for a better food system. It can help activate people to work to change food policies."

Food, after all, is much more than something you just eat. It has traditionally drawn families, friends, and communities together. Agri-culture is at the base of culture. The preparation and sharing of food and drink creates and sustains culture.

"I went to Slow Food Nation's parent, Terra Madre in Italy," explained the manager of the Sebastopol Farmers' Market, Paula Downing. "It was life-changing. I plan to go to Slow Food Nation because I do not want to miss another chance for a life-changing event."

"Terra Madre was a heart event. It was a thrill to see families still making the food they have made for centuries. You feel this human thing. It was very emotional and made me

cry. Some recipes for corn bread, for example, had been handed down for twenty generations," Downing continued. "I love the apple farmers here in Sonoma County. They are courageous. There is a history here that we need to remember."

"Slow Food is an opportunity to re-connect with our food and local growers and to understand the plight our planet is in. Our immunity and the immune system of the Earth are linked; building from here is a source of our healing," explained Ana Stayton of Golden Nectar Farm. "It helps create a sense of what real nourishment is. It brings farmers, children, and the community back into the food system, rather than leaving it in the hands of large corporations. Slow Food encourages people to grow and cook their own food and remember the pleasure in that."

"Being at Terra Madre was a powerful bonding experience," Stayton added. "It was intense being around people from over 150 countries in their traditional dress who have this common bond and language of the land, growing food, preserving local food cultures, preparing, serving and nourishing others."

"I discovered Tierra Vegetables last December while shopping," Mary Killian explained near the Slow Food table. "They have a delicious heritage bean. They so inspired me that I bought them as Christmas presents and included information about Slow Food." Slow Food also provides heritage turkeys from Sonoma County, one of its most active chapters.

Networking is common at Slow Food events. One grower at the Sebastopol market, Deborah Ramelli-Toth of Gratitude Gardens, was proudly carrying a couple dozen free-range eggs, though she has no chickens. "I traded them for tomatoes, of which I have many," she explained. She also made arrangements to share her canning equipment with a friend, Deb Kindy, who lives nearby in another town.

Waters spoke about the need to do something with all the food that is wasted, "We need to do more foraging and gleaning. Lots of food is wasted on the ground which is very edible."

On the land where Ramelli-Toth lives there will be a Sebastopol Gravenstein Apple Slow Dinner the week before SFN, hosted by the Culinary Underground and Voluptuous Smoke under the apple trees at Nana Mae's orchard. According to the invitation the Gravs "have a long history yet are mostly ignored by the culinary mainstream." It adds, "Eating is a political act. Eat your view!"

"We've been writing a declaration and petition calling for a new national food policy," explained Michael Dimock at the SFN table at the Sebastopol Farmers' Market on July 27. Dimock has chaired Slow Food USA, been active in California Alliance for Family Farmers (CAFF), and is president of Roots of Change. "We need healthy food and agriculture," Dimock asserted. The declaration will be released Aug. 28 and will include a preamble, set of principles, and call to action.

The August 28 National Congress is composed of 300 delegates who represent the 16,000 U.S. members of the international Slow Food Movement, which has over 86,000 members in more than 100 countries. They are organized into what internationally are called convivium and are beginning to be called chapters here in the U.S., where there are around 200.

The Congress takes place every four years. Participants will engage in peer-to-peer networking and in leadership training and professional development. They will also vote on

revisions to the National Statue. This year, for the first time, 35 Slow Food in Schools projects leaders will meet to discuss their garden-to-table efforts.

“When kids grow and cook their own food, they all want to eat it,” Waters explained from her experiences with edible education programs. “They want an interactive education. They are happy to be in the garden. Kids are not just hungry for food. They are hungry for people to take care of them and for nature.”

Direct democracy is important to the Slow Food Movement. When asked about the leadership of the Russian River Slow Food chapter in Sonoma County, Paula Shatkin explained that they have a leadership team of eleven persons, who do not have a hierarchy.

Shepherd Bliss has run the Kokopelli Farm in Northern California since 1992 and currently teaches at Sonoma State University. His writing on agropsychology and agrotherapy are scheduled for various books during 2009. He can be reached at: sbliss@hawaii.edu.