A Taste of the Future?

By Christine Muhlke

Members of the panel of the final talk at Slow Food Nation. Back row, from left: Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, Corby Kummer, Eric Schlosser, Michael Pollan. Front row, from left: Vandana Shiva, Alice Waters, Carlo Petrini. (Photo: Scott Chernis)

On Friday I was wondering whether Slow Food Nation, the four-day San Francisco event that aims to encourage Americans to come to the table, would turn out to be the Woodstock or the Lollapalooza of food. Today, I’m convinced that it’s the Davos (minus Bono).

While the food stalls, mini farmer’s market and victory garden were crowded, they weren’t going to change the world, though they did attract some inner-city visitors who might be too intimidated by the Disneyfied Ferry Plaza market. I overheard a tough-looking guy in a football jersey on his cell phone, saying, “You remember the place where we went to the Juneteenth festival? You’ve got to get down here and see all the vegetables. It says California Certified Organic. And there’s a garden!” The pretty, makeup-free girls in their “I [HEART] ASPARAGUS” T-shirts and heritage pork-eating families sprawled on the lawn and ogling the rainbow chard in the garden were a laughable contrast to the nearby Tenderloin neighborhood, where even daytime feels like the Lower East Side circa 1977. A block away, I passed a homeless drunk guy with a T-shirt that said “GOD HATES ME.”

The Taste Pavilion at Fort Mason was impressive for the experiences it created around a range of Slow Food-approved American producers, from pickle makers to salumi masters, coffee roasters to mixologists. (Standouts included the guinea fowl terrine from Café Rouge, Fra’Mani mortadella, Steve DeVries chocolate, Laloo’s fig goat milk ice cream and an interesting pre-Prohibition recipe for gum syrup used to thicken cocktails from Small Hand Foods. The wine and cheese areas were too intense, even for this New Yorker.) But the Taste workshops, which ranged from $10 to $60, could only accept 60 people each.

The idea behind the Green Kitchen was more democratic: heavy-hitting chefs are filming live demos to be posted on YouTube. On opening night, I watched David Chang nervously explain yuba, Paul Bertolli neatly tie up a roast and the Sicilian blacksmith/cook/Michael Pollan-hunting-teacher Angelo Garro whip up a devastating-looking bruschetta with poached egg.

After the Taste preview, those willing to pay $500 for dinner with the Slow crew went to Farina restaurant in the Mission. The mood was loose and familial: Betty Fussell, Dan Barber and friends at one six-top, Vandana Shiva at another; Carlo Petrini being introduced around by Alice
Waters after she had eaten her handkerchief pasta with Ligurian pesto standing up at the end of
the bar next to Bertolli. Floating from table to table, the Iowa hog farmer Paul Willis was having
the most fun of them all. Willis, who started with one sow, now runs the pork arm of Niman
Ranch, distributing meat from 600 farmers and making chefs (and bacon lovers) around the
country very happy. At Slow Food Nation, the farmers are rock stars.

But it will be the events that don’t involve actual food that will have the real impact. I spent
seven hours attending three Food for Thought panel discussions in a row, most of which were
sold out. Each talk assembled a dream team of minds from the food and agricultural worlds, each
of whom spoke with intelligence, passion and warmth. Who knew that a talk about climate
change and food could be … entertaining? (Maybe that Davos comparison doesn’t hold after all.)
Certainly, elitist parallels could be drawn between the two gatherings. And plenty of arugula and
Whole Foods jokes were made. But the mood in the plush theater was one of real motivation to
bring about change.

In each of the five talks I attended, the audience submitted questions. In each of the talks,
regardless of the topic, people wanted to know 1) how did the panelists rationalize the high price
and inaccessibility of local, organic food to most Americans (short answer: food is artificially
inexpensive), and 2) what could they do to affect change (short answer: consume less, become
co-producers with farmers, and force the discussion to the national level).

The weekend’s final talk was a three-hour blowout featuring Waters, Pollan, Petrini, Shiva, Eric
Schlosser, Corby Kummer and Wendell Berry, the man whom Schlosser credited with starting
the movement in the 1970s. “Everyone on this stage today has either been on the
acknowledgments page or the bibliography of my books,” Pollan noted. Their succinct
summaries of the issues facing food in the 21st century were alarming and galvanizing. Though
the politicians didn’t know it yet, they said, food will soon be on the table in the form of a major
crisis, linked as it is to energy, health care and the global economy.

Waters, who speaks with airy wonder, said that her dream is to build a victory garden on the
White House lawn. “We need to feed the politicians. We need to put those incredibly juicy plums
on the table.” She spoke of the fruit she packed into box lunches for Obama’s staff, hoping that
their flavor would bring them to their senses. “We’ve got to move politicians,” Petrini quipped,
“and not just through nice box lunches.”

Schlosser compared this country’s farm labor situation to slavery and urged people to focus on
the human rights before they focus on the food. “I don’t care if the tomato is heirloom, local and
organic if it was harvested with slave labor,” he said to whoops. “There can’t be a sustainable
food industry without a commitment to promising a sustainable life.”

Shiva, who said that the world has been polarized into “nutritional apartheid,” said that our
challenge is to integrate the food movements, be they Slow Food or migrant workers. “We divide
ourselves as the industry integrates itself,” she warned.

“The era of cheap food is over,” said Pollan. “Politicians like cheap food. It’s what allows them
to sleep at night. We’ve known this since the French Revolution.” But we’ve been eating oil for
30 or 40 years, he said, and those days are over. We now need to turn to the original solar energy: sustainable agriculture. Planting your own garden is important, he said, as is signing the Declaration for Healthy Food and Agriculture, which had a huge presence at the event — much more so than any sponsor’s logo, which were the least invasive of any such event I’ve attended. But in order to really make a difference, he said, Slow Food needs policy people and lawyers to carry the message beyond the table and the field.

Petrini urged people not to wait for politicians, but to revolutionize their own lives. “Let’s get rid of this heavy coat of being a consumer, because it’s destroying our lives,” he said. “It’s allowing all the injustices that we’ve been hearing about today. We need to be co-producers in an active way, with the awareness of sharing what the producers do and participating in their lives.” He urged people to waste less, starting with their own refrigerators. “Take that rabbit from Jurassic Park in your freezer,” cook it with the limp parsley in the crisper, and if you have leftovers, go around the streets and feed the homeless. “Because refrigerators are our tombs,” he said. “Let’s free ourselves from this consumptive disease.” And with that, the misty-eyed crowd rose to cheer. Slow Food Nation had been put into motion.