

ARE YOU GOING TO SAN FRANCISCO?

The First Continental Culinary Congress Wants You

BY BRIAN HALWEIL



When the motley horde of salmon smokers, cheese mavens, boutique winemakers, chutney canners, counterculture chefs, guerrilla gardeners, food gurus, and plain old citizens interested in the cosmic change happening to America's diet descends on San Francisco this Labor Day for Slow Food Nation, it will be a watershed moment in our nation's history.

Group it with the march on Washington, Woodstock, the Seattle WTO protest and other comings together that formed inflection points in the nation's collective consciousness. Food has blossomed as a formidable social force, a way for

Americans to affect the world around them, a metaphor for all sorts of change.

"It's the first continental culinary congress," said Gary Nabhan, the Arizona anthropologist who's been talking about the pleasures of eating local before most locavores were even born. When he stopped by the Slow Food Nation office recently, he flashed back nearly four decades to the atmosphere of the first Earth Day headquarters, complete with boundless interns, tireless brainstorming, and sincere faith that "we can change the world."

There's no doubt it will be a good party. The city's Civic

Photograph: Carole Topalian

Center will be stocked with aisles of cheeses, olives, wines, breads and honeys—mostly little known and beautifully made, but all crafted in the USA. From Flying Bison Brewery beers from Buffalo to bison jerky from Colorado, from Mississippi salami to Texas mozzarella, from Carolina pumpkin chip preserves to Royal Hawaiian honey, this land was made for you and me.

The legendary Ferry Plaza farmers market will offer an even more exhaustive selection of California foods than usual, from dried Blenheim apricots to salumi to nut butters of every persuasion. Restaurants from the Mission to the Haight will feature menus that resonate with the event. Slow on the Go will sample the city's ethnic eats, from Vietnamese Bahn Mi sandwiches to tacos with free-range pork. A banquet for 500 diners will celebrate the solidarity between rural and urban, farmer and eater.

But it will not just be about the food. On the eco-gastronome spectrum—to borrow a term from Slow Food godfather Carlo Petrini—the American brand of Slow Food has always been more eco than gastronome. Perhaps it's because our food traditions, while they do exist, aren't quite as deeply rooted as in the Old Country. Perhaps it's also because we seek redemption for our dysfunctional eating habits. Like the sinner who gets saved, the United States—dysfunctional eating habits and all—has in short order assumed a leadership role in the international movement founded as a counter-offensive to the first McDonald's opening in Rome. America's 15,000 intrepid members and 150 chapters from coast to coast represent the largest contingent outside of Italy. (The map of these chapters overlaps closely with a certain growing network of local food magazines.) The New York City Slow Food chapter's membership is second only to Rome's.

Buoyed by a quickening appetite for good food, this country's pantry of farmstead cheeses, craft beers, single batch spirits, heirloom veggies, and heritage meats rivals and dazzles its counterparts from Europe. American chapters have organized some of the movement's most innovative programs, often intervening in cases where the U.S. government has faltered. The Edible Schoolyard project spurred a national debate about what we feed our kids, while inspiring a parallel effort back in Italy. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Slow Food USA created the Terra Madre Katrina Relief Fund with the help of convivia around the nation, to support Gulf of Mexico food communities; recipients ranged from oystermen and shrimpers trying to get their boats back in the water to African-American farmers who raise forgotten varieties of sweet potatoes to New Orleans chefs struggling to retain unique Southern cuisines.

Yes, something may be afoot in American eating habits. "Locavore" was named word of the year. More people keep chickens than in recent memory. Your kid's school may have

installed a salad bar, and it may actually be stocking that salad bar with organic greens grown nearby.

"We are about to birth a new movement," says event organizer Anya Fernald. "And the new movement is about connecting plate and planet." Pleasure and politics will pleasantly collide, as people taste, but also strategize. Activists from across the land will gather to sketch out a national holiday for picnics and sign a mock dream Farm Bill. Chefs from coast to coast will take station in the Green Kitchen, armed only with mortar and pestle and a single burner, crafting essential, simple recipes for busy modern people. Outside the Civic Center, a 15,000-square-foot organic veggie garden—a modern day Victory Garden at a time of soaring food prices, stubborn hunger, and war—is already coming to life. By fall, attendees will literally see the abundance that is possible if we want to dig up our lawns, support a family farm, or plant a seed.

It will be a heavenly overwhelming display of exactly what it means to eat and live well. But remember, it will also be a sort of call to arms. So grab your fork and take a seat at the table. ♪

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