



# *Slow Food:*

A Philosophy for the Body, the Spirit and a Beleaguered Planet

BY JOCELYN ROBERTS   PHOTOGRAPHY STEPHEN ELPHICK

*I*s there anyone out there old enough to remember a time when people went to the grocery store and bought whatever was in season? For my teenage children, this is a concept as unfamiliar as dial phones and delayed gratification, so they're confused when I say no to watermelon in December.

“Progress is man's ability to complicate simplicity.”

*Thor Heyerdahl*

Perhaps I'm misguided, but it seems like simple common sense: If you're eating a peach on a snowy day in Ontario, it's either been developed in a lab (like 60% of the food in our grocery stores) or it has traveled several time zones before it lands in your cart. Who needs that?

I could go on about the implications of the global food trade. I could go on even longer about the genetic modification of food. Do we really want to eat food that needs to be tested on animals before it reaches our tables? But let's not think about that for now.

Let's think, instead, about Carlo Petrini, a man who has become world-renowned for stating the obvious: that food, family, community, and the entire planet are inexorably connected and that we have a responsibility to protect the heritage, tradition, and culture of food along with the precious environment that supports and sustains us.

Petrini conceived the concept of Slow Food in Italy in the 1980s and eventually helped promote it internationally. You need only to Google the words “slow food” to fathom the interest people are taking in this movement, especially right here in Prince Edward County, where a Slow Food Convivium was formed in 2005. According its mission statement, Slow Food works to “defend bio-diversity in our food supply, spread taste education, and connect producers of excellent foods with co-producers through events and initiatives.”

I'm not going to pretend that I fully inhabit this ideal Slow Food world. In fact, the people in my family are liv-

ing proof that modern conveniences tend, paradoxically, to accelerate the pace of our daily routine. If Carlo were to pop in on the Roberts household at dinner time on a Tuesday, he would likely find us gone, scattered somewhere between badminton practice and someone's community-service hours with a note on the fridge that says “Every man for himself!” Even on good days, we have been known to rely on pre-cooked, over-packaged, expensive and nutritionally-compromised foods that barely resemble their original form. The good news, especially in places like Prince Edward County, is that the Slow Food lifestyle is easily within our grasp.

Take a look at the County's website, <http://pec.on.ca>, and check out the vast array of specialty-food and produce vendors in the region. If you live in Prince Edward County, there is absolutely no reason not to eat slow, especially in summertime. Shared-community agricultural programs, local cheese artisans and meat producers abound. And many restaurants in the area support the Slow Food movement as well as local farm industries.

So I won't worry that I ate dinner last night standing up or that our laps often serve as the dinner table as we drive off, late to some activity. The Slow Food philosophy is the foundation of a counter-movement that I can incorporate into our lives in small steps. It may not be easy at first, because it requires us to do a little bit more in order slow down, but the rewards over time can be relaxing, rejuvenating, and life-affirming.

Here are some pointers as you embark on your Slow Food journey:

- Help to raise your family's awareness of the benefits of the Slow Food philosophy, from the global perspective all the way down to the obvious personal benefits of not eating in your van. Check out the County's own website, [www.slow-foodthecounty.ca](http://www.slow-foodthecounty.ca), and be amazed at the wealth of local information and involvement in the movement.
- Visit your local farmers' market and talk to the farmers themselves about the foods they provide and what it takes to get them to market.
- Allocate a set number of meals per week as absolute family time with no exceptions.
- Establish all eating areas as electronics-free zones. You would be surprised at how many people allow cell phones, personal music devices and other distractions at the table. Cell phones may connect us to people who are not among us, but they distance us from our immediate relationships and remove us from the moment. Turn off the land line as well. Who taught us that a ringing phone always has to be an emergency?
- Attune your senses to the subtle differences in flavor between mass-produced foods and ones grown and/or prepared with care within a few postal codes of your own.

- Know the address of the farmer who raises the livestock that becomes your meat sources. Some chicken factories raise their product in cubicles no larger than a shoebox. Can a sad chicken, never exposed to the light of day, possibly become a nourishing meal?

- Experiment with traditional methods of cooking and involve the whole family in meal preparation. If this becomes nerve-wracking, click on the "Wineries" link on the PEC website and find yourself a nice bottle.

- Read labels as you shop to learn where foods -- especially meat and produce -- originate. Keep in mind how nutrients diminish in fruits and vegetables over time, and how much it must cost both the consumer and the environment to ship a pint of strawberries from California.

- Make the language of gratitude part of your ritual as you sit down to enjoy food together. It can be prayer; it can be reflection. Whatever you call it, it will add meaning to your new way of life.

So the next time you crack an egg, take a look at where it came from and find out if its mother was allowed to roam free. Clear the dirty dishes from your van and say "No!" to eating on the run. The Slow Food philosophy asks us to be mindful of the simple. Make Carlo proud! Save the microwave for emergencies and make wholesome, locally-grown food choices your new normal. If you are lucky enough to live in or near Prince Edward County, how hard can it be?