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Maine on Slow Food Fast Track

By Jo Anne Bander

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Eliot Coleman of Four Season Farm in Harborside, a regular participant in the public dialogue on locally grown, seasonal produce, faced a room overflowing with individuals in blue jeans, silk saris, turbans, African batiks-and earphones. The subject was Mass Communication about Agriculture in the United States, the setting was Terra Madre (Mother Earth) in Turin, Italy, and the earphones allowed simultaneous translation in English, Spanish, Italian, French and Russian.

This first congress of some 5,000 delegates representing 130 countries, including 13 Maine delegates, was organized by Slow Food International and held from October 20-23, 2004, to celebrate the contributions of small producers. Slow Food, founded by Carlo Petrini in Italy in 1986, and counting some 83,000 members worldwide, exists to protect the pleasures of the table from fast food and the homogenization of modern life. The delegates were small-scale farmers, wild food gatherers, artisan food producers, fisherman, herders, restaurateurs and food writers.

Telling Our Story of Taste

Coleman talked about carrots as the essential element of communicating. "We communicate about food through the taste buds of children more than through TV, radio or newspapers. Children in the communities around our farm respond to food with taste."

Many Mainers were in the room, and not just to hear their colleague. They, like delegates from India, England and Brazil, are growers challenged by the need to increase the market for their sustainably grown products. They looked to panelists for tips to attract media attention.

Mas Masumoto, a peach grower and writer from the Central Valley of California, proffered his media strategy. "Make the story magical; we need an authentic story that separates what we do as farmers from promotion and marketing. We have to elevate the ordinary and everyday experience of the farmer to a higher level."

Michael Pollen, a frequent contributor to The New York Times and Gourmet, stressed the importance of changing the story from the price of food to the narrative about how it is produced. "When we can get information to travel down the food chain, behavior changes and price becomes only one part of the decision on what to buy." He set a goal to motivate vast numbers of people to increase what they spend on food to 15% of income and to increase their purchase of organically raised and local foods from growers, retailers and restaurants that support

Maine Delegates at Terra Madre and their "Food Communities"

Jim Amaral, Alna, Borealis Breads, *Community of Bakers*

Eliot Coleman and Barbara Damrosch, Harborside, Four Season Farm, *Farmers' Market Community, New England*

Belinda Doliber, Swans Island, Lobster Council of Maine, *Community of Maine Lobster Harvesters*

Janika Eckert and Rob Johnston Jr., Albion, Johnny's Selected Seeds, *Community of North American Seed Savers*

Jim and Megan Gerritsen, and Angie Wotton, Bridgewater, WoodPrairie Farm, *Farmers' Market Community, New England*

Linda and Matt Williams, Linneus, Aurora Mills and Farm, *Community of Grain and Field Crop Producers*

John and Shelley Jemison, Orono, *Farmers' Market Community, New England*

The network of Slow Food members is organized into local groups-Condotte in Italy and Convivia elsewhere-which, coordinated by leaders, periodically organize courses, tastings, dinners and food and wine tourism, and promote campaigns launched by Slow Food. Organized Maine Convivia are Slow Food Maine-Rockland and the new Slow Food Aroostook County. New covivia are forming in Portland and Bethel. Information is available at www.slowfoodusa.org.

the movement.

Jim Amaral of Borealis Breads picked this session and others on getting the story out, because "we need to connect the farming community with the food producing community." He launched his "baseball cards" in 2001, putting a face on producers by including cards with pictures and stories of such Maine farmers as wheat grower Matt Williams, another delegate, with his loaves of bread. Amaral shared this idea at a Terra Madre gathering of some 25 members of the Bread Bakers Guild of America.

Worldwide Connections: Power in Numbers

Terra Madre was organized to counter the way that decisions on agriculture at the international level seem to take place—exclusive of small farmers and the grassroots production base. For many participants, this was their first venture out of a home country; for most it was the first time to meet people from other countries, particularly third-world countries, who were producing or growing the same food.

Most Maine delegates funded their own way, excited at the unique potential of Terra Madre. For Megan Gerritsen of WoodPrairie Farm, it was "a golden opportunity to meet with 5,000 other food producers. A community of farmers shares the same struggle to make a living selling food. Food is undervalued and under-priced. We all struggle with the economy, with the weather, and have a common bond, especially those of us who are organic and small farmers."

Terra Madre had a clear goal: to create a forum to connect those who grow, raise, catch, create, distribute and promote food in ways that respect the environment, are economically and environmentally sustainable, defend agricultural biodiversity, support human dignity and protect the health of consumers.

Delegate Angie Wooton worked for Slow Food USA in New York in 2003 when the concept of Terra Madre was first floated. Now back in her childhood home of Littleton, Maine, and working at WoodPrairie, she approached the gathering

with excitement but measured skepticism. "I thought it would be more for show and could not for the life of me fathom how it would work out. I hoped it would be sincere. It far surpassed any expectations that I had. Carlos Petrini, the instigator of Terra Madre, is one of those visionaries who inspire people to get it done.

"How can a little farmer take on Monsanto? Yet there I was with 5,000 others like me, and I realized that it does matter, we do make a difference, we have to keep fighting the industrialized agriculture world and [the] whole GMO."

Event Organization

Terra Madre organized its delegates by "food communities"-the long chain of people involved in getting food to the consumer. Invited delegates are part of a chain of production, linked by a common product, ethnic identity, region, history or approach.

The selection process and fundraising by Slow Food convivium, with the major support from Slow Food International, the Italian Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the Piedmont Regional Authority and the City of Turin, gathered 1185 food communities from around the world: 164 from Africa; 188 from Latin America; 109 from North America; 140 from Asia and Oceania; 136 from Eastern Europe; 178 from Western Europe; and 270 from Italy. Maine's growing organic and artisan food movement and predominance of small farms generated a delegation disproportionate to its population-one larger than those from Massachusetts, Michigan or Texas. It included representation from the "food communities" of farmers' markets, bakers, lobster harvesters, seed savers and grain and field crop producers.

Terra Madre was held at Turin's Palazzo del Lavoro, a mile from the fifth biennial Salone del Gusto, Slow Food's major fair and a paradise of artisan foods. Salone had aisles of the finest cheeses, chocolates, smoked meats, preserves and wines made by small-scale producers in a sustainable manner in communities around the world, there for the tasting and often sufficient for a free meal.

Terra Madre's delegates created their own spontaneous market at the center of the Palazzo where, at any moment, displays and tastings of yerba mate from Argentina, yak milk from Ladakh in the Himalayas, dried mangoes from Africa and cheeses from Italy appeared.

The proximity was deliberate. Petrini in his opening remarks encouraged the delegates to "take a walk through the pavilions to see the products but also to meet the producers and consumers: all of them committed to fueling the creative force between every human identity: exchange."

Terra Madre opened and closed United Nations-style as thousands of people, many in native dress, assembled in front of a stage filled with a flag and delegate from each represented country to hear the luminaries of the movement. They included Vandana Shiva, author of *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*; Alice Waters of Chez Panisse, a passionate advocate for involving school children in gardens; and Prince Charles, an organic farmer and ardent supporter of traditional agriculture.

Over 60 "Earth Workshops" addressed water, seed and energy resources; destruction of rural economies; the role of women in agriculture; and sustainable fishing and organic cultivation. Smaller, fringe meetings organized around projects, themes, food communities, books and regions. Angie Wooton resonated to Swedish-born Helena Norberg-Hodge, founder of the International Society for Ecology and Culture, who, in a session with Vandana Shiva on the Food Manifesto, questioned a system "that exports products such as milk that it then needs to import at higher cost."

Informal Contacts Prove Invaluable

Many Maine delegates' best experiences came from conversations in lunch lines, on bus rides and over communal, traditional meals in Piedmont's villages, where they were housed in monasteries, agritourism facilities, homes and farms. Janika Eckert and husband Rob Johnston Jr. of Johnny's Selected Seeds had signed on to farm hospitality, wondering how Terra Madre

could possibly "make housing assignments for the thousands of delegates, get them fed and get them transported." They were hesitant about staying in a family's household, but found "it was the best part."

They were placed on the Zappino family's multi-generation dairy farm in Pralormo, an hour from Marizza Zappino's family vegetable farm dedicated to a heritage variety of corn sold to a local mill for polenta. "It was perfect. We come from Albion, heart of dairy farms," noted Eckert, "and we are interested in grains. We were also intrigued by the value-added products, the jams, jellies and nuts, they produced."

An equestrian school in Mattie housed Matt and Linda Williams of Aurora Mills and Farm in Linneus; Amaral; and four other Americans, including a baker from Vermont. One of Williams' best memories is of Giovanni, a beekeeper and rare sheep breeder, who made the communal dinner the first night for their group and for neighbors hosting other groups.

Williams attended sessions on grains, but it took a lunch break for him to meet Marc Liselle of Saskatchewan. Liselle grows 'Red Fife' wheat, a variety of interest to Williams, and offered to sell him seeds. Williams, who has insufficient land for extensive experimentation, will wait to learn from his new colleague how this year's production goes before committing to his own crop.

Megan Gerritsen made friends on long bus rides with the First Nations people from Minnesota who gather wild rice, one of the foods from Terra Madre delegates featured at Salone.

Lessons Learned

Italy gave Maine's contingent perspective, energy and motivation to think more broadly about how to connect their work with additional groups and people. Coleman tagged this the "think globally, eat locally" phenomenon. For him Terra Madre was the "Woodstock of Agriculture, a validation for the small farmers who are out there producing a superior product, typically without appreciation or recognition."

Eckert was inspired by how African women described their agriculture. Food for them was "so basic, so important, the mainstay of community, what they build their lives around, sometimes like gold."

Williams observed that "representatives from the U.S. were the most disadvantaged" in relation to a culture of food. "We live inside a culture and an economy that is the antithesis of Slow Food, a highly industrialized system of growing and distributing. We have more to overcome culturally, since we have no culture of food. We have to fight to change the paradigm of how people eat, and get away from the American trend to use food just to fill stomachs."

Delegate John Jemison, a water quality specialist with University of Maine Cooperative Extension, stumbled on the iconic Slow Food snail on an Italian restaurant in 2000, and returned for a 2003 sabbatical to immerse himself in the Slow Food movement. He used those experiences to develop a 25-hour Environmental Sustainability Course for the public, offered regularly through University of Maine Cooperative Extension.

Presentations by Shiva, Waters and Percy Schmeiser, a Canadian farmer who took on Monsanto after his fields were contaminated with Monsanto's Round-Up Ready canola, made Jemison feel that "the core lessons of the course are the right ones. Now I have to get people to re-evaluate their food and culture and take the time to prepare and eat locally based food with its personal, community and environmental benefits" and, a la Alice Waters, "get more involved with children and school gardens."

Delegates Appreciate Maine Organizations

Italy made Maine's delegates recognize and appreciate the strength of their own infrastructure. "Maine stood out from other states and countries at Terra Madre," according to Wooten, "by having MOFGA and its huge Common Ground Fair." Maine also has a GE Free Maine movement in which she wants to get more involved. Amaral finds Farm Fresh Connections,

which builds business relationships among Maine farmers, students, institutional food buyers and local communities, and the Eat Local Foods Coalition, which promotes more in-state consumption of Maine farm products, valuable parts of Maine's infrastructure to promote sustainable agriculture.

Williams, inspired by sessions on linking restaurateurs and growers, took home "the need to liberate the consumer to experience the enjoyment of food," with restaurants as a vehicle and, in Carlo Petrini's words, "co-producers." Restaurateurs Melissa Kelly and Price Kushner of Primo in Rockland, who attended Salone, and who grow most of their own produce and showcase seasonal Maine foods, mixed with colleagues and shopped for new artisan products, ideas and connections.

Buying Local Brings the Rest in Line

Eckert realized as she listened to people from Third World countries that "it should not just be people with money who have good food. We confuse fast food with the cost of food in general. Somehow, we must change our American attitude toward what we spend for food. If I had to focus on one thing, it would be to buy local. If we do that, the rest will come into line."

Slow Food at its essence is about families and friends sitting down together to enjoy local food, in season, produced using sustainable methods and prepared following traditional recipes. Amaral sees Slow Food as a natural fit for Maine, with its "strength of community-based efforts, coastal farmers' markets, northern Maine rural connectedness, small town meetings where people know each other and have social bonds, and the seasonal products like fiddleheads."

As a potato grower, Megan Gerritsen's goal is to help people regain lost knowledge of cooking, gardening and enjoying food. She remembers the comment that the flavorful tomatoes served at a communal Slow Food gathering "are best when they are grown on the slopes of Vesuvius." Returning to Aroostook County, she convened an informal Slow Food

group that meets monthly over potluck meals. The organic network and MOFGA connect her family to farmers, she says, and Slow Food builds new connections to consumers in their community.

Mainers understand the meaning of a flavorful, local tomato, a time-limited happening. This is, after all, a state where the Department of Agriculture and Eat Local Foods Coalition collaborate for an August Tomato Tasting Week, when freshly picked tomatoes are at their tasty peak. This symbolic and pragmatic effort connects farmers and consumers with seasonal produce and the place where it is grown. What else would one expect from a state that is on the Slow Food fast track?

Jo Anne Bander is a consultant and writer who lives and writes in Coral Gables, Florida, and Spruce Head, Maine. She was part of the international press corps that covered Terra Madre and Salone. You can visit her at www.fromthesource.info.

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