

'Slow Food' Followers Target Fast-Food Nation

By Georgeanne Brennan
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

The Slow Food Movement, as founder Carlo Petrini said recently, "has been likened to Don Quixote fighting the windmills." But if the enthusiasm — in Northern California and throughout Europe — for this organization is any indication, the quixotic figure of Petrini and his mission may be triumphant.

Spurred by the opening of Italy's first McDonald's in Rome in 1986, Petrini started the group to save regional foods and small producers from extinction and to revive and celebrate taste and the senses.

Groups Plan Events

The backbone of the nonprofit organization, headquartered in the Piedmont region of northern Italy, is a worldwide collection of small convivia, or chapters, groups of people that meet informally to discover and promote local small producers, to learn about culinary traditions and culture, and to arrange tastings. Many events organized by convivia throughout the world are open to the public each year.

Petrini visited Northern California last month as part of a 10-city tour of the United States to encourage Slow Food in this fast food country and to promote the Ark of Taste.

The Ark of Taste project, an important aspect of Slow Food, identifies and publicizes endangered foods and encourages people to seek them out, with the theory that if the market demands, supply will increase.

California foods in the Ark of Taste include dry Monterey jack cheese, Gravenstein apples, hard-smoked chipotle peppers, red abalone and the Sun Crest peach.

The Sun Crest, described by fruit grower Mas Matsumoto in

his book, "Epitaph for a Peach," was inducted May 19 in Sonoma.

Speaking at a dinner at Chez Panisse the following evening — the Berkeley convivium's first meeting — Petrini explained the importance of the Ark.

"To defend biodiversity we have to defend small producers," he said.

"The Slow Food movement is different from ecological movements and from gastronomy movements. Gastronomical movements don't defend the small producers and their products, and ecological movements fight the battles, but can't cook. You have to have both at the same time.

"We need," he emphasized, "an international movement for the defense of microbes — they make prosciutto, salami and cheese."

These were among the kinds of foods that were the focus of a three-day Slow Food Festival of Germany in Luebeck this spring.

Luebeck, an old Hanseatic League city with an active convivium, grew wealthy on the salt trade so the festival opened with a reenactment of a medieval Stecknitz Prahm, or salt ship, arriving from the nearby Lueneburg salt mines.

Masters at Work

Koberg Square, deep in the center of the old town, was the heart of the festival. Here artisan cheese makers, mustard millers, orchardists, distillers, beer and wine makers, and shepherds had set up their simple stalls, framed by the medieval spires of St. Jakobi church, the Hospital of the Holy Ghost, and the geranium-decked terraces of small hotels.

Through the weekend, artisans from all over Germany talked about their lives, their craft and their history, and offered samples of their products. Even shepherds set up hay-filled



By Lisa Allen / The Chronicle

ENDANGERED: The Slow Food Movement hopes its publicity saves the Sun Crest peach.

pens in the cobbled yard of St. Jakobi's church.

Their sheep are the chunky Moorschnucken, a regional breed of distinct flavor that are raised in swamps where they feed on saltgrass during the summer.

The disappearing breed has been revived and, during the festival, was inducted into the Ark of Taste, along with the Finkenwerder Herbstprinz, a once-popular but now disappearing apple of Northern Germany.

Like so many of the festival's artisans, Eckart Brandt spoke English and he couldn't talk enough about his beloved Finkenwerder Herbstprinz, which he had heaped around him in baskets.

Until 1950s, the Prinz was the most important apple variety grown in the entire region but by the 1980s the Prinz had virtually disappeared from production.

"The Common Market wanted only six or seven types of apples that could be grown and shipped from anywhere interchangeably — you know, like

Golden Delicious," he said.

Workshops exploring taste in a cultural context are an important component of the International Slow Food Movement, and Germany's Festival had 30, ranging from Vineyard Snails to The Tastes of the Lueneberger Heide to The tastes of Schleswig Holstein.

No Mere Tasting

What I thought was going to be a simple tasting was instead a three-course meal served by an entourage of waiters, while a speaker discoursed on the history of the dishes we were eating and the relationship of food, work and eating to the life and culture of the German province.

It's just those sorts of experiences — looking at indigenous foods that are key to the history and vitality of a region, that make the Slow Food movement so compelling.

For more information about the International Slow Food Movement, including how to join or how to start a convivium, visit the Web site www.slowfood.com.

Fran

"The San Francisco Chronicle"

June 2, 1999

FROM 6-17-1999 3:24PM

(big in America...)