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LEADERSHIP

Slow burner

By Amy Duff

The UK Slow Food movement is building support, bit by bit

You may be aware of the international Slow Food movement, a not-for-profit organisation founded by Italian Carlo Petrini in 1989 to campaign for "good, clean and fair food". But whether UK consumers fully understand the point of it is another matter. Which is why Catherine Gazzoli was appointed chief executive of the UK division in January 2009.

An American of Italian origin, she's spent the last few years at the United Nations working on sustainability issues for indigenous farmers, and in Australia, helping to improve micro-credit opportunities for Aboriginal communities. The work has, says Gazzoli, prepared her well.

Slow Food UK hasn't reached its full potential, she says. Membership numbers are low compared to countries like France, Germany, the US and the Netherlands. And feedback on the Guardian's Word of Mouth blog suggests that people have got either the wrong idea about the organisation—"that's just what the world needs, another elitist and expensive organisation wrapped up in impenetrable mumbo jumbo"—or are apathetic—"I was only vaguely aware of the Slow Food movement. I didn't know that it was a proper organisation where people paid subs".

Founded to counteract "fast food and fast life" in Italy, Slow Food's remit has expanded internationally to raise awareness about the sustainability of food and social justice issues surrounding its production. Organic food, food miles, supporting local producers—it's the kind of thing celebrity chefs preach all the time, and they don't get labelled "elitist".

Gazzoli's strategy is clear. While it has been successful at grass roots level, she says, Slow Food UK's direction and structure need updating. She'll be working hard to bring better governance, accountability, and transparency to the organisation. Although she's quick to counter that she loves working with a British board, where the "level of ethics and accountability are bar none; top of anything I've experienced", she's also looking to raise membership figures from around 2,000 to 10,000.

Gazzoli's already made progress on improving Slow Food UK's profile by building alliances with like-minded organisations such as the Soil Association, Sustain, the Food Ethics Council and even the Women's Institute. And by highlighting some of its better known members, including Jamie Oliver, Rick Stein and Angela Hartnett, and its board of trustees Prue Leith, Juliet Kindersley and Craig Sams. Ever the pragmatist, she's even willing to talk to the UK's big four retailers in the name of "engagement".

What she wants is for the organisation to be seen as inclusive, not exclusive. She says: "I'm not precious. I think Slow Food has come



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off as a bit elitist over the past few years. But it's not some holier than thou, 'don't buy that kind of chicken because it didn't have its own yard' thing. That's not what Slow Food is about. It's more about a universal right to good, clean and fair food for all and it doesn't mean it should be expensive".

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