

AROUND Britain with a fork

Matthew Fort catches up with the Slow Food movement's dynamo

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2008**Matthew Fort**

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Photographs by Silvija Davidson; Corbis

Carlo Petrini once addressed an auditorium of Americans. He spoke for 40 minutes or so in full Piedmontese dialect, which Italians from next door Lombardy would have been hard put to understand. At the end, his audience gave him a prolonged standing ovation. This says much about Signor Petrini's gifts as a speaker - he isn't one to let the complete absence of English get in the way of communication - and the affection and regard with which he is held.

Petrini (pictured below) has been the guiding spirit of Slow Food since its inception in 1985, and he remains president of Slow Food International, travelling constantly to promote it. He was in London a week or so back, to have a chat with his pal, Prince Charles, and to open the first Slow Food Market near London's Festival Hall (the second will be next month).



Given the forces ranged against it, the concept of Slow Food - to resist the homogenisation and globalisation of food production - may seem a bit fanciful. Certainly, few could have foreseen its success at its foundation. It now has more than 85,000 active members in 40 countries. But then, Petrini has a gift for turning the most apparently far-fetched idea into concrete reality. Not many people gave him much chance when he started mentioning a University of Gastronomy where students could study various branches of food and wine production, history, theory and practice and come out with degrees that would be recognised by other academic establishments. These days the university flourishes.

And then there was the evening when I happened to be in Bra some years back, having a drink with John Irving, then the editor of the English language Slow Food magazine. The door burst open, and one of Petrini's aides slumped on to a bar stool, wide-eyed with exasperation. "Have you heard Carlo's latest idea?" he said. "He wants to bring 10,000 peasant farmers and food producers to Turin for a congress. Ten thousand! Can you imagine what that means?"

Two years later saw the first Terra Madre in Turin. There weren't 10,000 peasant farmers, just a mere 5,000, from all corners of the globe. For many, it was the first time they had been outside their own countries. Along with Slow Food gardens in schools and the promotion of farmers' markets, Terra Madre is one of the achievements of which Petrini is most proud. He is far too much of a realist to think that this could halt globalisation on its own. But he knew that, in most cases, artisanal food producers live and work in isolation. He reasoned that if they knew they weren't alone, they would draw strength from solidarity. More, by harnessing modern communications technology, a yak herder in Mongolia, say, could get in touch with a llama farmer in the Andes. It was about creating a network of like-minded people.

His secondary aim in London was to energise people into creating another network, and, like most of his ideas, it has a practical edge. "We need to create a lobby group to work in Brussels on behalf of artisanal producers. All the big agro-industrial sectors and food companies have lobbies. We need to create the same for small producers."

Petrini, who survived a serious illness a few years ago, maintains a punishing schedule, trailing exhausted, far younger aides in his wake, his eyes beady and laughing, his sharp nose hovering over this food or that, pouring out his enthusiasm and passion on prince, politician or producer, making no distinction between them. Perhaps these were skills he learned when he was an organiser for the Communist Trades Union in Italy in the 70s.

What keeps him going? "Curiosity," he said. "Curiosity. And meeting people like these." He waved a hand at the farmers, cheesemakers, bakers, chutney and jam-makers, and brewers manning the stalls behind him.

Where to get it

Slow Food Slow Food UK Limited, Unit 3, Alliance Court, Eco Park Road, Ludlow, Shropshire, 01584 879599, slowfood.org.uk

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