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From The Times

May 23, 2008

# Could Britain go Slow? Let me chew that over

**What we eat defines us, to ourselves and to those around us. Waitrose or Asda? Organic or not? Veggie or omnivore? Fast food or slow?**

Jane Shilling

They've been having a bit of a blow-out up in Newcastle this week. Much of May has been occupied with a food festival called EAT!, a highlight of which was a gala dinner called "Ten Things to Eat Before They Die". Not, note, ten things to eat before you die. That was the theme of last year's inaugural festival bash, where they served the usual suspects - Beluga caviar, truffles, wagyu beef - all very delicious to consume, no doubt, but faintly revolting to hear about - like reading Seneca or some other mullet-obsessed Roman rhapsodising about the rainbow of colours an expiring red mullet turns when its death throes are viewed through the sides of a glass bowl.

After that blow-out, this year's gala was more in tune with the spirit of the times. The menu was devised in association with the Slow Food movement and contained ingredients from the Slow Food's "Ark of Taste" list, an engaging conceit designed to preserve endangered culinary treasures. So on the menu at Gosforth Park were Herdwick mutton, Formby asparagus, plus pears poached in perry and assorted artisanal cheeses.

The Slow Food movement was started in 1986 by Carlo Petrini, an Italian journalist who was appalled to find that a McDonald's had opened near the Spanish Steps in Rome, and decided that a counterbalance was needed to the homogenising creep of fast food. "We are enslaved by speed and have succumbed to the insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods," warns the Slow Food manifesto, which ends with an inspiring rallying cry: "Let us rediscover the flavours and savours of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of Fast Food."

Lovely sentiments, I'm sure, though you have to do a pretty nifty mindswerve to get your head around the notion of the Ark of Taste, the thinking behind which seems to be that to preserve these giant pandas of the culinary world from extinction, the thing to do is expand their tiny local markets and, er, globalise their distribution. Still, anything has to be better than the Sisyphean exertions of the shepherd featured in Griff Rhys Jones's series Mountain, whose occupation on a National Trust farm in the Lake District was to keep Herdwick sheep, not for their meat or wool, but as ovine lawnmowers, their sole reason for existing to keep the landscape looking as it had when Beatrix Potter knew it (give or take the odd tasteful tea room). That seems, in its way, almost as decadent as the existence of a McDonald's at the foot of the Spanish Steps, and if the efforts of the Slow Food movement and its sympathisers can create a proper market for this admirable little breed and the other inhabitants of the Ark, so much the better. But it still leaves a question about what we really mean by "regional" food.

Food has always had many functions beyond that of mere nutrition. We prepare and consume it for comfort, for nostalgia, for festivity and as a mark of status. In fundamental ways what

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we eat defines us, to ourselves and to the people around us. Asda or Waitrose? Organic or not? Veggie or omnivore? Gordon or Nigella? Fast food or slow? In countries such as Italy, where the economy was predominantly agricultural until after the Second World War, the concept of culinary regionality is embedded in the culture. A generation is still alive that could pass down to its grandchildren the peasant recipes from rural Italy collected by Patience Gray in her book, *Honey from a Weed*. For Carlo Petrini to call for a return to regional food in his home country is a matter of a shift in attitude, a revival of tradition still alive, if endangered - the equivalent, say, of establishing a captive breeding programme for a rare animal species.

In Britain it is another matter. To reanimate the concept of regionality here would be more like trying to reproduce a living dodo from the handful of desiccated skin and feathers preserved in the Pitt-Rivers museum. This is not to say that there are not stubborn, dedicated producers of glorious regional food in Britain. The problem is not the producers but the consumers, and what the mass retailers perceive them to want.

During the postwar decades of the Fifties and Sixties, when the concept of convenience food really took off, we lost in Britain the connection between food and identity. This is an important subject and there is no space to discuss it here, but its legacy is curious. Scraps, shards, archaeological remnants remain - the glorious post-Imperial culinary culture, for example. But essentially the 21st-century British attitude to food is entirely divorced from the land - the paysage - of its production. The connection, in so far as there is one, is to lifestyle, so we eat for "spiritual" notions of health or purity (organic) or for reasons of fashion, buying ostrich and quinoa rather as we might choose to decorate our houses in Provençal or Gustavian style. What we don't do - not much, not yet - is cherish our traditions of local produce locally, in any way that might enable producers to build anything much beyond niche businesses.

Perhaps the Slow Food movement can change that. Or perhaps it might be able to develop the very peculiar British relationship with food into a kind of national regional market, in which I can pop in to the north Greenwich Sainsbury's for a leg of Herdwick mutton and a bunch of Formby asparagus. That would certainly be more interesting, and more worthwhile in terms of the domestic agricultural economy than New Zealand lamb and Spanish asparagus. Better still, though, would be properly local food: Romney Marsh lamb and Kent asparagus (I have some in the larder now; its journey from ground to plate no more than 20 miles). If the Slow Food movement can encourage that, good luck to it. There are reports that new "market town" branches of Waitrose plan to specialise in local food (though the effects on local retailers remain to be seen). But to reinvent a true regional economy would involve a social, economic and culinary revolution. And we have a great British tradition of being timid about revolutions.

**For once the seeds didn't cost a packet**

To the Chelsea Flower Show, home of small formidable plantswomen and their tall meek menfolk. After one dreadful year when I was squashed, trodden on and (crowning indignity) bellowed at by stewards with bullhorns, I gave up trying to extract any horticultural value from Chelsea. Perhaps I picked my moment better this year, for the crowds seemed less dense, the prices more modest (I came home with a nice ball of hairy green string for an un-Chelsea-ish price of £2.50). And there was a charming new innovation: freebies. A packet of sweet rocket seeds at the QVC garden, mixed salad leaves from Daylesford Organic, while the Spana Moroccan garden trumped the lot with alfalfa seeds and a handy cotton tote bag. All this, plus the perennially thrilling sight of the Dubarry boot stand, populated by curled-lip dandies and swishy blondes, like a Jilly Cooper novel made flesh. Did I see any plants? I did. I noted that the fashionable plant of the year is yellow aquilegia. And at the Peter Beales rose display (where an agreeable cove with a white ponytail and a badge saying Lord Walpole was dispensing helpful advice) I saw that the wonderful climber *Souvenir du Dr Jamain* was making people reel with its astonishing scent. And felt suddenly fond of Chelsea since that very rose, bought there a decade ago, is the delight of my summer.

**From shoots to shoot**

More gardens. There was a lovely picture of Madonna in yesterday's papers, arriving in Cannes in a fetching sequined



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garment for the premiere of her documentary about Aids orphans in Malawi. She's credited as writer, producer and narrator. But the director's credit goes to her gardener, Nathan Rissman, who seems to have done a reverse Derek Jarman transition from potting shed to editing suite. Which must be a bit of blow for Madonna's husband, the director Guy Ritchie. But just goes to show that if you plant a seed, you never know what may eventually come up.

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