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Living the Slow Life

Slow Food has become an international movement within three decades touting an unhurried lifestyle centered on the appreciation of food. The major principles of this movement will be presented in this paper along with the various benefits and drawbacks of these ideals. In addition, how Slow Food has expanded will be analyzed with ideas for future potential expansion. Lastly, this paper will address the effectiveness of the movement in educating the public as well as what areas, in general, can be improved.

The Slow Food Movement

The Slow Food movement was started in response to the fast food industry and the lifestyle it represents. Worried his traditional, lengthy Italian lunches were in jeopardy of being replaced with lunches while sitting at an office desk, Carlo Petrini formed the group in 1986 to counteract the alien habits that were invading his Mediterranean way of life. Petrini was struck most notably when a McDonald's was scheduled to open near the Spanish Steps in Rome, which prompted him to start the Slow Food movement in his hometown of Bra, Italy. (Owen, 2009)

Petrini and his co-founders had many ideals they were trying to address in the formation of this new movement. They wished to preserve gastronomic pleasures and promote the idea that food was more than simply eating. They believed in artisan and regional foods that should be supported by a local economy in addition to assuming environmentalism goes hand in hand with food culture. However in their eyes, many of these principles could be married together with more left-wing liberal politics. The group's views on anti-globalization and anti-technologies easily supported endorsing small, food economies and valuing regional ways of life. (Severson, 2008)

Wendy Parkins states it well in her article, "Out of Time: Fast Subjects and Slow Living."

"The 'slow' in Slow Food, then, signifies firstly an opposition to speed, homogeneity, corporate greed and globalization associated with fast food, but it also tries to convey positive values associated with pleasure, taste, authenticity, connectedness, tranquility and community."

As a well chosen symbol, the Slow Food campaign logo is a snail which represents an animal that slowly and calmly eats its way through life. This goes along well with the goals of the Slow Food movement as they are stated in the Slow Food's *Welcome to Our World* companion.

“Its [the Slow Food movement’s] initial aim was to support and defend good food, gastronomic pleasure and a slow pace of life. It then broadened its sights to embrace the quality of life and, as a logical consequence, the very survival of the imperiled planet that we live on.”



In addition as it is clearly stated on the Slow Food website, Slow Food is “good, clean, and fair.” Each of these adjectives, described in greater detail, reflect many of the main principles of the movement. Good food is achieved through aroma and flavor which are recognizable to a well-trained palate and derived from the natural growing and production methods. Clean food signifies the sustainable farming and processing methods the food system should be considerate of to protect the environment and biodiversity while ensuring healthy food and safe ecosystems. Fair defends the practices of regional diversity that support a balanced global economy while ensuring social justice and fair labor conditions of the workers in these areas. (Irving, 2009)

Movement Benefits

There are many benefits the Slow Food movement brings to the table. One major benefit is the defense of biodiversity through the support it gives to local and regional farmers. Slow Food looks to indentify traditional and sustainable foods within a particular region and to protect these foods through original cultivation and processing methods. This has popularized many heritage breeds of animals and heritage varieties of fruits and vegetables, that are often more flavorful and diverse than mass produced types. (Severson, 2008) In addition, this support often means financially helping artisanal farmers who are cultivating foods that are at risk of disappearing; many of which are located in underdeveloped countries where this funding also protects their community, culture, and way of life. (Slow Food, 11/02/09)

Creating a connection to regional biodiversity and consumers, Slow Food also provides a network between the farmers who grow local foods and those people who wish to promote, sell and consume them. Members take an active interest in knowing who produces their food, how it is produced, and the problems producers face, thereby making smarter choices about the food they eat. (Slow Food, 11/02/09) In addition to the availability of food fairs and markets, this network

also includes connecting consumers to traditional restaurants who support local cuisine, especially those restaurants that provide regional food at affordable prices particularly to local people. (Parkins, 2004)

Taste education is another significant aspect to the Slow Food movement. Also linked to active consumer awareness, taste education is a way to re-awaken and train the senses to enjoy good food. This strives to inform people that the act of eating can change values, attitudes and emotions, and that good, clean, and fair food is and should be available to all people. Local chapters, or *convivia*, work at all levels, in three to four events a year, to provide lifelong education through a variety of taste projects such as sensory workshops for local children and taste workshops for adults as well as food mastery courses for its members. Education also include cultivating professionals through the Slow Food University of Gastronomy Sciences, who are then able to further promote the ideals of high-quality, regional foods. (Schneider, 2008)

Convivia within the United States have implemented these ideas in a variety of ways. Many chapters have helped plant gardens in schoolyards and have provided fundraising to farmers and producers in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana. Last fall, Slow Food USA hosted Slow Food Nation, an event aimed to evoke social, ecological, and political change through the awareness of sustainably produced food, attracting 50,000 people in San Francisco. (Severson, 2008)

Another interesting education application is Slow Fish, a sustainable seafood salone. A salone is a gathering of individuals or groups that meet to share information and discuss ideas. This sustainable seafood event drew attention to the state of the world's oceans and the overfishing crisis bringing together fishing communities to discuss the environmental problems associated with fishing. Held in Genoa in 2004, this event hosted a variety of workshops and activities related to fishing and explored ideas to promote fish conversation and responsible enjoyment. (Slow Food Companion)

Movement Drawbacks

Slow Food has also had its share of drawbacks in addition to its benefits. From its onset, the movement has attracted mainly culinary types who are already interested in promoting local and regional foods. Therefore, it has given the Slow Food movement an air of elitism, full of small, enlightened groups of people who wish to change society's view on food, and has tended to polarize others along the way. (Severson, 2008) Despite preaching the availability of good, clean, and fair food, the promotion of artisanal foods along with local and regional production further narrows

those who are able to participate in the movement itself. This tends to limit Slow Food members to those who are wealthy enough to afford these specialty foods. However in the movement's defense, the cheap cost of mass-produced food often does not include hidden costs in terms of the environmental and human health, while paying the fair price of a locally produced food tends to go direct into the hands of the farmers. (Schneider, 2008)

As the movement has grown in size beyond the left-wing culinary circles, much of the original message of Slow Food has also been lost to the masses. Political messages of anti-globalism, corporate greed and the development of industrial farming to fit a capitalist economy, in addition to the understanding the true costs of food productions, are many issues that have fallen to the background. Many newer members have a hard time understanding what the movement stands for and therefore focus on the hedonistic side of food and eating. (Severson, 2008) While many of these political issues are still in the hearts of Slow Food's main figures, it seems the movement has been able to focus its endeavors on good, clean, and fair food through defending biodiversity, taste education, and providing a network of producers and co-producers.

Due to its elitist beginning, the Slow Food movement has also been accused of lacking economic and racial diversity. This has especially been a drawback for Slow Food USA as it has tried to fit itself into the food culture in the United States. The group has realized it must redefine itself and venture from its parent group in Italy to adapt to the specific food concerns in America and appeal to the masses. These issues were a core theme at Slow Food Nation in San Francisco as they included panels on race, hunger and poverty. In addition, Slow Food USA hopes these increased efforts will boost membership and help them gain more political clout to have an influence on the national industrialized food system. (Severson, 2008)

There are also questions as to whether or not Slow Food is an organized movement at all or rather a collection of grassroots individuals. Drawing its beginning from a specific region within Italy, it is difficult to apply the all same concepts to different areas of the world. In addition, much of the movement is based upon an individual's educated choice of food and lifestyle preferences. Promoting this type of individuality makes it complicated to articulate a larger message of the movement. Thus, the group has focused on broader social issues that encompass many of the decision seen through the individual choices its members make. (Schneider, 2008)

Expansion of the Movement

The Slow Food movement has expanded rapidly since its inception. It went international in 1989 and now has 100,000 members in 132 countries. The movement has country headquarters in Australia, France, Japan, the United Kingdom and the USA, just to name a few. (Slow Food, 11/2/09) Slow Food International maintains a popular website and runs a publishing house that establishes food and wine guides in addition to a quarterly magazine and a variety of books. The movement also hosts a biennial food fair and in 2004, it opened the Slow Food University of Gastronomy Sciences. At a local level, members engage in food-centered activities like education, preparation, and enjoyment of regional foods in one of the 1000 *convivia*. (Parkins, 2004)

In its original home of Bra, Italy, Slow Food has turned into a local industry, and has become a tourist destination attracting people to the region. This is a form of education in itself drawing people from around the world who wish to experience the ideals of the movement in its original setting. Several establishments, including the Slow Food hotel, many Slow Food restaurants, in addition to the University previously mentioned, have been started locally. This industry has also sparked the marketing of Slow Food souvenirs that tourists purchase while in Italy and bring back to their home countries to wear. (Severson, 2008)

Being an idealistic movement, Slow Food has also been able to expand its influence in other areas. This movement sparked a sister movement in 1999 called *Cittaslow*. Meaning literally Slow City, this is a group of cities that are committed to improving the quality of life and calming the fast, homogenizing globalization that is happening to their cities. (Slow Cities Website) Many of the same principles that guide the Slow Food movement are applicable in reference to urban design and city planning. This can extend to banning traffic in town centers and allowing citizens instead to walk or bike to promoting sustainable energy, green spaces and local food. (Owen, 2009)

For future expansion options, the idea of a *salone* is a wonderful way to expand the breath of this movement. Each year or every several years, Slow Food could host a *salone* on a different environment and food issue. This would be a great way to bring together people within the industry to create awareness and brainstorm innovative solutions. Much like training culinary students, this is a wonderful example of education a group of people who can become ambassadors and in turn educate other within their home environments.

Education Effectiveness and Improvements

Slow Food has been fairly effective in being able to educate the public. The movement has dedicated many of its efforts on outreach programs, which were previously mentioned, such as supporting farmers who grow local foods, providing taste education to local children and adults, and opening the Slow Food University of Gastronomy Sciences. This is most successful and effective at a national and international level. From my personal experience of being interested in joining the Philadelphia chapter of Slow Food USA, I feel this message is somewhat lost at the local level. The group comes across as grassroots supper club with more importance placed on dining and food experiences for members and less emphasis on community outreach to spread food support and education.

However, Slow Food has already expanded globally to over 100 countries so it has proven to be a model that can be exported to new regions. Yet, I feel the theories behind the Slow Food movement are very region specific, and this can be a difficult aspect to mold to a new area. This is one of the problems, as mentioned previously, that is affecting Slow Food USA. Italy is a small country with a strong food culture while the United States has many people bringing together a spectrum of food cultures. Slow Food USA is headed on the right track by trying to redefine itself to fit better into the American public. As a whole, I believe the Slow Food movement will be most successful if it can incorporate its regional principles upon the individual country chapters allowing them to address specific needs or concerns that are closer to their own hearts.

In addition, rather than rejecting technology, the movement should be mindful of fast life and consider how to utilize it to protect food culture and the environment. Slow Food has already embraced the internet which is a wonderful source to promote the movement and provide a network for producers and co-producers. I feel there is also potential for other advancements in machinery that would help further aid farmers who produce local food or social networking tools that could be innovative ways to educate individuals and the public about good, clean and fair food.

The Slow Food movement has proven to support important food issues as it has spread its message around the world through membership in many countries. Using workshops and public service projects, the group educates its member and the public about making smart decisions about the food they eat and learning to fully enjoy it. Aside from small improvements that can be made as the movement grows and comes into its own right, Slow Food is strongly rooted in its principles and savors in aiding and education others on the important of local foods.

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