

THE SLOW FOOD MOVEMENT, NOT AN OXYMORON

► Our world spins faster every day. We can read our emails while we walk, watch 24 hour news from the gym running machine and multi-task our way through the blur of a work day. Our food too has followed suit. Industrially processed, nutritionally negligible, homogenized pap has taken over. Convenience and uniformity trump taste and health. Fortunately for us, there's a group of food super heroes out there, very possibly wearing capes flecked with loganberry juice, who are fighting back. They are swimming against the tide of hydrogenated oils, resisting the onslaught of glucose-fructose and denying the case for soy lecithin. They are the Slow Food Movement.

Now, Slow Food doesn't centre on competitive 16 hour 'braise-offs' (though they'd probably get a kick out of it) or indeed Timmie's new Slow Roast Beef Sandwich, which despite the agonizing and inexplicable prep time, definitely doesn't constitute slow food. Instead this is a movement founded on the values of "good, clean and fair food". Food should taste good and be good for us, its production should not harm our environment or animal welfare and it should provide farmers with a fair return for their efforts. As guardians of our gastronomic culture, choosing local, traditionally produced fare is also a defining emphasis for the movement.

In 1986, Slow Food followed bruschetta, risotto and tiramisu in a venerable line of Italian gastronomic exports when author Carlo Petrini was horrified to see the Golden Arches® loom large in his native Rome. In the intervening 22 years, local chapters, or *convivia*, have sprung up around the world.

Including, believe it or not, in little ole Niagara. Paying your annual subs however isn't the criteria for mention in this article, rather a dedication to the values that make the movement so important. And for these guys 2008 could be a big year.

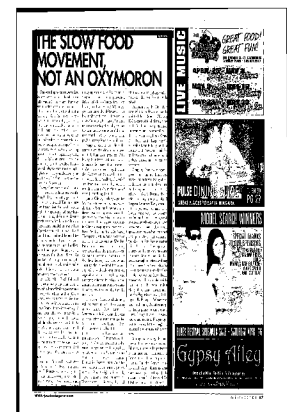
Stephen Treadwell, head chef and founder of Treadwell Cuisine in Port Dalhousie is an undisputed gastronomic heavyweight. Speaking with a strong Essex accent that belies his 20-plus years shaking things up this side of the Atlantic, Stephen offers an impassioned defense of a local-first policy. "Not having food come in 3,000 miles, you can taste the difference. It's like night and day." The restaurant's "farm to table cuisine" tagline underscores this philosophy, as does the fact that in the bountiful summer months, 90 per cent of their produce comes from the local area.

Niagara restaurants riding the coattails of the slow food movement; billing local produce while buying it in from California, was a favourite bugbear of all those I spoke to while researching this article. As Stephen Treadwell put it so succinctly, he is "walking the walk" and from the tone of his voice I wouldn't want to be in the shoes of those just talking the talk.

Jamie Oliver, cooking's golden boy and effervescent champion of all things local and lovingly produced, was so impressed with the efforts of another Niagara stalwart that he sent him a signed book, urging him to keep up the good work. Dave Perkins and his wife Nancy Thompson-Perkins have dedicated ten years to converting Wyndym Farm into a mecca for discerning

restaurant chefs the province over. As much research laboratory as Arcadian fantasy, the couple are ensuring that slow food has a cutting edge – developing culinary vegetable strains suited to the changing climate in Niagara and working to continually advance sustainable, environmentally-friendly practices.

However, Ontario chefs may well be weeping into their winter greens when they learn of Wyndym's exclusive focus this year on producing a restaurant garden for the Riverbend Inn, Niagara-on-the-Lake. Billed as a platform to show how slow food principles can work in practice, the prospect of a top restaurant cultivating 100 percent of their produce on site is based on the same values that have provided Raymond Blanc's Le Manoir and Canada's own Eigensinn Farm with legendary status. Tongue slightly in cheek, Dave explains the project as "Stadtlander [iconic Swiss chef and proprietor of Eigensinn Farm] meets Martha Stewart". Joking aside, for Niagara, the bar has truly been raised.





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According to the UN, 90 percent of the world's diet has been whittled down from 10,000 to just 120 species of food plants, a result of the food industry's preference for uniformity and patentability. In that scary context, Linda Crago of the Tree and Twig Heirloom Vegetable Farm is doing her best to ensure that Niagara salad bowls spill over with much more than just iceberg lettuce and rubber pellet tomatoes.

Dragging her away from her greens for a minute, Linda underscores a point identified by all those at the sharp end of food production in the region; that in fact, "it's a seller's market". Despite the best efforts of organizations like The

Niagara Culinary Trail, organic or artisan producers remain an elite bunch, with very few capable of producing the consistent quantities required by wholesalers, or even a restaurant. That said, everyone I spoke to in researching this article was quite clear that demand for "good, clean, fair" food is reaching a critical mass. Blowing on the embers of the organic movement, consumer interest has finally filtered through to chefs and supermarket buyers, and even slow foodies are responsive to market forces.

No treatise on Slow Food in Niagara would be complete without mention of the wine industry. Many of our local wineries are flying the flag, with Strewn, Reif and

especially Henry of Pelham prominent in the mix, the latter meriting particular praise for their visionary 'Dirty Hands Project', preserving one square meter of Niagara green-53.1 for every bottle bought, and intense focus on sustainable viticulture.

Spring has sprung, the hateful grey and yellow snowbanks are in full retreat, now is the perfect time to embrace our magnificent local food culture. Take a trip into the country, hit the farmers' market, buy local. Any political movement that makes you feel good about necking a bottle of ice cold VQA Riesling – now that can't be bad. **P**

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