Gastronomy—cultivating the art of eating—has been pretty rare in world history. Most people most of the time have had things other than delicious tastes on their mind as they settled down to eat. For the poor it was how to fill their stomachs or, on the rare feast day, to make sure of a real blow out. For the pious, it was how to prove that they could control the desires of the flesh. Nuns, or at least the more devout among them, proved their vocation by refusing to nibble on the rich sweets of egg and sugar they made for the convents' patrons. For the powerful, it was how to drive home their power by putting on meals way beyond the reach of most of their subjects. Renaissance courtiers paraded their status at interminable state banquets where the elaborate displays on food congealed on the plates. For none of these people was good eating the name of the game.

Only when there has been a well-to-do urban class that has had neither to worry where the next meal was coming from nor to show off its piety or its power has gastronomy appeared. Only in a prosperous society in which wealth is not confined to a tiny proportion of the population can it flourish. These conditions were found, for example, in the thirteenth century in the great cities of China and Islam—Hangchow, Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, and Cordoba—and then again in the cities of the European Renaissance, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Edo, Paris and the cities of China.

With gastronomy came gourmets. Instead of elaborate banquets, gourmets opted for intimate dinners or outings to fine restaurants. They organized competitions to taste and judge delicacies such as tea or wine. They enjoyed searching out rare regional specialties and were prepared to pay a high price for them. They created a gastronomic literature that included menus, cookbooks, culinary guides, poetry and philosophy. And they engaged in culinary tourism either by going to restaurants that specialized in the food of a particular region or, as transport improved, by going to destination restaurants.

For those who could afford it, gastronomy provided a welcome release from the anxious burden of showing off their wealth or their sanctity. It took eating out of the public realm and made it a matter of private pleasure. It modestly increased work for cooks, restaurant owners, shop keepers, farmers and gardeners, and tradesmen. Of course it tended to breed tiresome snobbery and one-upmanship. But irritating as these traits are, they are not the greatest of human failings. So gastronomy (like other hobbies of the well-to-do such as collecting first editions, breeding fine horses, or patronizing chamber orchestras) has increased human happiness without seriously harming others. And something that increases human happiness without harming others is a good thing.

And now we have Slow Food, an organization that crystallized from earlier Italian gastronomic programs when a McDonald's opened in Rome. On November 9th, 1989, it was formally founded as the International Slow Food Movement for the Defense of and the Right to Pleasure at the Opera Comique in

Paris. It has all the tell-tale signs of gastronomy: wine guides for eager shoppers, restaurant guides for culinary tourists, and a tasting event, the biennial Salone de Gusto where gourmets and would-be gourmets can sample wine, cheese, pork products and other specialties. Not surprisingly, it was greeted with joy by many of us who enjoy thinking about and eating good food.

But Slow Food, say its advocates, takes gastronomy to another and higher level. Somewhere between a latter-day religion and a political program, this version of gastronomy will save us from the widely-recognized problems associated with modernity. Slow Food is founded on the purported revelation that pursuing pleasure protects the environment, creates a sustainable agriculture, preserves culinary patrimonies, increases the good, the true and the beautiful, and has the potential to save us from ourselves. Corby Kummer, one of America's leading food commentators, tells us that signing on for Slow Food is a win/win move: by eating well we can do good.[1] Albert Sonnenfeld, professor of French at Columbia University and editor of a distinguished series of books on culinary history, explains that the table is an "altar" that offers "the template for the preservation of human rights and the environment." Alice Waters, revered founder of the restaurant Chez Panisse, says that Slow Food teaches us "compassion, beauty, community, and sensuality." Mario Batali, of the famed Babbo restaurant in New York, praises it as "far more spiritual, nay, religious, than any club (or religion, for that matter) I have been asked to join."[2] And Carlo Petrini, the entrepreneur who founded Slow Food and whose book under review here lays out the history and agenda of the organization, leads the chorus. "Faced with the excesses of modernization, we are not trying to change the world anymore, just to save it."[3]

Saving the world from the excesses of modernity simply by becoming gourmets sounds wonderful. No pain, just gain. But is this too good to be true? Has modernity really done its work? Is it time to return to tradition and legacy as an "avant-garde response to the minefield of modernity." That is what I hoped to find out from Petrini's book. Although it's an infuriating book—pompous, self-congratulatory, long on rhetoric, short on argument, and shorter yet on evidence—with some effort it is possible to discern what Petrini is up to. But first we have to see what Culinary Modernism amounts to because Petrini simply takes its bankruptcy as self-evident.

Culinary Modernism had many interesting features but the most relevant here is that it brought to an end, at least in the West, a two-tier system of eating. This had existed in all settled societies since the founding of the first cities. The upper tier, the rich and powerful, had dined on meat and the more prestigious grains such as rice or wheat. The lower tier, the poor who made up more than 80% of the population, had survived grains perceived as less desirable such as oats, millet, or maize with only the occasional bit of meat to liven up their meals.

Then in nineteenth-century England and the United States

the interests of the powerful and the poor coincided for the first time. The powerful were coming to accept more egalitarian political theories, as well as discerning a need for a well-fed citizenry to man factories and conscript armies. And because democracy didn't seem worth much if you couldn't eat what had formerly been only for the rich, the poor demanded a better diet. This coincidence of interests led governments to put in place policies to make wheat flour and meat, until then the prestige foods reserved for the wealthy, available to all.[4]

Culinary Modernism reshaped the world. Settlers appropriated the temperate grasslands of North America, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand to raise wheat and cattle for distant urban centers. Migrants moved from country to town and from Europe to the overseas colonies. The acreage under the plough shot up. Merchants opened up new commercial channels and institutions to bring wheat and beef to market. Inventors and industrialists found new ways to process them. People's lives changed in England and the United States as they began to take for granted the white bread and roast beef their great grandparents only have dreamed of.

Most Italians had to wait longer for pasta made of wheat flour and rich ragùs to accompany it. A few years ago I had lunch with a distinguished engineer in his eighties. He ordered polenta. He did so, he said, because although as a child he had longed for bread, polenta was all that was available. Never had he dreamed that polenta would become a chic delicacy offered in the Stanford Faculty Club. He and his family, like twenty six million other Italians, migrated to distant lands such as Argentina or the United States. For those who stayed, the poverty seemed impossible to shake off. Polenta may be delicious from time to time but three times a day it is not only monotonous but dangerous, leading to the deficiency disease now known as pellagra. Social scientists, reformers, and physicians conducted surveys of this misery and wrung their hands in despair. Mussolini tried to increase wheat production by slapping a high tariff on imported American wheat. To celebrate this "battle" he composed a poem that began "let us all love bread, the heart of every home."

Only after World War II did the diet improve for most Italians (and many, though far from all other societies around the globe). Beginning in 1957, the European Union, in accordance with its Common Agricultural Policy, subsidized Italian wheat farmers. They modernized and wheat production went up. Even so, it was still not enough to meet demand: even now imports (currently about a third of the wheat consumed) make up the shortfall in Italy.[5]

One of the virtues of Culinary Modernism was that cheap food allowed people to spend their money as they wished. As the price of food fell and incomes rose, people bought first nicer clothes, bicycles, tickets to concerts, and educations for their children, later sound systems, off-road vehicles, spacious houses, and vacations in exotic spots.

Relatively few chose to spend it on gastronomy. Indeed many

regarded lavish spending on food with distaste, a hangover from the days before Culinary Modernism when the rich used displays of food to brandish their power. For many Americans gastronomy was epitomized by the $4000 dinner that Craig Claibourne and Pierre Franey indulged in in Paris in 1975. "This calculated evening of high-class piggery," as one commentator put it "offends an average American's sense of decency."[6] Such a reaction reflects an widespread belief in the values of Culinary Modernism. Food should be available equally to all and not used to mark distinctions of class and wealth.

Of course, a change as dramatic as the shift to Culinary Modernism could not have occurred and did not occur without creating a wide variety of problems. Migrants often suffered a decline in living standards, even if in the end they or their descendents ended up better off. The increasing distance between producer and consumer, between farm and kitchen left room for the careless or unscrupulous to adulterate food. Newly ploughed land lost fertility without careful husbandry. More highly processed foods were calorie-dense and obesity began to replace deficiency diseases. And many people worried that the world simply could not produce enough wheat and meat for all those who wanted it.

Prominent among them were many leaders of the Counter-Culture. Frightened that a soaring world population would inevitably lead to famine, they rejected Culinary Modernism's attempt to provide white bread and beef for all, while sharing with it the belief that everyone deserved a tasty and nutritious diet.[7] In 1971 Frances Moore Lappé in *Diet for a Small Planet* suggested that new scientific research offered an alternative. Grains and beans, neither of them adequate by themselves, offered a complete nutritious diet if served together. If the first world would abandon meat and adopt a vegetarian diet, then everyone in the world had some hope of eating a decent and egalitarian cuisine. She and others inspired a generation to experiment with largely-vegetarian dishes from Mexico, the Middle East, India and China and to set up communes and cooperatives as alternatives to the agro-industrial complex. *Diet for a Small Planet* was a serious attempt to find an alternative to Culinary Modernism by adopting the inverse strategy: instead of the food of the West for the Rest, it was to be the food of the Rest for the West.

Diet for a Small Planet, though, ran into a series of problems. Not least of them was that for most Westerners bread and steak, pasta and meat sauce remained the ideal. They liked the cheap food of Culinary Modernism, problems and all. They did not want to eat the beans that they still associated with poverty. They relished their toast in the morning and their steak for dinner. When McDonald's invented a way to offer bread and beef quickly, cleanly, and cheaply without Mom having to spend time in the kitchen, it was a runaway success.

Meanwhile in his home town of Bra in the Italian Piedmont, Petrini looked around and saw a region in the doldrums. De-

serted tanneries dotted the town. The farming in the surrounding area was so-so, neither the bustling activity we imagine to be peasant farming, nor the mechanized efficiency of modern agriculture. The local vintners adulterated their wines. How, Petrini asked himself , could the area be revived? After casting around, he decided that the answer was food. Or, more precisely, the French Terroir Strategy.

The French Terroir Strategy was developed between the 1860s and the 1930s, first to prop up the French wine industry and then to encourage culinary tourism. In the 1860s, the French wine industry, the country's second largest export industry, was in deep trouble. Wars with England, mildew, phylloxera, and competition from cheap Algerian wines had reduced the big growers' markets. They rescued their vineyards—just—by mobilizing leading French scientists. After various failed strategies, they reached consensus that the best hope was to graft French vines onto coarse, hardy American root stock. The industry was saved.

But would wine-lovers conclude that there was nothing special about French wine if it was grown on common or garden American root stock? With this market-threatening possibility in mind, the growers argued that it was not the vines themselves that made French wine so good. It was the terroir. Terroir, first defined as the soil, quickly came to mean the local environment in which wine was produced. With the aid of the French government, they established the *appellation controlée* system, branding their wines by their place of origin.

Not so many years later, well-to-do Parisians began motoring through the countryside in their Renaults and Citroens. It was only natural that after hours tramping through medieval chateaus and gothic cathedrals, they would look for refreshment. Entrepreneurs saw a new market niche and quickly set up restaurants along the major tourist routes. There they created regional French cuisines by tweaking the dishes of the provincial bourgeoisie to satisfy the tastes of Parisians. The "prince of gastronomes," the food critic Maurice Saillant who went under the pen name Curnonsky began publishing the *Yellow Guide* to the food of the French provinces. The tire company, Michelin, awarded stars to restaurants. Now tourists could add to culinary destinations to architecture and landscape. They could sample foodstuffs and meals described as the culmination of centuries of refinement of the unique products of peasants close to the environment or terroir.

It made no sense as history. But the French Terroir Strategy was a brilliant marketing device that satisfied modern yearnings for a romanticized past by advertising tradition and exploiting modern methods of production and distribution. By proclaiming that certain foodstuffs or meals were inextricably tied to particular places and to mythic histories, the promoters created scarcity and high prices. Wealthy urban gourmets or would-be gourmets snatched up the products or went off to the country to enjoy local bounty. The strategy did wonders for big wine growers, restau-

rant owners, and those producers who could upgrade their products to appeal to sophisticated urban tastes.

It is worth noting, though, that effective as it was in serving the needs of tourists and restaurateurs, the French Terroir Strategy did nothing for the well-being of French peasants. Well into the twentieth century, they like their Italian counterparts continued to eat a diet that to us would be unimaginably meager and had nothing to do with the food served to culinary tourists. Instead it was a succession of thin vegetable soups and the coarsest of breads. Not until the large scale arable and livestock farming and efficient distribution networks associated with Culinary Modernism brought down the price of white bread and meat did their diet become richer.

Be that as it may, what Petrini decided was that the French Terroir Strategy would rejuvenate his particular region of Italy. In 1986 he founded an association to "sell" the world a package of history, landscape, wine, cuisine and style of welcome for his area of Italy.[8] It was this that a year later morphed into the brilliantly-named Slow Food with an agenda that extended far beyond the Italian Piedmont. Although in the United States many saw this as reviving the ideals of the *Diet for a Small Planet*, in fact, its origins were quite different.

So the question is whether a gastronomic movement like Slow Food, founded to stimulate culinary tourism, can deliver on the much grander ambitions of its advocates to correct or replace Culinary Modernism. In Petrini's book, and I am here restricting myself to that, there is nothing to suggest that it can.

To begin with, Petrini's adoption of the French Terroir Strategy, with its romanticized version of history, means that he simply glosses over much of what made Italian food what it is today. He ignores the canned tomatoes that the Francesco Cirio canning company made available year round. He says nothing about the extrusion press and the drying room that made what spaghetti available across the new nation. He plays down the part that well-to-do cookbook authors such as Pellegrino Artusi and Ada Boni did to create and codify what we think of as Italian cuisine. And he passes over Filippo Marinetti's campaign in the 1930s for a modernist Italian cuisine (although Petrini's methods—manifestos, promotional visits to Paris, and courting of the media—bear a probably not coincidental resemblance to Marinetti's). He offers a country without supermarkets, a country without its own fast food chains. There is no Food and Agriculture Association headquartered in Rome supporting the study of peasant means of food production worldwide, no World Trade Association with General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade and no CAP, the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union (even though Slow Food in fact has much in common with changes in policy in the European Union from producing as much food as cheaply as possible to producing healthy, high-quality foods in a manner that maintains the environment).

So Petrini's is an Italy as artificial as a Maui beach resort with

its trucked in sand and palm trees or a Disney Magic Kingdom with its oversized Mickey and its undersized castle. Instead of white sand and Mickey, we have tiny rural restaurants that offer up wonderful food, shops that offer artisanal bread, cheeses and salami.

Only occasionally does reality intrude when Petrini grumbles about certain traditional Italian foods. The peasants and farmers just aren't up to snuff. Herders spend the summers with their families instead of isolated in alpine huts. Farmers in the Abruzzi eat their own cured meat instead of selling it on the market. Sardinian peasants make second-rate cheese and need to improve their techniques. They have to be chivvied into producing high quality "traditional" products. This truly is, as Petrini puts it, the building of terroir. It is as much, if not more about the invention of culinary patrimony as about its preservation. For every product that goes back centuries, there are, I would hazard after looking at reviews of the Salone de Gusto, many more that have been quietly dropped from the repertoire, or that have been invented or reinvented for modern urban tastes.

As marketing, Slow Food's strategies are superb, perhaps the most successful example of the near-universal adoption of the French Terroir Strategy for selling food to the First World. As the foundation of a program of reform it is deeply suspect. If we in the advanced countries suffer from collective amnesia about the meagerness of the food supply until about a century or so ago, we also tend to forget that most people in the world still live on these meager diets. And to claim that Slow Food will produce sustainable agriculture and maintain biodiversity without considering the rest of the world means that the problem is ill-framed from the beginning.

But let us see how Petrini goes about it. To make the French Terroir Strategy work at all, let alone to make it the foundation of a revolutionary new agro-culinary culinary program, Petrini has to emphasize gastronomic education. The products on offer are more expensive than those offered by Culinary Modernism so that consumers have to pay higher prices for food. In principle, this is not at all a bad thing. The problem is that, as we have seen, very few consumers have been willing to do so. Instead they spend their surplus income on other goods that Petrini describes contemptuously as "superfluous possessions suggested . . . by advertising campaigns."[9] So to create a market for luxury foods, people have to be trained to recognize and like them. With this in mind, Slow Food advocates have set up programs to teach children taste, organized workshops for adults to study the tastes of different foods, and are now well on the way to having a university of gastronomy.

No one would want to quarrel with offering people the opportunity to expand their horizons. But education in taste is an ambiguous concept. It can mean education in the objective detection of flavors using the techniques refined by food scientists in the last couple of decades and the opportunity to explore novel tastes and textures. Or it can be education in

"good" taste, a much more subjective matter and traditionally a way of showing membership in an elite. Since many people are utterly uninterested in being part of a gastronomic elite, it is perfectly possible that even those who have passed through tasting workshops will still prefer food scorned by Slow Food. I have more than one relative who has experienced wine and prefers Coke, tried gnocchi and returned to French fries, and would pass over foie gras for a hamburger any day. These would not be my choices but my relatives have every right to make them. Nor will educating children in taste necessarily produce a crop of adult gourmets. Lots of research shows that tastes are neither patterned on those of parents or other adults nor fixed in childhood. Indeed if tastes were fixed in childhood there would be precious few people in the Slow Food movement.[10] So Slow Food cannot rely solely on education to persuade people to pay more for food and hence to set in train the changes in farming that could possibly replace the practices of Culinary Modernism.

Perhaps because education is not in itself enough to establish the credentials of Slow Food, Petrini committed the organization to another program, the preservation of biodiversity. "Scholars of gastronomy, sociologists, political scientists, and gourmets were confronted with a harsh fact: the worrying disappearance of competent craftspeople and the systematic disappearance of fruit and vegetable species [varieties?]."[11] Slow Food would extend its mission to save quality food production from the flood of standardization and to preserve vanishing animal and plant breeds.

The link between biodiversity and the consumption of fine wine, cheese and sausage appears to be obvious to Petrini though to me it is rather opaque. I think what he wants to argue is this. The French Terroir Strategy means that Slow Food encourages quality foodstuffs. Some, such as certain varieties of cheese, are made from certain breeds of cattle. A market for such cheese will give farmers a reason to ensure that the breed survives. This will maintain genetic variability within the species, one of several kinds of biodiversity recognized by biologists. It's a perilous argument for Slow Food to make because if it is the variety and not the terroir that creates the taste, then the Terroir Strategy is put at risk. But leave that to one side.

Offering no evidence whatever, Petrini claims that 300,000 plant varieties have vanished from the earth in the last hundred years.[12] It is all a little confusing because it's not clear if he (or his translator) is confusing varieties and species. The text slides back and forth in a way that is less than confidence-inspiring (see above). But suppose he is right. Would these postulated 300,000 or a proportion of them have survived had we eaten Slow Food instead of the products of Culinary Modernism? It's not obvious that they would. In any case, varieties, after all, are not a fixed pool. They are created and discarded all the time as needs and tastes change. The last two or three hundred years in the west have seen an explosion in the creation of new varieties.

So if some edible varieties disappear, it is no big matter provided that others are taking their place.

Nor is it clear that the three Slow Food programs designed to protect biodiversity and the environment make much difference. The first, the Ark of Taste, is not, as the name might lead you to think, a botanic or zoological garden but a list of products at risk. The second, the Praesidia, simply identifies products or producers that need special intervention if they are to be appreciated, improved or sustained. And the third is a prize, the Slow Food Award for the Defense of Biodiversity. In 2003 it went to the Mexican, José Iturriaga, who during his term in the National Council of Culture and the Arts (Conaculta) organized a series of fifty four books on the cooking of the poor and indigenous peoples of Mexico. It is, indeed, a quite magnificent record of Mexican food (I have reviewed it enthusiastically elsewhere). But the connection with the defense of biodiversity is at best tenuous.

And to create a sustainable agriculture the members of Slow Food need to think how to feed the world, something that the advocates of *Diet for a Small Planet* tried seriously to address. This means tackling the question of how to produce enough grains, meat, and if necessary legumes and other proteins. Even Slow Food members do not live on wine, cheese, sausage and greenery (the preferred foods of the organization) alone. The world certainly doesn't. These products may revive the economies of small regions of Italy or areas close to urban markets in other countries. But they are not the central issue of a global sustainable agriculture. Petrini says nothing about the grains and proteins that are. As a guess, presumably he would argue for his "avant-garde traditionalism." But a return to traditionalism would lead, if not to mass starvation, to the reversal of the gains of Culinary Modernism and the reinstitution of the two-tier system of eating.

So we are left with the fact—puzzling at first sight because of the socialist or communist background of the Slow Food founders—that Slow Food has nothing to say about the plight of the hungry worldwide.[13] Quite the reverse. Petrini wants nothing to do with the affordable, decent food for all that was the shared goal of both Culinary Modernism and *Diet for a Small Planet* however much they might have disagreed about the means of achieving it. Instead Petrini condemns Culinary Modernism as having brought the "pervasive acceptance of the primacy of profit for the producer and savings for the consumer, summed up in the shameful slogan 'low cost and minimal quality.'"

Try telling that to Chuy de Cabrera of Rancho El Rodeo in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. Because she goes out to work so that she can buy school books and uniforms for her three little girls, she no longer has time to make tortillas at home. Instead she goes to a tortilleria in the village where her cousin, a small entrepreneur bent on making a profit, sells cheap machine-made tortillas that she buys to go with the family beans.

Does she see this as shameful? Not in the least. She has decided that earning and saving money for her children's future trumps home-made tortillas. Those are now for birthdays and Christmas, perhaps with the rare treat of a newly-cheap chicken. And her cousin is making a profit, perhaps that's not so bad either.

Then there is Petrini's sonorous but vacuous paradox (of which he has many) that Slow Food "creates an elite without excluding anyone."[14] Nonsense. Chuy certainly can't join the elite who chose to pay substantially more for taste. The Slow Food organization, says Petrini, has to decide with respect to Italian food whether "you bring the food to the people or the people to the food." Well it's not an issue for Chuy because she's not going to be buying these cheeses and sausages in Mexico or in Italy. The poor are stuck with the tyranny of the local. Well-traveled food and well-traveled people alike reflect social status, rank and class. Slow Food's elite is reserved for those who have already reaped the benefits of Culinary Modernism.

If Slow Food advocates were content to rest their case with the claim that Slow Food, like earlier gastronomic movements, increased the happiness of gourmets while creating a niche market for farmers and food producers offering specialist products, then I for one would be cheering it on. If they find that it gives them the chance to experience compassion, beauty, community and sensuality as well as a religious experience, I'm delighted. But not everyone gets their jollies from food. And those who don't, don't want to be nattered at by self righteous gourmets. Worse still, if those who do sign up are misled into believing that Slow Food has the answer to preserving biodiversity and creating sustainable agriculture, then we are once more back in a situation where the best for the few is the enemy of the good for the many. Because there is still Chuy. And millions like Chuy around the world. And as long as there are, there are still people who want their culinary world to be changed and changed for the better. And for that, Slow Food has no plan to offer.

Notes

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1 Corby Kummer, "Doing Good by Eating Well," *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1999).

2 xii, xiv, x, and back cover.

3 86

4 Rachel Laudan, "A Plea for Culinary Modernism: Why We Should Love New, Fast, Processed Food," *Gastronomica* 1 (February 2001) 36-44.

5 *Canada Bi-Weekly Bulletin*, December 19, 2003, Volume 16 no 22, 2.

6 Quoted in John L. Hess and Karen Hess, *The Taste of America* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989, third edition), 157.

7 Warren Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry 1966-88* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

8 38

9 23

10 Paul Rozin, "Family Resemblance in Food and Other Domains: The Family Paradox and the Role of Parental Congruence," *Appetite* 16 (1991), 93-102.

11 85

12 87

13 Stefano Bonilli began publishing a magazine supplement called Gambero Rosso, (the Red Shrimp) to the Communist daily newspaper, Il manifesto Fabio Parasecoli, "Postrevolutionary Chowhounds: Food, Globalization, and the Italian Left,"*Gastronomica* 3, (2003) no.3, 29-39.

12 19