

Political and ecological impact of traditional food

Traditional food in the Slow Food sense is food that is an expression of eco-cultural diversity of its place of origin. As such it plays a highly important role in safeguarding of ecosystems, of cultural diversity, and not least of the diversity of flavours. Traditional food, without referring to a cosy backward-looking concept of traditions, are the 'product' of communities, traditional food needs to be taken seriously, to be supported and defended by all of us.

Traditional foods are foods that have slowly developed over time out of particular conditions – socio-cultural, climatic, geographical. They are not entirely fixed over time – potato dishes are considered traditional nowadays in many European regions, for example, but the potato has only really been widely distributed here since the 18th century. However, the evolution of traditional food and dishes is comparatively slow, advances in sync with local cuisine and agricultural and artisan practices, and – crucially – is a grassroots phenomenon (i.e. not tied to a particular commercial endeavour).

The knowledge about traditional food is at all stages of the production-consumption chain linked to and transmitted through local practices. These include agricultural and gardening practices, but also the distribution (local markets, shops), preparation (recipes, often handed down through family practices) and, not least, the final consumption of foods – which are often linked to local social events, be it private ones within the family or public ones, such as harvest festivals. This, by the way, is not simply a phenomenon in the more traditional communities, but also in

our rationalised Western societies, as we drink the new wine of the season with onion bread or give out sweet pretzels to school children on St Martin's day.

Lively practices around local foods are at the centre of a virtuous circle of promoting social cohesion, strengthening local economies and support local small-scale food production.

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Small-scale farmers have retained strengths from the past, and these are being gradually recognised as forward-looking assets in our quest for food production systems that can feed the current and future world population. Traditional agricultural practices are generally less energy-intensive and more eco-friendly than modern commercial farming. Mixed cropping and mixed farming systems – practised in local adaptations the world over – imitate natural ecosystems and aim to be self-supportive systems based on diversification and recycling. They contain various elements (crops as well as animals) that are integrated at nutrient exchange as well as functional levels. They reduce the risk in farming and allow for a higher intensity farming, maintain high levels of food production while at the same time, sustaining the system through soil water conservation, energy security, rainwater harvesting, cropping sequence management and multi-tier arrangements. These practices – called Integrated Farming Systems in their modern guise – can be found in a great variety of combinations and many places. They include the “Three sisters” intercropping farming system of North America – including winter squash, maize and beans – but also the Streuobstwiesen (mixed orchards) of Germany, where sheep graze under dispersed fruit trees on meadows that also produce honey, and hay for other animals, in species-rich semi-natural habitats. Also common are grain and legume intercropping arrangements – in Germany, often wheat and lentil. In tropical areas, coconut, banana and pineapple lend themselves to multi-tier farming.

Traditional systems of food production are usually closely linked to the local cuisine. Take the German example of wheat and lentil farming: grains and legumes also combine into tasty and highly nutritious dishes, like the Swabian dish of lentils with spaetzle noodles, or paste e ceci (pasta with chickpeas) and bean and pasta soup in Italy.

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The Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that more than 85 percent of farmers worldwide are smallholders. However, there is a remarkable discrepancy between the vital role of smallholder farming and the significance attached to it globally. The bulk of research funding, for instance, goes into technology-based agricultural innovation, despite the negative human and social impacts of the Green Revolution. The loss of sustainable agricultural practices based largely on traditional knowledge has led to low productivity and widespread suffering.

Smallholder farmers supply us with a great variety of high-quality food around the world. They look after the countryside, especially in marginal areas such as high mountain pastures and tropical forests, and they keep mountain and coastal communities alive. They have an intimate knowledge of their local area and its plants and animals. That is why smallholder agriculture is a key element in a sustainable, locally adapted agriculture.

In the early years of this millennium, Slow Food started the Presidia project to develop supportive networks for smallholder agriculture and artisan food production.

Presidia are formed around a traditional food at the risk of extinction, with the aim to protect and promote the food – which can be traditional breeds or heritage food plants, but also food products such as cheeses, preserves, baked goods or many others. But the food is not seen in isolation – the projects also aim to support the local economy and the community in which it is rooted. The project brings together

communities of producers who are willing to collaborate and jointly establish production rules, quality standards and ways of promoting their product. Presidia aim to be a tool of adding value, as well as giving cultural dignity, to the work of the artisan food producers, in order to create a food production that is sustainable and viable at environmental as well as at economic and socio-cultural levels. The Presidia networks also extend to other members of the community, such as traders, chefs, academics, and, not least, the consumers.

Slow Food does not consider food without its socio-economic context, so naturally, the safeguarding of traditional foods also involves the safeguarding of the knowledge about the foods and the structures of their production, distribution and consumption. These foods and their socio-economic context are a vast resource for the present and future well-being of humanity and of the planet. Protecting them means protecting diversity – biological and ecosystems diversity, diversity of culture and knowledge, and not least, of taste. Diversity and local adaptation on the other hand mean resilience, a highly important asset in the face of the pressures for example of climate change. The Presidia also help to preserve cultivated landscapes in marginal areas and they offer prospects to small producers around the globe. They safeguard hundreds of animal breeds and species and give future generations a clean planet rich in biodiversity.

A sound local economy and sustainable agriculture that is considerate of the environment, the cultural identity of the community and animal welfare are vital to support food sovereignty – the right of every community to decide for itself what it grows, produces and eats. This is of particular importance in the countries of the global South where often, food is not simply a question of improving the quality of life but rather concerns the very survival of people, communities and cultures.

There are currently around 400 Presidia projects all over the world, involving more than 10,000 producers – smallholder farmers, herders, fishermen and women,

and artisans. The Presidia are supported and coordinated by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, and through the international Slow Food network. Slow Food assists the producers directly by organising training and exchanges; it promotes products through communicating their stories of producers, knowledge, local areas and production methods, and can use the association’s network to link producers with consumers by means of events, the involvement of chefs, and through support for forms of direct sale such as farmers’ markets and purchasing groups. The projects are publicised through multi-channel communication (online, printed material, audiovisual material, media campaigns etc). Here are some examples of Presidia projects.

The first one is the **Argan Oil Presidium in Morocco**. The argan tree is similar to the olive tree but can only be found on the southern coast of Morocco between the cities of Safi (to the north) and Goulimime (to the south). This is an impoverished, dry area that gets very hot during the summer. Since the beginning of time this oil, pressed from berries that mature between July and August, has played a key role in the cuisine of the Berbers, a nomadic Semite population present in North Africa long before the Arabic invasion (7th century C.E.).

Almost 50 kilos of fruit (apricot kernels) are needed to produce just a meager half liter of oil, a low yield for a product where the processing is long and tedious. For these reasons, argan’s market price (approximately € 25 a liter) is much higher than that of olive oil.

In Morocco, the production of argan oil is women’s work; traditional knowledge is passed down from mother to daughter. With simple, repetitive movements, the women break the hard shells of the pits with a stone, and extract and chop the kernel. They add a few drops of warm water to this rough paste to help extract the oil, and the mixture is pressed in a small homemade mill made from two large stones, one balanced atop the other.

Argan oil is a deep golden yellow color and the flavor is unmistakable and intense, with notes of hazelnut and crudités. A few drops can be added to a freshly cooked pot of couscous, a fish or meat tajine or crudités. It can also be consumed alone on a simple piece of bread. Mixed with almonds and honey, argan oil is used for amlou beldi, the traditional creamy spread that is offered to visitors together with bread and mint tea as a sign of welcome. In the countryside, a few drops of this oil are used to feed newborns as their first food. Argan oil can also act as a skin-moisturizer, pomade or healing ointment.

The Presidium was founded in 2001 thanks to Professor Charrouf. It currently comprises 120 women in 9 communities. Collecting the fruit, husking it and extracting the oil serve as social occasions; the women meet, take courses and learn to read and write. The Argan Oil Presidium also has environmental value. UNESCO has declared the stretch of land covered with 20 million trees (the Arganerie) a Biosphere Reserve. The Arganerie helps maintain the balance of the region bordering the Sahara and keeps the desert at bay.

Thanks to the support of the Piedmont Regional Authority, training courses have been organized for the women, experts have visited the Presidium to help improve the production process, and a recipe book, tasting manual and video to create a local panel of tasters have been published.

Another example of a Slow Food Presidium is the **Pozegaca Plum Slatko from the Drina valley in Bosnia-Herzegovina**. The Drina valley and the Goražde enclave were among the areas most devastated by the Yugoslav civil war in the early 1990s. The conflict irreparably damaged entire cultures and rural traditions as well as destroying almost all local employment. In 1998, unemployment was running at 80% of the active population. Before the advent of the communist Yugoslav state, this area, surrounded by a low mountain range separating it from Serbia and Montenegro, had been famous for the quality of its fruit. This circumstance offered

an attractive opportunity to create activities that could generate an income while safeguarding the traditions and knowledge of the old rural culture.

Slatko means “sweet”, but in the Balkans, the word also refers to a plum preserve in syrup. It is still made in various parts of Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia, but is not as widespread as in the past. In the upper Drina valley near the town of Goražde, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the production method is particularly demanding – the entire process, from skinning the fruit to packaging, is done by hand. Pozegaca plum slatko is currently produced by a group of women. With the help of older members, they have rediscovered the traditional recipe. Their slatko is prepared on a wood fire in the village of Filipovici (Ustikolina/ Goražde), using plums grown on the banks of the river Drina.

The Presidium project was launched in 2004. At the time, slatko was only prepared at home by the oldest women, and the tradition was disappearing, along with the local plum variety, pozegaca. After a visit organised by Slow Food to similar projects in Italy in 2005, five women producers legally registered a producers’ consortium (EMINA). With the help of Slow Food, they began directing promotional efforts at Sarajevo restaurants and retailers. The production process was recorded so that it could be passed on, maintaining the traditional and artisan knowledge while providing consistent and uniform quality of the final product. The producers attended international food events in Italy, Bulgaria, and France to promote their products, to exchange information and to network with other small-scale producers. In 2009, the EMINA association collaborated with the Ustikolina local authority to set up a food event of their own, promoting local products.

Since 2005, sales of slatko have steadily increased (the only exception being the 2011-2012 period of economic downturn in Bosnia). The EMINA association has started to sell in Sarajevo, at two supermarket chains, as well as at the annual Christmas market, and has successfully broken into export markets for France and

Italy. More producers, and also fruit growers, have joined the Presidium, bringing their numbers to 14 slatko makers and 10 plum growers in 2014 – almost all of them women.

An example from Germany are the **Swabian Alb Lentils**. The semi-mountainous Swabia Alb in Southwestern Germany is a difficult landscape with poor soil, little water and a relatively harsh climate. Lentils were historically one of the most common crops here, and a major source of protein in the local diet. Many traditional recipes combine lentils with grain-based foods, like lentils with spätzle (local fresh noodles), the most representative regional dish.

In the 1960s, the regional cultivation of legumes was gradually abandoned, because they were unprofitable and linked to an old-fashioned food model. As a result, the seeds of traditional lentil varieties were lost. Only in the 1990s, lentils began to be grown in the area again, and in 2001 a consortium of producers was founded to coordinate the drying, cleaning, packaging and marketing of the Alb-Leisa (Alb lentil, in Swabian dialect). An increasing number of farmers began cultivating lentils organically, though without being able to use seeds of native varieties. Then, in 2006 two researchers found seeds from Albleisa 1 and Albleisa 2, varieties indigenous to the Alb region, in the seed bank of the Vavilov Institute in Saint Petersburg. Lutz Mammel, a local farmer whose family had been the pioneers of reintroducing lentil cultivation in the area, travelled to Saint Petersburg the following year, together with several Slow Food Germany members. They recovered the original seeds and brought them back to Germany where, with the help of a research project at the University of Nürtingen, they have been reintroduced.

Owing to the favorable combination of soil, climate and local knowledge, the lentils are of excellent quality, but require a long drying and cleaning process. The area’s two traditional varieties have different shapes and uses. One has a larger seed and is ideal for purees and soups, while the other one is smaller and best as a side

dish. Both have an intense, hazelnut-like flavor.

Now, thanks to the project, around 60 local farmers have started cultivating lentils and selling them locally. In addition to the strict organic standards of production, a Presidium protocol details best production practices, to assure consistent high quality.

The Presidium is working to promote the cultivation and consumption of these two lentil varieties in the region, though targeting local restaurants, specialized delicatessen shops and a dedicated farm store, as well as the participation at regional and national food events, such as the Slow Food fair in Stuttgart. Currently an application for a protected denomination of origin is being discussed.

Results of Slow Food Presidia

A study conducted in 2012 by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, which assesses the sociocultural, the agri-environmental and the economic results of Slow Food Presidia projects in Europe in the previous twelve years, found positive results in all three areas. All the Presidia have recorded a substantial increase in sociocultural sustainability, and in almost all cases studied, this was thanks to the significant increase in internal relations within the producer groups and in their external relations, and in greater consumer awareness of the value of their work and product. This was achieved through participation in events and communication efforts. In some cases, this result was further strengthened by the creation of a producer association, which improved organising and negotiating powers. The economic achievements of all Presidia were also encouraging.

Positive results in the realm of agri-environmental sustainability involve a general reduction in the use of synthetic chemicals (for plant-based products), and an improvement in the quality of animal diet, with a reduction or elimination of silage, and, in various cases, of feed containing GMOs. There are weak points,

particularly regarding the energy component, as there is still only limited use of alternative energies, and regarding packaging, which would require materials with a lower environmental impact. One especially interesting aspect the study was the particular nature of relationships created through the Presidia projects, in that they are circular, and never one-way. The network effect of these projects that link producers, traders, academics, consumers and many other players to each other and also to the natural and sociocultural environment plays a significant role in improving the situation of everyone concerned.

I would like to highlight one aspect that plays a role in many presidia, including those I have used as an example, and that is the role of women. A significant number of smallholder farmers are women, and they also play a vital role in other parts of the food system, be it in working the raw material gained from farming or fishing, be it in tending the gardens, or not least, keeping alive the traditional recipes for food products and dishes. Yet women receive only a fraction of the land, credit, inputs (such as improved seeds and fertilizers), agricultural training and information compared to men. The vast majority of studies have found that differences in yields between men and women exist not because women are less skilled but because they have less access to inputs such as improved seeds, fertilizers and equipment. Because of cultural attitudes, discrimination and a lack of recognition for their role in food production, women enjoy limited to no benefits from extension and training in new crop varieties and technologies.

Empowering and investing in rural women has been shown to significantly increase productivity, reduce hunger and malnutrition and improve rural livelihoods. Slow Food Presidia of course do not only include women, but the empowerment of women and also other marginalised people such as indigenous peoples and the younger generations, is very much on the agenda of Slow Food. Increasing their access to resources, their food sovereignty and not least, their dignity through

appreciation of their work, is an important part of the Presidia projects, and of the work of Slow Food in general.