



Terra  
madre

world meeting  
of food communities

OCTOBER  
20/23  
TURIN  
2004



Ministero delle Politiche  
Agricole e Forestali



CITTA' DI TORINO



Slow Food®

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## Alice Waters Speaks

It is self-evident to me — as it probably is to everyone else in this enlightened audience — that the best way to bring people together, and the best way to create caring, compassionate, *peaceful* communities, is to bring people together around *food*. And yet people around the world are increasingly alienated from meaningful participation in the everyday act of feeding themselves. This is driving us apart, and diminishing our world. In the United States, in just two generations, the number of farmers has declined so fast that surprisingly few citizens now know anything about the lives of the people who grow their food. Today one American farmer can feed more than *one hundred* of his fellow Americans; a hundred years ago, that farmer could feed himself and just five other people. This increase in productivity, which we owe to the technologies of industrial agriculture, is astounding—and yet it has come at a terrible cost.

We're all familiar with the most obvious elements of that cost — the loss of biodiversity, the loss of soil, and the agricultural pollution. All these things have diminished the world. But there has also been an equally important cost to our— to producers and consumers and the relationship between the two. When that bond is *broken* — as it has been in so many places now —the only piece of information exchanged between the producer and consumer of food is a *number* — the *price*. So a carelessness sets in, on both ends of the food chain, a carelessness that is deeply destructive. This wall of ignorance gives us an industrialized food system devoted to *quantity*, rather than quality. Wendell Berry, America's poet laureate of agriculture, put this best:

“The global economy institutionalizes a global *ignorance*, in which producers and consumers cannot know or care about one another, and in which the history of all products will be lost. In such a circumstance, the degradation of products and places, producers and consumers, is inevitable.”

Such a food system has brought forth in the United States a shiny affluence spread thinly across the land. But though it may sparkle from afar, when you see it up close, it is barren and sterile. Consider the facts: Every day, one in three American children eats at a fast food restaurant. Fewer than one in five sits down and eats a family meal around a common table.

And yet the family meal — especially when it consists of food a family has cooked itself — instills in us the most basic human values: courtesy, civility, honesty, generosity. The family meal is an everyday ritual enactment of our deepest humanity. Its repetition requires us to acknowledge that actions have consequences, that survival requires cooperation, and that people and nature are interdependent. Helping to prepare and share the family meal demonstrates to children that food is beautiful and that beauty merits attention and care. When we are children, we absorb such lessons without thinking, as if by osmosis.

However, when our children eat fast food, they absorb a very different set of messages, also by osmosis. The insidious, irresistible voice of consumerism says: Food should be cheap. Resources are infinite. It is okay to waste. Speed is a virtue. The seasons do not matter and neither does where you live in the world.

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Such are the fast food values that pervade so much of American culture and politics. How can we even begin to counteract them?

About ten years ago, I had an idea: the President of the United States should set an example for the whole country by planting an organic kitchen garden on the White House grounds. The White House, I reasoned, could thus show its commitment to environmentalism and to the Jeffersonian ideal of a government informed by the values of a nation of farmers.

A vegetable garden, I imagined, would help feed the President, his family, and official guests; it would be a working demonstration of environmental responsibility; it would be beautiful in every season. It would also elevate the work of growing food to its rightful place in the national imagination — as a craft worthy of our best minds and hands. Imagine a press conference held in front of a backdrop of beautifully tended greens and fruiting vines! Imagine the President of the United States welcoming a foreign dignitary to the White House with food from his own garden, instead of a can of Coke. So I wrote to President Clinton, imploring him to ground his legacy by leaving behind a White House kitchen garden and a compost pile to nourish it. “A simple and beautiful gesture,” I wrote, “a gracious gift to your successor, ... a gift that would be an act of presidential healing and humility unprecedented in American history.”

Alas, the White House kitchen garden has not yet been planted. But I continue to lobby for it, as well as for a constructive food policy that would no longer subsidize the industrialization of agriculture and would instead reward sustainable farming. And I have just written to Teresa Heinz Kerry to urge her to make a plan for a greener White House, and I offered to help her find a new chef and an organic gardener when she moves into the White House on January 20, 2005. [the speech was made before the US elections]

Most importantly, we must all lobby for a worldwide revolution in education. Fast food values must give way to a slow food curriculum in every school.

The amazing vision of the University of the Gastronomic Sciences, the Slow Food University opening this fall, gives new integrity to the science and art of eating, and honors the art and craft of producing food.

This is a noble idea that should begin in kindergarten and continue straight through college. We need to make school lunch an *academic* subject, a required part of *every* core curriculum. Students and teachers need to be brought into a new relationship with food. They should participate in the preparation of lunch, from the garden to the table, sitting down together, serving one another, and cleaning up together. Students would learn where their food comes from, and know something about the people who produce it. Lunch then would become an eco-gastronomic experience for all children, and they would get credit for eating it. And if the food were purchased from local, organic farms, imagine the impact it would have on sustainable agriculture.

I believe that the destiny of humankind in the twenty-first century will depend most of all on how people choose to nourish themselves. And if we can educate the senses, and break down the wall of ignorance between farmers and eaters, I am convinced — because I have seen it with my own eyes time and again — people will inevitably choose the sustainable way, which is always the most delicious alternative.



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*Alice Waters, a chef, writer and opinion leader, is an international vice-president of Slow Food*



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