

# What I Learned at Terra Madre

—Alan P. Mammoser

I was on a quest to discover local food. Supported by a journalism fellowship from the German Marshall Fund, I had spent the previous five weeks poking around farms and farmers' markets in England, France, Switzerland, and Italy. I journeyed across these countries watching the last fruits come in. I noted the potato harvest, the final cutting of lettuce, the last cabbages in the ground, boxes full of little apples, knotty squash and bright orange pumpkins, vats in Swiss wine cellars full of warm fermenting grapes, and villagers in Tuscany just beginning their ancient annual gathering of chestnuts.

This finally brought me to Turin for a big conference called Terra Madre. Sponsored by the Italy-based Slow Food organization, Terra Madre claims 1,600 "food communities" in a kind of network of farmers cultivating traditional crops around the globe. They're committed to keeping what's in danger of being lost: rare crops, animals, and traditional production methods. They're small farmers seeking to preserve, or re-create, a kind of agricultural biodiversity. It seemed just what I was looking for.

I found 5,000 people milling about a massive convention hall on the edge of Turin. About half of them actually were farmers, although they seemed lost amidst all

the talks, presentations, and panel discussions, much of it academic. I had to leave this formal business to find the farmers. And find them I did, seated at little tables that stretched in long rows across the bare convention floor. They were farmers from the five continents, many in the colorful dress of their countries.

The farmers set out seeds of one sort or another: nuts, spices, grains, herbs, flowers, leaves, tree fibers, what have you. They were quite happy to chat with any passerby about these things. They had me touch, taste, and smell what they had. They told me of what grows well and what grows poorly, of their seasons, soil, sunlight, temperature, rainfall. I met date farmers from Libya (who had all sorts of grains as well), learned about spelt in Asturias, sniffed small bundles of grasses, and observed little packets of seeds and bunches of greens on paper plates. I met a woman from Cameroon with small bags of gummy tree wood, selling the semisweet, tasty substance for 1 €.

Here I really felt myself to be among farmers. They were all quite different in look, demeanor, and dress, as naturally they would be. They came from wet countries and arid, from steppes and forests, from mountains and lowlands. But each one knew one small piece of earth very well. It occurred to me that their knowledge, when taken together, would form a great compendium of knowledge, an intimate knowledge of the earth in its many parts. Indeed, it seemed that a great living knowledge of Mother Earth was walking about on that bare convention center floor.

Just a few steps from Terra Madre stood a convention hall hosting a big culinary conference called Salone del Gusto. It was a big Slow Food show with a great mix of people: farmers, chefs, restaurateurs, food purveyors of every sort. Some of their food was basic fare and some was quite fine. The Salone featured the Presidia, about 300 Terra Madre food communities receiving support from Slow Food's Foundation for Biodiversity to revive artisanal foods. Their booths told stories of food from foodstuff pure and

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simple: rare farm animals, fish, insects, trees, roots, vines, veggies, milk. Elsewhere, chefs showed their skill to bring the basic elements together into subtle flavors of high cuisine.


I walked through there every day for four straight days, looking for lunch. Chefs had hauled in food from their home territories, preparing pricey lunches to show off their regional specialties. Basically, I subsisted on four Italian food groups: meat, bread, cheese, and gelato. Sandwiches of savory meats were incredible, with slices of pancetta, carpaccio, or spicy prosciutto (from rare pigs of course), which could fill the thick bread with flavor. One fellow offered samples of raw bacon that melted in the mouth. Fish, nuts, wine, olives, creamy cheeses from every corner of Europe, and much else were on offer.

Mostly I avoided the chefs and stayed near the farmers. I finally found some vegetables from a farmer of Languedoc, who prepared a little plate of the Pardailhan black turnip. He served it shredded, salted, and oiled, with a tiny glass of wine. It was so basic, so tasty, so nutritious, seeming to provide just the essence of what the human body requires. Somehow there was nothing more satisfying, in the way of food, than to savor this simple dish while standing by the farmer who made it.

I think that is what Slow Food hoped to achieve by this double gathering, this juxtaposition of humble farmers and high cuisine. Bringing Terra Madre to the Salone del Gusto made the connection. It showed that food comes from the earth, from life. The conference organizers made a big deal of all the chefs present. Many of them spoke of their work to revive local foods in their own areas. Some chef-educators boasted of taking their students to farms, to show them that

cheese really comes from milk and so forth. Otherwise, though, the connection was hard to see, covered over by the dry business of panels and talks.

I saw it by just going from table to table, chatting with those farmers, trying to catch a glimpse of how they bring their dry seeds to life. The distance from the farmers' seeds to the delicacies offered in big city restaurants today might seem quite wide, especially to us contemporary urbanites. Terra Madre put me in touch with the reality that all flavors first come from the hands of farmers, from the basic goods they take from the earth. More deeply, it showed me how the earth, in some ineffable way, shapes the people who work it, leaving a marvelous diversity of farmers on five continents.

I think that Terra Madre, as a network of farmers, really appeared at the very end of the conference. It occurred as people were milling about on the bare concrete floor near the exit doors, when a little group began singing. They were Andean farmers, one of them strumming a small string instrument. First they shouted a few times, "viva Italia", in thanks to their host. Then they sang and soon attracted a crowd around themselves, with some Africans joining in. They began to dance a simple happy dance of peasants. It was a spontaneous celebration by those who bring life from the earth, celebrating life itself. 

*Alan P. Mammoser is a regional planner and writer based in Chicago. His travels were funded by a generous grant from the German Marshall Fund of the United States.*

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