

# PRESERVING TRADITIONS

The Slow Food movement focuses on saving the heritage of food, and Atlanta's Julie Shaffer is spearheading the celebration of locally produced cuisine



Julie Shaffer, founder of the Atlanta chapter of Slow Food



Locally farmed carrots provide your body with richer nutrients and antioxidants than cookie-cutter carrots can.

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

**SPOTLIGHT** If you ate milk and cookies every day after school and now serve the same snack to your kids, you could say that's a gastronomic tradition. If milk and cookies is the common after-school snack within your community, you could call it a local food tradition. If all the folks who once made cookies from scratch stopped baking, these traditions would be lost. Slow Food is an international group with more than 80,000 members working to preserve food traditions, food heritage and food cultures throughout the world, while focusing on what they call "eco-gastronomy" or the connection between plate and planet. Slow Food hopes to establish and protect food systems that result in food that is good, clean and fair: That is, food that tastes good, is produced without harming the environment, animals or health, and provides fair compensation to producers. It's a cookie that's easy to swallow.

Slow Food was founded in 1986 by Carlo Petrini, an Italian food writer, in response to a McDonald's opening in Rome's Piazza Spagna. Petrini feared that fast food and the increasing industrialization of food systems would standardize taste and eliminate regional cuisine. He rallied his friends and neighbors to protect his country's food culture, and a movement was born.

"What started as an ironic protest pretty quickly turned into an educational organization," says Julie Shaffer, Atlanta convivium leader and southeast regional governor for Slow Food U.S.A. "It caught on really fast in Europe, where they're fiercely proud of their food traditions and heritage. They didn't want to see what happened

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in the U.S. happen to them." Europeans didn't want to become a fast-food continent.

Today, Slow Food is active in more 100 countries. Slow Food U.S.A. supports a network of 170 local chapters, each called a convivium. "Slow Food is not a protest organization," says Shaffer. "It's an educational organization dedicated to protecting food heritage and promoting biodiversity. It's about promoting good stewardship of the earth and land. We know that industrial food companies aren't necessarily doing that. So many varieties of fruits, vegetables and animal breeds have completely disappeared from our tables."

Slow Food's Ark of Taste & Presidia projects were created to preserve endangered tastes. "Most notable in the U.S. is the heritage breed turkey project," says Shaffer. "In 2002, Slow Food U.S.A. got a bunch of poultry farmers to agree to raise heritage breeds of turkey, like Bourbon Red, that had completely disappeared from our tables." Their basic deal with farmers was: If you raise them, we'll sell them. Contradictory as it may sound at first, a key to rescuing a food is to create a viable market for it. (Or, as Poppy Tooker, leader of the New Orleans convivium puts it, "eat it to save it.") By 2007, the turkey project involved 12,000 birds.

"Another example is the suncrest peach," says Shaffer. "A lot of California farmers were bulldozing their suncrest peach orchards because the peaches are fragile and don't travel well." In the current food system, anything dif-

ficult to ship is less profitable to grow, which is a shame, because foods like the suncrest peach are often "wonderfully delicious," Shaffer says. Slow Food persuaded the Masumoto family to grow suncrest peaches as long as they found a market for the fruit. "That sort of thing is happening all over the world," says Shaffer, thanks to Slow Food.

## BRINGING IT HOME

Shaffer discovered Slow Food while vacationing in Italy in 1999. "I heard about what I thought was a local club and reasoned it must be the opposite of fast food. On a whim, once I got home, I typed Slow Food into a search engine and a huge amount of information popped up," she recalls. "The more I read, the more interested I became." She called the national office in New York, asked about joining an Atlanta chapter, and was told the nearest convivium was in Chattanooga. "They asked me if I'd consider starting one in Atlanta." At that time, she was teaching full-time, a graduate student, a single parent and didn't think she had time to take on volunteer work. But she thought about it, decided it was something she believed in and sent a letter to 30 people inviting them to join. Early media attention helped establish the Atlanta group, which today boasts nearly 500 members.

"We've been focused on building awareness," says Shaffer. Initially, the group was viewed with some skepticism, but now there's a growing wave of interest in local sustainable foods in the Atlanta area. "I'd like to think

organizations like Slow Food have contributed to that through education and the events we do," she says.

Among Shaffer's and the Atlanta convivium's projects are a school garden in Decatur; campus chapters at Le Cordon Bleu and the Culinary Institute at Chattahoochee Technical College; the sustainable food initiative at Emory University; and the Georgia Restaurant Association's local, sustainable and green coalition. She also works with other organizations in Georgia that share philosophies similar to Slow Food, including Georgia Organics and Southern Foodways Alliance. Recently, Shaffer was invited to speak with the CDC's division of nutrition, obesity and physical activity. "The CDC and Slow Food are in the process of creating a formal alliance," says Shaffer. "I'm excited that we're in conversation with them. We gathered local farmers and stakeholders together with the CDC and spent a day talking about local food and the future of food in our country. This is more and more important because we're overweight in this country—there are stunning statistics on obesity in youth. We need to make some changes. And what's needed, frankly, is legislative change."

Toward that goal, Shaffer has organized various stakeholders—including the food bank, farmers markets, Emory, Georgia Organics, Slow Food and others—and is in the process of finalizing a manifesto or vision for Atlanta's sustainable food future to will be presented to Mayor Shirley Franklin.

But change starts at home. "I choose my foods carefully," says Shaffer, who chooses local, sustainable and fair trade products whenever possible. "I like knowing where my kale comes from." **SP**

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- **The International Slow Food Movement**  
[www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com)
- **Slow Food USA**  
718-260-8000  
[www.slowfoodusa.org](http://www.slowfoodusa.org)
- **Atlanta Convivium of Slow Food**  
[www.slowfoodatlanta.org](http://www.slowfoodatlanta.org)