

Slow Food's Terra Madre 2010 Conference Report for Transition Haslemere

Background

Terra Madre is the two-yearly global conference for the Slow Food network, which this year was held in Turin, Italy from the 21st to the 24th October 2010. I attended as one of the UK delegates on behalf of Transition Haslemere, and particularly the Landshare group within it.

Slow Food is an international organisation with branches in most countries in the world. It considers itself to be a network of grassroots producers, cooks, activists and gourmets aiming to link the pleasure of food to a commitment to community and the environment, their tagline is 'good, clean and fair food'. More information on Slow Food here - www.slowfood.org.uk.

Terra Madre brings together people from over 150 countries every two years to discuss issues relating to food. It is a four day conference, running in parallel to the Salone de Gusto – a food fair which focuses on worldwide food, particularly those under threat from 'extinction' – in Turin. The conference has a range of talks, lectures, discussions and activities running in parallel, and delegates can attend those which are most relevant for them, as well as making more informal links to other attendees. More information on Terra Madre here – www.terramadre.org

I wanted to go to Terra Madre for two main reasons: – firstly it was an opportunity to understand more about Slow Food, as their aims and objectives sound like they should align well with the food elements of Transition, and secondly I wanted to discuss the community garden project we've been running in Haslemere and to pick up ideas and inspiration from others involved in similar projects elsewhere. Terra Madre pay for the entrance, accommodation and food costs of delegates, and I self-funded the travel to Italy (by train, not plane!) so it was a zero cost exercise for Transition Haslemere.

Summary of conference

The conference aimed to "bring together those players in the food chain who together support sustainable agriculture, fishing, and breeding with the goal of preserving taste and biodiversity" and in 2010 had a particular focus on language as well, and the preservation of indigenous languages. The conference opened with an impressive ceremony with all delegates together and a procession of flags, with each continent having a representative speaking in an indigenous language about their food experiences and a traditional song. After the opening ceremony the remaining 3 days had a number of workshops, lectures, briefings and meetings all running in parallel. The most relevant/memorable ones I attended were:

- Food Policies – social systems and transformations – the importance of economic viability, ecological sustainability and social acceptability for any food system policy

- A revolution in the garden – thoughts on how gardens have changed the political, social and environmental landscape and what we can do to encourage them to develop
- Organic, Sustainable and Fair Farming – issues experienced worldwide in running active farms in an organic and sustainable way
- Small-scale producers – regulations, crises and opportunities
- UK regional meeting – which covered an introduction to Slow Food UK and their activities, resources which can be called upon (more below), as well as a networking and meeting session
- Networks meet: Terra Madre gardens – open mike opportunity to talk about the issues associated with gardens and gardening projects worldwide

As well as a number of more informal gatherings on topics as diverse as bee keeping (some interesting African perspectives on the European pre-occupation with declining bee populations), charcuterie and beer making. All discussions were held in the native language of the speaker, with simultaneous translation into 5 languages through translators and headsets.

The conference developed a number of papers on each of a set of key themes during the course of the four days, and these were read out at the end as part of the closing ceremony.

Key conclusions

Overall, although the experience was interesting and stimulating, I came away a little disappointed on all fronts.

I did learn more about Slow Food and their aims, but I am less convinced that they align as well with Transition as I had hoped. Although they have a declared environmental objective, they are more focused on the ‘good’ aspects of their tagline, rather than the ‘clean’. In this way supporting local food is encouraged, but mostly because of the importance of developing quality through locality, rather than because of the environmental or community benefits. Therefore, they would encourage eating specialities from a small quality producer in Africa, even if the food had been flown to the UK in order to do so (although they would never *explicitly* advocate a practice which was environmentally unsound). Furthermore, there is a certain whiff of exclusivity in the approach they take to engaging people in a discussion about food – for example they are not well aligned to supporting low income families, and focus more on high cuisine than on supporting or encouraging the majority of the population to think about where their food comes from.

I did make some interesting links to others running community garden projects, but mostly in the Americas and Africa, which although an interesting link is unlikely to have similar issues to those we face in Haslemere. Having said that, I am now part of an online global community writing a handbook for community garden projects, and that’s a positive step forward which may develop benefits for us in the future.

I made some interesting links to activists working in the UK – particularly Bristol, Cornwall and Yorkshire – who are addressing food related issues in different ways, and hopefully we can pull through some of that learning in appropriate places in due course. The biggest learning point I took from these engagements was the importance of engaging people through social networking and online communities, and has encouraged me to think about how we can use Facebook and Twitter more effectively to target a different population in Haslemere.

The most immediately useful outcome was an understanding of some of the resources which Slow Food UK have to hand which we may be able to use – particularly their ‘Taste Experience’ pack and the idea of a ‘Wisdom Wall – see below, and more detail on their website (www.slowfood.org.uk)

Taste Experience – this is an activity for children (or adults) in which a series of different tastes are explored. For example tasting food without knowing what it is and discussing what it tastes like, and exploring colour and texture in food. It can be run with just a few supporters and is apparently very engaging for children. The ‘kits’ can be borrowed from Slow Food HQ and provides all the information and materials needed to run it (without the food itself). I was thinking we could use it when we have an event on, such as the Green Fair, as a ‘stand’ for children to engage with.

Wisdom Wall – this is the idea of having a board where people write up their favourite recipes, or thoughts on food, or tips on food preparation (e.g. by putting Post-It notes up). It can build over time and obviously works to be read or contributed to. I thought this might be fun to have running at the Farmers’ Market as a way of engaging people in conversation and interaction?

Recommendations

1. Definitely worth maintaining a link to Slow Food UK in order to ensure that we maximise any opportunities to utilise their resources or ideas. There is no local group (closest are Tunbridge Wells, Brighton and London) but maintaining awareness through being on their mailing list is a useful step.
2. We should consider using the Taste Experience kit at our next event, dependent on the availability of their ‘kits’ (the earlier we know when we might use it the better). Particularly because we can focus it to talk more about local food, or food which has been produced in an environmentally responsible way, if we like.
3. We should consider introducing the idea of the food ‘Wisdom Wall’ at one of the Farmers’ Markets, to see whether it works to encourage engagement on a slightly different level.