

Slow Food reaches Beijing

Beijing's budding Slow Food campaigners are helping city folk connect with local produce

■ FOOD

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A pan of cream bubbles on a hot plate under the early autumn sun as chef Randhir Singh tells a crowd of onlookers about the finer points of making ice cream.

Next, he adds a butter-coloured mixture of egg yolks, sugar and vanilla seeds scooped from black pods. The result: a delicious, rich liquid that elicits murmurs of approval from eager tasters pressed up against Singh's outdoor work table.

As an opening to Beijing's inaugural Slow Food event two weeks ago, ice-cream-making was a good choice, appealing to both expatriates and locals in the audience. It is easy to make at home, even if not all ingredients are locally produced.

The setting for "Slow Food Saturday" was fitting, too. Less than two hours' drive from the capital, Mutianyu village sits under the Great Wall and attracts hordes of tourists year round. But the area is also famous for its orchards of chestnut trees - now bursting with almost-ripe fruit - as well as peaches, walnuts and farmed trout.

Still, rather than supporting a little-known Western food movement, many of the roughly 400 Beijing residents at the event simply wanted to swap city gridlock for the slower pace of pretty villages, where vines laden with bulbous gourds decorate yards and fuchsia-pink flowers line winding roads. But getting busy urbanites to connect with a place of food production is a first step in garnering support for Slow Food.

"This is a great place to learn about food. There are many things that people don't know about what they're eating. Is it locally grown? Is it from a sustainable farm? It's important to make the link between farmer and consumer," says Candice Lee of the Black Sesame Kitchen cooking school, who, with the school's founder, Jen Lin-Liu, set up the Slow Food Beijing Convivium this year.

Founded in Italy and France in the late 1980s, the international Slow Food movement aims to protect local food traditions against the rise of industrial food conglomerates. In the West, it has gained momentum as a counter-culture to the global spread of McDonald's and other chains. But on the mainland, fast food is not yet as prevalent. Most people still eat fresh food every day and many city dwellers still have family members living off the land.

"In the villages, they may not know it, but they're already practising slow food," says Adlyn Adam Teoh, founder of Hias Gourmet, which organises culinary excursions and events on the mainland. "People still make everything from scratch, take a couple of years to raise their own pigs, and follow sustainable farming. They just don't put a name to it."

Yet as urbanisation continues, more people are consuming processed or fast food and many young Chinese will lose contact with their rural roots. Already, many say, it is difficult to identify the origins of their food.

"I would like to know more about what I eat and where it comes from. But when you're back in the city, it's difficult to trace the vegetables on offer to the farm they were produced on," Li Xiao-yan, a Kunming native who works at a foreign firm in Beijing, says.

Lee and a handful of passionate food producers want to change that by supporting local growers and encouraging their customers to do so too.

"What grows in the village or on the mountain? Many people don't know. But what we get out of the soil round here is amazing!" raves Singh, chef at The Schoolhouse, a Mutianyu restaurant serving Western food.

Earlier this month, Singh's menu featured Mutianyu peaches, roasted and then basted in *erguotou*, the local liquor. Beef reared in the same county, Huairou, is another regular on Schoolhouse tables, surprising much of the foreign clientele.

"In Beijing these days, every restaurant has beef from Australia or Japan. But these places have no personality. In the village restaurants, you get an experience. You're connected to the place," the chef says.

Jennifer Yeh is also an enthusiastic supporter of local ingredients. A former TV producer, the Taiwanese moved to Beijing from New York four years ago and launched an artisan bakery, Boulangerie Nanda. All breads are kneaded by hand and take at least eight hours to make because Yeh uses less yeast than most industrial bakers.

She laments that more and more Chinese bakers are buying frozen, ready-made dough, leaving them with little control over the quality and taste of their loaves. Yeh takes the opposite approach, hand-cracking walnuts and preparing her own almond paste for her almond croissants.

Like Singh, she gets most of her ingredients from the area. Most importantly, the stone-ground flour comes from a Hebei miller. "It's so small that they don't deliver to Beijing. They take the flour on a tractor to the long distance bus and we pick it up at the other end," she says. Traditional stone mills are increasingly rare on the mainland but Yeh is adamant that this gives her bread its exceptional flavour. "I've tried every flour available in Beijing but I haven't found anything better than this one."

While not a 100 per cent guarantee, knowing your food producers is the best way of making sure that food is safe and healthy, Yeh says. "They may not have organic certification but when you

go to the farms and you see that this is all they have, that's really the only way you have to make sure you're getting good products. Farmers earn so little, we need to support them."

It's a pertinent message after the spate of food safety scandals across the country in the last few years. Leading guests on an orchard walk, Teoh points out that the county's millions of chestnut trees are a cash crop for the area, with nearly two-thirds of the harvest exported to Japan. Growers are starting to discuss the possibility of organic production but the shift will depend on consumer demand.

Promoting and preserving local recipes, one of the main strands of the Slow Food manifesto, is another way of supporting high-quality produce, Teoh says. Huairou chestnuts are already famous for their taste and history - first planted during the Ming dynasty, the fruit was once off-limits to the public. Now they add flavour to dishes like slow-braised chicken or pork, or are simply roasted on chilly Beijing streets for a high-energy winter snack. Living up to the established name for Huairou chestnuts encourages growers to follow sustainable farming practices and respect quality.

"Slow, traditional habits are still present in China but we have to preserve the culinary heritage. That's what a Slow Food movement here should be all about," Teoh says.

Village restaurant owners like this goal. Han Wei, manager at the Shuntong Rainbow Trout Culture Centre, where the specialities include thin slices of trout sashimi, says: "I think the name [Slow Food] is confusing. But it's a good idea because people are more and more interested in where their food comes from." Others promote *yuanxiao*, dumplings that are usually boiled, but in this village, are fried, or an egg soup, a concoction of powdered chestnuts, and the wild mountain vegetable *ye kong xin cai*.

Culinary heritage can perhaps include new recipes, too. Although Singh chose to make vanilla ice cream for the Slow Food demonstration, he claims that his hawberry variant is a hotter item. "Vanilla is so common but hawberry ice cream - well, it's just more special." And hawberries are, of course, locally grown.