

# IN THE SPIRIT OF NOAH

## FOOD DIVERSITY & THE SLOW FOOD MOVEMENT

*By Renate Sander-Regier*

**Food diversity and tradition, genuine foods and flavours, the appreciation of quality food, a less hectic pace of life. These are some of Slow Food's central philosophies, and they reflect values that many Canadian organic growers share.**

**S**low Food, for those of you who are unfamiliar with it, is an international movement which developed in Italy as a reaction to fast food. It all started in Rome in 1986, when McDonald's sought to open a franchise on the city's historic Piazza di Spagna at the base of the Spanish Steps.

Wine/food writer Carlo Petrini, along with other members of an Italian gastronomic society, were quick to respond. They formed the International Movement for the Defense of, and the Right to, Pleasure and issued a manifesto against what they perceived to be a threat to Italy's culinary heritage.

In the manifesto they proposed the idea of "slow food"—food which takes time to prepare, consume and appreciate—as a remedy for fast food and Western society's increasingly fast-paced lifestyle. Carlo Petrini is quoted as saying that the movement started almost as a joke—if there's fast food, why not slow food?

Little did he and the other founding members suspect how quickly the idea would catch on. Petrini started receiving telephone calls from people enthusiastic about the idea of slow food. They wanted to enjoy quality food, support food traditions, and slow down their lifestyles; slow food offered a framework for doing those things.

In 1986, the original light-hearted initiative became the national Slow Food movement of Italy. In 1989 it went global and has since spread throughout the world—through five continents

and 83 countries, with almost 100,000 members in over 700 local chapters (called *convivia*).

### **Education and diversity**

According to Slow Food, all traditional products, along with local food customs and traditional methods of cultivation and production, epitomize the flavours and character of their regions of origin. The movement's mandate has conse-

quently developed to protect, in broad terms:

- food and agricultural heritage (e.g. crop and animal biodiversity, sustainable agriculture, heritage techniques and recipes, food traditions, rural development); and
- the historic, artistic and

environmental heritage of places where slow food is enjoyed (e.g. cafés, inns, bistros).

To carry out this mandate, Slow Food works internationally to support rural communities, promote agricultural approaches that respect the environment, and gain recognition for gastronomic traditions that are part of a region's cultural heritage.

One of Slow Food's main objectives is taste education. This part of the mandate includes conferences, publications, workshops, courses and programs for educators, a Master of Food program, and the University of Gastronomic Sciences (the first institution of its kind in the world).

Slow Food's other primary objective is biodiversity protection. The main biodiversity

---

Let us rediscover the  
flavours and savours of  
regional cooking and  
banish the degrading  
effects of fast food.

---

project is the Ark of Taste, a symbolic ship loaded with foods threatened by industrial standardization. This international undertaking is designed to rediscover, catalogue, describe and promote endangered animal breeds, vegetable species at risk, and food products in danger of dying out—all victims of a global agrifood industry which produces inexpensive food at a high cost to the environment.

The operational offshoots of the project are presidia, local groups which help communities meet various needs, like creating micro-markets, constructing buildings, developing networks and helping facilitate the transmission of traditional knowledge between generations. Presidia also provide economic support, and media and public

relations backup to people working to save an Ark product.

Slow Food has started to grant awards to provide public recognition for food diversity work. The award is presented annually to people—farmers, researchers, teachers, distributors, entrepreneurs, trade associations and more—who help support and promote biodiversity through research, production, marketing, education or documentation activities in the fields of food and agriculture.

### **Slow Food Canada**

The Slow Food movement is still getting organized on a national scale in Canada, with recent developments including a newsletter, official bilingual status, and the national Ark of Taste.

But it's at the local and regional convivium level that the real Slow Food action takes place. This makes perfect sense considering it is local and regional culinary traditions the organization seeks to discover, protect and promote.

---

It started almost as a joke—if there's fast food, why not slow food?

---

Local Slow Food convivia are independent regional groups that bring together people who share Slow Food values.

Convivia typically organize events like tastings, farm visits, workshops, demonstrations and festivals to raise awareness, pass on knowledge and share experience. Some convivia focus on reviving and protecting animal breeds, plant varieties, food production methods or agricultural techniques. Others help small regional producers promote their products and develop larger markets.

Convivium leaders are always interested in connecting with local producers. "We want to get farmers, ranchers and people from farmers' markets involved in events," says Sinclair Philip, Slow Food Canada's president. "We want to put small producers in touch with consumers, purchasers and journalists who will get the word out and raise awareness of their products."

### **Canada's Ark of Taste**

Canada's Ark of Taste currently includes one animal species (the Canadian cow) and two plant varieties (Red Fife wheat and the Montreal melon)—all

### **Slow Food Manifesto**

Our century, which began and has developed under the insignia of industrial civilization, first invented the machine and then took it as its life model. We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods. To be worthy of the name, *Homo sapiens* should rid himself of speed before it reduces him to a species in danger of extinction. A firm defence of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of Fast Life.

May suitable doses of guaranteed sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment preserve us from the contagion of the multitude who mistake frenzy for efficiency. Our defence should begin at the table with Slow Food. Let us rediscover the flavours and savours of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of Fast Food. In the name of productivity, Fast Life has changed our way of being and threatens our environment and our landscapes. So Slow Food is now the only truly progressive answer. That is what real culture is all about: developing taste rather than demeaning it. And what better way to set about this than an international exchange of experiences, knowledge, projects? Slow Food guarantees a better future.

*Source: < [www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com) >*

interesting and potentially rewarding choices for organic producers in Canada.

“We need diversity in our food system,” says Mara Jernigan, who coordinates Canada’s Ark of Taste. “We need choices. If we have only one kind of food system, our choices are gone.”

She adds that the Ark of Taste Canada focuses on identifying, cataloguing, celebrating and spreading the word about traditional Canadian food choices. She also stresses that it is important to protect this country’s unique food diversity by getting involved politically. And it starts by telling the stories . . .

The story of Red Fife wheat has already been covered in this publication (Winter 2004 *EcoFarm & Garden*). The story of the other plant, the Montreal melon, is just as colourful.

## The Montreal melon

The origins of the Montreal melon have been traced back to varieties brought to this continent by French settlers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Those melons, likely including the Cavaillon melon, were crossed with other melons along the way, such as the Giant Green Nutmeg melon, to produce the distinctive Montreal melon—a large fruit growing up to 6.8 kg (15 lb.), renowned for its unique, spicy taste with tones of nutmeg.

That flavour was famous in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a period known as “Montreal melon mania.” At the time, the melons were grown at a rate of 2,500 dozen per year to supply the fancy dining rooms of New York and Boston, where guests paid a

pretty penny to eat a single slice of the fruit. Seed catalogues distributed the seeds widely during that period. The melon was even sent as a gift to King Edward VII of England, a well-known gourmet and gourmand, who was apparently delighted by its taste.

Then, in the wake of World II, it virtually disappeared from the menu and the catalogues. The reasons for this are complex.

After the war, the city of Montreal expanded into the rich farmland where the Montreal melon had grown so well. Industrial agriculture started taking over small farm production, favouring fruit that was easy to grow, ship and store—the opposite of the Montreal melon, which didn’t store well, required considerable attention in the field, and whose size and easily bruised skin made transportation complicated and expensive. Expanded and more rapid means of transportation also meant that a wider variety of imported fresh fruit was



*The Montreal melon is grown regularly at the Cantaloupe Garden, located behind the YMCA in Montreal.*

available to consumers—tough competition for the local melon.

The Montreal melon virtually disappeared as a result—until recently when some Montreal residents starting looking into their city’s rich agricultural past. To make a long story short, careful sleuthing unearthed some Montreal melon seeds in a seed bank in Iowa.

Today, the Montreal melon is grown regularly at the Cantaloupe Garden, located behind

### Montreal melon growing tips

- Plant the seeds directly into hot beds outdoors under black, compostable plastic, or
- Start the melons early indoors with 3 seeds per 4" or 6" pot. Transplant seedlings out under black compostable plastic under a cloche.
- Provide soil rich in potassium and magnesium, with a pH between 6 and 7.
- Water every two days with tepid water, avoiding the leaves, and maintain consistently moist soil.
- Once the plant has produced five flowering branches, pinch the main stem above the fifth branch to concentrate growth on flowers and fruit.
- Limit the number of fruit to three or four per plant.
- Time the harvest carefully (if the fruit is picked too early, it will not be very sweet)—the melons will change colour slightly when the fruit is ripe.



*Ruth, a Canadienne cow, is a member of Ark of Taste, a symbolic ship loaded with foods threatened by industrial standardization.*

the YMCA in Montreal's Notre-Dame-de-Grâce district where the fruit was traditionally grown. The garden is associated with Montreal's Action Communautaire, a community-based environmental organization that promotes healthy communities and community food security.

Montreal melon seeds are also increasingly available to growers wishing to try their luck with the famed heritage fruit. Ken Taylor, an organic producer involved in reviving the Montreal melon at his Windmill Point Farm near Montreal, encourages people to grow the Montreal melon for the challenge and the excitement. But he stresses that the fruit needs perfect growing conditions to develop the qualities it should have, including a long growing season, lots of heat, and nights that aren't too cool. He points out that the melon was devel-

oped in an area with lots of sun and a climate tempered by the St. Lawrence River.

### **The Canadienne cow**

Another member of Canada's Ark of Taste, the Canadienne cow is the only dairy breed developed on the North American continent. The Canadienne is descended from cows brought to Canada in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

As suggested by some of its local names—Black Jersey, Black Canadian, Quebec Jersey, French Canadian—the Canadienne cow resembles the Jersey. Mature cows reach 450–500 kg (1000–1100 lb.), while bulls tip the scales at 700–800 kg (1500–1750 lb.). Calves, light-coloured at birth, usually turn dark brown to black at maturity, with lighter tones around the udder, muzzle, and back line.

We don't know what type of cattle the Canadienne cow has descended from. It was most likely a variety of breeds. What is known is that settlers made no attempts to keep breeds separate.

They needed cows that would survive, reproduce and provide milk throughout the year despite relatively poor feed and extreme weather conditions. And selection led to the contemporary Canadienne cow, a breed known for its hardiness, longevity, good nature, intelligence, fertility, calving ease, excellent grazing ability and high-quality milk and meat.

Canadienne cows were a family tradition for Quebec's Jean-Marc Bigué, lifetime member of the breeder's association. His father and grandfather milked them, and he did too. "They are gentle and docile, not nervous," he says. "And they're very hardy, easy keepers—the most economical breed."

As a small dairy breed well adapted to Canada's climate and vegetation, the Canadienne cow doesn't require expensive imported feed or intensive management to produce milk. It does well on pasture, and can go out earlier in the spring and later in the fall when larger breeds tend to cause damage in the wet field conditions.

Doug Law, a Rare Breeds Canada director who milks Canadiennes and Holsteins on his dairy farm in Ontario, has nothing but praise for the Canadienne. "She excels when others have a hard time," he says. "She will come when called and lead other cows to and from pasture, saving many hours a day. She will graze on hills so

steep that other cows will not bother. And she will encourage Holsteins to graze rather than stand at a feeder.”

The Canadienne is considered among the most productive of the world’s old and hardy breeds, efficiently producing milk noted for high levels of protein, butterfat (4.4% compared to the Holstein’s 3.65% and the Jersey’s 4.2%), and Kappa-casein B variant—excellent for cheese production. Doug Law concurs and adds, “While her production is a little less than a Holstein on average, she eats much less.”

Yet despite its hardiness, economy and productivity, the Canadienne cow almost faded into oblivion.

First came a federal government policy in 1853 discouraging farmers in Quebec from breeding Canadienne cows. As a result, Canadiennes became largely overlooked. Fortunately

a few men recognized the gravity of the situation and got together to save the breed from extinction. They started a herd book in 1886, followed by a breeder’s association in 1895. Both initiatives helped sustain the breed.

---

The Canadienne cow is considered among the most productive of the world’s old and hardy breeds.

---

Then, when the modern dairy industry started taking shape about mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with its focus on milk quantity and larger dairy breeds, the Canadienne cow was dealt another blow. The breed declined to the point that it was listed as endangered by Rare Breeds Canada.

In 1999 the Quebec government granted the Canadienne cow official heritage status. That designation has helped raise the breed’s profile in the province.

“We must conserve the Canadienne cow, a pioneer breed in Quebec and Canada,” says Jean-Marc Bigué. “Governments should do more to protect it—at all costs.”

Doug Law feels it is important to promote the Canadienne cow as a viable commercial dairy breed. He points out that the breed has suffered from being promoted as simply a relic of the past or for its suitability as a hobby, not commercial, animal.

“The Canadienne cow is a commercial dairy cow,” he stresses. “A good Canadienne cow is capable of competing with dairy cows of any breed if conditions are suitable.”

### **An ode to Slow Food’s logo – the humble snail**

“One of the first books devoted entirely to snails was written in 1607 by Francesco Angelita of L’Aquila in Italy. He lists many species, traces their histories and describes the ornaments that can be made out of their shells. But his particular focus is on what human beings can learn from the silent life of snails... Francesco Angelita believed all creatures to be God-sent bearers of the divine message. Slowness was an essential virtue, as was adaptability and the ability to settle anywhere, in any situation. By slowness,

he meant prudence and solemnity,

the wit of the philosopher  
and the moderation of

the authoritative governor. We could

extend this interpretation to say that the

snail takes its time as it trails along, impervious to haste and readily at home everywhere. Cosmopolitan and thoughtful, it prefers nature to civilization, which it takes upon itself, with its own shell. Such gems of traditional country lore are now part of this animal and explain its extraordinary success, culminating ten years ago in Slow Food’s adoption of a little snail as the symbol of an entire movement. It seemed then that a creature so unaffected by the temptations of the modern world had something new to reveal, like a sort of amulet against exasperation, against the malpractice of those who are too impatient to feel and taste, too greedy to remember what they had just devoured.”

Source: < [www.slowfood.com/eng/sf\\_cose/sf\\_cose\\_filosofia.lasso](http://www.slowfood.com/eng/sf_cose/sf_cose_filosofia.lasso) >



## The costs

Jean-Marc Bigué is right. We must protect breeds like the Canadienne cow, along with plant varieties like the Montreal melon and Red Fife wheat, at all costs. The cost of not doing so is a lack of biodiversity which can have devastating long-term results. Disasters like the 1840s potato famine have demonstrated the dangers of relying on a small gene pool.

We all—governments, Slow Food, breed and plant organizations, independent producers, backyard vegetable growers, concerned consumers—must work together to protect food diversity, spread the word, tell the stories, in the spirit of Noah.

Our survival depends on it.

*Renate Sander-Regier is a writer and educator living in rural West Quebec, where she is in the process of restoring native plant biodiversity to the fields surrounding her home. She has returned to graduate studies in geography at the University of Ottawa, where she is studying the relationship between human beings and the natural environment as manifested through current ecologically oriented gardening movements. Renate is also the author of the soon-to-be-published Autumn Wild, a personal geography through a West Quebec season, written under the pseudonym Robin Stone.*

## More information

### Slow Food International:

< [www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com) >

Slow Food in Canada: Sinclair Philip, 1-800-889-9688, < [sinclair@sookeharbourhouse.com](mailto:sinclair@sookeharbourhouse.com) >

Ark of Taste Canada: Mara Jernigan, 250-743-4267, < [engeler@telus.net](mailto:engeler@telus.net) >

### Montreal melon seed sources:

Seeds of Diversity Canada, 1-866-509-7333, < [mail@seeds.ca](mailto:mail@seeds.ca) >

Windmill Point Farm, 514-453-9757, < [info@windmillpointfarm.ca](mailto:info@windmillpointfarm.ca) >

Terra Edibles, 613-961-0654, < [www.terraedibles.ca](http://www.terraedibles.ca) >

Greta's Organic Gardens, 613-521-8648, < [greta@seeds-organic.com](mailto:greta@seeds-organic.com) >

### Canadienne cow:

Société des Eleveurs de Bovins Canadiens—Canadienne Cattle Breeders Association  
Michelle Giasson, Secretary,  
2460 du Couvent de Lorette  
St-Hyacinthe, QC J2T 4P4  
T: 405-774-2775 F: 405-774-9775.



On the Critical List – the Large Black Pig

Thanks to the efforts of RBC members, the Large Black Pig is again being bred in Canada and is available for meat.

*Make your next livestock purchase a rare breed.*

JOIN RBC - support heritage livestock conservation and education projects AND receive Genesis, RBC's quarterly journal.

341-1 Clarkson Road  
RR#1 Castleton, ON, K0K 1M0  
905-344-7768  
[rbc@rarebreedscanada.ca](mailto:rbc@rarebreedscanada.ca)  
[www.rarebreedscanada.ca](http://www.rarebreedscanada.ca)

### Photo credits:

*The Montreal melon was grown by volunteer gardeners at the Action Communterre's Victory Garden Network in Montreal. Action Communterre is a community-based environmental organization promoting healthy communities and community food security through a network of community gardens and shared backyard gardens. The group produces several tonnes of food each summer with a focus on producing a surplus for redistribution through the food bank and other food security partners.*

*The photo of the Canadienne cow (named Valley Acres Prestige Ruth) is from Dorothy Shier.*



- Pioneers in practical, energy-efficient housing
- Small-scale company providing constant, on-site supervision & personal interaction with clients
- Uniquely crafted homes, additions & renovations
- Extreme care taken in choice of building material for quality & chemical composition
- Barrier-free access & attention to other special needs is 'our standard'

*"We believe we build the most efficient & comfortable homes in Ontario."*

(519) 856-9306  
FAX: (519) 856-9611  
Rockwood, Ontario

< [www.bradenhomes.ca](http://www.bradenhomes.ca) >