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Slow Food in a Fat Society

Satisfying Ethical Appetites

In *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* historian Hillel Schwartz escorts us through the fashions and follies of dieting advice popularized in the United States over the last 150 years.¹ He narrates numerous episodes in the American love-hate affair with reducing, arguing that the logic of dietary redemption is akin to that of consumer capitalism, dooming adherents to the disappointment and debt of being never satisfied. In his portrayal, abundance is the temptress of appetite. It is the original American sin.

At the end of his book, Schwartz tempts *us* with a utopia: the world-altering promises of a “Fat Society.” Schwartz’s Fat Society is not to be confused with one populated by an overweight majority. If we take seriously the dietary recommendations and health standards of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the American Medical Association (AMA), contemporary America already is an Overweight Society. Instead, imagine, for a moment,

a comforting society, less harried, more caring. It would favor the gourmet over the glutton, slow food over fast food, matriarchy and communal affection over patriarchy and self-hate, eroticism over pomography, philanthropy and art over greed and blind technology.²

Though Schwartz’s polemic is provocatively hyperbolic (Are all family matriarchs selfless? Should they be? Is art less blind than technology?), I take him to express a desire for a pleasure ethic that is more creative than exploitative:

A fat society would be a consumer’s society, though not in the manner of the cannibal or the narcissist....In a fat society...[c]onsuming would become satisfying to the degree that it became social, generous and unburdening. People would consume not to hoard but to harbor. Abundance would not terrify them, for they would not fear that everything must be consumed lest it consume them. Abundance would be a quality of life rather than a test of appetite.³

Writing in the middle 1980s, Schwartz noted that “[t]he Fat Society, neither a glutton’s paradise nor a thin farm, has yet

to take shape as a substantial cultural vision.”⁴ I would like in this essay to entertain a possible contemporary candidate: the Italian gourmands’ consciousness-raising group that in 1986, the year *Never Satisfied* was published, coalesced as a rejoinder to the opening of a McDonald’s at the foot of Rome’s Spanish Steps. Surely known to readers of *Gastronomica*, it is named, in a serendipitous echo of Schwartz, “Slow Food.”

Slow Food

With surprising rapidity northern-Italian-born Slow Food has become, by the turn of the twenty-first century, an international movement. It now boasts as many as sixty thousand members throughout more than forty-five countries. As Fabio Parasecoli has reported in this journal, Slow Food seeks to marry the pleasures of the table to a leftist politics of production and consumption.⁵

Slow Food strikes many obvious notes in harmony with Schwartz’s Fat Society. Seeking to reject “alimentary monoculture”⁶ and arrest the McDonaldization of society, Slow Food favors the gourmet over the glutton, enticing eaters to slow down, enjoy the company, taste their food. Slow Food refers not merely to home-cooked meals served socially in satisfying portions but extends to artisanally produced foods and heirloom varieties with histories, even pedigrees. Under the Slow Food banner local groups enunciate regionally inflected concerns about the impact of global agribusiness and genetically modified crops on the livelihood of family farmers and the taste sensations of consumers. The Slow Food Award for the Defense of Biodiversity recognizes individuals who work to represent food difference and abundance as cultural patrimony, not as an invitation to gluttony.

Slow Food USA

But what happens when Slow Food moves across the Atlantic to the United States? What adjustments have been

made for American appetites? For one thing, Slow Food is trimmed of any lingering anticapitalist sentiment. In New York City, home to the national office of Slow Food USA, a majority of members have ties to the restaurant industry. A primary goal of Slow Food USA is to match like-minded producers with consumers eager and financially able to provide a market for those heirloom turkeys, raw-milk cheeses, and small-batch wines under threat. Slow Food USA has

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faith in the power of the consumer. One of the local New York City convivium leaders announced at a gathering I attended in 2002: “I’m a slow food person, an American, and a capitalist—and I don’t think they are incompatible.” Slow Food wants to whet appetites and speaks little of hungry bodies. It is a movement that prides itself on requiring no sacrifice. Patrick Martins, the director of Slow Food USA, clarified to a reporter in 2002, “We are not a protest organization....Most protest organizations have a short life span. We are a celebration organization. We protest by eating good food.”⁷ Following Schwartz’s vision, Slow Foodies consume “not to hoard but to harbor” for future generations.

As befits a movement that came into existence in the shadow of the millennium, Slow Food promises not only to save our conscience but to bring the world back from the edge of alimentary apocalypse. To celebrate and preserve

the nearly extinct flavors of *bottarga di muggine* (mullet roe) and “the wild rice that grows naturally, is harvested by Native Americans, and is hand parched over a wooden fire,”⁸ Slow Food seeks to build a great “Ark of Taste.”⁹ In evangelical tones, founder Carlo Petrini promises that “saving genes in the golden age of biogenetics”¹⁰ can save us from our own overreaching industrial missteps. Echoing the early nineteenth-century “philosopher in the kitchen” Brillat-Savarin, the Slow Food movement promises that The End can be “forestalled by gourmandise.”¹¹ At the turn of this last century, concern was not how to keep nations at peace but, perhaps, to redeem globalization and forgive Europeans and Americans their sins of colonization (which arguably did more to enhance Western cuisine than did any technological innovation). Slow Food may be viewed as an exercise in what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has called “imperialist nostalgia,”¹² romantic regret for selectively recollected conditions whose loss one’s own society has condoned if not orchestrated.¹³ Harboring Native American wild rice does little to address the poverty-based malnutrition afflicting Native American communities.¹⁴

It is worth questioning the bodily effects of this Slow acceptance of capitalist consumption. As its logo, Slow Food sports the snail, which, on the western side of the Atlantic, might suggest embracing the sloth that American dietary history has fought so hard to whip into shape. So, how does Slow Food address an overweight society? Might Slow Food, at least or especially in the United States, where, as Schwartz details, obsession with bodily regulation has been systematically cultivated, require a denial, a suspension, of the weight of the body?

The Slow Food Body?

Is there a Slow Food body? If so, is it, at all, fat? Carlo Petrini is himself rather tight-lipped on matters corporeal, addressing the full sensorium of the pleasure of eating without regard to the material aftermath of the feast: “Much knowledge is

to be gained through the taste buds and the mucous membrane in the nose, and attaining such knowledge is an experience that is closely related to pleasure,” he writes. “Pleasure of this sort implies moderation and awareness and is an integral aspect of health.”¹⁵ Here Slow Food runs retro, returning to the tradition of the wise, happy, moderate gastronome made famous by Brillat-Savarin and periodically reintroduced through such optimistic diet guides as Martin Lederman’s post-World War II *The Slim Gourmet*.¹⁶ But is Petrini’s concern for “health” to be read as a euphemism for waistline maintenance? Or might he espouse truly a Fat Society ethos, girth and all?

Because a sense of wise moderation and a screed against the commercial greed among cardiologists and margarine producers that animates the so-called cholesterol theory is about as close as the Slow Food literature gets to the body,¹⁷ it is difficult to adjudicate this question. In *Slow Food: The Case for Taste* Petrini addresses, with a trace of apparent weariness, the query, “Is it risky for your health to make gastronomic pleasure a priority?”¹⁸ He responds by redirecting the question, astutely interrogating the object of *health* itself. He points us to fifteenth-century revivals of classical medical recommendations for a personal “regime” of well-being “aimed at achieving a balance between instinct and self-control, desire and wisdom, and—precisely—pleasure and health.”¹⁹ Health, that is to say, is not to be confused with asceticism, which is just as unhealthy as excess. Nor, for that matter, are the healthful properties of food fully quantified in terms of calories, proteins, vitamins, or grams of fat, polyunsaturated or otherwise. Pleasure creates health, too—bodily, mentally, and socially. Though I find this move intellectually sound, I wonder whether Petrini’s displacement of bodily health concerns will really satisfy the more weight-conscious among Slow Food supporters or those able to recite their cholesterol levels—particularly in the United States, where the virtue of moderation has not been a particularly persuasive practice. As a dietary philosophy, Slow Food does not satisfy many biomedical concerns.

A next step in tracing the outlines of a Slow body would be to consider the forms and figures of those who attend Slow Food events. My ethnographic data are slim, gathered while attending Slow Food events with the eye of a trained anthropologist, but not in any official research capacity. My data are simply suggestive. Speaking from New York City, as might be expected from the socioeconomic class hailed by the call to gourmandism, Slow Foodies do not, as a collective, obviously parade the accumulated effects of slow eating. They tend to be slim gourmets dressed in black (one wonders how many smoke!). There are exceptions. Of one

noted cookbook author, a rotund Italian-American man in his fifties, a friend of mine asked gleefully toward the end of an all-afternoon wine tasting event, “How can we become like you?” The reply, delivered in a mock-serious baritone: “Eat and listen to opera.” In Northern California, Slow Food folk I have met present loosely dressed bodies, suggestive of stockiness rather than rotundity, although under the layered drape of soft cottons and linens it is difficult to tell.

On both continental American coasts the ideal-typic Slow Food body is a comfortable body. It blends into the local environment. It is not self-obsessed. It is materially and professionally secure. It houses a self that errs on the side of moral superiority—what Schwartz might characterize as a thin self content to be ensconced in a portly body. Produced by a dieticity, a moral philosophy of eating, that revels in its disregard for aesthetic effects, the ideal Slow body may also be implicitly masculine. I suspect that the Slow Food ethos does not transcend gender ideals, which continue to make and mark a difference in how people eat in relation to how they perceive their bodies. In the United States slenderness represents an appropriately self-controlled feminine appetite.²⁰ Reviewing US college students’ food journals, Carole Counihan concludes, “for men eating can be a path to size and power; for women it is a path to thinness and control.”²¹ It is not gender neutrality, then, that permits Slow Food supporter Mario Batali to display his solid belly on the cover of *Gourmet Magazine* and in a *New Yorker* quasi centerfold.²² As one of Counihan’s female students tellingly noted, “I think my father shows some power and authority because of his big, round belly....[M]en can get away with being overweight more than women.”²³ In contrast to Batali or the male cookbook writer mentioned above and true to her localism as Berkeley’s Slow Food convivium leader, Alice Waters, beneath her eye-catching hats, goes for the shape-mystifying layered look. Slow Food eats its cake and wants it, too, but I for one wonder how many (especially female?) Slow Foodies pull out the supermarket celery and machine-miniaturized carrot sticks in between events.

Fat Futures

If Slow Food remains mute on the subject of girth itself, it is nevertheless worth noting that nowhere in their literature are the ills of modern society, the threat to culinary traditions, or the lamentable fact of inequitable food distribution blamed on fat people. Schwartz writes, “Blaming fat people for world hunger diverts attention from the real villains who inveigle societies to consume ever more, regardless of consequence. Thin people are capitalism’s ideal consumers,

for they can devour without seeming gluttonous; they have morality on their side. Fat people are ideal scapegoats.”²⁴ The foes of Slow Food are not overeaters with poor taste. The enemies are clearly agribusiness, government agencies obsessed with pasteurization and homogenization, and, of course, the supersizing fast-food industry. In this, Slow Food is on the right track.

Schwartz suggests, “Dieting strategies have followed the stages of capitalism so closely that one could be the model for the other.”²⁵ In Slow Food USA and contra Schwartz’s Fat Society, there may lurk “food fetishism and...consumer fetishism,” even “worship of the consumed object or of the marketplace itself.”²⁶ Slow Food dieticity, especially as instantiated in the United States, might be seen as the apogee of consumer capitalism in that penitence for desire need not be demonstrated through bodily effects of right eating but through a faith that social reform—and a truly satisfying meal—will emerge through right shopping. Although I would not go so far as to suggest that such an “association between consumption and morality is ridiculous,”²⁷ I am skeptical that activist consumerism alone can change the world. For Slow Food to be transformed into a vanguard movement for Schwartz’s Fat Society would require a vocabulary for talking about size and heft that conveys a sensitivity to embodiment; in the utopian Fat Society “obesity” would be a valid, vibrant way of living, irreducible as it is often today to either an object of disdain or pity or a statistical biomedical health risk. This is not, however, part of Slow Food’s charter. Nor need it be. Veering away from Schwartz’s utopia, let me speak directly to my own vision of how, in a society whose economy and bodies are fuelled by supersizing, food movements like Slow Food may yet suggest novel ways of satisfying ethical appetites.

We are familiar with an ethical approach to eating directed at realizing the virtue of self-control. Under this ethic being well is an indication of doing good—it is the ethical framework of biomedicine, where individuals are held morally responsible for their health and overweight, supposedly the outcome of out-of-control eating, is read as an indication of moral sloppiness. This is the ethical attitude toward food that Sidney Mintz has recently characterized as being “very American”²⁸ and that Harvey Levenstein glosses as America’s “paradox of plenty.”²⁹ But Slow Food promotes an indulgent dieticity that is directed at moral aims other than reducing, other than self-control for its own sake, and this is what I find most interesting about it. Encouraging an ethic of eating that is not completely narcissistic, that does not rehearse the Cartesian battle between self and body, the Slow diet weaves ethical relationships between self and

convivial others, between self and cultural heritage, between self and biodiverse environment. Slow Food recognizes that the decision to patronize a family-owned, local diner rather than a franchise of an international chain can be an ethical decision invested in the well-being of one’s community. As a pescatarian myself, I would like to see more Slow attention paid to ethical relationships between human and animal. (In my dietary practice interest in sustaining the cultural tradition and spectacular taste of proper *pâté de foie gras* is overridden by sympathy for force-fed geese. My moral Rubicon is rennet, commonly a byproduct of the veal industry. I just cannot imagine a life worth living without good cheese.) Nonetheless, if a critical mass of Americans came to regard eating as a morally charged practice with obligations and consequences beyond our own individual well-being, we might, as a society, come to read differently, less narcissistically, the moral implications of our own and others’ bodies. Moral standing would cease to be measured by scales and tape measures and clothing size. *Voilà*: the Fat Society.

Sidney Mintz asks, “Why is food in American life so powerful a vehicle for moral consideration?”³⁰ Schwartz might answer by pointing to puritanical suspicion of America’s abundance: “Increasingly perplexed or intimidated by abundance, Americans have taken the protocols of slimming as the protocols for social and spiritual renewal.”³¹ Similarly, fears of “bad” cholesterol, the “wrong” fats, and now insulin-happy “high-glycemic-index” carbohydrates belie a gnawing suspicion of the hidden costs of eating our fill. But by redirecting the moral concerns of eating away from the body’s fitness, Slow Food offers a sense of virtue without self-denial—the cake of virtue that we can eat, too. And this cake is multilayered. As abundance is diversifying, Americans are weighing the social costs of industrial food: the environmental degradation and demise of small family farms wrought by agribusiness, and a rise in food allergies and a decline in immunity from eating nonlocal foods and animal products primed with antibiotics.³² Slow Food, capturing the moral imagination of virtue-hungry Americans, promises a set of scales on which consumers with means might balance a cornucopia of social and ethical concerns.³³ ◉

NOTES

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1. Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

2. *Ibid.*, 326.

3. Ibid., 327.
4. Ibid., 332.
5. Fabio Parasecoli, "Postrevolutionary Chowhounds: Food, Globalization, and the Italian Left," *Gastronomica* 3:3 (Summer 2003): 29–39.
6. Carlo Petrini, *Slow Food: The Case for Taste*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 21.
7. Martins, quoted in William Rice, "A Slow Food Nation," *Chicago Tribune*, 6 June 2002.
8. Barbara Bowman, Chuck Lavine, and Marcia Lavine, "In the American Ark: Wild Rice," in Carlo Petrini, ed., *Slow Food: Collected Thoughts on Taste, Tradition, and the Honest Pleasures of Food* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Co., 2001), 16.
9. In "Building the Ark" Carlo Petrini describes the Ark as "a protective receptacle for quality products that should be saved from the deluge of standardization and worldwide distribution." In Petrini, *Slow Food: Collected Thoughts*, 2.
10. Ibid., 3.
11. Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*, trans. Anne Drayton (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1970 [1825]).
12. Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).
13. The traditions Slow Food wants to preserve are selectively recalled. As Italian historian Paolo Sorcinelli writes, a hundred years ago Italian laborers, far from living *la dolce vita* with leisurely, multicourse, extended-family meals, generally subsisted on hunks of bread and polenta washed down with onions and perhaps an anchovy or two: "When they ate at home, the meal was usually rushed and frugal." From "Identification Process at Work: Virtues of the Italian Working-Class Diet in the First Half of the Twentieth Century," in Peter Scholliers, ed., *Food, Drink and Identity: Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe Since the Middle Ages* (Oxford, UK: Berg Press, 2001), 83.
14. A US Department of Agriculture survey found that 22.2 percent of Native American households were "food insecure" between 1995 and 1997. See "WIC in Native American Communities: Building a Healthier America" by the Food Research Action Center, www.frac.org/html/news/wicoisummary.html#anchor286668.
15. Petrini, *Slow Food: The Case for Taste*, 5.
16. Martin Lederman, *The Slim Gourmet, or The Joys of Eating: A New Concept in Weight Control* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955).
17. Uda Pollmer, "On Fats," in Carlo Petrini, *Slow Food: Collected Thoughts*, 33–37.
18. Petrini, *Slow Food: The Case for Taste*, 21.
19. Ibid.
20. See, for example, Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).
21. Carole M. Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 125.
22. See Bill Buford, "The Secret of Excess: Mario Batali, a Chef Who Knows No Limits," *The New Yorker*, 19 and 26 August 2002, 123.
23. Ibid., 125.
24. Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 329.
25. Ibid., 327.
26. Ibid., 327.
27. Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft, "East of Eden: Sin and Redemption at the Whole Foods Market," *Gastronomica* 2:3 (Summer 2002): 88.
28. Sidney W. Mintz, "Food and Eating: Some Persisting Questions," in Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton, eds., *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 24.
29. Harvey Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
30. Ibid., 27.
31. Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 5.
32. See Rich Heffern, "The Ethics of Eating," *National Catholic Reporter* 24 May 2002, www.natcath.com/NCR_Online/archives/052402/052402a.htm.
33. Petrini, *Slow Food: The Case for Taste*, xxi–xxii.