

CUISINE

Chefs find slow and steady wins the taste

Gourmands are packing the house for tomorrow's celebration in the Don Valley of natural, local and highly expensive food



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As slow food goes, it doesn't come much slower than the rainbow trout in chef Mark Cutrara's hand.

It's dead, but was killed just 2½ hours ago at a specialty hatchery in Grey County, then trucked straight to Mr. Cutrara's new restaurant, Cowbell, in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood.

"It's still in rigor," he says proudly, the fish stiffened in a mid-flip arc and free of any fishy odour.

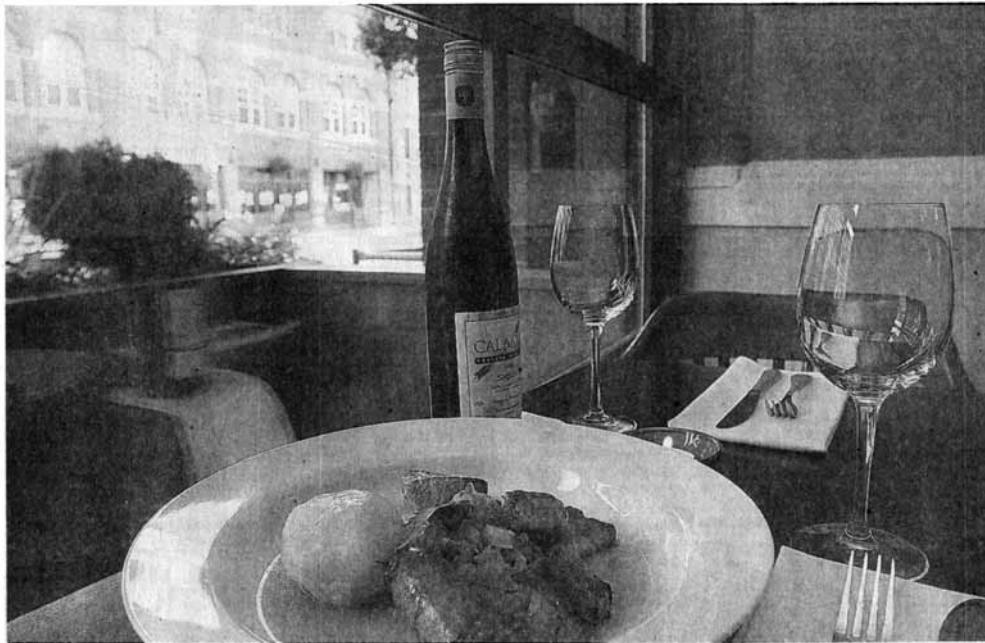
It's also *de rigueur* for adherents to the slow food movement, who are mounting a tasty — though not cheap — backlash against the bland, nutrient-lacking, Earth-destroying results of modern food production.

At three or four times the cost of conventionally farmed fish, such principled trout clearly come at a price. But it's just as clear to Mr. Cutrara — a onetime apprentice of celebrity chef Jamie Kennedy, a Toronto slow-food pioneer — that an increasing number of gourmands are willing to pay for it.

How else to explain the buzz around tomorrow's innocuously named Picnic at the Brick Works, for which a sell-out crowd of more than 800 people have shelled out \$75 to \$95 each to taste slow-food offerings from Mr. Cutrara, Mr. Kennedy and more than 30 other chefs?

"There is a certain zeitgeist that's in the air right now that has been fuelled by people like Al Gore, where connections are suddenly made between the environment and sustainable food," Mr. Kennedy said at the Don Valley Brick Works site this week, flanked by Paul DeCampo, leader of Slow Food Toronto.

"The culture has really come



A dish of *chocroute garni* sits on the table at Cowbell, a Parkdale bistro specializing in organic food. ARANTXA CEDILLO FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

awake to the idea of local, sustainable food systems," said Mr. DeCampo, whose group is one among 800 chapters — members call them *convivia* — that have sprung up around the world since the movement was founded in Italy in 1986.

Dropping \$95 to nibble items seasoned with descriptors like "artisanal," "small-herd" and "pasture-raised" might sound more precious than practical, but Mr. DeCampo said organizers wanted to ensure the suppliers of the ingredients are properly paid.

"We're doing cost recovery for the food and the beverage, where most fundraisers do not," he said. "Chefs are getting paid per serving, and they're paying full price to the producers for the food."

Remaining proceeds will go to the local slow-food chapter, which has grown to 130 mem-

bers since its birth in 2003, and to Evergreen, a local charity that is transforming the old Brick Works in the Don Valley into a centre where urbanites can explore the connections between nature, culture and community.

While slow food is more costly, Mr. DeCampo said the premium price pays for the added flavour, nutrition and eco-friendly farming practices that defined good food in the days before mass production and widespread global trade. In other words, it's not that slow food is too expensive, but that commercial food — with its hidden costs to the environment and human health — is deceptively cheap.

"It's not about high-quality food becoming less expensive," he said. "It's about low-quality food reflecting its true cost."

John Cranfield, an associate professor of food economics at the University of Guelph, is not as quick to buy that explanation.

"Slow food doesn't mean expensive food, necessarily; it means having access to food that is grown locally and in season, and all of those things can be affordable," Dr. Cranfield said. "I think a lot of the reason why we see price premium on slow food, just like why we see price premium on organic, is that it's scarce."

Prices could fall as interest in slow food and local produce keeps growing, he said. In that sense, events like tomorrow's picnic and the growing number of restaurants such as Mr. Cutrara's Cowbell could help, by increasing access.

Dr. Cranfield's academic experience, however, has made him circumspect about claims

of slow food's superiority over the conventional kind. "It's hard to say whether one is better than the other," he said. "I think it's really quite subjective and based on what the individual consumer thinks."

While he has no doubt that locally grown food requires less fuel to transport to market, and that an Ontario apple picked yesterday will taste better than a weeks-old Chilean one, "the jury has tended to be out on whether organic or conventional is more nutritious for you," he said.

Also, while chemical-free produce will carry less risk of harm, "Some of the things that are used [in organic farming] — for instance, composted cattle manure — could be associated with the presence of certain pathogens that could cause a food-borne illness," Dr. Cranfield said. "I'm not saying it

The culture has really come awake to the idea of local, sustainable food systems.

Paul DeCampo,
Slow Food Toronto

does; I want to be clear about that ... but there could be a concern that you're trading one potential hazard off with another potential hazard."

As for the slow-food movement, he expects it will continue to grow, though not nearly as quickly as the fast-food culture, which it aims to counteract, did in its early days.

"The current system's just so big," Dr. Cranfield said. "It's like someone starting up a custom-made auto manufacturing plant and someone saying, 'Well, is it going to outpace Ford?' I mean, the current system is massive, and it's evolved over time to the point where it's at because the economies of scale are from being that large."

Maybe now, but not necessarily forever, said Harriet Friedmann, a sociology professor at the University of Toronto who studies the world food system.

That system "depends on a variety of explicit but even more hidden subsidies which are not stable," she said, citing the volatility of energy prices. That, combined with mounting pressure on governments to deal with climate change, could spell the end of low prices for mass-produced food that is shipped long distances, and shift political support to the kind of local food networks espoused by slow-food enthusiasts.

It might still look like a hobbit for the rich, but as Dr. Friedmann pointed out, "the rich have always set the pattern that then becomes generalized into the larger population."