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PRINT EMAIL

Iowa: The New Old World

Restoring Slow Food in the Heartland

BY LINDA EGENES



Simone Delaty's renowned slow dinners embody what great meals are all about. (Photo by Kurt Michael Friese)

The first time I drove through the Italian heartland, I thought I'd entered heaven. Romantic medieval villages, rolling hills sculpted with vineyards and olive groves, and, of course, the food. Whether we ate in a family-owned trattoria, shopped in colorful outdoor markets, or frequented tiny *frutta e vedura* (fruit and vegetable shops), locally grown produce was everywhere. And it tasted amazing—the mineral-rich Italian soil yielded raspberries the size of your thumb and zucchini tasting like manna.

I remember solemnly telling my husband and friends, "You know, we could have this in Iowa." They eyed me warily, wondering if my brain had fried in the Tuscan sun. But I didn't mean the castles or winding roads or Renaissance art. I meant the food. Because even on that first brief visit, I glimpsed how the small family farm was the living heart of Italy's vibrant rural culture.

In his book ***A Cook's Journey: Slow Food in the Heartland***, Chef Kurt Michael Friese takes us on a culinary journey as delectable as any Italian countryside's—except this particular feast for the senses is happening right here in the heartland of America.

As a national board member of Slow Food USA and co-owner of the celebrated Devotay restaurant in Iowa City, Chef Friese knows good food when he sees it. Over the course of four years, he traveled to 13 heartland states in search of people who champion Slow Food. The book is a collection of his informal essays about the various farmers, chefs, food artisans, and organizations that he encountered.

What's Slow Food?

You can think of Slow Food as the opposite of fast food, and everything industrial, tasteless, and exploitive that fast food represents. Friese points out that eating is a political act, a moral act, and a philosophical, even religious act. He defines Slow Food in simple terms: "If the food is raised with care, prepared with passion, and served with love, then it is 'Slow' food no matter who makes it."

The Slow Food movement started (you guessed it) in Italy, when folks protested the first MacDonald's opening at the foot of Rome's Spanish Steps. Unlike its name, since its beginning in 1986 Slow Food spread quickly—around the world and most enthusiastically in America, mainly along the coasts. In 1999 Friese founded the first Slow Food convivium in Iowa (today one of five). He wrote this book partly to show that Slow Food is not a coastal phenomenon—in fact, he points out, many of the world's most cherished food traditions are from the rural centers (think Tuscany or Provence or Sichuan).

The essays are as easy to read as a chat over the back fence, seasoned with deft character sketches and sprinkled with recipes tested and tweaked by Chef Friese (making the recipes alone worth the price of the book). Infused with the consummate chef's love for good food and good living, Friese dishes his philosophy with a spoonful of brie, so to speak, skillfully weaving the tenets of Slow Food with sensual descriptions of heat coming off a just-picked heirloom tomato or the nutty flavor of Walloon, a raw-milk goat cheese from Missouri.

In one of the Iowa vignettes, you'll meet the French immigrant Simone Delaty, dubbed Iowa's "Queen of Slow Food" by CBS's *Sunday Morning* news crew, who raises chickens and vegetables and flowers on her bucolic farm in Wellman. Using her own vegetables and eggs, she cooks private dinners—sold out months in advance—and serves them on her screened porch. She calls her cuisine "plain and simple," which Friese interprets as "simple farmhouse cooking made with generations of French technique."

Preserving Variety

While there are many eye-openers in the book, the description of Seed Saver's Exchange in Decorah, Iowa, one of the world's largest guardians of heirloom seed diversity, hit close to home. It was sobering to read that today only 30 plant varieties feed 95 percent of the world's population.

By collecting some 24,000 heirloom seeds from around the world and making them available to its 8,000 members around the world, Seed Savers is possibly the most biodiverse place on the planet. The orchard alone, which is open to the public, contains 700 varieties of 18th century apples. This sounds like a lot, until you read in the next sentence that in 1899 there were 8,000 apple varieties recorded.

The Quiet Revolution

One thing I like about foodies—they don't dwell too long on problems. Although Friese touches on the bureaucratic snafus some of the organic growers have encountered, referring humorously to the "Law of Unintended Consequences," he mainly points to the ways our heartland foodscape is rapidly changing for the better.

He talks about a quiet revolution that is taking place, noting that today Iowa has more farmers' markets per capita than any other state. And throughout the Midwest, he observes, "Where once a restaurant might be judged by the distant and exotic sources of its ingredients, today the best restaurants are known for getting their food from just down the road."

Friese is eclectic, featuring deer, buffalo, and mulefoot hog ranches alongside the Dragonfly Neo-V—Columbus Ohio's world-class vegan restaurant. He is also inclusive, explaining that although not everyone featured in his book is an official member of the Slow Food movement, they are still important contributors. "So many are and don't know it," Friese muses. As readers, we can become part of the Slow Food movement, too, he reassures us, just by planting a garden, shopping at a farmers' market, or visiting a farm.

"As I have so often said, if you think about the very best times in your life, I'll bet that most of them were spent around a table with great food in front of you and the people you love all around," Friese writes. "If the Slow Food Movement is about anything, it is about making many of those moments possible."

Reading this book is like sitting down to a home-cooked feast with new friends and old—the best kind of food for the soul.

Linda Egenes is a freelance writer from Fairfield, Iowa, where she enjoys writing, eating, and living—slowly.

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