The Local Food Movement in Macedonia

By Stephanie Georgieff



Traditional Macedonian Foods at the reception for Local Food Matters, Trnovo Macedonia March 20 - 22, 2014

Slow Food International has been in Macedonia since 2008, now host to 13 individual chapters and national headquarters in Bitola. Slow Food International strives to encourage its world wide membership to educate local populations on the value of their traditional indigenous cuisine and agriculture. One of the more unique programs of Slow Food International is the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity. By highlighting endangered foods, it is the hopeful goal of Slow Food that ecosystems, local economies and cultures can be preserved for future generations. The Foundation is active in Macedonia with exciting results.

The Ark of Taste is one project of the Foundation for Biodiversity; where nations are encouraged to list their regions culinary and agricultural products in danger of becoming extinct due to the emphasis on industrial food system. The Ark is a living food library where products are nominated and receive international status as endangered. This status enables the community associated with the item to exhibit their culinary heritage both locally and internationally. The hope of the endangered listing that such attention will inspire a resurgence of use and increased awareness surrounding production. When a product has a particularly strong anchor in an ecosystem and culture, it receives Presidium status, which as in the case with Macedonian Fig Slatko. This sweet green preserve has sparked a booming cultural and economic renaissance in the region since it's listing several years ago.

At past Slow Food International events, it became apparent that the fluid political situation present in the Balkans meant modern international borders had little meaning for food and agriculture. So many traditions and bioregional ecosystems were shared amongst the nations of the Balkans, it was decided that joining forces was the most efficient way to preserve the ancient traditions of the region. Terra Madre Balkans was formed, with regional meetings and cultural exchanges between once warring factions. One of the most innovative projects from this exchange is called the ESSEDRA project.

ESSEDRA stands for Environmentally Sustainable Socio Economic Development of Rural Areas, and is a joint project between Slow Food International, The United Nations Farm and Agriculture Organization and the European Union. Members include the nations of Albania, Bosnia-Hercegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Republic of Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey. Macedonia has become a leader in this movement, with one of the most organized and passionate participations in all aspects of ESSEDRA.

The headquarters of Macedonian Slow Food ESSEDRA is located in the cultural capitol of Bitola. Nestled in the transitional land of Pelagonia plane and the Pelister National Mountain preserve, Bitola is part of the cheese region in Macedonia, and is home to BiMilk, the largest cooperative dairy for small independent farmers in the nation. The modest office near historic Old Town Bitola is the nerve center for ESSEDRA projects in Macedonia. Partnering with academics in the Agricultural Faculty at the Universities of Bitola and Skopje, as well as sending field agents to all corners of the country, the Macedonian ESSEDRA staff is working to seek out and document the disappearing food traditions of this historic Balkan nation. Macedonia is also the country that has hosted several regional meetings and trainings for partner nations, the most recent gathering, "Local Food Matters," which was held in March of this year, as well as a Training the Trainers where all member nations attended. In addition to ESSEDRA partner nations, European Union representatives and other EU partners who are struggling to maintain their cultural heritage while adhering to EU hygiene standards attended and benefitted from "Local Food Matters" in Trnovo.

At Terra Madre 2012, Macedonia had produced a list of 25 endangered foods. By the time of the last meeting in Spring of 2014, the list had been expanded to 50. During the Local Food Matters meeting, the Macedonian Slow Food hosts arranged excursions to farms and heritage food producers. According to Macedonian ESSEDRA project coordinator Emilja Nedelkovska, the most popular venue was to a local sausage producer. Partnerships are being created between the Ministry of Tourism, Slow Food Producers and non-profit tourism organizations such as Balkania to create Agritourism opportunities throughout Macedonia.

Slow Food Macedonia is also working to educate and preserve food traditions within her borders, to promote traditional products and encourage their markets and use. If you ever have the pleasure to visit Macedonia in the late Summer, September is pepper season. The food Bazaars, gardens and porches throughout the country are literally bursting with red, green and yellow peppers of all kinds. A product for consideration on both the Ark of Taste and Presidia for Macedonia is the Bukovska Pepper. This local beauty makes up the ubiquitous Paprika that gives Macedonian food it's unique, smoky spiced flavor. Throughout September, this pepper adorns every terrace, porch and walkway



Bukovska Peppers

on long strings so the fruit can dry in the warm sunshine of the season. When it has dried, it is ground into a powder and either kept for personal use or sold in the markets. The food Bazaars often have several booths where the Bukovska Paprika is sold in several grades and colors, often by cheerful old Baba's. As I was walking through the Prilep Food Bazaar, several women wanting to know where I was from approached me. When I told them, and asked to take a picture, I was greeted with the traditional Macedonian grin and offers to taste the delicious powders. Back in the various kitchens I had the pleasure of visiting whilst in Macedonia, this Paprika is often the ingredient that pops the dish with flavor, and brings the familiar orange red tint to what ever is being made.

With global climate change resulting in lower water availability and hotter, drier summers, the pepper is becoming more difficult to grow. These climate changes are resulting in lower yields of Bukovska. The mills where the peppers have been traditionally ground are falling into disrepair. Another challenge is the youth of the families who have for centuries ground the delicious condiment are not interested in carrying on the tradition. The invasion of "super markets" bringing in industrial produced foods are taking attention away from traditional locally produced spices, especially among the younger generations who are not as likely to cook as much as their parents. Thanks to ESSEDRA funds and Slow Food Macedonia efforts, the plight of this pepper is being made more public so that appropriate measures can be taken to preserve this delicious tradition. Land and cultural preservation efforts can be made more urgent, and a traditional economic base providing jobs will be sustained.

The casual observer can often miss the power of ESSEDRA and Slow Food in Macedonia. The thought of loosing an ancient traditional taste can often rally a community to create the need for a product. Such efforts can preserve farmland, keep alive ancient traditions, and initiate sustainable economies that create living wages and healthy lifestyles, all in a tasty human centered manner. In the case of the Bukovska Pepper, it is my hope this treasure will not be lost. If the activity of the Macedonian ESSEDRA partners is any indication, my hope is being realized quite deliciously.



Bukovska Peppers drying on a Prilep Apartment patio

Stephanie Georgieff will be hosting a series of on line webinars featuring all aspects of Macedonian Gastronomy in June. As a joint project with Slow Food Macedonia, participants will get a "virtual" culinary tour of Macedonia, proceeds going to help Slow Food in Macedonia's many projects. For more information please go to Real Food Empire on Facebook, or follow on Twitter for updates on how you can participate in this unique endeavor and help preserve your culinary heritage in the Old Country. For a complete syllabus please email Stephanie at realfoodempire@gmail.com



Spice Stand featuring Bukovska Paprika, Bitola Bazaar



Bukovska Paprika purveyor Prilep Bazaar



Spice Stand in Prilep Bazaar

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