

MPO Talk: The Food Movement in Macedonia

speech by Stephanie Georgieff,
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I first want to thank the Committee for inviting me to speak on this most inspiring subject. I also want to thank all those who have from the inception of the MPO have poured their hearts, souls, time, money and passion into this organization. We have many before us who have worked hard through our 90-year history, many who are on the other side of the threshold of life, and I wish to thank them for their efforts. I want to thank all the farmers; chefs, cooks and servers who have made this incredible feast possible. And most importantly, I also want to thank all of those in Macedonia who have under the most dire and difficult conditions throughout the centuries lovingly and deliciously maintained their cultural heritage by tending the land, making the cheese, aging the wine, baking the bread and cooking the food. We owe them a debt of gratitude as they have provided an anchor for our most unique and delightful heritage, our Macedonian heritage, which is a jewel in the tapestry of our global community.

For all of you attending this evening, you are aware of the complex history of Macedonia. Macedonians are very proud and passionate people, and a joke I have heard is that if you have four Macedonians in a room you have five opinions. Since her Independence in 1991, The Republic of Macedonia has been struggling to define herself, create an economy, play a part in the world stage and plan for the future. Even her name is the subject of international debate. As an ancient Chinese Proverb states, *May you live in interesting times*, and Macedonia has been certainly blessed in this way throughout her long history.

What I will be focusing on for my talk is a vibrant, exciting aspect of Macedonian culture that may not only hold the key to Macedonia's future, but can also be a light and example for the rest of the world as we struggle to define our selves in a rapidly changing global economy. We in the Diaspora often think, how can we help those in the "old Country"? What I learned last Spring, is that the Macedonians actually have much to teach us in the First World, and it is to our mutual benefit if we pay attention and learn.

This aspect of Macedonian culture and current activity is what many are calling the Food Movement. For while Macedonians here and abroad are quite adept at arguing about many things, the one thing we Macedonians can all agree upon in that our food is incredibly delicious and unique. The Food Movement in Macedonia is quite remarkable, and I hope after this talk, you will be inspired to explore not only your own culinary tradition, but explore the rich offerings in Macedonia, as your cousins abroad are delighted to serve you in a delicious and hospitable manner.

A bit of historical reflection, one of the reasons this current movement in Macedonia is so intriguing, is that in our ancient past, we Macedonians actually helped shape the world through food. In the past and even now, food is a force that actually gives power, obviously it gives life, but when the human family transitioned from a hunter-gatherer culture to an agrarian one, he who had the food (land, water and animals to make that possible) had the power. Entire political structures were based on who had the food. In the interesting book, *An Edible History of Humanity*, we learn that it was Philip of Macedonia who first implemented this awareness in his reforms to the practice of warfare. His son the famous Alexander further refined such practices. What Phillip and later Alexander realized that equipping an army with lots of support staff, animals to carry such staff and food, was very inefficient. The original reforms were to cut down on the support staff and animals because to feed these individuals was expensive and cumbersome. Some of the reforms were to have soldiers carry their own supplies that would last for up to four days, and only fight in areas that could provide supplies within a four day walking distance. Battles were chosen near a water source such as a port, river or lake, so supplies could be easily transported to the conflict. This enabled the ancient Macedonian warriors to be strong and effective, the expansion it afforded is legendary. It is said that Alexander's army reputation was so formidable, often the local populations simply negotiated a peace rather than have their food sources drained by an extended conflict. We all know the rest of the story.

Another global influence from Macedonia was when the Romans conquered Macedonia in the Second Century BC, they adopted the warfare practices of Alexander, but also found a culture that had 70 different types of bread. The Romans learned the secrets of Bread Making from the Macedonians, and well, we can say we had an influence on Italian cooking. What I realized when I was in Macedonia last Spring, is that what Macedonia is doing right now, in a much more peaceful and creative way, is setting an example for how we can start a new culture of abundance, harmony and health, while preserving deep cultural roots for each area of the globe. It is my fervent belief, after my experience last Spring, that Macedonia is shaping a model for the rest of the globe based on food.

Lets go back to this current Food Movement. What is interesting about this movement, this Food Movement globally is how truly universal it is. We have witnessed many movements in the last century; Labor, Women's, Civil Rights, Environment and so on. We are celebrating the Labor Movement here in the United States this very weekend. Each cultural movement is born out of a desire to create a more just, equitable and inclusive culture. Each one has quite a turbulent evolution, and each one has had its shares of triumphs and setbacks. But each one of these movements has undeniably altered how we live, what we expect and how to go forward

The Food Movement draws upon much of the experience and ideology of the other movements, but there are distinct differences as well as profound outcomes. As famed chef James Beard once said, "Food is our common ground, a universal experience." I think this says it all actually, and I will tell you why. When you eat something, it is the one time you are in community with all

aspects of life. You are consuming the effects of the radiant energy of the sun, the minerals of the soil, the make up of the animals. What you eat is dependent on water and air. Countless, nameless people who grow, harvest, produce, transport, market, sell, cook and present the food before you produce what fills your plate. When you eat, you are truly participating in all of creation, from the heavens to the earth, from animals to human. Food is a living tradition, which comes from our earliest experiences, from the mother's breast, to family suppers and celebrations. Food is how we connect, food is our tradition. Our Sacraments are based on Food; Communion for the Christians is an example. Yesterday, in the workshop, it was so lovely to hear all the stories about people's food memories, their holiday experiences, watching their mothers and grandmothers cook, what they learned, what they wish they learned.

And there are aspects of food that are not apparent to our five senses, like the love and heritage that goes into Baba's banitza. How many times have you eaten something your baba or dedo made, only to make it your self, and it just doesn't taste the same? That is the love that is poured into your banitza, your zelnik, and that can't be sold or replicated. We hope to preserve these traditions in our age of microwaves and instant mixes. Traditions can not be replicated in food that is processed beyond belief by machines, barely touched by human hands. We humans are the transformative beings for creation, and well, compare the fast food burger or frozen pizza with something that is home grown, hand made? It just tastes different, and at the risk of being a touchy feely Californian type, it is the love.

So how did I, Stephanie Georgieff, get here before you to talk about this Food Movement in Macedonia? It is a delightful journey I assure you, and it is my hope you can join Americans, other Canadians, Macedonians, and me in this most unique journey.

To say I am an eclectic individual is an understatement. But as I get older, I am realizing that my Macedonian heritage is the genetic DNA that brings out this trait. I often joke, that I am the most under represented minority on earth, a Macedonian Naturopath and Acupuncturist. I am it folks, if there are others out there, I am desperate to meet you. What this does is it helps me to really articulate who I am and what I do, and to learn as much as possible in order to do that. My main job is that of a healer. In Naturopathic School, it hit me that the main form of medicine I was being schooled in was how the gifts from the natural world facilitate healing in humans. It amazed me how the elements of the earth, the plants all had intricate interactions with the physiology of Humans. What was particularly startling, was that there were all sorts of chemicals in the plants that had nothing to do with their reproduction or structure, but had everything to do with the facilitation of human life and welfare. Nutrition was the key to health, so I delved into learning all about plants, foods, and how this could help my patients. When you become interested in Nutrition, you become interested in agriculture and cooking, because you need to know how to enable your patients to get the best and what to do with it so they actually eat what will help them. This resulted in teaching herbal and cooking classes, in addition to constant study of medicine, here and abroad.

I first became aware of Slow Food International at a Natural Products Expo in California. I followed this movement with interest, especially since often one does not connect pleasure and taste with nutrition and health. The concept of building community around a dinner table, celebrating cultural cuisine, exploring the roots of food traditions and supporting small farms and food producers intrigued me to no end. When I finished my second medical degree, Acupuncture, I decided I then had time to pursue Slow Food as a civic involvement. In all practice building strategies, professionals are encouraged to participate in their local communities as civic leaders, you are seen as part of the community and it is a way to enhance your reputation and broaden your referral base. Well, no one would come to me if they saw me play golf or tennis, thank god for Slow Food! I was lucky that there was an established chapter in Orange County, and joined the Board as the events coordinator. I filled out an application to become a delegate to the International Gathering of Food Communities in Turin Italy, for the October 2008 convention. To my delight I was chosen, as the first and only at that time, health care provider to be part of the US Delegation. Once again, Macedonians are setting cultural food history! (on another note, when I moved to Redlands, California, my enthusiasm spread and I helped to found and am now the President of Slow Food Redlands, which resulted in a local weekly Radio Program, Real Food Empire which documents the local artisan food movement in Southern California)

Slow Food International is a global food education organization dedicated to three core values: to eat Good, Clean and Fair Food. Its prime purpose is to create a re-humanization of the global food system. To do this, Slow Food Encourages its members to educate on the values of eating Good Food (food that tastes good and celebrates cultural heritage) Clean Food (food that does not harm the environment in it's growth and production) and Fair Food (the growers and producers of a food are paid a fair wage and work in a safe environment) Slow Food was started by Carlo Petrini in Rome Italy in 1989. It was a reaction to the building of the first McDonald's in Rome next to the Spanish Steps. In true Italian political tradition, a large protest greeted the opening ceremony, where protestors were throwing wet pasta at the door, yelling, "we do not want fast food, we want slow food." The name, like the wet noodles on the door, stuck. Slow Food is now a global movement with individual chapters in 150 countries. Slow Food hosts a series of global gatherings. Every two years there is an International Gathering of Food Communities, called Terra Madre. During the "in between " times there are two gatherings one in the Spring, called Slow Fish, and one in the Fall, called Slow Cheese.

So off I went, in October of 2008, frequent flier ticket in hand to Turin Italy, nestled in the Alps of the Piedmont region of the country, which is also the home of the Slow Food International Headquarters. Attending Terra Madre as a Delegate is something like attending a United Nations Conference, only much more entertaining and delicious. The gathering drew 7000 people from 150 countries. I was ecstatic to note on the billboards for the registration that there was a Macedonian Delegation. I left my card with the registrar, and went to the opening ceremonies, which were in the Olympic Stadium. While waiting, the overhead marquis posted pictures from people from all over the globe, and played traditional folk music from numerous cultures. All of

the sudden, I heard some music, and said to my fellow US Delegate, "That's Macedonian Music!" I then saw the bright yellow and red sun Macedonian flag waving from across the arena, and promptly galloped towards the group waving the flag, and that is how my journey began. Since then, I have been communicating with the Slow Food Chapters in Macedonia to try to get a relationship going between my own chapter as well as the chapters there.

Terra Madre 2008 was the first formal gathering that Macedonia attended. They were in the process of forming a national chapter, called a Convivium, and at that time had a small display on the convention floor, for their products. They now have a formal presidium and chapters are spreading literally like wild fire across the country.

One of the most incredible aspects of Terra Madre is the Presidium Market Place. The Presidium project of Slow Food International is one of the most remarkable and powerful projects not only of Slow Food, but also actually in the history of humanity.

The Presidium market place at Terra Madre is a global market place and networking opportunity for small farmers and food producers to show their products. Slow Food International, through the Presidium, is one of the most unique and powerful of human endeavors in Human History. Throughout the centuries, usually in an effort to have freedom to eat and control ones own destiny, people have tried to create justice for themselves and their communities. They usually begin by petitioning their rulers or the over classes for justice, trying to work with them to create a more equitable form of living, they become ignored, then violent conflict results, and maybe there is change, more often there is not, it simply is postponed for another generation to deal with it. Remember back to earlier in my talk, Food is Power. For centuries, but most importantly now, the common people, particularly farmers have been struggling to create justice over food and agriculture. The most recent attempts at this are through international bodies such as the United Nations, The World Trade Organization, The European Union, and multiple international trade agreements. We here in the US, are always creating laws and governing bodies over our food and economic policies. What has ALWAYS, always happened is that the larger corporate money interests overwhelm the small independent food producer. The treaties, the laws and trade policies always get formed to enrich the powerful money interests to the great detriment of the small farmer, small food producer. Here in the States we are witnessing the decimation of the family farm, much to our peril, less than 2% of our population grows food for the rest of us, and that 2% has an average age of 62 years old. Trade policies favor multinationals take NAFTA for instance; it has decimated the small farmer in Mexico. Guess what folks, all those small farmers and workers in Mexico are flocking here to our land, or turning to the illegal drug trade. Those of us in the southern Border States are dealing with that outcome and it is bankrupting us. The way we grow, process and transport food requires a lot of energy, specifically oil. Our fertilizers and pesticides require petroleum. So energy and food are related. And water, blessed water, well our nation right now is in a water schizophrenic fit, half of the nation is literally under water and the other half is burning up, due to global climate change, which 98% of the worlds scientists and 99.99% population recognizes comes from the use of fossil fuels.

Many bodies have been trying to address this through international and national treaties, laws and so forth, to no avail. The powerful money interests always water down legislation, and the small independent producer is left in the cold.

What The Slow Food Presidium does is revolutionary. For the first time in human history, the common person is taking their own destiny in their own hands, in a non-violent way and over really great food. The Presidium is an international certificate and trade organization that enables small farmers, small producers and small countries like Macedonia to create markets and awareness for their products. To be a presidium, a product has to taste good, be part of an endangered cultural tradition, to be grown sustainably (meaning the environment is not harmed in its production) and the people making the product are treated with justice and fairness. The small food producer through Slow Food Presidium is basically saying to powerful multinationals, well, we have tried for years to get justice, to get a foot hold in the market place, and you will not let us, so we will bypass you and do our own thing. It has spread like wild fire, and Macedonia is a participant in this movement, and the small delightful, tradition of their cheeses, jams and foods are benefitting from this movement.

As I said before, at the 2008 Terra Madre gathering in Turin Italy, Macedonia participated for the first time with an informal presence sharing their Chestnut Honey, what they call White Cheese we would call it Feta, and their Smashed Salt. In the time between the 2008 and 2010 Macedonia formed it's first Convivium called the Sharplanska-Marvrovo, which hosted numerous food themed festivals. They formed a Presidium on Wild Fig Slatko, and are in the process of getting Presidium Status for their Cheese, Their Ayvar, and several other products.

Macedonia, because of her Presidium status, was able to be a participant in the 2010 Terra Madre Presidium Market Place. The theme of Terra Madre 2010 was to honor the Indigenous Peoples of the world. The opening ceremonies this time, was a spectacular production where each continent's Indigenous people had a voice. Who opened the ceremonies? Macedonians through their songs and dances, I can assure you I was the only Macedonian American there, and it was a sight to see, with the traditional costumes, dances and music. Carlo Petrini chose the theme because he and Slow Food International feel that the world's Indigenous people hold the key and wisdom to help our mutual survival in these times of great change. So, once again, the Italians see the benefit of how the Macedonians live!

Macedonia had, as I said, a Presidium, and this was the first time she was an official participant in Terra Madre. This first Presidium has an incredible story. Obviously, we are in a very tenuous economic time, and small countries such as Macedonia, who are land locked and at the mercy of larger richer countries. Such places have really suffered in this current global economic collapse. In an effort to think of some way both to preserve tradition, literally, a group of 32 women in the municipalities of Bogdanci, Gevgelia, Dojran and Valandovo decided to do what their Baba's had done for centuries, make Wild Fig Slatko. The Wild Fig is different than the cultivated fig,

and it grows literally everywhere. The ubiquitous Wild Fig is inedible in its raw state, but never fear when the Macedonians are in charge, particularly Macedonian Women, they figured out how to make this resource valuable. The recipe has been guarded for centuries, the figs are boiled nine times to extract the milk, then the figs are boiled one last time with lemon to give it color, and a prepared syrup is added. These 32 women got together and have created a cottage industry from their tradition, and now the municipalities where this cooperative exists, have festivals, cooking lessons, created a product that now is part of the larger global market place through the Slow Food Presidium. Many of these women were at Terra Madre 2010, where I met them and the president of the Slow Food Campus Movement, Ivan Kirovski. He and I had been in conversation, and he through his network, arranged for me to meet the most incredible people that are taking charge of their destinies, celebrating their cultures and creating sustainable economies in their respective communities.

When Slow Food first came to Macedonia, many greeted it with the typical Macedonian style criticisms, but one was actually relevant. Why do we need Slow Food, they said, we already eat like that? It is true, Macedonians already eat locally grown, hand made food that is delicious, raised sustainably and the workers are treated fairly. The carbon footprint of a typical Macedonian food is quite light, but jam packed with flavor and tradition. Macedonia is on the cusp of history, trying to participate in the European Union, in Global Markets. An editorial in the International Herald Tribune for the Arab Spring, stated, in countries where the government can afford to pay police or military to oppress it's people does not have give in to public dissent. We are seeing this in the poorer Arab nations, when the military cannot be paid, then the democratic protestors can press their claims, but in the countries where the government has lots of money and can pay either the military or mercenaries to oppress the people well, just look at Syria and Saudi Arabia. What this means for the Macedonians living in The Republic of Macedonia is that they are able to really foster a true democracy, a living and sustainable economy that will enable them to not only survive the current crisis, but actually thrive.

Macedonia, as my hosts would say everywhere I went, is small but has a big heart. She does not have the resources or access to waterways that are so coveted by big corporate and international interests. What she does have is an incredible culture, a very educated and savvy people who are creatively meeting the challenges of the 21st century. Macedonians are taking what they have been given, a rich agricultural land, using centuries old techniques, coupling them with modern appropriate technology to create a sustainable economy based on their agriculture and cultural traditions. What is also incredible is that even tourist endeavors like a Casino; these interests are actively engaged in their communities. The Apollonia Casino and Hotel in Gevgelia is a proud sponsor of school gardens in their community. Access to television and the internet is taking a toll on children's health and nutrition habits, and Slow Food in areas such as Gevgelia and Bitola are sponsoring school garden programs to create life long consumers of fruits and vegetables. One of the projects of Slow Food Macedonia is to educate Macedonians on the benefits of eating local fruits. Exotic fruits such as bananas and pineapples are delicious, but have to be flown in at great expense to the environment and the government,

while local orchards are losing customers. By encouraging the population through cooking classes, festivals and gatherings Slow Food Macedonia is helping to create markets, jobs and revenue for their communities. Balkania which is an international Balkan tour company, specializing in agricultural tourism, has joined up and sponsored Slow Food Macedonia to create culinary themed festivals, tours and guides. You can visit the Macedonian Wine Country, the Cheese Region, stay at a guest house where you can pick your own supper or salad, receive cooking lessons.

One particularly poignant story comes from the Municipality of Dojran. As the Lake of this Municipality is shared with Greece, we all know how thoughtful and helpful the government of Greece has been to the Republic of Macedonia. Greece drained the lake 80% of its capacity, effectively destroying the delicate ecological balance of the region and the local fishing community. Thanks to international environmental intervention, the lake has been restored, creating a thriving fishing industry, tourist attraction, as well as health and wellness market since the water, as well as the rich mineral deposits in the Moore of the lake, are used to help healing of many diseases. There is a fishing technique there, called Mandra, which is a century old tradition, that only two fishermen, I met them, know how this is done. It is a wonderful example of cooperation between human and animal, because the technique is performed with pelicans. The pelicans help herd fish into a series of reed cages where the humans gather them. This has gotten the attention of the United Nations World Cultural department and Dojran, who has a Slow Food Chapter there and is helping to create this project, are creating a fishing school where a new generation of fishermen and women can learn this ecological sound, ancient practice that will create sustainable employment. The fish, by the way, is delicious. You can learn more about this on their website, Dojran Renaissance.

There is so much more, so very much more. Small Sheep and Goat herding towns with delicious cheeses, breweries, vineyards, restaurants, festivals celebrating bread, Baba's, culinary and hospitality schools. Vibrant farmers markets, world class restaurants, all awaiting you with open arms and warm hospitality.

But what is most important is that Macedonia is creating a viable, sustainable economy that will withstand the fluctuations of a global economy based on greed and petroleum. As Greece was burning, Macedonia was a calm haven, where the people are well fed and they work hard. Sure, compared to the wages in other countries, it is less, but the cost of living is less because it is in my opinion all locally based. And this is all based on Food. Remember at the beginning of my talk, I said, he who owns the food owns the power, and that Macedonia's food traditions with Alexander and Bread under the Romans, shaped history. Now, we must again learn from the Macedonians, how they are structuring their economy, their community focused initiatives based on their culture and their food. Macedonia has much to offer the world, we in North America must learn from them. In that way we will all not only survive our current challenges, but also we will thrive.

So we here in North America, we need to learn about our vibrant and delicious culture. Talk with your Baba's and Dedo's, talk with your families, learn about your rich traditions, talk and learn from the Macedonians who are keeping your heritage alive in a most creative way. We share in our hearts a grand history, lets together bring it into the new millennium with pride and true enjoyment.

Please, go to Macedonia, enjoy their hospitality, invest in their economy, trade with them, and learn from them. Because the immeasurable quality you will enjoy in each bite and sip you take, is that love, like you tasted in your Baba's zelnik, it is there in the Food of Macedonia. You will never be the same!

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