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The pact of life

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The Slow Food movement has been with us for many years, and while I agree with its founding principle of fighting the global fast-food revolution, I've always found its universal message a little difficult to interpret effectively at ground level.

More recently, its original raison d'etre has almost become obsolete – a victim, perhaps, of its own success, as more of us appreciate seasonal local food and as new local food associations have been launched.

Though it was originally founded in 1986 by the Italian food activist Carlo Petrini – who was spurred into action when Italy's first McDonald's opened in Rome – Slow Food has been morphing ever since. From defending the enjoyment of eating and a slower pace of life, it's broadened to encompass sustainability and environmental issues. It's now a global, grassroots non-profit organisation with supporters in 150 countries. A network of volunteer food group members around the world, including the UK, organises events and activities such as taste workshops, farm visits, social meals and film screenings. In Scotland, there's a network of Slow Food members and food groups (formerly called convivia) in Aberdeenshire, Ayrshire, North Berwick, Edinburgh, Fife, Glasgow, Orkney, Perth, and west Highlands and Islands. However, while Aberdeen, Ayrshire and Edinburgh are particularly active, others are currently dormant –including the beleaguered Glasgow group, which has failed to establish itself despite four attempts over the years. This seems disappointing, given the size of the city, its rural catchment area of producers, and its burgeoning eating-out scene.

This week, the movement was given fresh impetus in Scotland with the launch of the Slow Food UK Chef Alliance, launched by the recently appointed CEO Catherine Gazzoli. Aimed at encouraging chefs to actively support the aims of Slow Food UK, the Scottish launch followed London, where member chefs include Raymond Blanc, Richard Corrigan and Michel Roux Jr.

A Slow lunch prepared by chef Tony Singh at Edinburgh's Oloroso restaurant was attended by 20 chefs from all parts of Scotland, including: Michael Smith of Three Chimneys in Skye; Ian McAndrew of Blackaddie House Hotel in Sanquhar; Adam Stokes of Glenapp Castle in Ballantrae; Tom Lewis of Monachyle Mhor Hotel at Balquhidder; and from Glasgow, Andrew Cumming of Rogano, and Amanda Hope of Ubiquitous Chip/Stravaigin. All have signed up, or intend to sign up, to the initiative. The problem is, most chefs already follow the Slow Food ethos. Heritage varieties, forgotten or old-fashioned cuts, local sourcing and seasonality are key elements of any self-respecting menu these days.

So what, I asked Gazzoli, is the point of the SFUK Chef Alliance? What chefs can do that they're not already doing, she replied, is help save ancient foods that are on the brink of extinction. "In Scotland these include reestit lamb and beremeal barley from Orkney, Shetland black potatoes and Shetland cabbage, and red grouse in the Outer Hebrides and east Fife, west Ayrshire, north Argyll and west Inverness-shire. If chefs can support the growers and producers of these items, it helps promote sustainability, supports local communities and can boost tourism." Highland Park, for example, is trialling a crop of beremeal barley, an ancient grain originally grown on Orkney but which would die out were it not for two small growers on the islands.

Asked if there were other regional items on the endangered list – which Slow Food romantically calls the Ark Of Taste – Gazzoli replied: "We would be delighted if Herald readers wanted to nominate others for consideration."

Another pressing task is to address the Glasgow conundrum. "One solution may be to merge Glasgow with Ayrshire," she said, "though I can't understand why a city as unique as Glasgow cannot make it happen. All you really need is a strong leader who has the personality to drive events."

Andy Cumming, head chef at Rogano, voices frustration on behalf of those chefs who follow Slow Food ideologically but find it difficult in practice. He has long been a champion of small Scottish producers, but needs large volumes which many can't supply. "I love putting Scottish native oysters on my menu, but I can easily go through 100,000 a year, and it's difficult to get a grower to be able to guarantee that number," he explained. "Only recently I found a great butcher who supplied me with beautiful local pave of beef, but he could only get me 200. With Shetland reestit lamb, which is only produced in small quantities, I'd need to restrict it to a one-off specials menu. It's sad, but it's a fact of life for any chef running a busy restaurant."

If you want to nominate an endangered Scottish food you think should be saved, or volunteer to lead the Glasgow Slow Food group, visit www.slowfood.org.uk.