

Global sustainability in food focus of conference in Italy attended by local pair

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ENTERPRISE — Liza Jane Nichols and her daughter, Adele Nash, spend a lot of their time focused on food. Last month they traveled to Italy to share their passion with 5,000 other like-minded food enthusiasts from around the globe at the Terra Madre conference in Torino.

“The mission,” Nash said, “is promoting good, clean and fair food.”

Nichols said, “They bring people from all over the world to support this mission.”

Every other year, Terra Madre invites food producers for workshops, lectures and food sampling. Nichols said 164 countries were represented. She and Nash were two of 15 Oregonians and the only attendees from Eastern Oregon. Wallowa County gourmet potato and carrot growers Gene and Ilene Thiel were selected to attend the conference 10 years ago.

Terra Madre, a branch of Slow Food USA, is an international network of food producers, cooks, educators and students from 150 countries who are united by a common goal of global sustainability in food. The “food communities” of Terra Madre come together biennially to share innovative solutions and time-honored traditions for keeping small-scale agriculture and sustainable food production alive and well.

Nichols said the Portland Slow Food chapter raised funds for her and Nash’s plane tickets; admission was free. This past year a Slow Food chapter was started in Wallowa County.

Yet what seems the latest trend — gardening, eating home-cooked, traditional food and supporting local food producers — is how things have always been done in Eastern Oregon. Nichols and her husband, Craig, run the 6 Ranch, in existence since 1884, outside of Enterprise and raise Corriente cattle, chickens, dairy cows and produce. Nash grew up working on the 6 Ranch and is a graduate of Cordon Bleu culinary school in Austin, Texas. She runs the kitchen at Terminal Gravity Brewing.

Nash and Nichols were right in their element at Terra Madre, sampling Italian food made by small-scale producers and meeting people from other countries who share their passion for growing, cooking and marketing their products.

Many of the attendees, Nash said, wore traditional dress. Her mother donned her work clothes, jeans and her signature prairie hat, and they both wore 6 Ranch jackets representing Western culture.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Slow Food movement is preserving foods threatened by

extinction. The group calls these foods “The Ark of Taste.” Slow Food challenges people to buy unusual foods in their markets to ensure their lasting sustainability.

Corriente is one of four cattle breeds that are on the Ark of Taste list of endangered foods, Nichols said.

“Because of the cattle we raise we were brought to Slow Food,” Nichols said. “Corriente take the best care of the land and provide our business with diversity.”

Some of the 6 Ranch cows are leased for rodeos, others are used for seed stock and a portion is sold for beef, Nichols said.

The Nichols last year completed a conservation project on the Wallowa River that runs through the ranch, funded by BPA and the Oregon Water and Energy Board. In return, the restored stretch of stream bank can’t be grazed for 10 years.

Currently, the ranch is applying to be certified by the Food Alliance, an international third-party certification that does a thorough background check on applicants that includes how they treat their family, dogs, wildlife, water and livestock, Nichols said. The Food Alliance also encourages good, clean and fair food.

Nash was inspired by the Austin food scene, where she attended school. Some of the restaurants had their own gardens and emphasized the importance of ingredients. In her position as Terminal Gravity’s kitchen manager, she accesses produce from Backyard Gardens when available and is seeking ways to purchase more local food to be served in the pub. Her life dream, she said, is to turn the family homestead on Highway 82 into a restaurant where she will cook and serve food she grows.

During mealtime at Terra Madre, when they were served gourmet Italian meals prepared by chefs from a local culinary school, Nash and Nichols had opportunities to meet and eat with a variety of people.

“It was an opportunity to come around a table and discuss issues. We all came together at this huge, worldwide table,” Nash said.

A Kenyan they met said the importance of the tradition of eating around the table with friends and family is, “No one wants to eat alone.”

One of the highlights of the conference, Nash and Nichols said, was the Salone del Gusto where thousands of booths of artisan food producers offered samples of Italian meat, cheese, wine, olive oil and fresh game. The booths took up the equivalent of two football fields.

Nash said it wasn’t like a typical scene of vendors hawking wares.

“They were all eating, talking and having a good time,’ she said. They would say, ‘Try this and admit that you love it!’”

Some of the rare and endangered foods they sampled were Argentinean syrup made by hand

from root bulbs and black honey from lava fed bees.

Nichols said the attendees aren't just "foodies." There were lectures geared toward farming on soil, water, biodiversity and sustainability.

By attending Terra Madre, Nash and Nichols said they learned how fortunate they are.

"Not everyone has the privilege we've had," Nash said, "of working hard to raise healthy cows."

Nichols said, "It was an honor to be chosen as delegates from the U.S. as rural food producers. Food is a shared resource and the local vision is making it possible."

Terra Madre promotes activism, Nichols said, like the current food safety bill in Congress. Part of the Terra Madre conference was to write a document that is a global statement on food change.

"They create policy with a unified voice to further Slow Food worldwide," Nash said. "It was neat to see what I believe is so worldwide."

Despite some criticism of the local food movement, Nichols said, "Everyone eats, these are not social, class issues."

Nash said she is grateful for those who concentrate on activism, so she can concentrate on producing and cooking. She said she agrees with the message of sustainably grown food.

"When you buy food that is carefully raised you are buying virtue," Nash said. "You are what you eat, eats."

Nichols said, "We are powerful as consumers, we all eat."

Trackback:

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