



Slow Food USA Magazine

Fall 2008

By: Leah Koenig

Food-Focused Reading Groups Inspire Action

Good books and delicious food—what could be better? For years, reading groups have paired their discussions of literature's classics with tins of homemade cookies and oozing wedges of Camembert. There's even a Book Club Cookbook, published in 2004, that features recipes inspired by popular book club selections. (Great Gatsby Mint Juleps anyone?) More recently, however, a number of food enthusiasts—people who admire Michael Pollan as much as William Faulkner—have pioneered a new trend in reading and eating: the food-themed book club.

But many members of these gastro-literary groups seek more than compelling prose. For Shaun Chavis, a Boston-to-Alabama transplant who started a club last summer in Birmingham, creating a community of like-minded food enthusiasts was the first priority. "When I moved down here [after finishing culinary school and receiving my masters in Gastronomy from Boston University], I missed having other passionate people to discuss food issues with," she said. "Starting this book club was my attempt to find that." Chavis's group reads both fiction and nonfiction food books, but she has found that the non-fiction titles like Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *The Sushi Economy* by Sasha Issenberg generate the most enthusiastic conversations within the group. "Not long ago, all you could find were memoirs about dining in France or Italy," said Chavis. "Today there are books on food and politics, economics and safety—topics that reflect how food shapes our lives."

Christa Glennie Seychew, who started a food-themed book group in Buffalo, New York through Buffalo Rising, an online city guide for which she was the Food Editor, also hoped to foster a stronger food community through literature. She saw a gap between the 1,300 farms around Buffalo and the foods available in the city's restaurants and supermarkets. "The food resources in our area are tremendous," Seychew said. "But many residents have been completely out of touch with them." The book club gave Seychew an opportunity to tap the city into the growing national momentum around local and sustainable food. "[Focusing on books] gave me a creative way to reach out to people and give these ideas validity," she said.

Buffalo residents, it seems, are ready to dig in. Seychew said that some people (readers, but also specially-invited Slow Food members, farmers and local food purveyors) traveled more than 50 miles to attend Buffalo Rising's last book club soiree around Bill Buford's memoir, *Heat*. "People came out of their way to be a part of something," she said. "It was amazing to watch readers meet folks who make pickles nearby, or for a chef to meet a guy who makes yogurt that has been mentioned in *The New York Times*, but which he did not know was available locally." In addition to strengthening local food communities, the conversations held at food-themed book clubs can lead to tangible changes in members' food choices.

Chavis's club co-founder, Sean Kelley, was motivated to lower the ecological footprint of his family's meat consumption. As a diabetic and the parent of a child with food allergies, Kelley's interest in food had been primarily health-related. Before starting the book club, Kelley said he had never even heard of the concept of Slow Food. But reading the club's selections—*The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *Heat*, and *Animal, Vegetable*,

Miracle—introduced him to a “radical way of thinking about food.”

Kelley decided to raise and slaughter two pigs on the small, previously dormant farm he lived on with his family. He strategically named his pigs “Dinner” and “Lunch” to avoid any confusion with his children that they might be pets. “I felt a need to introduce my kids to a richer and more natural relationship with food than I had,” he said. Kelley’s experiment in animal husbandry, which he wrote about on his blog, “Killing Dinner: A Slow Food Story,” was transformational for him. “I now know that I can raise my own meat if I want to, and I can do it at market price,” he said. “[The experience has made me] much more wary about where I shop for food.”

Brooklyn resident, Cara Cannella, has also seen how a food-focused reading group can be personally transformative for members. Last year, she created The Four Burners Collective, a women’s reading group with a mission to “use literature as a catalyst to discuss individual and collective steps towards personal, social and ecological balance.” Through the group’s monthly meetings, Cannella has watched participants passionately express their food ethics—even those members who previously only thought of food in the context of “What’s for dinner?”

Since starting the group, she has also expanded the group’s activities “beyond the book,” organizing a holiday party and food drive where members donated canned goods to a local pantry, a workday on an urban farm, and an afternoon where some members learned how to make traditional Italian tortellini worthy of a Slow Food dinner. At a recent Four Burners meeting, member Megan Klein said that reading Jane Goodall’s *Harvest for Hope* had her seriously considering switching professions—from a litigation attorney to an environmental lawyer. Another member, Erin Tolton, said that reading the same book prompted her to start a raw food health cleanse. “I’ve always been able to separate myself from the things I read,” she said. “But this book hit the trigger.” Tolton said that starting the cleanse was a first step in making larger changes in her food habits including eating less meat and enrolling in an organic produce delivery service. “I wanted to join a CSA, but they were already sold out for the season,” she said.

Across the country, people are sitting down together to read and talk about food. The emerging crop of food-themed book clubs models celebratory activism at its best, by inspiring committed Slow Food members as well as sustainable food novices to take a deeper look at their food choices. Through a mix of literary analysis and “on-the-ground” discussions of values and ideas, members of these clubs leave meetings feeling not only the satisfaction of a conversation with friends, but empowered with the knowledge to change the world with their forks.