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# take it easy

Slow Food Nashville defines itself with new events and amazing cuisine

BY STEPHANIE STEWART • PHOTOS BY RON MANVILLE

**O**n Aug. 12, I found myself in the Capitol Grille at the Hermitage Hotel for a gastronomic thrill ride, courtesy of Executive Chef Tyler Brown and his aides-de-camp Andy Manchester and Andy Hayes. At my table were Robin Riddell, convivium leader for Slow Food Nashville (the beneficiaries of funds raised from the dinner), Elizabeth Moore and Katherine Provost of Green Olive Media and Alan Powell, musician and representative of Long Hungry Creek Farm, which supplied some of the meal's fresh produce. James, our waiter, hovered over us, making sure we knew just what we were getting, from delicate, wonderful amuse-bouches to the luscious main courses.

The room was electrified by the amazing nature of the food we were presented with, paired with exquisite wines selected by Riddell and an incredible tomato martini produced by Brown, and by discussion of the progress made by the Nashville Slow Food convivium and expansion of the local farm-to-table movement.

"You heard about the new farmers' market on Charlotte, right?"

"And about the new Murfreesboro farmers' market at MTSU?"

"You've heard what they're doing with local food at Tayst/Miel/Miro District/Capitol Grille/City House/Marche/Wild Iris (et cetera)?"

But behind the burgeoning interest in fresh local food was also a genuine, delightful social experience: people sharing a meal, taking time to appreciate what was set in front of them and—whether blessed with gourmet sensibilities or just good eaters who love a great meal, reminding themselves what taste is all about. And that, aside from all the other trappings, is what Slow Food as a movement seems to be at the core. The taste in a fast food burger may be all added fat and sodium for a quick nod at flavor ... the taste of the dinner at Capitol Grille (at only \$40 per person, plus a suggested \$20 wine donation), is exquisite, and the memory of that



Late summer tomatoes at the Nashville Farmers' Market

taste lingers.

Slow Food's been around locally for several years. I first discovered it through Martha Stamps, of Martha Stamps Catering, when she was sponsoring early Slow Food events at the late Martha's at the Plantation. Through her, I met Riddell and then-Nashville Convivium leader Cindy Wall, and they changed the way I ate and viewed food. (Okay, there's still the occasional McDonald's fry in my diet, but it's far rarer than what I buy at the Franklin Farmers' Market.) Together, they introduced me to local farmers and the pleasure of cooking as art—and eating as healthy, as opposed to eating as “diet.”

“We’ve come a long way, I think,” muses Robin Riddell. “Good things don’t happen fast, but now we’re pretty mainstream. Nashville’s [convivium is] kind of trying to learn our place. There are a whole lot of food organizations with similar goals, and we’re all working together—it’s just wonderful.” She pauses, then adds, “Food is a great common denominator, across all spectrums. We all understand some deep concept of food, there’s no being snobby about it, and absolutely everyone has something to bring to the table.”

In an era of periodic scares over food safety, an obesity epidemic (which many believe stems in part from an over abundance of processed foods) and a growing concern about what’s good for the body, truly, Slow Food makes sense. With goals that include promoting the revival of the kitchen and the shared pleasures of cooking and eating, caring for the land and promoting biodiversity, preserving heirloom breeds of animals and plants, aiding food artisans, helping to improve food in schools and educating the public about the joys of real food, Slow Food as an organization manages to emphasize the richness of the ordinary experience of cooking and sharing a meal to the point where it can become something magical.

Tyler Brown discovered Slow Food through the Southern Foodways Alliance. He met Riddell at an S.F.A. meeting in Oxford, Miss., and conversations the

two had, combined with efforts at events like the recent dinner for Share Our Strength, led to the dinner we enjoyed in August. "For us," he says, referring to Capitol Grille, "this is the opportunity to let people see us as a neighborhood restaurant, not just a special occasion one. It's also evidence you don't have to break the bank to enjoy something fantastic here. But also, for us, this is a strong opportunity to get further involved in the community."

Of course, the meal centers on the quintessential ingredient of summers in Tennessee, the tomato. Aside from stressing the "local" concept, the ingredient gave Brown the chance to do great things. "I think tomatoes are something you can touch people with," he says. "People have such intense memories of tomatoes and seasons past—fresh BLTs, sliced tomatoes from grandparents' gardens—like bread, it's a Southern tradition on the table. Why wouldn't we celebrate that?"

Brown, with Manchester and Hayes, absolutely celebrates heritage and tradition, but his own creative flair comes into play, with a menu that serves, with every bite, to remind you why the humble tomato became a staple—because fresh, lush, ripe-from-the-vine (none of this pale, cardboard stuff you get on your fast-food burger), tomatoes both common and heirloom have a vivid flavor you can't help loving. "And really, simplicity is a theme here," he adds. "This is Mother Nature's work, too."



Robin Riddell at the Farmers' Market

When it comes down to it, it's about delicious. And healthy, and safe, and what our bodies need. But, truly—it's about joy in cooking, and eating.

For more information on Slow Food Nashville and upcoming events, visit [slowfoodnashville.org](http://slowfoodnashville.org).

## FAST FACTS ON SLOW FOOD

The Slow Food movement began in Italy in 1986. The organization has grown into a global cause with 100,000 members in more than 1,000 *convivia* (local chapters) worldwide. Their mission includes preserving food heritage, tradition and culture, and educating the world about the importance of *eco-gastronomy*. Combating decades of fast food domination, *eco-gastronomy* highlights the importance of food's journey from "planet to plate." Slow food reflects upon the destructive nature of mass-produced cuisine—harmful to both the body and the environment. Slow Food activists believe the food we consume should be produced in a "good, clean and fair" manner that compromises neither our health nor our planet. The organization spreads its knowledge by hosting fairs, dinners and markets that offer locally grown products deemed excellent in terms of quality and production. At the very least, Slow Food's goal is to provide food for thought the next time you're tempted to skip cooking in favor of the drive-through window.

[slowfood.com](http://slowfood.com)

—Ali Seiderman and Lisa Karvellas



# **SLOW FOOD NASHVILLE LATE SUMMER TOMATO HARVEST DINNER**

THE CAPITOL GRILLE AT THE  
HERMITAGE HOTEL, AUG. 12, 2009  
*Featuring produce from Long Hun-  
gry Creek Farm and Farmer Dave,  
buttermilk from Cruze Dairy  
(Knoxville)*

## **THE COCKTAIL**

Tomato-infused vodka martini  
with gooseberries to garnish.

## **AMUSE-BOUCHE(5)**

Compressed watermelon with  
tomato and olive oil.  
A shot of liquid cantaloupe  
and tomato consomme (with basil,  
mint and grains of paradise) with  
a surprise of little banana pepper  
slices at the bottom.  
Mini fried green tomatoes  
sandwiching pimento, with a  
garnish of watercress. Served warm.  
A smoked trout mini-BLT with  
Benton's bacon, extra virgin olive  
oil and a garnish of micro greens.

## **STARTER**

Tastings of two local Kentucky  
and Tennessee country hams,  
with garnishes of green tomato  
relish, gooseberry jam and a red  
tomato chutney.

## **FIRST COURSE**

Tomato Pie  
Maso Canali Pinot Grigio,  
Trentino, Italy

## **SECOND COURSE**

Maine diver scallops, with  
foamed parsnip in a sauce vierge  
Louis Latour, Grand Ardeche  
Chardonnay, Vin de Pays

## **THIRD COURSE**

Braised Beef Short Ribs,  
Carolina Gold rice "middlins"  
(rice grits), ratatouille  
Torre Roa, Barbera D'Asti

## **FOURTH COURSE**

Dessert Amuse  
Sundried Tomato Macaroon,  
white chocolate basil ganache

## **FIFTH COURSE**

Dessert  
Tomato and Buttermilk Panna Cotta,  
balsamic gelée, tomato jam,  
black pepper tuile  
Fonseca Vintage Character Port  
Bin 27