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TFT Interview: Slow Food's Josh Viertel

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When Josh Viertel took the helm at Slow Food USA in 2008, the organization had a reputation—at least in this country—as a club for foodies. Under Viertel's leadership, though, the organization has dispelled this image with an increasing focus on food justice issues such as improving the abysmal quality of cafeteria food and fighting "ag-gag" bills that would've made it illegal to take photos or videos of farms. Last month, Slow Food organized its members to "take back the happy meal" by showing that it's possible to cook a nutritious meal for less than $5 a person. Over 30,000 people came together at over 5,500 events to participate in Slow Food's $5 challenge.

When I spoke to Viertel a few weeks ago, he had just returned from a board meeting in Portland, Oregon, and was full of praise for both Andy Ricker's Thai restaurant Pok-Pok and Portland's energetic food justice scene. As I talked to him, I came to the happy realization that Slow Food is a flourishing network of people from all backgrounds and socioeconomic levels—from advocates of Native American fishing methods to radical kimchee makers in Indianapolis. All these members are coming together to overthrow the industrial food system and buy and make food that is good, clean, and fair.

Mark Bittman had an op-ed in the Times a few weeks ago in which he argued that, despite subsidies, junk food can actually be more expensive than cooking meals from scratch. You have said in the past that we live in a country where it's cheaper to feed our children Froot Loops than it is to feed them fruit. So, which is it?

We live in a country where it's *easier*—to feed our kids Froot Loops than it is to feed them fruit. Sometimes that's price but a lot of times that's access and a lot of times it's knowledge, too. Price, access, and knowledge come together as this set of three factors, which can make it really hard to do the right thing when it comes to food.

Take potato chips. To buy a pound of potatoes in the form of potato chips, you are probably spending $11 or $12 a pound for potatoes. And potatoes, even the fanciest organic fingerlings, are never more than $2.75 or $3 pound, which is obscenely expensive. (Generally potatoes are $1 per pound.) So we're talking ten or twelve times more for the junk food version.

Now the issue with that, though, is that it's not just a matter of personal choice. It's not that low-income people are making bad choices—it's that they live in a food environment where making good choices is really really difficult. And so we need to change the structures that make that the case.

Bittman did acknowledge food deserts, but he implied that most people are lazy and opt to watch T.V. rather than cook. I think there's some truth to these skewed values, but I also know there are many poor people who want to

eat better but don't because they're pressed for time and are surrounded by fast food.

If we pretend that food is a democracy, you have to acknowledge that for a lot of people in a lot of neighborhoods, there are no polling stations and there's only one candidate, and it's the incumbent. And just saying "Well, if you just voted differently, we'd have a different food system," verges on pathologizing poor people for bearing the traits of poverty. We can't do that. We do have to talk about, "Hey, everyone needs to learn how to cook." This should be something we value and the time should be valued, as well. Everyone should be engaged in building a world where it's not easier to feed our kids Froot Loops than it is to feed them fruit. Whether that's a matter of price, access, or knowledge.

Before you became the president of Slow Food USA, you were the co-director of the Yale Sustainable Food Project. Tell me a little about that project.

I was hired by Yale to get local, sustainable food into the dining halls and to build a farm on campus. And also to build curriculum and extra-curricular programs for undergraduates. It was a great adventure.

The idea was, "Let's intervene with this incredibly intelligent—and for the most part very privileged—group of young people right before they catapult into the world." Since '72, every single presidential election at that time had a Yale graduate as one of the top two candidates. If you can intervene in that population you can create incredible change in the world.

At the same time, I was feeling a need to tap into the energy that was growing all over the country—particularly post-*Omnivore's Dilemma*. I was seeing a lot of people—not just college students—either really angry or really inspired about food. They needed a place to put that energy. After Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*, you saw the Sierra Club and other environmental organizations take readers of the book—people who would be engaged in pushing for social change. So I thought, "Slow Food should be the vessel for all that energy." I got asked to join the board and eventually got asked to take it over.

So was that your charge as president—to engage in movement building?

Exactly. Which takes organizational change. But we turned ourselves into an organization that's built to do that work.

Every mom who drops her kid off at school for the first day and realizes, "My child may be eating something that's going to make her sick"—that mom needs a path to do something about that concern. Everyone who reads Michael Pollan and complains about corn subsidies with a friend over a cup of Fair Trade coffee—they need something to do about it! And our job is to give them something to do about it. That's what gets me up in the morning. I think it's what gets all of our staff and volunteers up in the morning—how do we make sure that we take that energy and turn it into power to make change?

I noticed the shift in Slow Food's mission right around Slow Food Nation, in August of 2008. After that, the popular perception started to change from the notion that Slow Food was a club for foodies (whether or not it was) to a social justice organization.

It wasn't just me. It was a mood—a tone and tenor and culture of the movement that needed to change. We realized we needed to move in that direction.

But social justice has always been embedded in Slow Food's overall mission, no?

Absolutely—and globally. Right now we have members in 150 countries. Slow Food has nothing to do with being a gourmet club in these countries. It has to do with changing the world, preserving traditions and maintaining the sovereignty of the people who are growing and eating in their countries. It has a lot to do with corporate power and the way globalization plays out.

Slow Food's tag line has always been about making food good, clean, and fair.

At the very beginning it was a protest against McDonald's on the Spanish Steps. And so it started with that sense of anti-corporate protest—it's in its DNA. And I think some people forgot and thought it was good, clean, or fair. But the "and" is really important.

The latest e-mail I got expands on that: "Food that is good for those who eat it, good for the farmers and workers, and good for the planet."

And that's basically how I describe what Slow Food is. It's the opposite of fast food—it's all those things.

Do you still get remarks from people who think Slow Food is elitist?

I've always been clear that I don't want to spend any time in an argument about whether we're elitist or not. I want to do work that makes it completely apparent that we're not. I'm committed to doing work that is relevant to the people who are most hurt by these problems. If we can do that, I think the argument will fade away.

I think it *is* clear from all the "campaigns" you've engaged in—from the $5 challenge to the fight to ensure that taking photographs of farms is legal.

Our first campaign, in 2009, was about school lunch. It was called "Time for Lunch."

We had over 300 potluck protests all over the country and yet no one talked about that as a social justice campaign or a campaign that was about social change. It was talked about as fixing school lunch. But school lunch is a program that feeds 31 million of America's poorest children every day. It's a program that disproportionately impacts low-income people and people of color. Time for Lunch was not just about this lesson: everyone should cook. It was about "What makes it more challenging to feed our kids real fruit rather than Froot Loops?"

The 2012 Farm Bill is right around the corner. Is Slow Food planning a campaign around it?

Food and farm policy is completely against our nutrition and environment policy. It's a really interesting political climate right now—it's a budget-driven climate. So we see huge opportunities to take away some of the incentives that allow corn and corn syrup to be so cheap. At the same time there is a huge risk that some of the programs that feed people or support ranchers and farmers will also get taken away.

We're not sophisticated lobbyists, but what we are are really good organizers. The $5 challenge is essentially a way of helping us find anyone who is concerned about these issues and setting them up to be advocates on the Farm Bill.

We'll have a policy platform that we'll be pushing and we'll be asking Congress to do the right thing by it. The timing of it remains to be seen. But we know that with or without Congress, we're organizing people around good, clean, fair food policy. The $5 challenge is the launching pad for that.

So what will the organizing on this issue look like? Will you ask members to call their Senators and Representatives or will there be more of a MoveOn house party model?

The face-to-face engagement—whether it's political or not—is vital. The kind of relationships we build when we have a meal together is the foundation for doing good work to change the world. What you'll see are small groups meeting all over the country for meals and taking the $5 challenge over and over again. And pushing legislators by phone and meeting them in their home states.

A lot of the really effective advocacy that's happening right now is happening not in Washington D.C., but back at home. That's where legislators are listening. I actually think that's a healthy trend. We're set up to do that kind of advocacy because we have 225 chapters, members in every state, and this great volunteer corps.

What is the membership of Slow Food USA these days?

We have about 25,000 active members. We reach a network of about 250,000 people via e-mail. Through Oct. 15th, membership is pay what you can. So instead of it being $25 for

membership, even $1 will make you a member. It's part of trying to make sure everyone can be involved in this work and be part of the organization.

We also have a really big Twitter and Facebook following. I think we're at 179,000 Twitter followers now and have 85,000 "likes" on Facebook. What's great about that community is they're all over the country and they're sharing stories of the work they're doing on the ground but then they're also talking about food all the time. It's a nice mix.

We beat McDonalds by a couple thousand Twitter followers—we're pretty proud.

Does Slow Food do some kind of outreach to low-income communities or food deserts? I would guess that people in most of these communities are not familiar with Slow Food, but I could be wrong.

Our chapters have over 500 local partnerships in the communities where they work, with other organizations. They range from churches to nonprofit organizations and direct service organizations. And a pretty substantial percentage of those local organizations are doing work in low-income communities. For us the key is to do work that is relevant in those communities and let the Slow Food identity and membership follow. So we're actually not that focused on aggressively diversifying our membership but we are really focused on making sure that the work of Slow Food is relevant to diverse constituents. And if diverse membership follows—and particularly if diverse volunteer leadership follows, whether that's socioeconomic or racial diversity—that, we think, is a really good thing.

I think Slow Food's New York chapter gave money for the garden atAutomotive high school in Greenpoint.

That's a great example. Almost all of our tangible on-the-ground work happens at the local chapters. Our hope is that the local chapter will be better at doing local work—whether it's gaining local press or raising local money than we ever could be at the national level. Our work at the national level is to build up the leadership of those chapters and support them so that they can be effective at their work but then bring us all together around national campaigns.

Bryan Walsh, in his article about the food movement, was tallying up the membership of Slow Food as if it were the main sign of this being a viable social movement.

But you know, another way to look at it is that it's about potential. The Tea Party at its outset had a much smaller membership than Slow Food has now. If you look at the early Civil Rights movement—the assets both in organized people and in dollars—it's much smaller than the food movement.

I think the question now is how do you tap into the passionate concerns of people who want to change things and give them pathways to do it? For me, I look much less at our current membership than to our potential membership, which is enormous. And then what you do with those folks is incredible as well. We have a set of three Slow Food chapter leaders in Denver: Andy, Gigia, and Krista. They started a garden in their kids' school and soon parents at other schools were saying, "We wanna see gardens in our school. Would you help us do it?" So they did.

Finally, the three of them were running twelve different gardens in twelve different schools. And they thought, "We can't do this any more!" The next parent who came up and said, "We want to do this, would you start a garden in our kids' school?" They said—"Go find twelve parents and teachers that get together regularly and we'll train you how to do it yourself."

A few years later, they've got gardens in over 60% of the public schools in Denver and they've organized a network of 500 parents and teachers to get this whole thing off the ground. So for me, show me, 50 Andy, Gigias, and Kristas—and we've got a Tea Party for the food movement.

Were you pleased with how many people turned out for the $5 challenge?
Over 30,000 people took the challenge and there were over 5,500 events on that day. We thought we'd have 500 events and maybe a few thousand people taking part. We never could've anticipated this turnout. I think this speaks to the potential power that's out there and the drive and desire to share food and knowledge and get together in our communities.
There's a section of our web site where we posted the tips, tricks, and recipes people sent us. It ranges from videos, pictures, and recipes to a theory of cooking beans. The underlying idea is our communities collectively have a lot of the solutions we need. Whether it's how to cook real food on a budget or it's how to effectively drive our legislators for meaningful change for federal policy. We own those solutions ourselves, so let's begin using them and sharing them with each other.
What's your definition of food justice?
Everyone can eat every day food that is good for them, good for the environment and good for the people who grow and pick it. That food is a universal right and not a privilege. That's the short definition.
I used to be a vegetable grower and I would sell very expensive produce at a farmers' market in an affluent neighborhood. There were some low-income people who would come to that market and they couldn't afford the produce I had. So I would give it away. My partner and I were making maybe $12,000 between the two of us.
So there's this paradox. To even stay at the poverty line as a farmer, selling directly to consumers, you have to charge prices which means that your food—which is real food—is completely unavailable to low-income people. And you are a low-income person! So we have this false choice. My only option would've been making zero—losing money. When you have those kinds of paradoxical situations, I think it doesn't call on farmers to lower their prices. And it doesn't call on poor people to spend more money on food. It calls on all of us to change the way that we grow and share food in this country, so that we don't have those kinds of choices anymore.