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Slow Food movement takes root here

By JEFF HOUCK

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Consider it a sign of how disconnected people have become from their food sources that a teen cook who recently enrolled in a class at the Rolling Pin Kitchen Emporium in Brandon wasn't aware that chicken breasts came from chickens.

"I guess I should have been surprised, but I really wasn't," said chef Dave West, the Rolling Pin's co-owner.

West belongs to a new group, Slow Food Tampa Bay, which aims to bridge the gap between farm and table by encouraging eaters to consider the sources of their food. It wants to identify for them local growers and businesses who use best practices.

The group, the 10th Florida chapter of Slow Food USA, will hold a Slow Food Sampler at 7 p.m. Thursday at Studio@620 in St. Petersburg to attract new members.

The event will feature a silent auction and a menu by West that includes eggplant flatbreads, Bloody Mary shrimp and diver scallops with pomegranate brown butter sauce. The food is being donated by Whole Foods Market of Tampa.

Slow Food is an international movement that started in 1986 in Italy in reaction to the spread of fast food throughout that country. Since then, the worldwide Slow Food organization has attracted 100,000 members in 132 countries. The group educates people about food practices and promotes sustainable and fair agricultural methods.

Other parts of the country, including California, New York and Texas, have seen rapid membership growth in their Slow Food groups. The national organization has been key to pushing the Obama administration to adopt more slow-food principals in schools and federal guidelines. In 2008, the Slow Food Nation event in San Francisco attracted thousands of participants and led to planting a vegetable garden outside city hall.

Locally, the movement has taken root at several restaurants that emphasize local, sustainable ingredients. At the Sono Cafe inside the new Tampa Museum of Art, for example, chef Marty Blitz and co-owner Maryann Ferenc designed the fare to mimic the Italian roots of the slow food movement.

The Slow Food Tampa Bay chapter started in November. School social worker Jaye Williams said the national organization put her in touch with others from the Tampa Bay area.

Williams said she was surprised the Tampa Bay area didn't yet have a group, especially since there's plenty of agricultural activity in Hillsborough County. She hopes to spur demand for produce and livestock grown by local farmers by promoting them.

"I found a source only about 20 minutes from my house for locally raised grass-fed beef," she said. "As passionate as farmers may be, they still need a market for it."

Cathleen Ryan, a pastry chef and instructor at the Jacobson Culinary Academy in Tarpon Springs, said the group plans to host taste workshops featuring local food artisans so that chefs can find local ingredients.

"We're just going back in time to do what used to be the right thing to do," she said.

West said that as a chef, he wants to be put in touch with local growers who can provide ingredients for his cooking classes and events.

"Our students are constantly asking for health-driven menus," he said. "They also want to know where their food comes from. I think that's what's pushing a lot of people to get involved."

Tickets for Thursday's sampler dinner are on sale for \$10 and can be purchased online at www.slowfoodtampabay.org. Studio@620 is located at 620 First Ave. S. in St. Petersburg.