

▶ Matthew Jukes explores the 'slow food' movement in Bohai township

On a hillside in Tianxiayu village, a group of visitors are haggling with a tanned, wrinkled woman over the price of a bottle of honey. Half a kilo of the sticky, ant-attracting syrup in a flimsy plastic jar is going to set them back 40 yuan (\$6.27), probably around the same amount as at a Beijing supermarket. After settling on price and weight, and wiping away a few stray ants, a couple agree, deciding that they'll take a jar, made from bees flitting in and out of hives less than a few feet away, and thusly they've contributed to Beijing's small but growing slow food movement.

Saturday was the second time that The Schoolhouse group of hotels and restaurants around the Great Wall section of Mutianyu have hosted their annual Slow Food Saturday, bringing together a few of the villages in the Bohai township area in an attempt to get people away from fast-food culture and into something a bit more sustainable. Talking to a group of curious visitors, Randhir Singh, head chef at The Schoolhouse, explains the idea.

"It's about learning the culture in the village, about what they do in their daily routine and how we can learn from that," he says, pausing only to prepare some local eggs for an ice cream demonstration. "What we are trying to do is approach the young generation; we want *them* to experience local life, not just the old folks. You don't find any young people here working the ground; we want the young generations living in the city, who just go to a restaurant for lunch, to know where their food comes from and get the most out of the land," he adds.

The audience is held rapt, perhaps primarily in anticipation of the ice

cream he's making, but the message seems to get through as people hurry away with a scoop and conversation to nearby tables.

The slow food movement has been around for some two decades in America and Europe, where advocates hope to educate consumers about the dangers of fast food and preserve local cooking traditions that might otherwise die out. While those involved are very active, it has still remained relatively low key. This is the second year for Beijing, with The Schoolhouse championing their mission of sustainability, inspired by a similar-style event held by friends in Canada.

To do it, they ask the local villagers to pitch in, serving up whatever their community specialty might be, from hand-cut noodles, to hand-made corn cakes, pancakes, grilled delicacies and more, all made with ingredients grown in the surrounding area, prepared by people who've been doing this for years.

According to the organizers, 80 percent of the money spent on the chits they are using to exchange for food will be passed on to cover the cooking costs of the participants, while the other 20 percent goes to charity. To compliment the occasion, they invite local performers to strut their stuff, with fan dancing, a pair of young comedy crosstalk twins and demonstrations taking place across the township.

"The stories behind the dishes are actually more important than the food itself," says Wang Wenbin, who owns a family courtyard restaurant in Tianxiayu, explaining what he interprets the event to be. On Saturday, he was serving up char-grilled chicken and a specialty vegetable roll to a group of families touring the area by bike.

"We call the vegetable rolls *si wawa* [baby vegetable slices] in Chinese; it's kind of like wrapping a baby. In the south of China, they say one should eat more vegetables as a child, but children hate eating vegetables, so why not wrap them in a pancake to disguise them?" he adds.

The participants aren't your archetypal activists or environ-

mentalists, although thanks to the fine weather bearing down on the bountiful greenery of the mountains, it's possible that one or two sit-ins wouldn't have gone amiss, giving consumers and providers alike the opportunity to relax.

Further up the road, Ge Haojin and his wife set up a barbecue in the street and are offering grilled trout and onion pancakes to passersby. He too has his story behind the food, using ingredients he's grown himself, along with something a bit more medicinal.

"I've been doing this for around 12 years," he says proudly. "Along with the local ingredients we use a medicinal herb that grows in the mountains called *yesuzi* [known as Vietnamese balm in the West]; together the ingredients are very warm and can cure stomach ills, and even internal parasites."

Ge has a happily-filled table in his restaurant, and the chatter about food continues jovially throughout the day, including during the bus ride home.

Perhaps there will be more than a few stories about slow food floating around town in the coming days, and who knows – maybe a

few more visitors to mountain areas around Bohai to find out where their food and cooking traditions really come from. If just a few more people think about what they're eating when they go out to lunch in the city, then it's mission complete for Slow Food Saturday.



CUISINE CRUSADERS



Audience members sample ice cream at The Schoolhouse on Saturday. Inset: A man learns to make hand-cut noodles. Photos: Matthew Jukes / GT