



# *the* Snail

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# Doctored, Strange Food:

## Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the MicroWave

by Sarah Whitman-Salkin

Going to college provides students with many freedoms, including the ability to make their own culinary choices. Taboo foods become the norm, and the school cafeteria is there to lend a helping hand. Initially excited by these changes, I soon learned the reality was harsh. At home, doughnuts were a rare treat, but the cafeteria “donuts” displayed in a large plastic trough yielded no such delight. French fries, which once held a special spot in my heart, lost their appeal when poured from 30-pound freezer-bags. I fared no better at the salad bar, where lettuce lay exposed until it resembled cultures from the biology lab and the dressings were all “creamy.” This diet was intolerable, and something had to be done.

I thought the obvious solution was to move into the school’s “apartment-style” housing, where I would be able to evade the yoke of the meal plan and cook my own food in my own kitchen. Yet, when I finally moved in to my new “apartment,” my roommates and I packed the place with the very products I hoped to avoid: instant ramen, just-add-water pancakes, and the like. Initially, I thought this diet was a transitional quick fix until I resumed my usual Californian regime of sautéed vegetables and fresh fruit. Four months later, however, I found myself microwaving frozen spinach to accompany pasta smothered in jarred tomato sauce. What had gone wrong?

There seem to be three main fac-

tors that influence the food choices made by my peers and me: time, money, and kitchen space. The combination of funding that tends to impede the consumption of quality products, little time to prepare these inferior foods, and an environment in which cooking is less than enjoyable makes me think that the Slow Food way was not designed with college students in mind. And, in fact, it was not. But this does not mean that we can’t make it apply to our lifestyle: in fact, for the sake of our health, our sanity, and our futures we must. In an attempt to figure out how I can remedy my fast food way of life I have tried to deconstruct the three obstacles to a Slow Food existence for the college student.

**Time** Students generally divide their time between classes, studying, socializing, and sleeping. Meals rank slightly below cleaning on the priority list. Most students skip breakfast. Lunch is a snack. Dinner is not a meal but the consumption of food while writing a paper, reading a book, or watching television. The importance of eating in the Slow Food sense is replaced with a need for calories, the completion of one more necessary task.

**Money** College students live what we like to call “the frugal life;” that is to say that after books, coffee, and the occasional beer, there’s not much left for the farmers’ market. At merely 25 cents a pop, a package of Top Ramen tends to present itself as an easier food choice.

**Space** In the dormitory hierarchy, those with kitchenettes rank pretty high up. But even those fortunate enough to have a kitchenette (shared with four others), must practice the peculiar politics of sinks filled with foreign (sometimes moldy) dishes and cramped refrigerators (also sometimes moldy.) Additionally, this kitchenette remains without the basic culinary equipment most homes possess.

When eating becomes simply a task instead of a celebration, the element of pleasure in eating that is so fundamental to Slow Food evaporates.

But all is not lost! My solution to this problem is simple: take one food at a time. I eat canned soup because it is fast, cheap, and easy. Why can’t I make fresh soup with locally grown ingredients and freeze it for later? I buy quality cheeses but usually end up with bits left over. Why not make macaroni and cheese with all the small pieces I have, instead of reverting to a box of Kraft? And we must recognize the need for community if we are to gain pleasure from cooking and eating. Would it be difficult for me to start a Slow Food convivium at my college? With student membership rates and a clear need among food-conscious students for something more than “just add hot water,” these changes can’t be that difficult. If I modify my diet to adapt the Slow Food way one food at a time, I too can be a Slow Food-ie, as well as a college student.