

FEATURE



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHARON OLSON, CULINARY VISIONS PANEL

## REPORT FROM EXPO MILANO 2015

**'Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life' comes alive for millions**

BY SHARON OLSON





**E**xpo Milano 2015, which was designed to create and encourage an international discussion about feeding the world and sustaining the resources to do it, brought together citizens from more than 140 countries to examine the best of technology that “offers a concrete answer to a vital need: being able to guarantee healthy, safe and sufficient food for everyone, while respecting the planet and its equilibrium.”

With a core theme of “Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life,” the expo ran six months, from May 1 to October 31, in Milan, Italy. The conversation was as much about feeding the hungry as it was about enlightening those who suffer the effects of poor nutrition and excessive food intake.

The objective was clear; identify and collaborate on solutions to feed our world population of 9 billion by the year 2050. Lofty goals and high ideals were the order of the day, yet realistic conversations about small measures that empowered individuals left those attending the Expo with a glow of inspiration and great intentions. Our exploration focused on finding ideas and inspiration for supermarket deli executives and managers who want to become leaders in educating and engaging consumers today and tomorrow.

### Supermarket Of The Future

The Future Food District was a large exhibition space dedicated to the supermarket of the future. One might have expected some sort of futuristic technology-enabled fantasy, yet the focus of this space was on using technology to connect the consumer with the provenance of every item they might wish to purchase



in a supermarket or deli. It's important to note the technology enabled a free flow of information for those who wanted to know, yet it would not deter shoppers who know what they want and want it quickly.

Refrigerated display cases had consumer accessible panels and clear glass overhead panels that would display origin, production methods and details about products in the cases when activated by the consumer. This system called “augmented labels” enabled consumers to see the story behind a product by simply brushing their hand over a panel and looking up at the display screen. It demonstrated how to feed the consumers’ desire for transparency by connecting them directly with the supply chain.

The personal connection with in-store experts took center stage attention in the supermarket of the future where product specialists were able to connect with consumers, providing product details, tasting samples or tips on serving and preparation. The Future Food District also attempted

to demonstrate that the traditional marketplace concept of a place where people connect over food will be very much part of the future.

Packaging highlighted many things available in today's delis, like combinations of cheeses and meats in clear plastic compartmented containers to conveniently serve a one or two person household. The impression was that food items were packaged in limited quantities on premise rather than combinations received pre-packaged by vendors.

Old world was clearly the hot trend with products displaying generations of family commitment to unique products and time-honored craftsmanship. Some packaged in butcher-type paper with a wax seal communicated an exclusive, limited availability of a luxury product. Exploration of the Future Food District made it clear consumers’ attraction to small production niche products has the potential to fuel an influential consumer food movement.

### Exploring International Cuisine

Cultural and culinary tourism was clearly a focus of Expo Milano. Foods and wines from Italy dominated the Expo with products available from all of the Italian regions for consumers to explore and wholesalers to consider for export. Lines at various pavilions, which covered more than one million square meters, provided an informal focus group of thousands who presented insight into the most intriguing world food cultures. Mediterranean countries including Italy, France, Turkey, Israel and Morocco were among those with the longest lines.

Brazil captivated visitors with a physically engaging suspended exhibit where movement of visitors triggered light and sound. The educational focus was on how





Brazil has been able to sustainably increase its food production six fold over the past 40 years with controlled expansion of cultivated areas.

Mexico used its pavilion to showcase the great diversity of foods from the six different regions/states of Mexico, giving attendees a far broader culinary perspective on Mexican food, which is so popular around the world. While visitors enjoyed the exuberant display of fiesta so typically associated with this country, their eyes were opened to the rich cultural diversity of the region.

Japan and Korea, both countries that have invested significantly in promoting cuisines throughout the world, also welcomed significant crowds. At food expositions worldwide, Japan has demonstrated the art of utilizing umami in cooking for many years; this was a main theme in their pavilion. Korean food relies heavily on vegetables and feeds the growing demand among Americans for veg-centric dishes. The restaurant in the Korean Pavilion offered traditional dishes and menus based on very modern trends with items based on anti-aging, detox and other diet concepts.

The U.S. Pavilion, American Food 2.0, United to Feed the Planet, gave international visitors a broader perspective of American food culture than the limited stereotypes that often exist. A 7,200 square foot vertical farm that was harvested daily provided an impactful demonstration of the possibilities of urban agriculture. According to Mitchell Davis, executive vice president of the James Beard Foundation and chief creative officer, USA Pavilion at Expo Milano 2015, "Research indicates consumers are increasingly interested in knowing where their food is from,

how it is made, and what impact it has had on the environment."

American cuisine was on display at the pop-up James Beard American Restaurant in downtown Milan. Top American chefs were invited to prepare meals during the Expo and visitors from around the world were treated to a unique and intimate showcase of American gastronomy.

One evening, James Beard Award-winner, Chef Alex Young, chef/partner of Zingerman's Roadhouse in Ann Arbor, MI prepared an unforgettable experience that was uniquely American. His passion for farming and sustainable agriculture was the foundation of the dining experience, which included New Mexico lamb posole, a salad of soured, parched and sprouted oats with toasted oat vinaigrette, eastern North Carolina pulled pork served with green beans and a flight of grits, and Native American Indian pudding.

### The Power Of Food

Food trucks at the U.S. and the Netherlands Pavilions created instant communities of global visitors around these installations. Food Truck Nation outside of the U.S. Pavilion served up iconic and innovative American street food from around America. The organizers were mindful of wholesomeness, sustainability and nutrition; yet hungry showgoers appreciated the indulgence of Maine lobster rolls, barbecue, burgers and a variety of classic desserts. Bleacher seating, adjacent to the trucks, demonstrated how a restaurant, supermarket or chef brand can take to the streets and create an instant food community.

The Dutch Festival was the first thing visitors to the Netherlands Pavilion encountered. It was a vibrant scene

of colorful trucks set up in a park-like area where attendees lined up for indulgences like fries and burgers but also gave a nod to more healthful offerings like yogurt and smoothies.

### Connecting With Consumers

Today's consumers want to be connected to each other and to those in the know about what interests them. They do not want marketing that tries to sell them on a product or an idea; they want information and experiences that captivate them. All types of food experiences fascinated the millions of consumers attending the expo.

Storytelling was a large component of many of the experiences at Expo Milano. In the Italian Pavilion children were given large coloring books to learn and share their own stories about food and agriculture. In the U.S. Pavilion a visual display of the Great American Foodscape required no words to communicate America's history and food culture with visitors from around the world.

In the Holy See Pavilion visitors were welcomed to walk around a long table with video projected from the ceiling, which was, motion activated. When a visitor would place their hands over various places at the table the video would begin showing the hands of peoples from different countries and cultures preparing and serving food. This was a dramatic and captivating example of how food connects people and cultures — food is the common language.

Consumers also connect with suppliers they believe to have ethical business practices. Sustainability is a concept that was barely understood by mainstream consumers a decade ago, and today it can be a powerful selling tool.

### Insight For Deli Operators

When Davis was asked what he would advise supermarket deli executives and managers to consider doing to become leaders in educating and engaging consumers today and tomorrow, he said, "Much like Expo Milano, the deli counter is a place to support entrepreneurs, artisans, and quality food producers, from both the local region and from abroad. Being educated and informed about the products you sell allows you to educate and inform clientele so you can guide them to the best tasting, most healthful, most environmentally-friendly choices."

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