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Slow Food Triangle sponsors a New Year's Day meal of Southern favorites such as peas, rice, collards and sweet potato pie. The proceeds will help bring locally raised foods to Durham's E.K. Powe Elementary School.

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BY KRISTIN COLLINS - STAFF WRITER

DURHAM -- Black-eyed peas eaten on New Year's Day are said to bring good luck. But the people who gathered in the Golden Belt Warehouse to eat them Friday had higher hopes for their meal.

For many who scarfed down plates of heirloom beans and rice, North Carolina-grown collards, fresh-baked cornbread and sweet potato pie, all prepared by Triangle chefs, the aim was to help usher in an age of simpler, more environmentally conscious eating.

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In a time when many people subsist on industrially produced foods that come from across the world, often served at drive-through windows, about 150 supporters of the group Slow Food Triangle started 2010 by savoring a locally sourced, family-style meal.

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Proceeds from the event went to a program aimed at introducing elementary school students to fresh, local foods.

"In North Carolina, we have such an agricultural bounty, and kids don't even know what's in season," said Jenne Scherer, a teacher at Exploris Middle School in Raleigh. "Slow Food is about waking people up to what's locally available."

Slow Food is an international group that has been around since the 1980s, pushing back against

the forces of industrialization and globalism that have shaped modern diets. In the past year or two, their call for local, unprocessed food has become a popular movement in the United States.

Locally and nationally, people are crowding into farmers' markets, joining farm cooperatives, seeking pasture-raised meat and, especially since start of the recession, returning to the practice of planting home vegetable gardens.

First lady Michelle Obama gave the cause a boost this spring, when she and a group of elementary school children planted an organic vegetable garden on the White House grounds. It was the first since Eleanor Roosevelt's victory garden.

This was the second year that the Triangle Slow Food chapter held a communal new year's meal. The event sold out at a cost of \$15 to \$18 a head, even though diners had to bring their own plates to eat in a rough-edged warehouse.

What the ancestors ate

Phoebe Lawless, a Durham baker and one of the organizers, said the event is, first and foremost, about carrying on a culinary tradition rooted in the South's history and agriculture.

Legend says the humble black-eyed pea became a New Year's staple at the end of the Civil War. Sherman's advancing troops ignored the beans, raised mostly to be consumed by livestock or slaves, while stealing or destroying other crops.

Now seen as symbols of luck and prosperity, they are usually served with hearty greens and cornbread - all dishes that can be made with locally available ingredients, even in the dead of winter.



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Lawless said Slow Food Triangle got black-eyed peas and rice from Anson Mills, a South Carolina company that produces organic, heirloom grains. The vegetables, including sweet potatoes for the pies, came from local farms. Even the pork that seasoned the beans came from a Triangle farm.

Everything was cooked in the kitchens of local chefs and consumed at three long rows of folding tables.

"The idea of coming together at a communal table is a really attractive idea to people," Lawless said. "These are people who are interested in simple, sustainable food."

Thoughtful shopping

Diana Palmer, an editor and graphic designer from Durham, said she used to eat whatever was on sale at Kroger. But in the past six months, she has started shopping at farmers' markets, looking for organic vegetables and free-range meat. She said her New Year's meal symbolized a new commitment to more thoughtful eating.

"It just kind of dawned on me, that I needed to have more awareness of what I was putting in my body," Palmer said. "Not all food is created equally."

Cindy Chang, a Durham event manager, said the dinner of inexpensive foods was also proof that you don't have to be rich to eat locally.

"It shows that quality food that's been carefully prepared is obtainable," Chang said. "It's for everyone."

The money raised at the event will go to a pilot program that will bring a buffet of locally raised foods to the cafeteria at Durham's E.K. Powe Elementary twice a month - in the hope of shaping a new generation that will prefer local beans and collards to paper-wrapped hamburgers.



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