I want to thank the organizers for inviting me to speak today. This is a bit of a challenge for me. I come from around here and I think that was one reason it felt like a challenge to speak. It’s also very exciting because I feel that I am in exalted company. There are a number of heroes here; some of whom are famous and some of whom just beaver away quietly doing extraordinary things throughout the countryside. They are not here for their own egos or self-aggrandizement. They actually work very hard in the community to make life more satisfying and to make agriculture more satisfying and, hopefully, more profitable to those involved.

It can be overwhelming when you look at the enormity of what we are dealing with. There are just so many facets to get our heads around in trying to work out how to make a difference. And it is easy to feel very isolated in trying to deal with all that, so these kinds of meetings and networks are very important. It’s good to know other people you can ring up or email just to say, ‘This is really hard, what do I do now?’ or ‘Can you come and stay because I need to talk?’

**Rediscovering Flavour**

I come from a farming family at a place about one hour west from here. When we were kids we had vegie gardens, cows, chooks, pigeons, sheep and cattle. To actually buy something from a shop was a real thrill. It’s funny. I was at the Farmers Market this morning and I heard people saying, ‘Wow, this is fantastic, you can’t buy food like this now.’ I asked some people selling spuds when they were dug and they were able to tell me precisely — on Wednesday, three days ago! And I thought, ‘brilliant’, because I knew they would have an incredible flavour. So now I get excited by things I once took for granted.

Because of my background, I’ve been lucky that I have always eaten pretty good food and have managed to stay pretty close to the producers. About seven years ago, I went to Daylesford and bought a run-down old
guesthouse which had an Argus stove that I fell in love with. We had a dining room that seated about twenty-five and I was worried about how the stove might cope. So I just said to guests, ‘There is no menu here, you just have to eat what I cook.’ Of course, some people were deeply challenged and said to me, ‘What if I don’t like what you are cooking?’ And I said, ‘Did your mother ever ask you what you wanted?’

Then I started to sniff around and I found people who grew beautiful things. And I would say to them, ‘Just bring me whatever you’ve got and whatever is good’. Then I would decide what to cook after the farmers had delivered their produce. Sometimes people at lunch would ask what I would be cooking for dinner and I would answer, ‘I don’t know yet, but it will be good.’ And everything was fabulous because the ingredients were so fresh. For example, my weekend vegetables would be picked on Friday. I was lucky because I had this amazing network of people who were really keen to help me and to get their stuff out there without going through the big retail chains. The only fights I ever had were about how much to pay, because some of them would ask $5 for a kilo and I would insist on paying them $10 a kilo. Would you pick Morello cherries with a long stalk on every cherry, without a mark on them, sell them for $5 a kilo and then do the same thing next year? I wouldn’t. So I said I wanted them to stay in the business.

So, guests would sit down for dinner and instead of presenting them with something smart and toyed with I would serve a plate of tiny new steamed potatoes with a sprinkle of salt. And they would say, ‘Wow, these are mind-bending’. I would tell them that they tasted like that because they were dug that very day.

Making a Market for Local Produce

After doing that for a while, I moved on. There is a sign on the edge of the road as you drive into Daylesford which says, ‘Gourmet Food and Local Produce’. I used to laugh about that because at that time you just couldn’t find any. There was the supermarket with the usual supermarket things. To be fair, the butcher did a good line in local stuff, but the greengrocer bought from the major markets. There was very little that was local. That seemed like a challenge for me, so in a moment of madness my partner and I bought this silly old, falling-down building and thought we would start a local produce store.

We had the usual fight with the local Council and all that. We fixed it up a bit, but you couldn’t really see what we had done. It still looked like it needed painting and the floors were still wobbly. But it’s a nice old store. It was moved to that location in 1904 from the gold diggings, so it had this nice old feel about it. And we just asked all the local producers to bring their stuff to us. We got jams, and fantastic smallgoods—like prosciuttos—and local honeys. The farmers we already knew would bring their stuff in. And our menu was rather like the menu at the guesthouse. It just said things like
‘Soup’ or ‘a stew thing’ or ‘a meaty thing’. It had to be that way because you just didn’t know what you would get. You might get one pumpkin or you might get a ute load of pumpkins.

People would come in and say, ‘I would like a ham, cheese and tomato sandwich, thanks’, and I would say, ‘I can do the ham and cheese, but it is August and there are not a lot of tomatoes around here in August’. Then they would say, ‘But I saw really good tomatoes in the supermarket’, and I would say, ‘OK, you go off down to the supermarket and buy them, and then come back here in summer to find out what the local tomatoes taste like.’ Some people would be really affronted by this and say in a grumpy way, ‘OK, then what can I have?’, and I would say, ‘Oh, well it is August so we have potatoes and cabbage and pig, and that’s about it.’ By this time they would usually try it and, of course, the cabbage was sweet because it was only a few days old, and they would say, ‘Wow, I have never tasted cabbage like this before.’

We called our store ‘Cliffy’s’ in honour of a man who once ran a store in the same building, and it was certainly not very flash commercially. It was started as a philosophy, which was about teaching people about food and looking after the farmers and producers. If you are selling something you have produced yourself you will sometimes settle for a low price. But if you have a middle person who knows what the value really is then they can make sure that people are prepared to pay more, with more of that money getting back to the producers. People would whinge to me about the price of cheese if it was selling at, say, $65 a kilo, and I would say, ‘You should try getting up early every morning and working through to dark to get the milk and make the cheese, and keep that up for eighteen months even if you are not making much money when the cheese sells for $65 a kilo.’ People are willing to pay $2.20 for 500 millilitres of water in a bottle, but will complain about the price of the local cheese.

**Spreading Slow Food in Victoria**

About two years ago, the Slow Food people wanted me to crank up a branch in Central Victoria. I said I was really busy, but they said that I was already doing this kind of work in linking pleasure, flavour and an awareness of what is happening with food globally. I decided that it would fit in with what I was trying to do with Cliffy’s, so we got it going and now we have about eighty members from Central Victoria out to Hamilton and up to Mildura. We’ve got room for more leaders if you are interested. We run lots of interesting workshops throughout Central Victoria and we could really spread that kind of activity. Just to give you one example, we are working with two cider makers at Harcourt who are making traditional farmhouse cider. If you taste cider like that you won’t go back to that Strongbow muck, which is fizzy and sweet and full of chemicals.

When you work with food, surprising things can happen. I had been trying
to get Tom Cooper, the most famous fish smoker of all, to come to things for about four years and then he turned up, unannounced, one day when I was trying to run a smokehouse day. I nearly died, but he was kind enough to tell me I had done really well. As a result of that one day, I know about eighteen people who went home and made their own smokehouses.

These days ‘variety’ is being confused with ‘choice’ and people think that variety means having a Woolworths supermarket with three aisles selling very similar things in different packages. We really need to rethink what ‘variety’ and ‘diversity’ should mean. There are people willing to have a go at being food producers, but they need support from each other and from middle people who can help them find a market. The key thing is flavour because once you discover that you won’t want to go back. One of my clients at Cliffy’s said to me one day, ‘You know you have cost me a fortune because even my kids will not eat vegetables from the supermarket anymore.’ I take that as a compliment because if we can get through to the kids then that will make a big difference in the future and even a small business like mine can make a difference.

Mary Ellis lives near Daylesford and has been the Slow Food Central Victoria convivium leader for the international Slow Food Movement. A passionate cook and gardener, she has run a popular B&B in Daylesford and the very popular ‘Cliffy’s Emporium’ fine-food store. She is particularly interested in the connection between food producers and consumers and has worked to establish kitchen gardens in schools in the region where she lives.