Slow Food Presidia are local projects that work to improve the infrastructure of artisan food production. The goal of the Presidia is to guarantee a viable future for traditional foods by stabilizing production techniques, establishing stringent production standards, and promoting local consumption. The Presidia project is coordinated by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, which organizes and funds projects that defend our world’s heritage of agricultural biodiversity and gastronomic traditions.
The Oldest Breed of Sheep in North America

The hardy churro sheep breed—with its multi-colored double fleece—was brought by the Spaniards to Mexico by 1540, and reached overland to northern New Mexico by 1598. Over four hundred years, this multi-purpose breed has adapted to the arid conditions of the sagebrush steppe and pinyon-juniper woodlands of the mesas, buttes and desert canyons of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and Colorado. Now called the Navajo-Churro sheep, its carpet-quality wool has been used by Hispanic, Diné (Navajo) and Pueblo Indian weavers to produce world-renowned rugs, saddle blankets, coats and vests. Relying on native forage of the canyon country of the Colorado Plateau, the sheep also provide “sage-fed” lamb and mutton, central to their sustenance as well as religious ceremonies. However the value of the breed was not recognized by government range managers whose stock reduction programs in the mid-1800s, and again in the 1920s, reduced the number of breeding individuals of Navajo-Churro sheep to less than four hundred. Then, in the 1940s, a number of grassroots organizations joined forces to recover the breed and its unique products. By 2005, the Navajo-Churro Sheep Association had registered more than 5000 individuals, and for the first time ever, the lamb is now featured every day of the year in regional restaurants. Navajo-Churro lambs produced in canyon country are range-fed, antibiotic-free, and parasite-free. Because the fat of this breed is typically concentrated around the organs rather than being spread throughout the body, even the meat from animals reaching fourteen to sixteen months of age does not suffer from the musky, “muttony” smell that afflicts other breeds. Instead, it retains a light, herbal fragrance and a complex, grassy flavor. The meat is highly valued by both traditional cooks and celebrity chefs.

The Presidium

In the summer of 2006, several nonprofit organizations joined forces with Slow Food USA to establish a Presidium to promote the recovery of Navajo-Churro2 lambs and to foster its sustainable production. The Navajo-Churro Sheep Presidium was designed to initially benefit a diverse collective of Navajo shepherders, meat producers, ranchers, chefs and weavers, who are known as “keepers” of the Navajo Indian reservation. The project will help develop marketing strategies within the region, particularly targeting chefs and caterers who are interested in using the whole carcass. The Presidium was initially formed through the collaboration of Slow Food USA, the Diné Borrego, the Navajo Churro Sheep Association, American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, the Center for Sustainable Environments, and Renewing America’s Food Traditions. The Alto Arizona Slow Food Convivium, the Institute for Integrated Rural Development at Diné College, the Navajo Sheep Project, and Heifer International have also played important supporting roles. It is hoped that once the world-renowned marketing of Navajo-Churro is spread to benefit those in Western Navajo lands, similar efforts will be developed between Eastern Navajo and Hispanic lands in New Mexico.