Today’s food retail landscape can be confusing to navigate. For consumers, it is a landscape characterized by an abundance of products to choose from, the omnipresence of food in multiple and nontraditional points of sale such as hardware stores and gas stations, and mixed messages from manufacturers, retailers, food activists, celebrity chefs, and public health officials and advocates. Not surprisingly, for many consumers, the weekly trip to the grocery store has become a dreaded experience marked by the stress of making sense of nutritional labels, marketing promises, and eat-this-not-that advice. From the manufacturers’ and retailers’ perspectives, the food retail landscape is equally fraught: they are faced with uncertainty, paradoxical trends, and daunting challenges. Commercial success is often elusive and requires accurately predicting consumers’ changing needs and tastes as well as the alignment of numerous variables, which is often more the result of providence than calculated moves. While cooking shows, food exposés, cookbooks, and magazines have increased consumers’ interest in food and cooking, the food industry remains opaque, its inner workings often hidden and mysterious to the public.

Actually, “food industry” is a misnomer. More correctly, the agrifood system encompasses several industries, including primary agriculture
and its suppliers, food and beverage processors and transformers, importers, wholesalers and distributors, retailers, and the foodservice industry. According to Agriculture Canada, the agrifood system represents 8 percent of the country’s GDP and employs 2.1 million people (Canada, AgCan 2013). The different sectors in this system face both common and unique business parameters and operating challenges. The modus operandi of the retail sector influences many of the practices and processes that occur earlier in the value chain that moves foods from producers to Canadians’ tables. This chapter examines the retail end of the agrifood system and describes various aspects of its operating reality. Ultimately, my objective is to begin to explore how the retail sector influences what Canadians see on grocery stores’ shelves, what they bring home, and to some extent even shapes how Canadians think about food.¹

THE BATTLE FOR THE CONSUMER’S FOOD DOLLAR

A heated battle is being fought for the consumer’s food dollar. On one side, “food-at-home,” totalling over $90 billion in 2011 (Canada, AgCan 2013), includes food sold by manufacturers and retailers and meant to be prepared at home, regardless of where it is eaten. On the other side, “food away from home” (FAFH), valued at $72 billion (Restaurants Canada 2015), includes food prepared outside the home, regardless of where it is eaten. Since the mid-1950s, in part because of urbanization and changing lifestyles, FAFH’s share of consumers’ food dollars has grown consistently. By 2013, Canadian households spent on average $7,980 on food-at-home and $2,226 on FAFH (Statistics Canada 2015). However, the battle lines are not as neatly drawn as this overview might suggest, for providers of food-at-home and FAFH are both competitors and accomplices.

In their fight for a “share of stomach,” food-at-home providers have expanded their product offering, focusing on “value added” products. These products reflect the growing importance of convenience and the changing Canadian appetite. For instance, products known as “speed scratch” are designed to save preparation time for the home cook. These include products that have undergone varying levels of transformation and are sold in more advanced stages of preparation. “Ready-to-cook” and “ready-to-heat” options, such as seasoned skinless chicken breasts, require little or no preparation but some level of cooking or reheating. Many of
these food-at-home innovations are in fact inspired from and speak to the growing competition with FAFH providers. Betty Crocker’s Warm Delights Molten Chocolate Cake mix, for example, was clearly inspired from the popular dessert found on many restaurant menus. And the very name of Healthy Choice’s Café Steamers product line is itself a nod to the cafés and FAFH providers with which it competes. This latter example falls within the food category that is generally known as HMR, or “home meal replacement.” These value-added products have been developed to save consumers preparation time and still give them the impression that they are actually cooking, along with the accompanying emotional fulfillment of doing so, even if that involves performing highly simplified tasks. Lastly, in a growing encroachment on the territory of FAFH providers, most grocery stores now feature often quite sophisticated buffet-like options of “grab-and-go” and “ready-to-eat” (RTE) foods.

Not to be outdone, Canadian FAFH providers are trying to gain a greater share of stomach in a variety of ways. While a full treatment of the current trends in FAFH is beyond the scope of this chapter, two important trends are worth noting. First, “premiumization” (also referred to as “gourmetization”) has been taking place in both the food-at-home and the FAFH sectors (Ipsos Reid 2008). Within the FAFH industry, this trend has been driven in part by the rapid growth of “fast casual” restaurants serving higher-quality fare than fast food at a price point higher than fast food establishments but lower than restaurants in the “casual” segment. The success of fast casual restaurants has prompted fast food operators to improve their menu selections. The McDonald’s Angus Beef Burger exemplifies the gourmetization trend. Affordable premium offerings make eating out more appealing for consumers than cooking at home. A second important way in which FAFH providers compete for a share of stomach is by offering “ready-to-cook” or “ready-to-heat” versions of their signature products, often sold by the very retailers against which they otherwise compete for a share of stomach. In 1965, Québec’s Saint-Hubert Rotisserie became one of the first FAFH providers to enter supermarkets. The company’s products, benefitting from the restaurant’s established brand equity and recognition, are now on sale in more than ten different categories (such as soups, salads, and frozen entrées) and are manufactured by a third party. Supermarkets thus extend the distribution and reach of FAFH providers against which they otherwise compete for a share of consumers’ food dollars.
In this battle, constant innovation is required to remain attuned to consumers’ changing taste preferences, and convenience and availability (being available when and where the customer wants to eat) are key “value added” features for which many consumers are willing to pay a premium. In this competitive landscape supermarkets are at times willing allies and at other times victims of food-at-home manufacturers’ and FAFH providers’ attempts to shape and influence consumer demand.

THE STRUCTURE OF FOOD RETAILING: INTENSIFYING COMPETITION

The front line of the battle for Canadians’ food dollars is the retail sector, which is currently facing an identity crisis brought on by increasing competition, particularly from supercentres, warehouse clubs, and newly arrived players in the food retail sector. While traditional supermarkets’ sales increased from $69.2 billion in 2008 to $74.6 billion in 2012, their actual share of the food retail sector decreased from 85.6 percent in 2007 to 80.7 percent in 2012. In Canada in 2013, Loblaws was the leader of the supermarket sector with a 31 percent share, followed by Sobeys, which, after its acquisition of Safeway, controlled 21 percent of the market; Metro was in third place with an 11 percent market share (“Target” 2013). Together, the “big three” controlled the traditional supermarket sector with a combined 62 percent market share. By comparison, in the United States, sales by the top twenty food retailers accounted for 63.7 percent of the market in 2012 (United States, USDA, ERS 2014b), revealing a much more competitive industry structure where innovation is a key success factor. In contrast to the United States, serious competitive threat for the control of a large share of the Canadian market comes from only two other major players, so there is less need to innovate. As a result, and by virtue of the decisions they make about product assortment and operating processes (which favour volume-oriented large producers), the “big three” have an unavoidable influence on the content of Canadians’ plates. Have Canadian supermarkets become complacent? Not entirely. New competitors and the increased presence of established ones have forced the three leaders to adapt and improve both their product offering and operations.

Supercentres and warehouse retailers, fairly recent arrivals on the retailing landscape, have gnawed away at traditional supermarkets’ share. Costco and Walmart, for example, each have 6 percent market share.
For retailers like Walmart and Costco, selling food increases store traffic and generates purchases of other merchandise with higher profit margins (Beatty and Senauer 2012). Although Walmart has only a 6 percent share of the food retail sector in Canada (in contrast to its 25% share in the United States), the company’s supply management processes and everyday-low-prices strategy have influenced competitors’ practices (Kinkoff 2011) and have kept the pressure on other Canadian retailers to keep prices low. In a defensive move, many traditional grocery stores have expanded their product offering to include over-the-counter and prescription drugs, housewares, and even clothing. But this is only one half of the identity crisis facing the food retail sector.

A more recent shakeup in the Canadian food retail sector has come from an unexpected competitor and is a harbinger of more competition to come. More than a quarter of the sector’s sales (the remaining 26%) are made by “nontraditional” retailers, a broad heading that includes convenience stores, specialty food stores, dollar stores, and drugstores. The gourmetization trend noted earlier has favoured some of these nontraditional retailers: specialty food stores’ sales have increased by more than 23 percent between 2008 and 2012 and now account for $5.3 billion. New “hybrid pharmacies,” where up to 50 percent of the public floor space is dedicated to food (mostly dry goods, frozen foods, and beverages), have given both traditional supermarkets and convenience stores cause for concern. As a result of these hybrid pharmacies’ penetration, sales at convenience stores have decreased slightly from $6.8 billion in 2008 to $6.3 billion in 2012 (“Target” 2013). The recent acquisition of Shoppers Drug Mart by Loblaws is indicative of the growing importance of pharmacies in the food retail landscape and its strategic role in the ongoing and intensifying battle for consumers’ food and wellness budget. Given consumers’ interest in food, it is no surprise that Walmart, Loblaws, and Sobeys all have massive expansion plans. In fact, the two leading traditional retailers (Loblaws and Sobeys) are expected to expand their available square footage (total across all stores) at a rate faster than the Canadian population growth rate (Charlebois et al. 2012). Moreover, further changes are soon to come to the food-retailing landscape, as Loblaws is said to be contemplating the addition of hot and fresh foods to the product assortment to be offered at Shoppers Drug Mart (Canadian Press 2014).
To lure customers into stores and to keep them coming back and spending more, retailers must strategically choose to emphasize breadth of product selection, convenience of location, in-store shopping experience, low prices, unique brands or products, or a combination of these and other attributes appealing to their targeted customers. While surveys—typically conducted in conditions bearing no resemblance to the environment in which food choices are actually made—often point to taste, convenience, and health as key drivers of consumers’ choices, sales receipts tell a different story: as many industry veterans often point out, price is the key decision factor. Consumers are price sensitive, especially in some product categories, such as FAFH, soft drinks, and meats (Andreyeva, Long, and Brownell 2010). Additionally, the rumoured possibility of a Canadian expansion by Whole Foods Markets continues to worry Canadian retailers: the US retailer would likely capture a large share of the lucrative organic market should it decide to enter Canada with a more substantial presence.

**SUPERMARKETS: NO LONGER IN THE FOOD BUSINESS**

The battle for consumers’ food dollars is, of course, being fought and most visible on the store shelves. Consider that the first self-serve grocery store, Piggly Wiggly, opened in 1916 in Memphis with a little over six hundred items on its shelves. In 2013, grocery stores offered just under forty-four thousand items, and some of the largest supermarkets offer twice that number of products.\(^2\) Traditional retailers are thus caught in a delicate balancing act by having to face competitive pressure from established and new retailers, to meet customer demand for variety and new products within the constraints of limited floor space and the many enticements of manufacturers and distributors who wish to gain access to consumers. Adding to the challenges of this reality is the notoriously small profit margins in the retail food sector—in the order of 1.2 to 1.5 percent (Bergeron 2008)—which forces retailers to focus on volume and inventory turnover (Cardello 2009).

Although we tend to think of supermarkets as being solely in the business of selling food, they are, fundamentally, in the real estate business. Since space is a marketable commodity, supermarkets supplement low-margin sales from food with revenues from selling valuable real estate. To be a recognized supplier, most supermarkets charge manufacturers a
standard “listing fee” (also called a “slotting fee”) per “stock keep unit” or SKU. These fees usually start around $25,000 but can go as high as $250,000, depending on the coverage (number of stores) and the desirability of the area to be covered—high traffic areas with high sales potential command higher fees. Some categories (ice cream, frozen foods) command higher fees to offset the steep investments in refrigeration equipment and maintenance costs. In addition, supermarkets charge a “shelf fee” to manufacturers that wish to occupy highly visible shelf space within stores. For instance, the mid-section of aisles at eye level is usually considered premium space, as is the end-of-aisle space, usually reserved for products with high contribution margins or for products of manufacturers willing to pay for that specific space. To be visible in this sea of products, manufacturers always want to have multiple “facings,” or product facing consumers. In addition, special placement fees or promotional fees may be charged, at the discretion of the retailer, to manufacturers who wish to hold special promotions, such as a large display of product at the entrance of a store. These fees, negotiated on a case-by-case basis, typically depend on the contribution margin of the product category or specific brand: a product that brings higher contribution margins (potato chips, for example) will be charged lower promotional fees than a brand or product with lower margins. The key performance metrics used by traditional supermarkets clearly convey the importance of nonfood sales and real estate: supermarkets closely monitor sales (of food) and revenues (including nonfood such as fees) per square foot and per linear foot. What Canadians are exposed to as they go about their weekly grocery shopping and what ends up in their cart and on their tables is no accident but rather the result of calculated choices made to maximize sales and the use of real estate.

A second important way in which supermarkets increase their profit margins is through marketing their own store brands (also called “private labels” or “house brands”). Store brands have enjoyed unprecedented popularity as of late, partly because of the economic climate, and sales show no signs of slowing down (Glanz, Bader, and Iyer 2012). These store brands are priced lower than competing national brands but generate higher contribution margins, thus adding significantly to a retailer’s bottom line. For instance, the worldwide sales of Walmart’s private labels account for US$150 billion of the company’s US$446 billion in total sales. By comparison, Loblaws’s store brands generate US$8 billion of the company’s
US$31 billion sales. On a global level, private labels are expected to double their market share and account for 25 percent of food retail sales by 2025 (Gerlsbeck 2011). Store brands usually thrive in categories with low differentiation and low emotional attachment (canned goods, for example, have low differentiation and low attachment, while cookies or ice cream do not). The importance of store brands must be understood within both the battle for consumers’ food dollars and the power struggle between national brands (more accurately, the powerhouse that owns them, such as Procter and Gamble or Unilever) and retailers. Whereas national brands previously held considerable consumer loyalty, which gave national brand owners hefty powers in negotiating or even removing slotting fees, today’s store brands, in addition to increasing profits, can help to increase loyalty to a supermarket (Azzato 2009), thereby giving retailers more power. In the evolution of store brands, President’s Choice represents a notable success story and has now become a national leader in its own right. Its slogan, “Worth switching supermarkets for,” indicates the newfound status of store brands as destination brands (Collins and Bone 2011).

To appreciate food retailers’ impact on what Canadians eat and how they communicate about food, important aspects of their internal processes must be understood. Managing the cornucopia of available products in supermarkets is done through an approach known as Efficient Consumer Response, or ECR. The kingpin of ECR is management by category (fresh fruits, canned goods, frozen foods, etc.). “Category managers” or “category buyers” must ensure the profitability of their category and are thus concerned with contribution margins and inventory turnover. This means they must select and secure the products that their clients want at a price point that will return adequate margins for the retailer. Miscalculations can lead to significant waste and financial losses. Category buyers prefer value-added products that have a stable shelf life and that travel well: such foods facilitate distribution across hundreds of stores, command a higher price, and generate higher contribution margins. As a result of this focus on value-added convenience, the farm share, in the United States, of a $1 food purchase is 15.5 cents, with the rest going to all other postfarm activities, such as processing, packaging, retail costs, and advertising (United States, USDA, ERS 2014a). Beyond margins and transportability, an important concern for category buyers, especially as it relates to the obligation to move inventory, is the notion of “frequency.” The foremost interest of retailers
and manufacturers alike is in creating repeat purchase, or getting consumers to buy frequently and repeatedly. However, given consumers’ price sensitivity, many retailers and manufacturers believe that brand loyalty is very difficult to achieve in today’s food environment. Consequently, short-term price-driven tactics such as instant rebates and price discounts, coupons, bonus offers, and reward points are often preferred means to sustain repeat purchase. Hence, by deciding which foods enter supermarkets, category buyers control what ends up on Canadians’ plates, and by focusing on price, they also contribute to shaping the discourse on food, thus influencing how Canadians’ relate to and eventually communicate about food.

To move products off of store shelves, marketing at the “point of sale” (that is, the grocery store) is critical. In-store merchandising efforts are typically aimed at increasing “spending per visit” (getting consumers to purchase more than planned in terms of quantity and/or to buy premium items) as well as increasing “number of categories purchased” (leading consumers to consider and purchase items from more categories than planned). Categories are carefully laid out according to a “planogram,” which even manufacturers and distributors have access to and check from time to time to ensure that they have the right facings and that their products are correctly displayed. In recent years, “shopper marketing” has emerged as a complementary approach to category management (Ståhlberg and Maila 2012). Essentially, this involves seeing the grocery visit from the consumer’s perspective and placing products and purchase enticements in such a way as to facilitate problem solving, whether that problem is “How do I make a tasty salad?” or “How do I fix dinner for the family in thirty minutes?” As a result, consumers are bombarded with “Buy me!” messages and calculated sensory stimulation. Making healthy choices in this environment can be daunting: indeed, 50 percent of consumers don’t believe that their supermarket is helping them making healthy choices (Catalina Marketing 2010).

REACHING TODAY’S CONSUMERS AMIDST CONFUSION AND DISTRUST

The wild card in today’s food environment is the consumer, who both drives and blocks innovation. On the one hand, by virtue of their evolving preferences and spending power, consumers act as powerful agents of change and motivate innovations in the entire agrifood system. On the
other hand, they can also be creatures of habit reluctant to embrace new ways of eating, new products, or even new information. This makes it particularly challenging for manufacturers and retailers, who must identify the features that will add value to food products in the eyes of consumers and lead to product adoption and repeat purchase. Adding complexity to this exercise is the heterogeneity of consumer demand: demographic changes, such as those that affect ethnic composition, and an explosion of lifestyles have made it particularly challenging to predict consumer preferences and choice criteria. While surveys point to taste and nutrition as key drivers of food choices (see, for example, CCFN 2008), field observations reveal that consumers’ actual use of nutritional information is far less frequent and detailed than surveys suggest (Grunert, Wills, and Fernández-Celemin 2010). When they do use nutrition labels, Canadians tend to use an elimination-choice heuristic, looking primarily for red flags such as high levels of sodium, sugar, and calories (Nielsen 2012). In the grocery store, a number of cues can sway consumers’ product evaluations and choices. The shape and colour of a package, promotions, and even the retail environment and the pleasantness of the shopping experience can influence product evaluations (Collins and Bone 2011). In the current competitive landscape, manufacturers and retailers gladly seize on any trend that has the potential to give them an edge over their competitors, even if momentarily. In this crystal-ball-gazing exercise, providers of syndicated surveys and commercial market research hold considerable influence. Given the fact that public policy makers have been timid and slow to regulate communications in this area, this has resulted in a cacophonous and confusing landscape.

To encourage consumers to buy, food marketers have long appreciated the importance of a key principle: the closer one gets to consumers, the shorter the message must be. That is, a manufacturer can develop sophisticated communication for distributors and category buyers, but when it comes to communicating with consumers, messages must be short and clear, and must provide a compelling motivation to purchase. Weekly flyers, for example, typically show appetizing pictures and only a few key words. Nowhere is this principle clearer than on packaging’s “available display surface” (ADS), the limited area used for communicating key messages, including nutritional information. ADS must be strategically and carefully maximized so as to draw consumers’ attention as they navigate crowded
aisles. Food marketers have therefore resorted, among other techniques, to using a variety of evocative words chosen to convey a product’s benefits and to trigger emotionally laden mental associations and images. Words such as authentic, local, organic, homemade, natural, fresh, and light owe much of their marketing effectiveness to the fact that consumers make over two hundred food decisions daily (Wansink and Sobal 2007) and to their propensity to use shortcuts or heuristics when making these decisions. Some keywords, such as homemade, can make foods appear tastier and even more filling (Wansink, van Ittersum, and Painter 2005). Interestingly, laboratory evidence reveals that pleasure-oriented descriptors, while associated with estimation of higher calorie content, do not lead to greater consumption than health-focused descriptors (Provencher, Polivy, and Herman 2009). By using these evocative keywords, retailers and manufacturers shape how Canadians communicate about food, since consumers willingly adopt these words and participate in cocreating the narratives that support their effectiveness, making up stories and myths of their own to connect with brands (Kniazeva and Belk 2010). At the same time, consumers are becoming distrustful of marketers’ liberal use of these keywords: a recent survey reveals that a vast majority (70%) “only sometimes” or “never” trust these product descriptors (Nielsen 2011). As sophisticated as food producers’ efforts to sway consumer choice appear to be, they are mostly based on intuition and past success rather than on rigorous scientific evidence, so we still do not clearly understand the mechanisms and processes underlying consumers’ interpretation and assessment of these keywords and product claims (Lähteenmäki 2013; Labbe, Pineau, and Martin 2013).

Social media has become part of how Canadians think about, experience, and communicate about food. Consumers use social media, blogs, and online resources to expand their culinary horizons, share experiences, and even guide food purchase decisions. As much as social media have democratized food knowledge and access to information (Johnston and Baumann 2010), they are also partly responsible for the current distrust of food marketers and have contributed to propagating suspicious or untrustworthy information, myths, and beliefs (Rousseau 2012). Consumers are more likely to distrust information provided by food manufacturers than to be critical of pseudo-scientific information contained in some anonymous chain emails touting the merits of this or that new diet or miracle food. Food myths such as the oft-cited but inaccurate fifteen hundred miles
travelled by industrially produced food (Desrochers and Shimizu 2012; Black 2008) are illustrative of the misinformation that manufacturers and retailers must now deal with. As it stands, consumers can more easily find reliable information about which car to buy than about what to eat.

To nudge consumers in their decision-making process, retailers and manufacturers have two relatively new tools in their arsenal. Front-of-pack nutritional labels now summarize key nutrition information on the front of packages. Nu-Val and Guiding Stars (used by Loblaw’s) are two popular systems. By placing such information in plain view, these information systems shape the discourse on food and how Canadians relate to foods as bundles of calories, fat, and sodium. Another tactic to nudge consumers’ decisions is the use of loyalty programs or other point-based rewards. For instance, PepsiCo uses Aeroplan miles to move consumers toward its Tropicana and Quaker products. Sobeys offers AirMiles, Metro introduced a successful loyalty program called “Metro and Me,” and Shoppers Drug Mart uses its Optimum loyalty program in part to promote its own Simply Food brand. Both of these tactics, front-of-pack labels and reward programs, shape how Canadians relate to their food, either as a gateway to better health or as a vehicle with which to accumulate points.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have tried to explain some of the food retail sector’s practices with two goals in mind: first, to help readers, as consumers, to understand food retailing practices and thus possibly avoid some of the marketing traps in their weekly grocery shopping trip; second, to contribute to a greater understanding of the retail sector’s challenges and operating reality so that critics and researchers interested in the food retail environment may develop solutions and address important issues as we collectively try to improve the system that feeds Canadians.

Through its position in the chain that moves food from producers to consumers and through its business practices, the retail sector of the agri-food system has a defining influence on what Canadians eat. From an industry perspective, retailers’ practices impact those of producers, manufacturers, and distributors earlier in the food value chain, shaping product development, packaging, marketing communications, and merchandising at the point of sale. Engineering value-added products yielding high
margins, paying for privileged shelf space, and using enticing keywords and nutrition information on product packages are all examples of tactics employed by producers and manufacturers to ensure that their products stand out in the crowded retail environment. That very environment, in turn, dictates consumers’ food choices. Thus, from a consumer perspective, retailers’ decisions and practices define what Canadian consumers see and buy during their weekly trip to the supermarket and, consequently, what they eat at home. Through product variety, store layout, strategic placement of high-margin items, in-store merchandising techniques, pricing, and other enticements, supermarkets shape consumers’ food choices—typically toward high-margin, ready-to-eat processed foods that tend to be high in fat and sugar or sodium. Such foods are increasingly popular with Canadians, who are essentially trading health and nutrition for convenience and ease of preparation, even as they claim to care about health and nutrition. The growing presence of these foods on the tables of Canadians speaks to an evolving relation to food items as bundles of conveniences and practical attributes rather than as vectors or sources of varied pleasures, conviviality, and, indeed, good health.

Through marketing communications and other practices, the retail sector also influences how Canadians relate to and communicate about food. Consider, for instance, the promotion of ready-to-eat processed foods. Whether as mass-produced packaged goods or self-serve, grab-and-go buffets, these foods are typically promoted with enticing and often misleading keywords, such as authentic, homemade, fresh, or natural. While some consumers may have become skeptical of such promises, these claims nonetheless still influence choice. For instance, while considerable confusion now surrounds the term organic, the overwhelming majority of consumers still buy foods labelled as such (Watson 2014), quite possibly because of the peace of mind or reassurance produced by a label or seal that, in the end, acts as a decision shortcut. While these keywords influence Canadians’ product perceptions and purchases, more importantly and perhaps alarmingly, as their meaning is co-opted by industry and often further transformed by the shorthand of popular culture, they come to define consumers’ mental associations and representations of what constitutes authentic, homemade, fresh, and natural foods. The lack of clear standard definitions and the outright abuse by a minority of unscrupulous food marketers underlie the growing skepticism that Canadians have toward
these tactics and their eroding confidence in food marketers and in the entire food system.

To be fair, food marketers are not the only force shaping how Canadians relate to and communicate about food. On the one hand, health advocates—including public health officials, nutritionists, and doctors—remind us of the importance of making healthier choices and eating well. On that front, even the definition and meaning of a healthy food and diet is subject to interpretation. On the other hand, food magazines, cookbooks, celebrity chefs, televised cooking shows, and food marketers tantalize us and invite us to indulge. Add to that cacophony all the self-proclaimed experts with an exposé or provocative book to sell, and you have a confusing sea of mixed messages where pseudo-scientific evidence and urban legends pass for truths. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that in spite of the unprecedented attention currently directed toward food and cooking, consumers often lack the knowledge to make educated choices and, equally importantly, to communicate about food in ways that promote mindful appreciation of the varied pleasures of the table. Even so-called foodies, whose raison d’être includes the pursuit of knowledge about food and evaluation of food (Johnston and Baumann 2010), often rely on global evaluations (such as “It’s delicious”) rather than precise words to convey their liking. Developing a more detailed and comprehensive knowledge and vocabulary about food is important because it leads to more defined preferences and to greater resistance or immunity to marketers’ tactics.

Herein lies an opportunity for professionals from different sectors—including health, agriculture, education, business, media, and even policy making—to work together and develop both programs to educate consumers about the fundamentals of making sound food choices and vocabulary that goes beyond simplistic keywords on product packaging. In this regard, Sobeys’s recent collaboration with celebrity chef Jamie Oliver to educate Canadians and empower them to eat better is a step in the right direction. Still, the situation calls for more ambitious and far-reaching initiatives. Without any such education initiatives, it is likely that, given our busy modern lifestyles and the lack of nutrition literacy, consumers will continue to favour shortcuts when grocery shopping, relying on cues such as keywords or summarized nutrition information.
NOTES

1 With a few exceptions, the food industry’s practices have been largely undocumented and ignored within the academic literature. Research on the industry’s impact on public health began only recently and is largely attributable to the obesity epidemic. This chapter is based on personal experience and communications, trade references, and, whenever available, academic research. Industry-specific expressions appear in quotation marks. Unless otherwise indicated, values are in Canadian dollars.

2 For grocery store statistics, see “Supermarket Facts,” on the Food Marketing Institute website, where numbers are updated regularly: http://www.fmi.org/research-resources/supermarket-facts. Superstore statistics can be found in Moss (2013, 27).


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