Snapshots of a Canadian Cuisine

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It was good fortune that transformed my passion for cooking into a career. In the early 1970s, publisher James Lorimer invited me to write a cookbook about Canadian food, encouraging me, a modern languages graduate and French teacher, to think beyond my southwestern Ontario roots and my family’s repertoire of recipes. *Classic Canadian Cooking: Menus for the Seasons* was the result, and it provided my entry into a career in food. After its publication, I freelanced, contributing a weekly column, “Canadian Cookbook,” to the *Toronto Star*; teaching cooking classes; appearing frequently on Peter Gzowski’s CBC radio programs and on CTV’s *Canada AM*; and writing cooking articles for magazines, notably *Canadian Living*. In 1987, I was named food editor at *Canadian Living*, a job I prided until I retired in 2009.

During my tenure with the magazine, I felt that there were two aspects of cooking that *Canadian Living* should cover. First, I wanted to profile our nation’s regional food—things like Saskatchewan’s turkey suppers and rhubarb-saskatoon pie, cedar-planked Atlantic salmon from Nova Scotia’s south shore, Acadian meat pie, Ontario’s peameal bacon on a bun, and Prince Edward Island’s lobster chowder. Second, I wanted to invite readers to cook dishes from ethnic communities, using food as a way of connecting people. Thus, *Canadian Living* introduced many new-to-Canada cuisines, including a Portuguese family dinner and recipes from the Afghan Women’s Catering Group. Charlottetown, PEI, was the site of a supper prepared by women of the Lebanese community. A Sephardic Jewish family in
Montréal cooked a Moroccan Seder meal. Food activist Anita Stewart shared the extraordinary experience of a Coastal First Nations potlatch. Kathy Lee invited readers to her family’s Lunar New Year’s feast. When space constraints in the magazine eliminated full-length features, we used two-page cooking lessons that provided step-by-step instructions on how to make potstickers, baklava, and gnocchi. And we slipped recipes like Vietnamese pho or Punjabi samosas into recipe-driven stories to add variety, setting them into context with an explanation of ingredients or special techniques.

The magazine has enjoyed a wide following, and issues are regularly passed along and collected. During my years as food editor, its reputation for reliable well-tested recipes encouraged people to experiment with new recipes, whether harira, a lentil soup served at day’s end during Ramadan, or the latest twist on Nanaimo bars. The magazine helped cooks realize what was possible in their own kitchens. It provided inspiration for occasions that marked the year: a Canada Day barbecue, the perfect turkey and stuffing for Thanksgiving, and sweet treats for birthday parties, anniversaries, or baby showers. Canadian Living provided a reference for what is Canadian, for Canadians new and old.

Cookbooks, television, and new media provided more outlets for the Canadian Living food philosophy, often to new and younger audiences. At the time, I don’t think the food department thought that Canadian Living was shaping Canadian cuisine; however, the sheer bulk of recipes must have influenced what and how Canadians cooked at home.

While media like Canadian Living can influence the direction of Canadian cuisine, they’re also significant to understanding what Canadian cooking is. In my almost forty years of publishing on Canadian cooking, both as a food editor and cookbook author, I have come to believe that a number of building blocks are essential for a recognizable cuisine. These include regional ingredients, distinctive cooking techniques, codification through cookbooks and “heroes,” and iconic dishes. Canada offers these in spades, and they all combine to create a Canadian food.

First, there are regional ingredients, like cod on the Atlantic coast, caribou in the North, five species of salmon on the Pacific coast, inland freshwater pickerel and goldeye, bison, wild rice, fiddleheads, maple syrup, and corn. Canada has four seasons; for First Nations, that meant preserving enough food for the frigid winter. These foods required hard, often dangerous work to harvest and process. Consider the buffalo. Before guns
and horses, bravery and skill were required to lure the animals to a cliff, stampede them over, and butcher the thousand-kilogram beasts at the bottom. Buffalo provided an incredible harvest. In addition to the fresh meat to cook and satisfy immediate hunger, they also provided meat to dry as pemmican, skins for blankets and clothing, bones for tools, and sinews for sewing and snowshoe webbing. Nothing was wasted. Similar diligence went into preserving the salmon harvest on the West Coast, fire-drying wild rice, and planting corn, beans, and squash so that the corn stalks supported the beans that nourished the soil, covered by squash vines that retained the earth’s moisture. Every spring, eastern First Nations made maple syrup by repeatedly freezing and removing the top layer of water from the sweet unfrozen sap, leaving the progressively thicker syrup at the bottom of containers.

What’s significant about these regional ingredients—salmon, bison, maple syrup, fiddleheads, and corn, for example—is that they still play a major role in foods we recognize as Canadian. An outing to a sugar shack in eastern Canada is a rite of spring. An August corn roast—what could be more Canadian? At First Nations powwows, attendees look forward to burgers, with bison patties tucked into fried bannock. When Canada’s Governor General entertains at Rideau Hall, these iconic ingredients inevitably appear on the menus.

As for distinctly Canadian cooking techniques, remnants of early cooking and preserving methods linger in the jerky and buffalo snacks of the Prairies, lyed corn found in Six Nations cookbooks of our era, the popular candied salmon sold in British Columbia, and trendy foraged fiddleheads. European settlers learned to use these foods and appropriated the techniques, but their very being belongs to the First Nations.

Another way to trace a cuisine through its evolution is through written records like cookbooks. Canada’s first cookbook, La cuisinière bourgeoise, was published in 1825 in Québec City by Augustin Germain, its author known only as Menon. The book dates from 1746 and, by the time it reached Lower Canada, it was a classic in France, even translated into English. It was successful in Québec, reprinted in many editions, and it helped imprint French as the model for Québec cooking and identity.

The first Canadian cookbook in English was The Cook Not Mad, published in Kingston, now Ontario, in 1831 by James Macfarlane. Its recipes were lifted entirely from a cookbook produced in 1830 across Lake
Ontario at Watertown, New York. While *The Cook Not Mad* contained recipes that could as easily have appeared in British cookbooks, of interest are the dishes made with North American ingredients: cornmeal, cranberries, pumpkin, crookneck squash, and candied watermelon rind, a replacement for hard-to-find citron. Noteworthy too are the book’s many tasty and timeless recipes—hard gingerbread, for example—that have found their way into kitchens of historic museums like Fort York National Historic Site, where the Officers’ Mess Kitchen operated around the same era as the cookbook.

A breakthrough in the Canadianization of cooking in English-speaking Canada came via Catherine Parr Trail’s *The Female Emigrant’s Guide, and Hints on Canadian Housekeeping* (1854). Here, Trail introduces newcomers to life in Canada—nonstop hard work. The book reflects a transition from British to Canadian ways of life, influenced by contact with First Nations and their foods and with more experienced settlers. *The Guide* includes recipes for cooking game and local fish, notably venison and the pike-like muskellunge, and details sugaring off, ice fishing, and substitutions of wild leaves and bark for tea and charred roots for coffee. Its many recipes range from wild rice as a savoury side dish, or as a sweet custard, to cranberries made into a sauce or a jelly. To familiarize newcomers with the novel ingredient, corn, Trail scrapes fresh corn off the cob to add to pancakes and fritters or to boil “like peas, with butter and pepper for seasoning; this obviates the ungraceful mode of eating corn so much objected to by particular persons” (Trail 1854, 118). She goes on to entice readers with cornmeal in familiar British dishes like Indian Pound Cake with lemon, nutmeg, wine, and brandy, or Indian Tea-Cake with currants or caraway seeds and molasses, ginger, and nutmeg. She includes North American dishes such as Johnny-Cake and Suppone, the latter a cornmeal porridge, eaten hot with sugar, butter, and milk, and when cold and firm, sliced, fried, and buttered for breakfast.

A national cuisine also has heroes. What would French cooking be without Escoffier, or British cuisine without Isabella Beeton? Canada also has standouts like Mme Jehane Benoît, whose Québec flair made her a darling of television.¹ Kate Aitken, from a generation earlier, was Canada’s titan of the kitchen via radio, personal appearances, and cookbooks.² Consider too, cookbook author Savella Stechishin, Canada’s first home economist of Ukrainian heritage, and the mythical and prodigious Edith Adams.³
But even as these icons slip into the memories of old-time cooks, new ones emerge, through television, restaurants, cookbooks, and new media. People like Michael Smith, Lynn Crawford, Michael Stadtlander, Martin Picard, and Vikram Vij and Meeru Dhalwala inspire Canadians to consider food as a career and to cook for pleasure. These new heroes popularize new ingredients and lay the groundwork for cooking dishes first tasted in ethnic restaurants.

National cuisines usually have iconic dishes. As pizza makes you think Italy, kimchee links to Korea, and croissants are to Parisian breakfasts as eggs and bacon are to the United States. We have inherited from other countries many dishes that are well established in Canadian kitchens: scones and shortbread from Scotland, salads from Greece and Nice, and Italian standards like lasagna. In my experience, shared dishes aren’t enough to “make” a distinctive Canadian cuisine. There have to be dishes we can claim as our own, by ancestry or by sheer volume. Butter tarts and their Québec cousin, tart au sucre, serve as examples. Longer settled by Europeans and more isolated than much of Canada, Québec contributes tourtière and poutine. Perhaps we can say “as Canadian as baked beans, split pea soup, corn on the cob, perogies, Montréal bagels, saskatoon pie, lobster rolls, Nanaimo bars, beaver tails, macaroni and cheese, and grilled cheese.” Serve with beer.

A national cuisine has strengths. Canada has three that are so obvious we rarely reckon their importance. The first is home baking. Historically a necessity, the heat and drudgery of baking was eased with the popularity of wood burning cook stoves. The love of baking can start with Granny hauling out the mixing bowl for a batch of cookies. Children are hooked by the sugar and butter, but also by the idea of accomplishing something important enough to enjoy themselves, and to share. Elsewhere, such as in France, pastry is an art not often practiced at home. It’s to the boulangerie for croissants, not baking blueberry muffins at home. Our skill is expressed in the fundraising bake sales that pervade the workplace and bazaar scene, the fall fair pie contests, cookie exchanges, and the making of items for our rites of passage—birthday, wedding, and anniversary cakes. Home baking is a significant contributor to Canada’s cuisine.

A second strength is barbecuing—or, as Americans say, grilling. Barbecuing has neatly dovetailed into the reality of contemporary family cooking where sharing tasks is a given. Barbecuing is convenient—all
you need to do is turn a knob. The gas is there, the flames immediate. No charcoal to light, no wait for the coals. While outdoor cooking is usually seasonal, Canadians don’t pack their barbecues away for the winter. Entertaining in warm weather almost invariably happens around the barbecue, with the rallying call, “Come for a barbecue.” The appliance somehow takes the angst out of having company, turning occasions into friendlier, more casual affairs.

While the third strength may seem minor, preserving has been vital to Canadians having enough food for the winter. Thanks to freezing and the availability of year-round fresh food, we no longer need to salt pork, dry salmon, or can vegetables. But preserving lives on. There has been a resurgence of preserving books and classes over the past decade. Getting together to make marmalade or pickles is gaining in popularity. The Canadian repertoire of chili sauces and dills has been augmented by chipotle salsa, chardonnay jellies, pickled fennel, and antipastos. In some neighbourhoods, September is announced by the aromas of peppers roasting and tomatoes being made into sauce. Preserving is a choice, either for our pleasure or for our culture.

Possibly the most significant future contribution to Canadian cooking will be made via the emerging cooking profession. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, when I started to write about food, most chefs were Europeans, and there were limited choices for professional training in Canada. Teachers at existing schools were also often European, and being a serious chef meant working in traditional cuisines in large institutions and hotels. Cooking did not have the prestige of medicine or law. But all this has changed, thanks to cooking shows, global travel, busy lives, a mania for eating at the hippest restaurants, and chefs and cooks who are the new rock stars. Cooking as a profession has been totally rebranded. Excellent professional cooking schools are releasing a veritable army of creative, trained chefs and cooks with new ideas, new appreciations of seasonal cooking with local ingredients, better skills, and respect for and curiosity about the cuisines of newcomers to the country. Many of them are reworking traditional foods for a contemporary audience. With more prestige than home cooking, professional cooking will invariably play a large part in shaping the future of Canadian cooking.

The future of Canadian cuisine will also be shaped by new media. For instance, at a conference organized in February 2013 in the Toronto area...
by Food Bloggers Canada, trend mistress and marketer Dana McCauley challenged bloggers to “find out what the Canadian food experience is.” Among the attendees was Edmontonian blogger Valerie Lugonja (www.acanadianfoodie.com), and she took up the challenge with a call to identify our Canadian voice:

So what is it that makes Canadian Food Bloggers unique? What do we bring to the collective table that is undeniably Canadian? Why is it so difficult for us, as Canadians, to get a handle on the uniqueness of our own culture? The vastness of the Canadian landscape contributes to this conundrum, yet other countries are as vast and present a clear cultural front to the world. And Canadian food. What is it, really? That would be an important bit of information for a Canadian food blogger to consider.

Already more than fifty bloggers have joined Valerie Lugonja in writing monthly posts about topics on a particular Canadian product, ranging from the Tamworth pig to Red Fife wheat.

It’s these many voices of blogs, television shows, websites, community events, cookbooks, newspaper and magazine articles, young chefs—along with the recognition of Canada’s heritage ingredients, heroes, and dishes—that will fine tune our cuisine as it grows out of a tasty mix of First Nations, English, French, Jewish, Chinese, Greek, Japanese, Italian, West Indian, South Asian . . . and more to come. Let’s not be impatient. We’ve laid out the ingredients—let’s give them time to cook. And let’s talk about it.

NOTES

1 In a career that spanned the 1930s to the late 1980s, Madame Benoît, as Jehane Benoît was known, wrote over thirty cookbooks, notably the *Encyclopedia of Canadian Cuisine*, for which she travelled the country collecting recipes. She was a broadcaster, owned her own cooking school, operated a restaurant in Montréal, and became well known in English-speaking Canada thanks to her regular appearances on *CBC’s* afternoon magazine-style show *Take 30*, with host Adrienne Clarkson. The 1960s and early 1970s were the heyday of the show. Later in her career, she was an enthusiastic advocate for microwave cooking.

2 Known as “Mrs. A,” Kate Aitken was the cooking authority in English-speaking Canada from the 1930s well into the 1950s, owing mainly to her popular *CBC* Radio cooking and advice shows. From 1938 to 1952, when
Kate Aitken was the director of the Women’s Division of the Canadian National Exhibition, thousands of women lined up for cooking classes. *Kate Aitken’s Canadian Cookbook* is still very much in print, and in use.

Like Betty Crocker, Edith Adams is a fictional persona, created by the *Vancouver Sun* and made real through cooking shows and seventy-five years of cooking advice and recipes by a succession of home economists, chefs, editors, and writers. Despite her fictional status, she played a big part in cooking, especially in British Columbia. She produced the food pages for the *Sun*, gave cooking lessons and demonstrations, ran recipe contests, responded to countless readers’ telephone calls and recipes, and produced numerous cookbooks.

REFERENCES

