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THE WALRUS

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Let's Eat!

The best food writing from across Canada



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Editor's Letter

IF THERE'S A subject The Walrus staff love more than food, I haven't found it. With our office in downtown Toronto, many of us will walk to St. Lawrence Market for fresh-made pasta or grab a booth in a nearby old-timey diner. We will also find just about any excuse to run out for an order of momos and fried rice (with extra hot sauce, please). And a big sheet of apple cake from local institution Mystic Muffin on standby at our meetings.

We're always comparing notes. *What herb do you find underrated? Do you use a paring knife or vegetable peeler for potatoes? What spice do you keep buying multiples of accidentally?* And it's clear that references to soup or spatchcocking are segues into much bigger topics to dish on: family traditions, the cost of groceries, or what brings us comfort.

So it feels fitting, given our endless food talk, that Senior Editor Samia Madwar contributed a feature about hummus to this issue. She explores not just its origins but stirs in her relationship with the chickpea spread as it's become more popular, co-opted to sell just about anything mashed up in dip form (cookie dough hummus is, in fact, a thing).

Other pieces take on the science behind pumpkin spice's strange power to conjure nostalgia, Second Cup's surprising second life abroad, and the wine war popping off between BC and Alberta. Food is never really just food. It's culture, policy, business, and memory, all simmering together.

And so we're offering readers a full spread of the best food writing there is in Canada, some of which grapples with what Canadian food even is. Sasha Chapman argues that Kraft Dinner should be considered our national dish, while Khalil Akhtar explores why Canada, a lentil-growing powerhouse, has never quite embraced the humble legume in its own cuisine. Then there's Simon Thibault's salty ode to Hawkin's Cheezies, which has become a symbol of sovereignty amid the recent spike in nationalism.

This issue's got a little bit of everything—my favourite way to eat and, I suspect, the team's too. A few times a year, our staff gathers for meetings that end with a big lunch. Everyone brings a dish. Think of this special issue as our literary potluck: lots to try and something for everyone. 🍴

—Monika Warzecha, digital editor

Quebec Gin Was Having a Moment. Then the SAQ Killed the Buzz

The Crown corporation controls all spirit sales in the province. That's bad news for small distilleries

BY SHEIMA BENEMBAREK



SOMETIME IN THE seventeenth century, during military operations in the Netherlands, British soldiers came across a particularly strong juniper-flavoured Dutch spirit called genever. When they brought it back to the homeland, it quickly became the drink of the masses—easy to produce and cheap to access. What followed was the “gin craze” of the 1600s and 1700s, an epoch in Britain marked by a boom in gin manufacturing, consumption, and, eventually, its regulation.

By the nineteenth century, gin was becoming known as a British classic. The spirit had cemented its reputation and identity with iconic styles like London Dry Gin, enjoyed in well-known serves like the gin and tonic, a colonial innovation used to combat malaria in India. (Quinine, which is responsible for the bitter taste in tonic water, has anti-malarial properties—though nowadays, with the

reduced quinine content in tonic water, you’d have to drink around seventy litres of it per day for it to have that effect.)

In his 1953 novel *Casino Royale*, Ian Fleming gave us one of the most recognizable gin-based drink orders. Named after one of James Bond’s femme fatales, Vesper Lynd, the Vesper martini came with a clear recipe, starting with a British gin: “Three measures of Gordon’s, one of vodka, half a measure of Kina Lillet. Shake it very well until it’s ice-cold, then add a large, thin slice of lemon peel. Got it?” says Bond.

I definitely got it. It is, without a doubt, my favourite cocktail. But during a restocking trip at the Société des alcools du Québec—SAQ—last year, I was surprised to learn that there was such a thing as Quebec-made gin. And I was simultaneously dismayed to find out that the Crown corporation, a monopoly that generates over \$1 billion annually for

the province, was cutting shelf space devoted to it.

Last April, the SAQ announced it was removing roughly 150 spirit products from store shelves by the end of the year (at the time of the announcement, the organization had over 600); 35 to 40 percent of those products were slated to be Quebec-made gins.

The SAQ’s mandate is to sell alcohol throughout Quebec. Since it has exclusive control over the sector, local distilleries are always at its mercy. When the SAQ decided to start reducing shelf space devoted to local gin last spring, it didn’t just mean Quebecers like me would have fewer options; it also meant small distilleries were in big trouble. While the SAQ did not specify the number of affected distilleries, a flurry of media coverage at the time quoted owners complaining about the decision. Some said the shrinking of shelf space would limit their primary sales channel.

“The SAQ is reactionary. They don’t really have long-term vision,” says Paul Cirka, president of Montreal-based Cirka Distilleries, which specializes in grain-to-bottle spirits. “And small producers in this province have no way of convincing the SAQ that we should be in 100 stores or 150 stores; they decide. And they’ve been pretty tough.”

BETWEEN 2019 AND 2022, sales of Quebec-produced spirits, including gin, surged by 75 percent—a trend the SAQ breezily promoted. “Every trend in Quebec, whether it’s alcohol, clothing, decoration design, we are way closer to the European market than any other province in Canada,” says Simon Bourbeau, account director of supply management at the SAQ. “Gin being popular at the time...that’s why [Quebec] jumped into it.” He says people felt the appeal especially during the pandemic.

The SAQ didn’t explicitly stipulate that distillers needed to pivot to gin. But to some, the buzz created a free-for-all effect. “With the lack of regulations, that in itself is fundamentally an encouragement to ‘Give us whatever you have,’” says Cirka. “So, everybody looked at the trend and thought, ‘I can do this.’ Until

it got out of hand.”

At the time, the few local distilleries producing Quebec gin—Romeo’s Gin, Ungava Gin, Km12, BleuRoyal Gin—also contributed to the hype. It helps that gin isn’t complicated to produce. It’s made by distilling a neutral-grain alcohol, like fermented wheat or barley, with juniper berries and optional ingredients, such as coriander seeds, cardamom, angelica root, or citrus peels.

In Quebec, new and established gin makers have been infusing their drinks with local plant extracts, herbs, or spices, like birch bark and maple sap. Ungava Gin, for example, uses wild rose hip, Labrador tea, and crowberry, which are typically found in northern Quebec’s Arctic tundra. And according to SAQ financial reports, this formula was wildly successful for a while.

The gin spike dovetailed with the rapid growth of Quebec’s micro-distillery industry, which expanded from fewer than a dozen to approximately seventy distilleries over the past decade. Research suggests that Canadians have a preference for artisanal or craft alcoholic beverages. “There’s a romance associated with small and local,” says Vivek Astvansh, associate professor of quantitative marketing and analytics at McGill University. “If [consumers] see that there’s a local distillery that has exerted effort in producing that gin, [they] tend to say, ‘Okay, let me try this.’”

Nicolas Bériault, co-founder of Distillerie 3 Lacs in southwestern Quebec’s Salaberry-de-Valleyfield, suggests that it’s less of a surge in gin appreciation and more of a simple and natural recalibration of the market. During Prohibition, which ended in 1919, Quebecers lost the habit of drinking spirits, and the province leaned more into its love of wine and beer.

“We don’t have that culture compared to Ontarians who are bigger whiskey drinkers, for example. So I think, first, we were very low in our [consumption] habits. And then there’s an international explosion of the gin trend,” says Bériault. “We went through a period of catching up. Many businesses see a big trend and jump in.” Gin’s versatility in cocktails—its complex profile serves as a solid foundation

for both classic and contemporary drinks—has made it a growing favourite among home bartenders and mixologists in the past decade, fuelling its popularity in cocktail culture.

Sometimes, however, a trend just stops trending. The peak demand was never going to be sustainable. Bériault notes that, at one point, Quebec had around 450 different local gins. “It doesn’t make sense for a population of a little over 9 million people.”

Mix in a general decline in alcohol consumption and the bottleneck becomes unavoidable. Gen Z are drinking less than previous generations. In a 2023 Statistics Canada report, 67 percent of Canadians aged eighteen to twenty-two said they didn’t have any alcohol in the previous week. In a 2024 Léger survey, 22 percent reported never having consumed alcohol.

Over the past year, Quebecers’ interest in craft gin has waned. Cirka feels the province’s distillers were backed into a corner. “The SAQ, historically, has always taken the approach of ‘We’re just going to throw everything at the wall and see what sticks,’ rather than ‘Let’s set up an initial filter process, evaluate products, and put the best things on the shelf.’”

Even if distillers sell their gins onsite, as part of tasting events, for example, they still have to forward a percentage of those sales to the SAQ. And this, as craft distillers fear, can put a business in serious financial precarity—especially smaller and emerging ones as well as urban ones that, according to Cirka, don’t have the same regional brand loyalty as rural producers.

“Our job is to ease the sales of Quebec products,” says Bourbeau. “Our job is not to make any business plans for them.” He notes that following a trend is always risky and that it is a company’s responsibility to do market research. “What we did at the SAQ is say, ‘Hey, this is a positive context to introduce new products. The sales are there.’ But we didn’t say produce more gin than whiskey or more vodka. We didn’t say it must be gin. It’s really their business plan. And we respect every business plan in Quebec.”

Provinces that rely heavily on alcohol revenue—like Quebec, Ontario, and

British Columbia—have little choice but to factor in changing behaviours. The SAQ, for example, is tapping into the sober-curious movement and selling non-alcoholic beverages. In 2022, Quebec senator Patrick Brazeau, who has struggled with alcohol abuse, presented Bill S-254, which requires health labels on all alcohol bottles to clarify the causal relationship between alcohol and cancer.

In light of the current escalating trade tensions with the United States, the provincial government ordered the SAQ to remove all US-made alcohol from its store shelves, a move that Cirka feels is just for show. “Obviously, we don’t like what America is doing,” he says. But the SAQ, he adds, is “not saying, ‘Hey, we have empty shelves. Let’s go to our Quebec producers and go—what are your plans for the next six or twelve months in terms of production? Let’s fill those [shelves].’ We haven’t heard from the SAQ about this, and I don’t think we will.” In an email, Bourbeau said stores are replacing American products with Canadian ones but that there weren’t many American gins to begin with, “so the effects might be less exceptional for this particular category.”

So where does that leave smaller distilleries? Though a controlled market often prioritizes the volume, consistency, and profit margins that come with bigger foreign brands, moments of imaginative alchemy will still find a way. They might be rarer and more fleeting, but spirit producers in Quebec do what they do for reasons beyond revenue. As Bériault puts it, “We are a passionate people. To be in this industry, you have to be passionate.” Especially if you’re finding innovative ways to make classic spirits feel *ben d’icitte*—Quebec slang for “from here.”

It’s said that Quebec-made tequila, the latest trend, will be the next flash in the pan. “Do we think about it? Yes,” says Bériault. But at a certain point, as he sees it, you have to simply work at being a master in your own category. And for him, right now, that’s gin. □

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SHEIMA BENEMBAREK is a contributing writer for The Walrus.

The Wine Wars Are Back — and Alberta's Playing Dirty

BC has vino. Alberta wants vino.

Why is Danielle Smith making it so hard for them to do business?

BY CHRISTINA FRANGO

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ANA LUISA O. J.



CHRISTINE COLETTA AND her husband, Steve Lornie, own two wineries in Summerland, BC: Haywire, a ten-acre property that looks out over Lake Okanagan, and Garnet Valley Ranch, a vineyard that sits at a higher elevation and put out its first wines in 2022.

Last winter, the pair decided to splurge on a public relations campaign directed at Albertans. The theme: “Come visit. Be our guest.” They hoped to attract Albertans to their wineries and turn those visits into direct-to-consumer sales after visitors returned home.

The stars seemed to be aligning for the domestic wine industry, and Coletta and her team wanted to make the most of it. Canadians were prioritizing buying Canadian in response

to Donald Trump’s tariffs and his fifty-first-state threats. American wines had been pulled off shelves in several provinces. And premiers David Eby and Danielle Smith had signed an agreement the previous summer to allow BC winemakers to ship their products directly to Albertans.

Before that, the two provinces had been squabbling over wine sales for years. In 2018, the Alberta government, then under premier Rachel Notley, boycotted BC wines in a spat over the Trans Mountain Pipeline. The boycott lasted two weeks, but Notley’s government pledged to step up enforcement on direct-to-consumer sales. BC winemakers kept selling their products directly to Albertans, bypassing the taxes set out by Alberta Gaming, Liquor

and Cannabis, or AGLC, the province’s regulator.

In January 2024, AGLC responded by threatening to ban BC wines from Alberta stores and retailers. But the two premiers found a compromise: BC wineries could sell directly to Albertans, and Alberta could count on collecting its share of taxes. The deal, which came into effect this past January, was hailed as a model for the rest of the country and a boon for an industry that has long struggled to grow under tight interprovincial restrictions. For Coletta, it felt like “a pivotal moment where we could really have made some inroads.”

In late February, shortly before Coletta’s social media campaign was about to go public, Smith’s government announced a new tax on all “high-value” wine. The ad valorem tax (Latin for “according to value”) started on wines priced higher than \$15 a litre—or \$11.25 for a 750 millilitre bottle, the typical size of a bottle of wine. The tax rose in three tiers: 5 percent on wines priced between \$15 and \$20 a litre, 10 percent on those \$20 to \$25 a litre, and 15 percent on everything above that. This in addition to Alberta’s per-bottle fee of \$4.11 for a litre of wine.

That’s a lot of numbers. But what they mean is that someone in Alberta who buys a \$20 bottle of BC wine will have to pay \$26.11. On a case of those wines being shipped from BC, that’s an extra \$73.32.

This hits BC winemakers hard. Almost every wine made in the province falls into the “high-value” category as defined by

the Alberta government. As one Calgary wine shop put it, in cheese terms, that's like defining high-value as "anything that exceeds the price of Cheez Whiz."

Coletta and the rest of the province's winemakers are furious. This is "another layer of government with their hands in our pockets," Coletta says. And, she adds, the fees are nearly impossible for winemakers to implement given the logistics of calculating a three-tiered tax, in addition to a per-bottle tax, at the point of purchase. "It just wasn't feasible," she says. She soon scrapped the social media campaign and her wineries' participation in the direct-to-consumer sales program.

At Lightning Rock Winery, a family-owned winery that's ranked among Canada's top twenty-five, sales to Albertans have dropped about 50 percent since the new tax took effect, says owner Ron Kubek. Potential buyers begin ordering wine online and walk away when the taxes are added to their bill. "I'm seeing a lot more abandoned carts, unfortunately."

It's now more expensive for Albertans to buy wine from him than it is for Americans to get wine through his winery's agent in the US, Kubek says. He believes the ad valorem tax was brought in to increase revenues because of Trump's new tariffs. "It's despicable that the Alberta premier would use another country's tariffs on the rest of the world [to put] new tariffs on Canadian companies," he says.

It's expensive to make wine here compared with the countries considered titans of the wine world. Land and labour cost more in Canada than in Chile or Argentina, and places like France and Italy heavily subsidize their vintners. Kubek says he can't produce a bottle of wine for less than \$15.

"Foreign countries can produce wine at \$2 to \$3 a bottle. Even in the US, they can produce wine at \$2 to \$5 a bottle," he says. "We can't even come close to that in Canada."

The growth of Canada's wine industry has always been hampered by competition from lower-cost imported wines and restrictions on the sale of Canadian products outside their provinces of origin, says Dan Paszkowski, president

and chief executive officer of Wine Growers Canada. "Most countries around the world allow their wineries to ship wine to different parts of their own country," he says. But not here. Each province and territory sets its own rules for alcohol coming across its borders. That rankles Canadians who want BC wine mailed to their homes or a good deal on cheap beer from Quebec.

Canadian wineries would get a boost if national direct-to-consumer sales were legally permitted across the country without heavy taxation, says Paszkowski. He estimates that direct delivery accounts for as much as 95 percent of sales for a small winery that lacks the production numbers to get its wines into large retailers.

For years, many Canadians secretly brought in alcohol from other provinces. But in 2012, the government of New Brunswick took a stand against citizens breaking the rules. Gerard Comeau, a retired power utility lineman who lived in the province, was caught in a Royal Canadian Mounted Police sting as he was bringing 354 beers and three bottles of liquor home from Quebec—far more than the twelve pints of beer or one bottle of liquor permitted by New Brunswick's Liquor Control Act.

Comeau was fined nearly \$300. He went to court in protest, saying the restriction on carrying alcohol across provincial borders violated the Canadian Constitution. New Brunswick fought back, all the way to the Supreme Court, in a case known as "Free the Beer." And New Brunswick won. In 2018, the Supreme Court ruled against Comeau in a finding that was a big blow to domestic winemakers.

Provincial regulations on alcohol looked set to change this year as leaders in federal, provincial, and territorial governments called for removing internal barriers to trade. Almost no one was louder than Alberta's Smith, who, in March, encouraged Albertans to "drink BC wine" in response to tariffs. That was after her government's new tax was announced.

In 2005, the US Supreme Court struck down most state laws prohibiting

direct-to-consumer sales of alcohol to out-of-state consumers. That's led to increased revenue and investment and improved the quality of wine. Historically, Canada was the number one export market for American wineries, with retail sales over \$1.1 billion annually.

"We don't even have half the market share here for Canadian wines, [though] we have the capacity for it," says Jeff Guignard, CEO of Wine Growers British Columbia. That might change, he adds, if governments allow free movement of Canadian wine across the country.

For now, some BC wineries are still shipping their products to Alberta without adding full tax. The "Free the Beer" sentiment lives on, but this time with wine. Albert Hudec, a senior legal counsel at Farris LLP, says this grey market will continue. It's not even clear that Alberta has jurisdiction to go after BC winemakers. "There's no inspection at the BC-Alberta border, so it's extremely difficult to control," he says.

The government of Alberta isn't saying whether it will take action against BC winemakers or what that would look like. Alberta's liquor regulation falls under the mandate of the Ministry of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction, which has a stated aim of "reducing regulatory burdens across government." Minister Dale Nally did not respond to requests for comment.

Coletta is looking past Alberta to expand her Canadian customer base. She's bringing a social media campaign to Manitobans instead, encouraging them to join Haywire's winery. As she sees it, Manitoba is all in on an elbows-up approach to interprovincial trade. It does not put limits or additional taxes on domestic winemakers who want to ship their products to Manitobans. Coletta says that's how it should be. "We're just trying to get over all these provincial feuds that we have and lines in the sand that we've drawn, and wine seems to be an easy target any time Alberta gets upset." ☞

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How Second Cup Took On the World

*The coffee chain's international locations are sleek and popular.
At home, the Canadian brand feels confused*

BY MAYA ELHAWARY



IT WAS A SCORCHING August morning, and we had to beat the heat. A trip to the coast was ideal. To fuel up for the three-hour drive, my family and I picked up our caffeine fix: an iced green tea latte for me, an iced salted caramel latte for my cousin, and two boring but delicious flat whites for his parents—all from Second Cup. Located near my uncle's house, the branch was usually my first stop on a road trip. It was also one of my go-to study spots as a university student. The upscale interior with its beautiful furniture, warm lighting, and patient staff was also ideal for people-watching. And while Second Cup is ubiquitous in Canada, it might be surprising for many to learn that this favourite branch of mine is located in the historic neighbourhood of Korba, in Cairo. It's one of more than thirty locations in Egypt.

After years of frequenting the Korba Second Cup on trips back to Egypt, I decided to visit the coffee shop in my second home, Vancouver. I figured a chain that has garnered such popularity internationally must be a heavy hitter in its country of origin. But I couldn't have been more wrong. At the time, the only location in Vancouver was at the BC Children's Hospital (it has since shut down). And if grabbing a coffee in a lobby designed for sick children wasn't enough of a deterrent for me, images of the cafe on Google Maps imparted to it an uninviting ambience: sterile decor, a wall of beige pastries, and somehow the noisome vapours of plastic gloves and rubbing alcohol. Is this all "Canada's largest speciality coffee retailer" has to offer in a major city?

As it turns out, this standard was customary for many a Second Cup in Canada. Browsing through pictures of different locations, from Surrey to Calgary to Ottawa, I found that most are dated, unattractive, or simply *ordinary*. No branch looked like the next, and none

of them seemed to suggest the inviting experience I had at Second Cup in Egypt.

This August, the company celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. But it is in a strange spot: it doesn't speak the Tim Hortons-ian language of the working class, nor does it employ Starbucks' exceptionally well-trained baristas—despite pricing similarly. It has also evolved in various ways that haven't coalesced into a cohesive brand identity. In 2017, led by then chief executive officer Garry Macdonald, Second Cup signed a licensing agreement with Pinkberry Canada that allowed it to roll out

coffee market, it was regarded as upscale. People aspired to buy their beverages. "They start you on Italian soda and then you want the harder stuff," says The Walrus digital editor Monika Warzecha, who grew up thinking of Second Cup as "fancy." Nowadays, however, many of the Canadian locations don't offer the high-end experience typically associated with specialty coffee outlets: clean, modern interiors and freshly baked offerings. So how did this Canadian business manage to grow and prosper internationally while its domestic brand became impossible to pin down?



SECOND CUP's first location opened in August of 1975 as a shopping mall kiosk in Toronto selling only whole coffee beans. It was co-founded by Tom Culligan and Frank O'Dea, whose business partnership began with a venture to sell coin sorters to Catholic churches. Within the decade, Culligan purchased O'Dea's shares and became the company's sole owner. He then expanded Second Cup into a nearly 150-store chain before

selling it to food and beverage entrepreneur Michael Bregman in 1988. Bregman went on to build the chain into a pioneer in the coffee shop industry until he, too, sold it in 2002. Since then, Second Cup Café has had numerous owners, including Cara Operations Limited and Dinecorp Hospitality.

Online, the coffee chain's homepage boldly declares that the chain is "proudly Canadian," but the website does little to show us how that's the case. Their summer special menu included a "campfire delights" section that honoured the nationally beloved seasonal activity and took inspiration from the Nanaimo bar. But alongside these, they offered an iced matcha with strawberry rose cold foam and a number of tropical spritzers whose Canadianness one would struggle to make a case for. The website also doesn't do much to distinguish the company: visuals of the food and beverages are quite basic, and some

a frozen yogurt program in Second Cup cafes across the country. The following year, the board partnered with marijuana clinic operator National Access Cannabis to convert select Second Cup locations into cannabis dispensaries and potentially open cannabis-friendly cafes once it became legal to do so. Seven stores eventually opened in Ontario, six of which were in former Second Cup locations. More recently, Second Cup has been popping up in multi-brand stores alongside Pita Pit and Choccolato.

Shortly after its acquisition by Foodtastic in 2021, one customer used TikTok to voice his confusion over the brand's floundering identity. He's a fan of the drinks, but he's puzzled. "What is Second Cup doing? Why can't they pick a lane? Every time I see them, they're changing, they're pivoting. They can't seem to decide who they are," he says. Back in the 1980s and '90s, before Second Cup had much competition in the Canadian

information provided about the stores is outdated. What stands out the most, though, is the complete absence of their international expansion and locations.

A quick google of “Second Cup global” reveals a whole other website, with different branding, covering the chain’s roughly 170 stores across twenty countries. In contrast to the first website, this one appears more high end. It features aesthetic images of their locations and menu items, highlighting their quality and freshness. This version of Second Cup promises a “premium sustainable cafe experience to each of our guests.” My curiosity piqued, I dug. Deep. And there, nestled in only a handful of articles about the chain like some kind of classified information, was the mystery’s key: there are two Second Cups.

In 2003, Second Cup opened its first international locations in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, kickstarting an expansion journey that would eventually make Second Cup a globally recognized brand. The great divide happened in 2008. After the death of company chairman Gabriel Tsampalieros, Second Cup’s trademark rights were split between Canadian and international. Jim Ragas, formerly the vice president of international business development and operations, became president in 2011 and has led the international company ever since. Meanwhile, Canadian Second Cup changed leadership multiple times—sometimes abruptly so—until its most recent sale by Aegis Brands to Foodtastic, a Quebec-based restaurant franchiser managing twenty-seven brands. The concentration of Foodtastic’s work in eastern Canada is perhaps one of the factors explaining Second Cup’s western alienation.

Nick Brown, founder of *Daily Coffee News*, an online news outlet by *Roast Magazine* covering developments in the specialty coffee industry, believes that such frequent changes of ownership and corporate leadership often bring shifting priorities that can cause a large

company’s identity to “mutate over time.”

But what some regard as an identity crisis, Brown suggests is an effective strategy. “Large coffee brands constantly test concepts on customers,” he says. “It’s a pattern we see with successful chains.” Brown acknowledges that loyal customers may feel betrayed or disoriented by these changes. “The reality, however, is that the Second Cup that had started as a fiercely loyal single location kiosk in 1975 has transformed and developed different corporate and global interests.”

Over in Pakistan, Second Cup celebrated its tenth anniversary and opened its fiftieth location this July.

Upon acquisition, Foodtastic promised to add 100 new Second Cup locations over thirty-six months to the 211 operating at the time. But with frequent reports of openings and closures nationwide, the number of active locations remains in constant flux and is nearly impossible to ascertain, especially since the list of locations on the company’s website is outdated and inaccurate. It’s also unclear how much of Foodtastic’s growth can be attributed to Second Cup without access to the brand’s financials. The company did not respond to requests for an interview.

Meanwhile, the international side of Second Cup hasn’t changed leadership since the companies split. For nearly two decades, it tested out new markets for the brand—which yielded mixed results. It had a stint in the US, with locations in Boston and Florida, but all locations ultimately shut down. In the UK, Second Cup is now seeking a master franchise to rebuild its presence after all eleven sites it used to operate ceased their activities. Over in Pakistan, Second Cup celebrated its tenth anniversary and opened its fiftieth location this July. Ragas, chief executive officer of Second Cup internationally, was notably present at the celebration.

Despite Second Cup’s varying performance in global markets, their commitment to serving high-quality products in an upscale cafe environment has stayed consistent over the

years. Yahya Ghamdan, chief executive officer of Maximum Stores, the master franchise managing Second Cup’s Egyptian locations, emphasizes Second Cup’s focus on customer experience. “Our store designs cater to different customers’ needs by offering multiple experiences,” he says. “We have seating areas indoors and outdoors, as well as studying and smoking areas, and all are furnished for maximum comfort.” He is also keen that their success is achieved through collaboration with and guidance from the Canadian parent company.

But all is not rosy for the international Second Cup. On May 22, the company obtained protection under the Companies’ Creditors Arrangement Act after its majority creditor, Arbat Capital Group Ltd., filed an application for protection. Arbat’s shareholders and directors were growing increasingly concerned regarding the Second Cup Company Inc.’s ability to repay its loans without restructuring. CCAA proceedings are designed to help companies stabilize their operations and explore debt-restructuring options. The Walrus’s inquiries into the company’s future plans in light of this process all went unanswered. Ghamdan maintains, however, that the situation doesn’t impact global locations’ operations. “The company involved us in the situation from day one and made it clear that they will resolve the situation without partners being affected,” he says.

Conversely, all is not lost for the Canadian Second Cup’s brand identity. Prompted by the US–Canada trade war, many Canadians boycotting American companies turned to Second Cup for their morning cup of Joe instead of Starbucks. Some of these customers are rediscovering Second Cup after years away from the chain. Second Cup now has a unique opportunity to capitalize on its Canadian origins by rebuilding its identity to highlight them in its branding, menu, and location strategy. A nostalgically Canadian-forward identity, if you will. I hope they don’t start selling burgers. 🍔

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MAYA ELHAWARY is an editorial fellow at The Walrus.

The Big Steep: Why Are People Investing in Pu-erh Tea?

Speculators, collectors, stock-like tickers, and a trade in futures are brewing a frenzy over a tea that tastes like “licking honey off a bison”

BY AMIR AZIZ

ILLUSTRATION BY ANGELA HOANG



ON JUNE 3, 2007, a 6.4 magnitude earthquake rocked China's Yunnan province. The quake killed three, injured hundreds, and left behind property damage worth billions of yuan. It was a tragic setback for Yunnan's largely rural counties that had been enjoying an economic boom as the seat of China's pu-erh tea industry. For the preceding decade, sales in pu-erh tea had surged, and those sales were about to be scrutinized.

When news of the earthquake reached Guangzhou's Fangcun tea market—one of the largest in China and almost a quasi-stock market for the tea trade—something impossible happened: the going price of pu-erh tea remained the same. This contradicted bedrock economics. The earthquake had damaged tea factories and infrastructure, so the price of pu-erh tea should have gone up to reflect the lowered supply. And if it wasn't going up, that had to mean someone in the commercial chain had untethered tea prices from reality.

Buyers, sellers, and traders wanted answers. Outsiders may well have asked another question: How did a tea, of all things, become the target of market manipulation?

PU-ERH TEA—a fermented variety typically compressed into a brick or disk, sometimes called a cake—gets its name from the historic Yunnanese market town of Pu-erh, now named Ning-er. The southwestern province, verdant and mountainous, contains more than 40 percent of China’s rare and endangered plant life. Part of that diversity is the tea plant *Camellia sinensis*. The mountains of Yunnan hold the most ancient *Camellia sinensis* varieties in the world and, at 3,000 years and counting, according to estimates, some of the oldest tea trees on Earth. Unlike carefully bred and barbered plantation teas found elsewhere, used to produce varieties such as Darjeeling or Assam, wild “da ye,” or big-leaf, teas are bitter, astringent, and smoky.

According to legend, that burly flavour was tamed through an alchemical quirk discovered by accident: after merchants compressed wild tea leaves into bricks and cakes for easier transportation, the months-long trips on caravans traveling the “tea horse road” across China and Central Asia fermented the leaves, mellowing and enhancing their taste. That fermentation also improved with time. Like with wine, the longer a cake of pu-erh fermented under the right conditions, the more complex and flavourful it became.

Until the 1990s, aged pu-erh was a blip on the modern tea connoisseur’s radar. Compared with perennially esteemed teas like Big Red Robe oolong or Dragon Well green tea, pu-erh was valued primarily as a stomach-settling accompaniment to fatty dim sum dishes. Accordingly, it was cheap, valued at approximately 10 yuan—or \$1.38 (US), based on current exchange rates—per kilogram in 1992. Things began to change when wealthy tea enthusiasts from Taiwan arrived in Yunnan with a taste for naturally aged pu-erh tea and the drive—and cash—needed to energize the then quiet local tea scene. In 2004, the price of pu-erh went vertical.

Lawrence Zhang, an associate professor of history at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and author of the blog *A Tea Addict’s*

Journal, explains that a roaring Chinese economy in the early 2000s unlocked a massive reserve of customers willing to pay higher prices for non-essential goods. In that vein, pu-erh prices rose alongside those of goods like traditional alcohol. The rising prices attracted speculators, who began to buy the tea in bulk—not for consumption but for resale.

Pu-erh’s packaging and aging potential make for a desirable asset vehicle: after compressing the dried tea leaves into cakes, factories embed a descriptive ticket into each pressing and wrap each cake with thick paper detailing the tea. Tickets and wrappers are tracked in manufacturer yearbooks, making it easy to identify the provenance of cakes, which therefore have a standard reference for reselling. Compared to a jar of unmarked green tea that would go stale in a year, cakes of pu-erh are practically company stock. Because factories characteristically stack seven cakes into cylinders, called tongs, which are in turn packaged in a carton known as a jian, buying in bulk adds additional authentication, and therefore value, to the tea.

In *Pu-erh Tea: Ancient Caravans and Urban Chic*, author Jinhong Zhang describes a massive national focus on tea; between 2005 and 2006, the number of pu-erh-specific shops across China tripled. Would-be farmers bought land attempting to cultivate their own trees. Would-be investors entered the market. As pu-erh prices rose, the heights they seemed capable of reaching stretched higher as well. At least until 2007.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, CCTV investigations revealed why the price of the tea hadn’t risen: speculators had been hoarding pu-erh, creating false scarcity in the market in order to drive prices higher. As much as 95 percent of the tea traded at the Fangcun tea market had been purchased not for drinking but for storing as an investment. Now that the true supply had been revealed, the market cooled. The value of pu-erh, according to Zhang, dropped by half—a collapse that affected hundreds of farmers, sellers, and investors in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, many of whom went bankrupt.

FAR FROM ABANDONING pu-erh as a tulip craze, die-hard speculators still believe there’s money in the tea market. Even after the price of pu-erh popped in 2007, many cakes continued to appreciate in value. An unremarkable Dayi 7542, for example, purchased for roughly \$25 (US) after the market crash in 2008 could have fetched \$55 in 2021, when the price of that cake peaked—an increase in value roughly comparable to a mutual fund’s performance over the same period. And some tea blends, like the Dayi 801 Gaoshan Yunxiang recipe, which sold for around \$25 (US) per cake in 2008, reached a peak of \$1,006 in 2023—a 3,924 percent return on investment. Investors purchasing a carton of these cakes in 2008, and selling at the right time, could have made a down payment on a Toronto townhouse. Today, some pu-erh from the larger producers is traded with real-time tickers showing the fluctuating price of a cake and the value growth over time—a bit like an unregulated New York Stock Exchange. There’s even trade in pu-erh futures: offerings to purchase tea for the coming year’s harvest.

Critics say the pu-erh game is too much of a Wild West for investing: a cake might simply not gain value, or poor market timing could swallow the investment, or the investor might just fall prey to outright fraud. The pu-erh market is a tempting space for forgers, who will disguise cakes from less-famous regions in premium packaging, or artificially fermented ones in older wrappers. Literal tonnes of suspicious tea have been confiscated and destroyed by authorities in China. Regardless of forgeries, fraud still abounds: in 2023, a financial scam built around pu-erh futures was unearthed at Fangcun.

Zhang, at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, breaks down post-2007 pu-erh investment into two primary markets. The first is already-expensive pu-erh: cakes packaged before 2000. Due to a dwindling supply, these are likely to continue appreciating. Last year, a single cake from the 1950s sold in a Sotheby’s auction for \$71,600 (US). The second market is modern pu-erh.

While these teas tend to be cheaper, the right hype can elevate their value. Some enthusiasts enter this camp accidentally, by simply purchasing more than they can drink, then turn into resellers to further fund their hobby.

There is no way to gauge how many serious tea investors are in the market today—or to quantify how many are simply enthusiasts who occasionally resell and how many are sharks hoping to get rich. But recent factory outputs hint that producers expect most of their buyers are investors rather than consumers. Factories are slipping holographic ribbons onto their labels, releasing special editions and limited runs, and kicking resellers off e-commerce sites like Taobao, ostensibly to prevent fraud but with the inevitable benefit of controlling prices. The sum of these actions sells the hope of appreciation as well as the risks of depreciation to collectors and secondary buyers—like me.

FIRST TASTED pu-erh in 2016, brewing the crumbling edge of what had once been a larger cake, now unidentifiable, in a French press in my parents' kitchen. The first sip tasted like licking honey off a bison, the second like dates scraped off a mahogany table. Sweet fruit. Animal. Tobacco. Fall leaves. I needed more. Unfortunately, coming out of graduate school, I was far from

cash rich. I figured that if I just bought cheap, modern cakes, they would eventually mature into fine pu-erh. Anything I didn't drink, I could sell.

But even storing pu-erh in my parents' house at the time was rife with investment risk. The ideal conditions for aging pu-erh rely on a healthy environment for the bacterial strains that facilitate aging. In China, this has traditionally taken place in southern warehouses, where the relative humidity hovers in the nineties and the temperature soars. Even in cool and dry storage environments like those in Yunnan, the relative humidity is higher than that of many North American settings. This hasn't stopped collectors and resellers from fashioning so-called pumidors from unplugged refrigerators, clay jars, or Tupperware, but with results that can vary based on the attentiveness of the owner. While I diligently watered my pu-erh for a year to keep humidity high, throwing different humidification methods at my cakes week after week, I eventually became bored, busy, and employed. After two years, I abandoned my pu-erh stockpile as well as hopes of making back my money.

James Schergen, host of the TeaDB YouTube channel, is often asked about the viability of investing in pu-erh. In the West, he says, it makes little sense to bank on the tea. Instead, "you buy the tea because you like it and you're not

sure if it's going to be available in the future," he says, "and maybe you buy it at ten years old to see what it'll taste like at twenty years." He suspects that some of the interest might come from some distrust of traditional financial institutions, but the main driver is probably a newcomer's enthusiasm for the hobby. Schergen generally advises focusing on learning about and enjoying the tea itself rather than becoming fixated on the ups and downs of a price ticker.

Lawrence Zhang knows people who used to drink pu-erh casually before it became a precious commodity—who felt uneasy about brewing it after prices rose. Even though they'd bought it for a reasonable price, drinking it began to feel like throwing money away.

For anyone who loves pu-erh, there is something magical about prying apart a cake. Leaves that once reached to touch the sun are exposed to light and allowed to breathe again. And as they're unfurled by hot water, they release their aromas—alongside the invisible efforts of farmers and pickers, factory workers and pressers, sellers and resellers, as well as stories of rivers and lakes, of long-travelled roads and the chatter of friends and family. Surely, that's worth something. ☺

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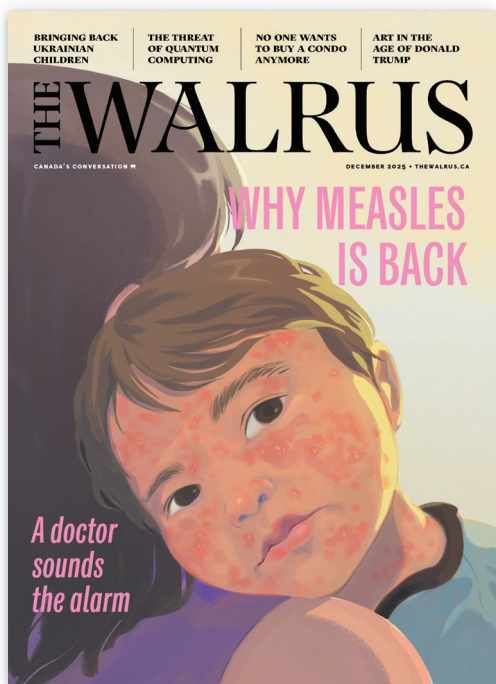


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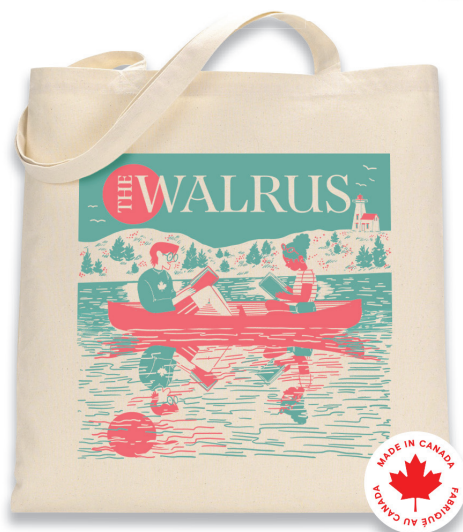
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Let's Brie Real: Can Vegan Cheese Pass the Taste Test?

And is it actually even cheese?

BY NICOLE SCHMIDT
ILLUSTRATION BY JOEY NG

TO MAKE GOOD CHEESE is to understand chemistry. Combine precise measurements of bacteria, salt, milk, and thickening agents at the right temperature and the mixture will congeal into a delicious mass. Miscalculations, however, can make a batch sour or clumpy or both. Take dairy out of the equation and the balance becomes even more fickle.

From her home kitchen in Guelph, Ontario, Morgan Mitchell—who has a degree in microbiology—spent months in 2012 trying to work out those ratios, experimenting with fermented quinoa and sauerkraut to culture plant milks. A health scare had pushed her to go vegan that year, and she'd been surprised by how many foods were easy to give up. She barely missed bacon, butter, or cow's milk. But she couldn't live without cheese.





Until fairly recently, most dairy-free alternatives looked and tasted like dried-out Play-Doh. Some of the earliest brands included the alluringly named Cheze-O-Soy, Vege-Chee (which came in a can), and TofuRella. Mitchell's early attempts weren't much better. One particularly bad batch turned into a festering white monstrosity resembling what she describes as a "sweaty diaper." It tasted like salty cabbage that had been left out in the sun to rot.

Six months in, she finally landed on a creamy, smoky Irish white cheddar imitation—made from cashews, coconut oil, tapioca starch, seaweed, paprika, and a secret bacterial culture—with a texture indistinguishable from goat cheese. "It blew away my family, and when I took it to social events, people were really wowed by it," she says. "When I nailed it, I felt like I really nailed it."

Five years later, vegan cheeses—which mimic the taste and texture of the dairy version without using animal products—became Mitchell's full-time pursuit. Her first commercial kitchen was housed in the meat locker of an old sausage factory (the irony doesn't escape her). In November 2022, Green Goddess Fromagerie moved into a bigger, more central location near downtown Guelph. When I visited just before the shop's grand reopening, the fridges were stocked with seventeen different cheeses, spreads, and dips, including herb and peppercorn "no-goat," caramelized onion cheddar, garlic chive cream cheese, and even a vegan halloumi.

While vegan cheese hasn't yet garnered the same sort of mainstream attention as the plant-based Beyond Burger or oat milk, its popularity is growing among plant-based eaters and omnivores alike. Vegan cheese boutiques are primed to be the new gluten-free bakeries, and they've popped up in cities across the country, from Okanagan Valley, BC, to Charlottetown, PEI. According to a report by Grand View Research, as of 2021, the global vegan cheese market was valued at about \$2.4 billion (US) (approximately half of what the plant-based meat market is currently worth), and it is likely to climb by over 12 percent in the next

decade. That's largely due to a growing appetite for more sustainable foods—one study, for example, found that some cheese alternatives produce about half the CO₂ emissions as compared to dairy versions. It likely also helps that most vegan cheese is becoming more palatable than its plasticky predecessors.

As a long-time lover of dairy cheese, I was once skeptical about the vegan version. But Mitchell's cream cheese doppelganger spread across my cracker like buttercream, while the rosemary sharp cheddar cheeseball tasted nutty and delightfully dense. Perhaps most surprising was the grilled halloumi—the by-product of a gouda attempt gone wrong. It was perfectly salty with a subtle bite: the outside was lightly crispy, the inside soft and gooey.

"Would you know it's not dairy?" Mitchell asks me. "No," I reply. "I can't taste the difference at all."

CHEESE, like penicillin or superglue, is thought to have been discovered by accident. One origin story has it that 4,000 years ago, an Arab merchant travelled across the desert with milk stored in a pouch made from sheep's stomach. In the heat, enzymes in the stomach lining caused the milk to curdle, creating what one can imagine resembled modern-day cottage cheese.

This happy accident laid the framework for centuries of cheese making to come: from the aged, ripened blue cheeses first made in France during the seventh century to the stacks of fluorescent orange blocks in North American grocery stores today. And while the sheep's stomach is no longer a prerequisite, the basic method isn't far removed from the first draft.

The history of vegan cheese is not as well known, but it stretches back nearly a century. One of the early proponents was John Harvey Kellogg, a now-controversial doctor and nutritionist best known for popularizing breakfast cereal. In the mid-1930s, he created some of the first commercially available dairy-free cheese alternatives. His now-defunct Nuttose pâté, made from peanuts, was marketed primarily as a health food

and was said to have the consistency of both brick cheese and cold roast mutton. While more alternatives have become available over the years, they lacked dairy's signature ability to stretch and, crucially, melt. The few that could were made largely from oil and starch, tasting waxy and artificial.

Dairy cheese owes its texture and meltiness to casein, a protein found exclusively in animal milks. During digestion, it's converted into casomorphins, which can attach to opiate receptors in the brain and release dopamine, the feel-good neurotransmitter associated with all of life's most delectable things, including sex and chocolate. In 2017, Neal Barnard, founder and president of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, went as far as to call cheese "dairy crack" because of its addictive qualities. Without casein, vegan cheese, for many years, seemed destined for disappointment.

But a handful of companies have started to figure out how to replicate the most attractive qualities of casein. At Nobell Foods in San Francisco, founder Magi Richani—an engineer by training who is lactose intolerant—has spent the past seven years developing animal-free mozzarella that she says is meant to taste and behave the same as its dairy counterpart. Her company, which raised \$75 million (US) in venture capital funding in 2021 and is hoping to soon launch its product in US supermarkets, is the first to figure out how to make casein from genetically modified soybeans. Soy is one of the most efficient crops to produce: it has a low cost and the most protein per acre. Yet nearly 80 percent of soy grown around the world is used to feed farmed animals. Richani believes that if more of it were used to feed people instead, that could help lower the carbon footprint attached to agriculture.

Unlike Mitchell's products, which are put through a charcuterie board test, Nobell cheeses are meant to emulate the stuff in the dairy aisle—designed to be sprinkled on pizza or stirred into pasta. Just as almond, oat, and other dairy-free milks have become popular latte substitutes among non-vegans, Richani

believes that her offerings could have mass appeal—not just because of their taste but also their price point. Consumers tend to prioritize flavour, cost, and convenience when purchasing food, she says, whereas health, environment, and animal welfare tend to be less important. “When I started this company, I wanted to hit those first three,” she says. To gain converts, “it’s easier to change how we make cheese than to change what people love about it.”

In 2021, Miyoko’s Creamery in north California—formerly headed by celebrity chef Miyoko Schinner, whom many consider the queen of vegan cheese—expanded its selection, with mass appeal in mind. While the company is best known for its artisan cashew cheeses, like smoked gouda and European truffle, its liquid vegan pizza mozzarella promises to melt, bubble, and brown just like the real thing and is widely available at regular grocery stores across the US and Canada. During the 2020 fiscal year, Miyoko’s Creamery was reported to have \$20 million (US) in sales.

But while interest may be growing, plant-based varieties account for just over 3 percent of the global cheese market. Art Hill, a retired professor and an adjunct at the University of Guelph’s department of food and science who devoted much of his academic life to the science of cheese, suggests the lacklustre demand could partly be a question of exposure and marketing. Most of us are accustomed to dairy products. Since breast milk is the only food our species is biologically capable of producing, it’s often associated with motherhood and vitality, and that long-standing social imagery makes milk-based products more difficult to tamper with than, say, meat. In a paper published in the journal *Agriculture and Human Values*, researchers from Oxford University wrote, “Milk marketing campaigns have repeatedly developed milk’s wholesome palatability through use of the nostalgic conception of the pastoral. These positive traits persist to this day in the advertising of dairy milk”—and, by extension, other milk products.

Hill, a lover of aged cheddar himself, suspects that there’s always going to be

a demand for really good dairy cheese. While he hasn’t yet acquired a taste for vegan alternatives, he thinks they’re going to shape the industry in the long term. In some ways, they’re already starting to disrupt it.

OVER THE PAST several years, vegan companies have faced legal backlash over their use of the word “cheese” on their packaging. Canada’s current food regulations, which were created in 1979, state that cheese, to be labelled as such, must be made from milk, and milk, they claim, is “the normal lacteal secretion obtained from the mammary gland of an animal.” A similar law is in place in the EU, where cheese has long been part of the culture in countries like France and Belgium (though both have burgeoning “Fauxmage” movements). While these cases have been built around the argument that non-dairy cheese labels are misleading for consumers, Camille Labchuk, a Toronto-based animal rights lawyer, suspects they’re actually about protecting Canada’s \$8 billion dairy industry. As an example, she points to the Margarine Reference, a former section of Canada’s Dairy Industry Act that prohibited the production and trade of margarine up until 1948 to give dairy products priority in the marketplace.

“The industry knows that dairy milk sales are declining drastically,” says Labchuk. (According to Statista, annual milk consumption in Canada hit a new low of around fifty-eight litres per capita in 2022—about a ten-litre decrease per capita since 2015. Meanwhile, Statistics Canada reported a 3.1 percent decrease in the sales of table milk—that which is bought for day-to-day consumption—between 2021 and 2022.) “We haven’t seen that same decline yet with cheese,” likely because there aren’t enough tasty alternatives that are widely available. But change is on the horizon, she says, “because dairy-free cheeses are getting better, and that’s when consumers start to make the switch.” Even Canada’s Food Guide eliminated dairy as a category in 2019 in favour of more plant-based foods, triggering an outpouring of concern from

farmers across the country. Soon after the new guide was released, one dairy farmer from New Brunswick told the CBC he felt like cheese was being punished.

More recently, Montreal-based Rawesome Raw Vegan Inc. won a four-year court battle—believed to be one of the first of its kind in Canada—against the city over the naming of its cashew-based cream cheese. In 2021, a municipal court initially found the company guilty of violating the Regulations Respecting Food and Drugs by referring to a non-dairy spread as cheese, but Rawesome successfully appealed the decision on the basis of statutory interpretation. Cheese, the company’s lawyers argued, shouldn’t need to adhere to a single definition set out by food regulations. “This is a decision that sets a precedent,” Rawesome’s lawyer, Natalia Manole, told CTV News in September 2022. “Nobody has a monopoly on the word cheese.”

For the time being, vegan cheese makers in the rest of Canada aren’t exempt from the current labelling requirements. Rewriting the legal definition more broadly would be a step toward normalizing dairy-free alternatives. But the bigger question this case raises is more philosophical: What, exactly, makes cheese cheese?

It’s something I asked each person I spoke with for this story, and no two answers were the same. Hill insists that casein—specifically from dairy milk—is the defining characteristic of cheese, while Mitchell thinks what matters most is how you make it. “If it’s not cultured, it’s not cheese,” she says. But Richani’s stance perhaps best captures the current zeitgeist. “If you grew up in China drinking soy, that’s what milk is to you,” she says. Couldn’t the same be true of cheese? “We’ve made cheese for thousands of years from animals, but we also rode horses as our main form of transportation,” she says. “It doesn’t mean we have to do things that way forever.” 🐾

NICOLE SCHMIDT is a freelance writer, editor, and fact checker based in Berlin. She was previously an associate editor at The Walrus.

Much Ado about Hummus: The Fight for Bragging Rights over a Middle Eastern Dip

From beet to butterscotch, how far can hummus travel from its origins and still be hummus?

BY SAMIA MADWAR

ILLUSTRATION BY JANICE WU



IN 2014, Makenzie McPherson, a holistic health coach from Ohio, brought “cookie dough” hummus to a Super Bowl party. She was familiar with savoury hummus and surmised that chickpeas, given their fairly neutral taste, could serve as a canvas for other flavours. The Seattle Seahawks triumphed that day, and so did her blend of chickpeas, oats, coconut sugar, and vanilla extract.

The following year, McPherson launched Delighted By, a dessert hummus company. In place of the smooth, creamy chickpea dish beloved for centuries, McPherson’s sweet variations of hummus—with flavours that eventually included vanilla bean, snickerdoodle cookie (cinnamon and sugar), key lime pie, red velvet, mint-chocolate fudge, and brownie batter—began selling out at farmers’ markets. By early 2016, her products were picked up by the US supermarket chain Wegmans. In 2017, she appeared on the business-pitch TV show *Shark Tank*; Mark Cuban offered \$600,000 (US) for 25 percent equity. (The two later parted ways without a deal.) Within a few years, major retailers that carried McPherson’s product, including Walmart and Target, were selling their own versions—or other newer, cheaper brands—of dessert hummus. Clearly, it had found a mainstream market. It also had its critics.

“From day one,” McPherson says about the moment her company began attracting publicity, “we were getting attacked on Twitter”—largely for cultural appropriation. To this day, online reactions to various brands of dessert hummus typically range from comically resigned to ferociously opposed. It’s a crime against humanity, declare Twitter posts, accompanied by photos of supermarket tubs cheerily labelled “chocolate,” “pumpkin spice,” or “apple pie.”

For hummus devotees, the bottom line is that the real thing is a dip made with chickpeas, tahini, some kind of citric acid, like lemon juice, and maybe a handful of other acceptable ingredients. Cocoa, vanilla extract, and pumpkin spice are not among them. Similar objections apply to dips that eschew

chickpeas entirely, as in black bean or cauliflower hummus, but are labelled as such—especially given that *hummus* is the word for chickpea in Arabic. To many, it’s not that those products shouldn’t exist at all; they simply shouldn’t be called hummus.

“I totally get it,” says McPherson, who is now based in Hawaii. “And I’m really unattached. I wasn’t ever defending us and being like, ‘No, this is hummus.’” In 2018, Delighted By even tried rebranding its product as dessert “dip,” dropping the h-word altogether. “I don’t know...if that worked well,” McPherson says, “because then it also didn’t differentiate us. It was calling it a dessert *hummus* that got us all the media.”

McPherson was eventually priced out by larger retailers that entered the market with their own spectrum of varieties.

“I was essentially pushed out of my own category that I created,” she says. The criticism she experienced is emblematic of the ongoing squabbles that hummus can’t seem to shake off. When enthusiasts aren’t objecting to the dip’s North American makeover, with retailers and recipe blogs hawking everything from beet to butterscotch hummus, they’re often arguing about its origins and which cultures get to claim it as their own.

I’ve eaten hummus, classic hummus, all my life. My family rarely made it at home in Damascus, Syria, where I grew up; we usually ordered it as part of a mezze spread at restaurants or bought it by the kilogram from hummus vendors. When I moved to Montreal for university, in the 2000s, grocery store hummus was still a novelty to me. I occasionally bought it and, out of curiosity, tried some of the common variations—roasted red pepper, roasted garlic, olive. I preferred making hummus myself; I go through those little tubs embarrassingly fast. In my student years, homemade hummus became my party trick. To my non-Arab friends, hummus wasn’t necessarily exotic, but my blender recipe still retained a bit of an edge. That’s possibly how I gained a reputation among friends and acquaintances as a bit of a hummus connoisseur.

Nowadays, friends routinely send me links and social media posts about

some of hummus’s bizarre incarnations, from chocolate hummus to kimchi hummus, as if to cue my outrage. There are plenty of abominations being created in the name of remaking globally popular foods (see: cheeseburger sushi, s’more tacos, Hawaiian pizza). They can feel inevitable, driven by a retailer’s need for a new product line, social media influencers’ desire for fresh content, or just the natural human urge to overcome monotony. To me, transformations like these are stripping hummus of its origins. Maybe some things just don’t need to be altered or updated.

I confess that I cling to my cultural bragging rights and scoff at the likes of banana hummus partly because it’s fun—a bit of lightness during bleak times. But, when I appealed to chefs and other hummus connoisseurs, hoping they’d bolster my case for leaving hummus alone, my quest took an unexpected turn. Our conversations forced me to think about what we’re really fighting about when we fight about hummus.

THE ORIGIN OF HUMMUS is a touchy subject, perhaps not surprising for a part of the world with perpetually contested borders. According to the 2021 book *Hummus: A Global History* by Harriet Nussbaum, there is no recorded date or location of its invention. Hummus bi tahina, or hummus with tahini, is thought to have first been made in the Levant in the eighteenth century, during the time of the Ottoman Empire, before many of today’s national borders were drawn. It became a staple, with regional variations, in what is modern-day Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Israel, and Egypt, among other places.

Given its ubiquity across the Middle East, you’d think hummus would be a unifying force, a delicious paste cementing regional ties. Instead, it became a symbolic battleground near the end of the twentieth century, a time when Israel began adopting hummus as a national dish. Dafna Hirsch, a professor in the department of sociology, political science, and communication at the Open University of Israel, has

documented that history as well as the nearly simultaneous rise of industrial hummus following the Second World War. In a 2013 paper, she and her co-writer, scholar Ofra Tene, note that the dish was little known to many Jewish immigrants arriving in Israel from Europe in the newly formed state's early years. During the period of postwar austerity, nutritionists and NGOs in Israel promoted hummus and other Palestinian foods as healthy and affordable. Jewish immigrants to Israel from the Levant brought their hummus know-how with them, further exposing other citizens to the dish. In the 1950s, immigrants from Yemen, Iraq, and some North African countries sparked a boom of what became known as "oriental" restaurants, which served hummus—though, as Hirsch notes, it wasn't commonly found in their cuisine. In 1958, industrialized hummus entered the scene. Telma, a brand owned by Eretz Israeli Food Produce, introduced canned hummus that year, marketing it as an Israeli food—a symbol of integration as immigrants from diverse regions adapted to a new homeland. Several competitors followed suit, and store-bought hummus became a staple in Israeli households.

Today, write Hirsch and Tene, many Israelis acknowledge that they've only adopted hummus and that the best place to get it is Arab-owned hummusiyahs, or restaurants that specialize in hummus. But, for many Arabs, that acknowledgment doesn't make up for what they see as Israel's co-opting of the dish. While there are plenty of Arab-owned restaurants and brands selling hummus around the world, Israeli companies, primarily, have profited from its industrialization, including several that played a significant role in promoting it worldwide.

Estimates of the value of the global hummus market vary, but all indicate that it's growing. In the US, for example, where store-bought hummus was introduced in the 1980s, consumption of retail hummus quadrupled between 2008 and 2018, according to the USA Dry Pea & Lentil Council. (America's hummus market is ten times the size of Canada's, although appetites for hummus have grown here in recent years

as well, according to data from Pulse Canada, an association representing the industry that grows and processes beans, dry peas, lentils, and chickpeas.) It has also gone mainstream: in 2013, Sabra, which is co-owned by Strauss and PepsiCo, became the NFL's official dips sponsor.

In 2008, Hirsch and Tene write, the Association of Lebanese Industrialists urged the Lebanese ministry of economy and trade to file a request with the European Commission to have hummus recognized as an exclusively Lebanese product, much like feta cheese, which can be labelled as such in the EU only if it is produced in Greece. But, Hirsch and Tene write, "to the best of our knowledge, such a request has not yet been filed."

The rivalry took a turn for the absurd, with Lebanon and Israel trying to one-up each other in a battle for the Guinness World Records entry for largest hummus dish. The back and forth included a 2,056-kilogram plate in Lebanon in 2009, followed by a 4,087-kilogram dish in Israel the next year. A few months after that, Lebanon shot back with 10,452 kilograms of the stuff—a figure representative of the country's surface area of 10,452 square kilometres. As of this writing, that record hasn't been broken. This particular spat may have ostensibly been about cultural claims to hummus, but Hirsch and Tene point out that some of the main players, including manufacturers, had business interests to protect.

For many Arabs, claiming hummus isn't just a political, economic, or even cultural matter: it's deeply personal. Appearing in an episode of the CBC's *Unforked* alongside Hirsch last summer, Laila El-Haddad, a Palestinian activist and co-author of the cookbook *The Gaza Kitchen*, calls Israel's claim to hummus "a slap in the face." For a lot of early Jewish settlers in Israel, she says, adopting foods such as hummus was "a matter of wanting to put roots on the ground and culturally kind of immersing themselves in the land of Palestine but rejecting the people behind the culture." Now based in Maryland, El-Haddad notes that she and many Palestinians are restricted from travelling to some places in Israel that

are their ancestral homelands. "So that sums up why we can't all sit together and eat hummus," she says in the episode, "and pretend like there was no borders or no problems or no occupation."

FOR CHEF ELIAS HASHEM, hummus has always been a constant. It's breakfast with family on Saturday mornings. It's the ritual of soaking chickpeas overnight before boiling and blending them. When it comes to hummus, he says, "We treat it with a lot of respect." Hashem, who is Palestinian, moved to Toronto from Haifa, Israel, in 2021 for a job at Parallel, a restaurant serving what its owners describe as modern Middle Eastern food. He had found it unsettling at first to see hummus topped with mushrooms, soy, and truffle oil on Parallel's menu. "But then I tried it," he says. He admits it tasted good.

Hashem came around to the idea of playing with toppings to suit the eclectic Toronto palate. He recently developed mashwiya hummus with the vegan crowd in mind. The dish features a base of classic hummus topped with roasted vegetables, garlic, a mango condiment called amba, a spicy herb sauce called schug, parsley, and a sprinkling of sumac. (The name *mashwiya* refers to the grilled vegetables.) "You'll never see a dish like that back home," says Hashem. Toppings and similar flavour combinations aren't completely foreign to hummus: pickled vegetables are often served alongside hummus, and in some places, it's common to top hummus with meat or fava beans, among other possibilities. Some Middle Eastern chefs have even toyed with hummus-based desserts: Karim Haidar, a Paris-based Lebanese chef, has a recipe for hummus ice cream.

When I ask Hashem for his thoughts on dessert hummus, he grins. "I think you just gave me a great idea," he says. The restaurant sells tubs of chocolate-flavoured tahini, which could be a stepping stone toward chocolate hummus. But where does Hashem draw the line? Would he do away with chickpeas entirely, as in, say, edamame hummus? "I think it's a very cool idea," he says. But it's not *hummus*: "It's like calling a vegan

burger a burger. Right? It is a patty, it is in a bun. It is the same idea, but it's not meat."

Hashem didn't grow up intending to become a chef. But, as he discovered an interest in cooking, he also found it helped him connect with his heritage. "I did have some identity issues trying to figure out who I was, what am I supposed to be, what do people expect me to be," he says. "But, honestly, I think I found peace with my identity once I started cooking and once I started dealing more with Arabic food, Palestinian, Lebanese food." Questions of identity are also among the reasons he left Haifa. His family is Christian; his partner of eleven years is Jewish.

Neither of them is religious, and he describes their families as accepting of their relationship. Back home, he says, "people really want you to define what you are and identify and just pick a side." He didn't want his future kids to have to go through that, so he moved away. It's perhaps why he's reluctant to wade into arguments around who owns hummus or what constitutes "authentic" hummus. He sees nothing wrong with change or experimentation. "I wouldn't call it cultural appropriation, necessarily, because it's just reinventing something, and that's fine," Hashem says. "Whether it's good or not, it's about each individual's taste."

AT THE NATIONAL HOME SHOW in Toronto, Yohannes Petros hands out samples of his company's hummus: his Moroccan seven-spice hummus, his roasted garlic and dill flavour, and his spicy, date-sweetened version. Try them in that order, he instructs passersby. Petros and his family came from Eritrea, via several countries, to Canada in 1980. Hummus was never part of their repertoire at home. He started selling it in Saskatoon at a local café, then at the Greek pavilion in the city's annual folk fest. In 2015, he started his company, Hanes Hummus, and since then has made it his full-time business.

He is careful not to paint the hummus he makes as culturally authentic. When his critics contend that his product isn't real hummus, he says, "To a degree,

they're right. It's not traditional." He's never been to the Middle East. The hummus he makes, he says, reflects his surroundings instead. "I can really appreciate somebody from Jordan or from Israel or from any country from that region of the world who would say hummus has become bastardized," he says. "For them to come and see peanut butter hummus or chocolate hummus, I can understand why they might feel that this is not taking... a part of their culture seriously. But we're not in Israel. We're not in the Middle East. We're in Saskatoon."

Instead of fighting over hummus, we should be fighting for what it represents: nutrition, affordability, and sustainability.

Noura Salah, an Egyptian photographer now based in Mississauga, stops by Petros's booth at the trade show; she's been fasting for Ramadan, so she can't sample Petros's hummus right away. She takes a tub of each flavour home and tries them after she breaks her fast. Her favourite, she later tells me, was the roasted garlic and dill—probably because it reminded her of bissara, a North African dish made with fava beans, garlic, and herbs. "It felt familiar," she says. To her, traditional hummus isn't just the spread I grew up with; it's also halabessa, a hot drink commonly served in Egypt in the winter and made with chickpeas, garlic, and tomatoes.

Growing up in Canada, Salah's children might develop a completely different notion of hummus, she tells me. As much as she tries to teach them about Egyptian culture, she knows they won't have the same relationship to it that she

does. And she has accepted that. "The culture here is a mix anyway," she says with a laugh. "It's like you put someone in a blender."

IN 2014, SABRA FILED a citizen's petition with the US Food and Drug Administration, calling for standards to be set around the composition of hummus. According to the petition, chickpeas, aside from water, must comprise the dominant ingredient by weight. Hummus must also consist of at least 5 percent tahini, with a prescribed list of optional additional ingredients, including spices and garlic. "The marketing of a 'hummus' product made from legumes other than chickpeas is akin to the marketing of guacamole made with fruit other than avocados," the petition states.

Creating a standard for hummus would support consumer recognition of products labelled "hummus," the petition argues, maintain their nutritional quality, and support a "level playing field" for producers. (According to a 2020 *Forbes* article, Sabra controls 60 percent of the US hummus market.) The FDA still hasn't reached a decision.

Even if the use of the term hummus is regulated in the commercial food sector, it may be too late to change its expanded definition in the popular imagination. According to Tanya Der, the director of diversification and market insights at Pulse Canada, market research shows that those who prefer flavoured hummus are part of a niche but growing sector. But, she adds, sales of classic hummus still top those of any flavoured variations.

I've always liked associating hummus with my roots, given that much of the world knows modern-day Syria mostly as a place of war and devastation. Hummus has become one of the few tangible connections to a home I can't return to. I can't fault chefs and entrepreneurs for experimenting with what is admittedly a very versatile dish. But, when hummus is sullied with chocolate chips, usurped by edamame-shaped impostors, or trussed up with benign labels such as "vegan" or "Mediterranean," obscuring its Middle Eastern background, I also can't help

feeling deflated. Maybe, when fights and fierce reactions to the latest hummus trend flare up, I just feel a duty to preserve what it means to me.

The hummus I grew up with was always affordable and accessible. (It's also fairly easy to make, though I can't expect everyone to boil and shell chickpeas whenever they need a snack.) I've come to love hummus even more, now that I've learned that chickpea cultivation can be sustainable when done right. Chickpeas can fix low nitrogen levels in soil, enriching the farmland they're grown in and leaving the soil more nutrient dense for the next crop. Instead of fighting over hummus, we really should be fighting *for* it and for what it represents: nutrition, affordability, sustainability, even creativity. For some, it's also a way to move forward without losing sight of the past.

Raghda Hasan, a Syrian woman from the northwestern city of Latakia, came to Vancouver via Turkey as a refugee in 2016 with her husband and four children. She shares her anniversary of landing in

Canada with the founding of Tayybeh, a catering company, where she now works, that employs newcomer women to prepare Syrian dishes. (In Arabic, *tayybeh* means "kind." In reference to food, it also means "tasty" in the Syrian dialect.) I assume that, as a fairly recent arrival to Canada, she must be a steadfast purist. But she doesn't mind hummus variations, she tells me, and she even makes beet hummus, which is part of Tayybeh's catering menu. It has become popular with customers, she adds, but it's still not as popular as the original.

When I mention dessert hummus, Hasan has trouble fathoming it; to her, it's a confounding pairing of savoury and sweet. "When you say, 'Chocolate hummus,' I say, 'Question mark, exclamation mark,'" she says. She has never tried it. She calls me out because I've never tried chocolate hummus either. "The more you're exposed to new flavours, the more you start to accept them," Hasan says.

I've fed my daughter hummus since she was old enough to eat solid foods,

and she's a fan. But she won't grow up knowing hummus the way I did, scooping it onto her plate from a clay bowl at a restaurant table long enough to fit the extended family, surrounded by the scent of grilled meats and Arabic music blaring from the speakers. When she's older, she probably won't bat an eye at sweet potato hummus. And I'll have to live with that.

I did eventually try chocolate hummus. I made it at home, blending boiled chickpeas with chocolate-flavoured tahini, and found that the resulting mousse tasted neither like chocolate nor like hummus. Perhaps my reaction can be best summed up by Hasan's diplomatic stance: even if she liked a particular hummus variation, she had told me, she probably wouldn't eat it regularly. At the end of the day, she'd said, "if I want hummus, I eat hummus." ©

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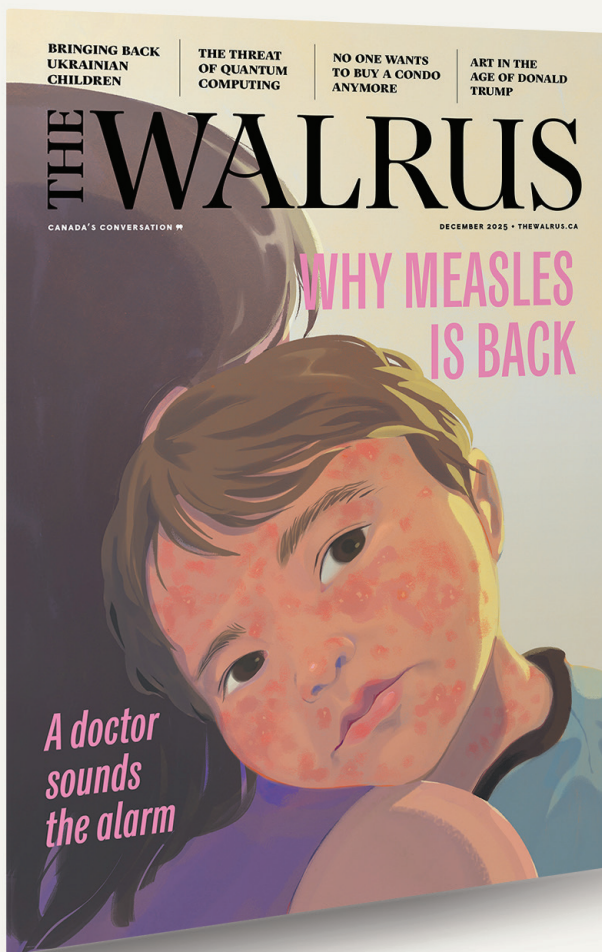


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In Defence of Garlic in a Jar: How Food Snobs Almost Ruined My Love of Cooking

*Celebrity chefs, food writers, and home cooks have sneered at pre-cut produce.
They're dismissing those of us with disabilities*

BY GABRIELLE DROLET

ILLUSTRATION BY KEELIN GORLEWSKI

I WAS IN MY second year of university when I discovered the joy of making meals from scratch. My desire to cook was sparked, partly, by the sheer excitement of having access to a kitchen. After a year of mostly eating the same few vegetarian meals from a dorm cafeteria, the possibilities now felt endless. Between classes, I rushed home and delighted in the ritual of trying a new technique or recipe: the perfect temperature at which to roast cauliflower, how to fry tofu so the edges were just crispy enough, how to use up all those cans of chickpeas I bought on sale.

My curiosity was further bolstered by the fact that I was coming into young adulthood around the same time that YouTube cooking channels were becoming part of pop culture; this was 2017, when *Bon Appétit* had just launched its now-famous *Gourmet Makes* series, and shows like *Binging with Babish* were garnering millions of views. As a terminally online student, I spent far too much of my time watching their videos and experimenting with their recipes.

One afternoon, I was making a stir-fry in the small kitchen of a house where I lived. As vegetables sputtered in hot oil on the stove, I remember one of my roommates coming downstairs and poking her head into the kitchen.

"What smells so good?" She smiled.

"Probably the garlic," I answered, stirring the bright contents of the pan.

I recall her eyeing the mess I'd made on the counter—discarded pieces of carrot and onion, spices spilled from plastic bags—and stopping when she saw the little jar. A spoon lay beside it, still slick with preservative oil.

"You use the pre-minced stuff?"

"Yeah," I said.

She wrinkled her nose and receded. I could tell I'd done something unsavoury.

I'd been in the habit of buying jarred garlic—the kind that comes minced and suspended in oil—because it was easy to use. I was still getting accustomed to the patience and time that cooking



required, and the jarred stuff seemed like a no-brainer: a way to save a few minutes. But, after that day, I stopped buying it. I'm not sure I even finished that container—it likely sat half-empty in the fridge for the rest of the semester. As I started to pride myself on my cooking, I also became hyperaware of wanting to do things the *right way*, and I noticed all the recipes and cooking shows I followed only ever used fresh ingredients.

Online, people affirmed my new belief. They joked that those who use jarred garlic can't cook. "What if you met your soul mate, but then found out they cook with pre-minced garlic in a jar," one tweet said. Media outlets published article after article condemning the stuff. An old quote by the celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain seemed to resurface every few months. "Avoid at all costs that vile spew you see rotting in screwtop jars," he had written in his book *Kitchen Confidential*, first published in 2000. "Too lazy to peel fresh? You don't deserve to eat garlic."

This was the first of many haughty ideas I'd hear about cooking and how selective we should be with our food. Who would buy a bottle of lemon juice when you could buy fresh lemons? Shredded cheese when you could grate your own? Pre-sliced mushrooms when they were apparently cheaper and better whole? An image of pre-peeled oranges from Whole Foods caused so much outrage in 2016 that the product was pulled from stores. Then there was the notion that those who opted for these packaged foods or ingredients weren't just lazy—they were wreaking havoc on the environment with all that unnecessary plastic. Under all of this criticism, there was always a minority voice telling people they were being ableist. Those voices reminded us that disabled people rely on these shortcuts—that not everyone can chop and peel and slice. Over and over again, those voices were drowned out by the majority.

I, too, ignored them, and I learned to love fresh garlic. I learned to love the feeling of smashing a clove between a cutting board and the flat side of a knife. Of mincing it: always by hand, never with

a press. I learned to always use more than the recipe called for, to love the smell and sizzle of it frying, to make sure it didn't get all browned and bitter in the pan. I learned to appreciate the slight (but usually unnoticeable) difference in taste when I used the fresh stuff, the allicin edge a little sharper or more present.

Then, in early 2021, I developed a nerve problem that changed everything.

MY LIFE BECAME immeasurably different a few years ago. A repetitive strain injury led me to develop thoracic outlet syndrome. Pain shot through my forearms and into my fingers when I did simple tasks. My hands often went numb. My elbows ached and seized. Looking down at anything—a book, a cutting board—hurt my neck and shoulders and worsened the rest of my symptoms.

As months went by, I got used to assistive technology, swapping a keyboard for voice-to-text. I asked for help when I needed to. I used paper plates, as I was unable to wash dishes myself. So many things tied to my identity were now inaccessible to me: hobbies such as embroidery and video games, writing with a pen, the Sunday-morning pastime of sitting hunched over a crossword puzzle, filling in and erasing answers. I felt I had lost so much. I didn't want to lose being a good cook too. So I continued to only ever use fresh garlic.

On a good day, I would wince and tear up as I peeled each clove from its papery skin, as I crushed it on a cutting board, as I minced it into tiny pieces. On a bad day, my hands would be so numb and my fingers so swollen that I would be unable to even grip the handle of a knife tightly enough.

Even at such points, I never considered buying jarred garlic. I pushed through the pain, no matter how excruciating. And, on especially bad days, I omitted the ingredient altogether, my food missing a certain edge I'd grown to love.

COOKING SHORTCUTS have been around for a long time, but for at least a century, we've been finding ways to appease those who

turn their noses up at easier options. In 1929, molasses manufacturer P. Duff & Sons started selling dehydrated flour mix—made up of wheat flour, molasses, sugar, shortening, salt, baking soda, ginger, cinnamon, and powdered whole egg. Housewives simply had to add water to the mixture and bake it to produce a dessert. In the early 1930s, the company released a cake mix with a similar concept. But it later amended the product to have cooks add the eggs themselves, stating, "The housewife and the purchasing public in general seem to prefer fresh eggs." Other food brands, such as Betty Crocker, followed suit.

The fresh eggs *did* make for a better-tasting dessert—the dried-egg mixtures produced cakes that stuck to the pan and often had a strong flavour of eggs—but the desire to add the ingredient yourself was at least partially psychological. Cracking and mixing in eggs provided the illusion of participation, and this became the first step in making a creation with layers and packaged frosting.

It seems the aesthetics of being a good cook by using fresh ingredients have always triumphed over convenience. But the disdain for shortcuts and anything that isn't fresh feels especially pronounced today. This might be partially because of the wellness industry: as a love of whole foods and a fear of preservatives have become commonplace, people seem more comfortable announcing their disgust for anything processed or impure. Social media has made it easier for fresh-food purists, many with entire accounts devoted to "clean eating," to make their opinions known too. Though not all of these accounts explicitly condemn processed foods, they perpetuate the idea that whole foods are significantly better.

The culture that surrounds cooking today is one that lends itself well to casual ableism. It's a culture that prizes specific ways of doing things over others, constantly pitting methods and recipes against one another: French-style scrambled eggs over American; minced garlic instead of pressed, nonstick pans against those made of cast iron, bouillon cubes

against broth cartons against homemade stock. It's a culture desperate to identify serious cooks as opposed to casual ones, assigning value to almost everything we do in the kitchen. Did you stir that with a wooden spoon? Did you cook it in the right kind of oil? Did you use pre-ground pepper? Kosher salt or iodized? In a culture obsessed with the *right* and *wrong* way of doing things, any choice you make is likely controversial to some, eliciting either eye rolls or enthusiasm.

Often, the *wrong* choice is the easier (read: more accessible) one—and making it is a fatal flaw. These aren't things to try to avoid when you can. They're things you should *never* do, even though many of us don't have a choice. This lack of nuance is what made me believe using accessibility tools might make me a bad cook, pushing me to hurt myself even when cooking alone.

None of this is intentional. People aren't thinking about disabled cooks when they turn their noses up at pre-minced garlic or pre-ground pepper or whatever else. That's part of the problem, though: dismissing ingredients and disparaging anyone who uses them means not thinking of who, exactly, that might be. In reality, it doesn't take much critical thinking to get there.

Who needs to use a quicker, less-labour-intensive method in the kitchen? Maybe it's someone short on time. Maybe it's someone who can't afford to keep topping up the fresh stuff before it goes bad. Maybe it's someone with mobility issues or chronic pain, or it's a neurodivergent person who struggles with long, multistep tasks. Maybe it's someone who loves fresh garlic but is, for whatever reason, not able to chop it themselves.

Because of this, it's hard to watch a chef's YouTube video or read through a recipe without constantly being reminded that the food I make will never be good enough. Sometimes, it's hard to believe you can be a good cook at all while being disabled.

who could pride herself on her food? I kept laughing at jokes about *the kind of person* who used pre-minced garlic, not wanting to admit that that could be me. And I stopped enjoying spending time in the kitchen, as the pain I felt while I cooked lingered for hours or days afterwards. I avoided cooking as much as possible, often ordering in and eating frozen meals instead.

The more time went on, the more I came to understand disability and casual ableism. As I spoke to other disabled people who used accessibility

Being a good cook isn't exclusively about using "high-quality" ingredients. It's about making great food with what's available to you.

tools such as electric jar openers or mandolin slicers in their own kitchens, I came to understand that these tools wouldn't make me a bad cook: they would just allow me to enjoy cooking at all. As my symptoms became chronic, I learned to accept that being disabled meant navigating the world a little differently and that reaching for tools to make my life easier wasn't a personal failing.

Eventually, I stocked my kitchen with all the things I simply needed: ground pepper, shredded cheese, a bright yellow bottle of lemon juice. Hesitant to leave fresh garlic behind, I bought pre-peeled cloves before eventually relenting, reaching for a little jar of the pre-minced stuff. And, as cooking became easier, it also became fun again.

There are days when the ableism in cooking still makes me feel alienated. Even as someone who talks openly and often about my struggles with the use of

my hands, I face ableism from friends and colleagues who don't know any better. Under a tweet where I simply said, "Pre-minced garlic is good, actually," an acquaintance responded that Anthony Bourdain would be rolling in his grave. (The account has since been deleted.) Another posted a meme about how wrong I was. One person—a stranger—told me this opinion was the reason we should end our species altogether; pre-minced garlic is apparently the grounds for mass extinction.

Though I'd like to say that seeing the suggestion made under a lighthearted tweet didn't bother me, I'm afraid to report it did.

I'm not here to argue that pre-minced garlic tastes the same as the fresh stuff (it doesn't) nor that any of the alternatives I've mentioned are equivalent to their fresh counterparts. I'm here to say the way we talk about accessible food options—whether in our homes, in recipe books, or in cooking shows—needs to change.

The question of *why* someone might use pre-minced garlic is less important than this one: *Does it matter?*

Cooking should be about the joy of making something you're excited to eat or serve—about preparing food you like in whatever way works best for you.

You can cook the way you want to. You can even say your way is better, if you like. But there's no reason to say other ways are wrong or disgusting. The simple truth is that being a good cook isn't exclusively about using "high-quality" ingredients. It's about making great food with what's available to you.

In my little kitchen, I toss pre-sliced mushrooms and pre-minced garlic in sizzling oil, filling my apartment with a rich allicin smell. And I feel comfortable in my skills, even if fresh garlic is absent from my pantry. □

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A version of this story was published in 2022.

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GABRIELLE DROLET is a Montreal-based writer and cartoonist whose work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Globe and Mail*, *The New Yorker*, and other publications.

AS MY CONDITION worsened, I kept pushing myself physically—because who was I if not someone

Inside Canada's Secret Potato Laboratory

*When they're not taste-testing french fries, scientists are building
a spud that will outlast us all*

BY KAREN PINCHIN

ILLUSTRATION BY JUSTINE WONG



IN A WINDOWLESS basement lab in Fredericton, New Brunswick, three white-coated researchers solemnly face a row of steaming boiled potatoes resting on numbered plates. At first glance, the tubers are identical, but closer inspection reveals variations: their exteriors range from crumbly to smooth, their tints from snowy to golden; on some, dark spots mar the creamy flesh. The scientists pick and prod the specimens with stainless-steel forks and assign each variety a score based on its colour, flavour, texture, and appearance. The researchers taste and smell as if they were sommeliers—and then scrape the leftovers into a plastic garbage bag.

The door swings open, and Benoît Bizimungu, senior potato breeder at the Fredericton Research and Development Centre, enters the room, holding aloft a fork with a merry laugh. His favourite days are the ones he spends in the field each September, but boil-and-bake day isn't bad either. "Too bad you weren't here on french fry day," says one young researcher, sipping water to cleanse his palate. It's a light moment in the midst of an otherwise serious task. This world-renowned lab, overlooking the Saint John River and surrounded by acres of silt loam, is focused on building a better spud.

Nearly sixty years ago, the FRDC created the Shepody, a smooth-skinned, white-fleshed potato that revolutionized the Canadian frozen french fry industry. Potatoes are an important global staple, but they are also notoriously tricky to breed: the plant is a polyploid, with many hard-to-predict sets of chromosomes, so uniformity is difficult to guarantee.

First crossed in 1967, the Shepody potato was the product of hybridization between a Fredericton-bred variety, the unglamorously named *F58050*, and the Bake King, developed in New York. It was one of thousands of potatoes bred that year. To make good french fries, a potato needs certain characteristics: a long, smooth, slightly rectangular shape; low sugar levels, so it won't burn during deep-frying; and a dry centre that will allow for a uniform cook. The Shepody

checked every box. But most important for New Brunswick's expanding McCain Foods, which was quickly starting to dominate the country's potato trade, the Shepody was ready for harvest weeks before the Russet Burbank, then the most popular fry variety. The Burbank, originally bred in California, matures at around four or four and a half months; the slightly earlier season made possible by the Shepody meant less scrambling for year-round supply.

Richard Tarn came to the centre in 1968, after receiving his PhD from the University of Birmingham, and later joined the Shepody team. Tarn had spent most of the previous year collecting wild potato varieties in rural Mexico and looking for rare or remarkable traits that would enhance global breeding stock. McCain's testing of the Shepody before its official release in 1980, says Tarn, was a large part of its success. Already pleased by test batches from its processing facilities, McCain was bullish, buying all the Shepody potatoes Maritime farmers could grow. The potato was swiftly adopted across North America and Australia, and in 1992, Tarn's team was awarded a certificate of excellence by Agriculture Canada. The Shepody is now among the top french fry potatoes in North America. In 2015, Canadian businesses exported more than \$1 billion in frozen potatoes, a large portion of which were Shepody.

Developing new varieties of potato requires profound patience, a wonkish attention to detail, the management of huge data sets, and, according to Bizimungu, imagination. "You have to have a science background, but also an artistic vision and sense of discovery that will lead to innovation," he says, striding through a white-walled room lined with pieces of state-of-the-art genomic testing equipment that resemble expensive photocopiers. Every year, his team manually crosses parent plants—selected based on which characteristics they are likely to transfer to their offspring—to produce new potato seeds. The tubers they produce are then grown season after season, and scientists follow each tiny plant from the lab, to the greenhouse in late winter, and to the field in early spring. After harvest in the fall, varieties are tasted and tested—and the lucky standouts make it through to another year.

As the breeders in Fredericton make selections, they keep an eye out for specific traits. Some varieties are chosen because they don't bruise and discolour after cooking. Some pass in part because they resist diseases and pests, such as the Colorado potato beetle; in the global potato industry, insects cause approximately \$5 billion in revenue losses each year. Other varieties currently in development are designed to slow down the digestion of starch, and so might one day offer diabetics a low-glycemic alternative. One deep-yellow potato—bred from South American stock—is filled with carotenoids, pigments found in carrots that may slow age-related eye disease. Some potatoes might look great and store well but if they taste bland or bitter they won't make the cut.

Every winter, the federal government releases its most promising potatoes to Canadian farmers, breeders, and producers, who pay a \$100 seed-handling fee for a chance to try out a new potato for two years. Then they can place bids—ranging from hundreds to tens of thousands of dollars—on exclusive licences, which grant them the opportunity to test the potato exclusively for up to three years and negotiate a contract to commercialize the variety. Every year, Agriculture and

Agri-Food Canada, which runs the FRDC, collects an average of \$5.3 million in intellectual property royalties from innovations in grains, technology, and farm machinery, which it says is “reinvested into research and development activities.” From potatoes still under licence, the government makes \$16.50 per tonne of seed sold.

But because government breeders are increasingly focusing on the specific needs of large growers and processors, such as the frozen french fry industry, consumers are missing out on options. Tarn remembers being disappointed every time the team decided to cut a particularly delicious or handsome potato from the program. Sometimes it did so because of a single, crucial flaw: the tuber’s unsuitability for rough-and-tumble large-scale harvesting and processing. “No matter how good everything else is,” he says, “if the potato is going to shatter when it falls eighteen inches, it’s not going to survive.”

In the arms race for the perfect potato, large multinational companies push mid-sized or small family-owned farms

towards cultivating profitable varieties. The Irish Cobbler, for example, an irregularly shaped, tan-skinned heirloom with a nutty aroma and a distinctive earthy flavour, was once grown across Prince Edward Island as a perennial favourite commonly sold at roadside stands. But not anymore: cooks in search of convenience didn’t want to dig out its deep eyes with a peeler. As scientists strive to provide the primary traits large processors want—more productive plants, or ones that need less fertilizer—Tarn says there’s a risk that researchers may be overlooking potatoes with other redeeming qualities, such as the Irish Cobbler’s pleasant taste, or the beauty of delicate, knobby pink fingerlings. Customers are used to buying generic potatoes labelled “red-skinned,” “yellow-fleshed,” “waxy,” or “new.” Even the legendary Shepody, when it makes it to grocery stores, is simply labelled “white.” The next super potato is out there—delicious, efficient, and resilient—with a yet-to-be-discovered combination of genes.

Next door to the FRDC’s kitchen and

tasting room is an earthquake-proof gene bank that houses the bulk of Canada’s important potato genetic resources, primarily in the form of temperature-controlled seeds or seedlings. Included in the collection is the Lumper, the variety hit by blight between 1845 and 1849 that led to the Irish potato famine. Its history serves as a cautionary tale of what can happen when we rely on a single variety.

In the Fredericton lab’s sunny propagation room, Bizimungu, surrounded by bright- and olive-green potato seedlings in round glass beakers, is nursing some of the 80,000 seedlings, preparing them for planting in the spring. Come fall, he will trade in his lab coat for steel-toed boots, a floppy hat, and rain gear, and then once again head to the field where the next top spud may be waiting underground. *

A version of this story was published in 2017.

KAREN PINCHIN has written about food and economics for *National Geographic*, *Newsweek*, and *Macleans*.

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**CANADA’S
CONVERSATION**

Kettle

BY JAMES POLLOCK

Listen, it's haunted. Quavery metal *ping*,
clunk, then a long tense silence. This hiss. Low
or, rather, distant, banging or ratcheting
noises like basement renovations. Slow,

sustained sighs, growing hoarse. Huge pause for breath.
Hesitant whistles. Then this wheezing laugh,
growing hysterical, like a dance-of-death
devil's tritone, toggling on a fife.

At last, that throat-clearing rasp, low and long,
of hot water boiling, and a jet of steam
whose high crazy glissando plainsong—
poltergeist shrieking a baby's scream.

The Mushroom Boom

*Fungi are increasingly being used in new ways.
But there's still a lot we don't know about the mysterious organisms*

BY ANNE THÉRIAULT

ILLUSTRATION BY JEFFREY KAM



WHEN ALICE FIRST discovers the mushroom in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, it looks perfectly ordinary—until she sees what's sitting on it: a large blue caterpillar smoking a hookah. The caterpillar, an impatient sort, grills a confused Alice on who she is and what she's doing before telling her that eating from one side of his mushroom will cause her to grow and eating from the other will cause her to shrink (he refrains from clarifying which side is which). Alice grabs a handful of both, and her first bite diminishes her down toward the ground. The corrective bite sends her head soaring above the treetops, her neck so long that a nearby pigeon mistakes her for a serpent.

Alice's experience encapsulates the weird position that mushrooms take up in our psyche: the way they occupy some borderland between the prosaic and the uncanny. They can be found in the aisles of any grocery store—rubbery white buttons tamed by plastic wrap. They're ubiquitous in children's books, especially fairy tales—which might be where they start to spill over into the otherworldly, since many of those illustrations depict the *Amanita muscaria*, a red mushroom with white spots, prized by Siberian shamans for its powerful hallucinogenic properties (it's also highly toxic). Things only get wilder from there.

Though we typically associate mushrooms with a classic toadstool silhouette, they come in all kinds of fantastical shapes and colours. Take, for example, the jack-o'-lantern, a poisonous orange variety that glows green in the dark. There are mushrooms whose names wouldn't sound out of place at a punk show, like witches' butter, wolf-fart puffball, bleeding tooth, and amethyst deceiver. Then, of course, there's the fact that fungi are a potent symbol of death, not just because eating the wrong type might kill you but also because they literally feed off decay. Most fungi survive by decomposing material around them—not only feeding themselves in the process but clearing away lifeless organic material so that more things can grow. Because of that, mushrooms could also be seen as symbols of rebirth, creating space for new life by doing away with the dead.

Maybe that sense of renewal is part of why mushrooms are having a bona fide moment, one that straddles several wildly different sectors. In late 2021, the *New York Times* predicted that mushrooms would be the 2022 ingredient of the year, which makes sense given that the global market for edible fungi rose to \$45.3 billion (US) in 2020 and is projected to keep on growing. Meanwhile, advancing technology means we're finding more applications for fungi, from the seemingly frivolous (high fashion "mushroom leather") to the potentially groundbreaking (fungus that feeds off radiation and might be used to clean up nuclear waste or protect astronauts in space). In medicine, more and more studies are being done on the use of psilocybin

to treat depression, anxiety, and even substance use disorder. Mushrooms are also becoming increasingly popular as a supplement, touting benefits like improved immunity, cognitive function, and energy.

When I first had the idea to write about mushrooms, I thought it would be a light trend piece—something like "mushrooms are so hot right now, how interesting!" But what started out as general journalistic curiosity sent me down a trail of increasingly amazing facts, one that has led me to question so many things I thought I knew about the natural world and our place in it—an identity crisis similar to the one Alice experiences as she journeys through Wonderland. It's clear that mycologists have only just begun their journey down the rabbit hole, and the applications for mushrooms are seemingly endless. And it seems that the more we learn about fungi, the more we learn about our own values and connections.

Fungi are a potent symbol of death, not just because eating the wrong type might kill you but also because they literally feed off decay.

IN 2022, WHEN Deb Kelly led me through her Yarker, Ontario, mushroom farm, the Fungi Connection, I couldn't decide whether it reminded me more of an industrial warehouse or some sci-fi laboratory. Dominating the entryway was a homemade sterilization unit, a hulking metal thing that blasted steam through the bags of hardwood sawdust in which the mushrooms would grow. From there, we passed into a room with hospital-grade HEPA filters, where the shelves were lined with dozens of petri dishes, each containing a bit of mushroom culture that was grown in a test tube. This was where the cultures would be mixed with sterilized grain in order to form the mycelium, which

is the root-like structure out of which mushrooms develop, and everything had to be as clean as possible. Even the tiniest contaminant could ruin an entire batch.

Once the grain was colonized by the mycelium, it could be added to the sawdust bags—these mushrooms are all wood decomposers, so that will be their food—and then moved to the incubation room, a warm, dim purgatory that it must journey through before its final stop: the fruiting room.

"This is the part that a lot of people get most excited about," Kelly told me as she opened the door. I could see why. In this light-, humidity-, and temperature-controlled space, designed to mimic the conditions of the forest floor, row upon row of sawdust bags burst with fantastical shapes: oyster mushrooms in shades of beige, eerie indigo sprout-like clusters of tiny flying saucers, and lion's mane mushrooms frothing out of their containers with long, white spines that looked like shaggy hair.

It's hard to describe the surreal feeling of the fruiting room—it was a bit like stepping into another world. It also felt like looking into the future, which, in a way, it just might be.

When Kelly and her husband, Darren, founded the Fungi Connection in 2017 at a farm they were renting on Wolfe Island, they thought it would take them at least five years to build some

kind of following. To their surprise, they were soon supplying mushrooms to restaurants across Eastern Ontario and selling their goods at several local fine food shops and farmers' markets. In the years since, they've had to move twice to larger digs thanks to skyrocketing demand—though since I visited, they've decided to sell their large farm and scale back to a smaller homestead.

One of the Fungi Connection's most popular products has been a kit that allows people to cultivate their own mushrooms at home. As it turns out, you don't need a lot of space or fancy equipment to grow mushrooms. In fact, the use of old factories and warehouses as urban mushroom farms is on the rise. Blanc de Gris in Montreal, one example of this model, has put an extra eco-friendly spin on the idea by using residual grain from local beer production as part of its cultivation.

When it comes to food, mushrooms have many benefits in an age of climate change. They're chock-full of nutrients and make an appealing meat substitute. (Despite being a staple in many vegetarian diets, mushrooms aren't vegetables; they share more genetic traits with animals and belong to their own separate biological kingdom.) Compared to other crops, they require fewer growing materials, water, and energy while also taking up a fraction of the square footage. Because they don't need significant access to land and are relatively inexpensive, easy, and quick to cultivate, mushrooms could also potentially help address food insecurity, particularly in urban environments.

The Kellys cultivate a number of varieties, including shiitake, black king, reishi, chestnut, the aforementioned lion's mane, and four variants of oyster mushrooms: blue, pink, golden, and white. Almost all of these could be used to make satisfying meatless stir fries, pasta sauces, gravies, soups, or stews. (I have a great recipe somewhere for mushroom bourguignon.) Some mushrooms, though, are able to mimic the texture and flavour of actual meat. Lion's mane, for example, is a great replacement for crabmeat, lobster, and some types of fish; it works well in "lobster" rolls and vegetarian gumbo. Then there's the variety *Laetiporus*, which some people call "chicken of the woods." As its nickname suggests, *Laetiporus* makes an incredible chicken substitute, whether you bread it and deep-fry it or turn it into a simple soup. Then there's mycoprotein, which is a meat substitute made out of protein derived from fungi. You can find mycoprotein products in supermarkets under the brand name Quorn. Personally, though, my favourite mushroom dishes are those where the mushroom isn't trying to be anything other than its own delicious self.

As I was leaving the Fungi Connection, Deb handed me a paper bag filled with oyster and lion's mane mushrooms. I felt like I'd won the lottery. I used the oyster ones to make a beautifully creamy risotto, and on Kelly's recommendation, I decided to try my hand at lion's mane "crab cakes." I made them for

my mother and served them with a fancy lemon aioli. Both of us thought they tasted just like real crab cakes.

ONE OF THE most fascinating recent innovations in the world of fungi is so-called vegan mushroom leather (which is actually made from mycelium). This hot new trend in luxury apparel has designers like Hermès and Stella McCartney incorporating it into their products, and it could potentially upend fashion both high and low.

Artist Philip Ross first learned about reishi mushrooms when he worked as a hospice caregiver in San Francisco during the AIDS epidemic; interested in their immune-boosting properties, he began growing them for medicinal use. He soon started using them in his sculptures and eventually began experimenting with materials made from the organism's mycelium.

After fielding interest from multiple companies about the technology he was developing, Ross and long-time artistic collaborator Sophia Wang founded MycoWorks in order to commercialize it and wound up focusing on creating a plant-based leather alternative. Designers say it's indistinguishable from the real thing.

Mushroom leather has many things working in its favour, the biggest one being that it's cruelty free. It's also more eco-friendly than both leather and the majority of leather alternatives: mushrooms don't come close to stressing the environment the way that rearing cattle and other animals does, the tanning process doesn't use chromium (a pollutant historically used to tan hides), and it's not made from plastic, unlike "pleath-

er" (leather-like products made from polyurethane or polyvinyl chloride). Mushroom leather can also be combined with other fibres, like cotton, and customized to a much higher degree than real leather.

The only drawback is the price. In an interview with the *New York Times* in late 2022, Ross would not put an exact number to the cost of his product, but he did say that it was comparable to that of exotic hides. There's a reason that mushroom leather lies (at least so far) firmly within the domain of luxury apparel: no one else can afford to work with it. But other companies are quickly developing their own mushroom leather technologies, and MycoWorks is ever growing. It's possible to imagine a future where mushroom leather is mainstream.

MUSHROOMS MIGHT CURRENTLY be associated with wealth and health, but they haven't always been viewed so positively in the Western world. Just a few hundred years ago, Europeans had a much darker take on them.

"Mushrooms were always about the night side of nature," says Mike Jay, author of *Psychonauts: Drugs and the Making of the Modern Mind*, about historical Western attitudes toward psychedelic plants and organisms. In his native Britain, they

"There's a bit of a trickster element to mushrooms, a shadow side, an underground intelligence."

are associated with fairy rings, naturally occurring circles of mushrooms that spring up in forests or meadows. These were said to be made by fairies, mischievous and spiteful little imps, to dance in.

A fairy ring was a dangerous place, and an errant human who stumbled into one might find themselves whisked away to fairyland—or worse. Of course, transportation to another world is exactly what some people hope to get from ingesting certain mushrooms.

The term “magic mushroom” was coined in 1957 by *Life* magazine. In that issue, R. Gordon Wasson, a vice president at J.P. Morgan, detailed his participation in a Mazatec mushroom ritual. Wasson, whose Russian American wife and co-author, Valentina, had first interested him in mushrooms during their honeymoon, claimed to be the pioneering Westerner to have undergone such a ceremony; in fact, he had lied his way into it by claiming to the woman conducting it, a curandera named María Sabina, that he was looking for information about his son. Wasson also reneged on his promise not to publicize identifying information about Sabina, something that had devastating consequences for her. The essay, however, proved to be an enormous sensation, one that Wasson followed up on by collecting and identifying various species of psilocybin mushrooms and publishing about them. If Timothy Leary and Ram Dass were the godfathers of the psychedelic '60s, then Wasson might be a close third.

Few people understand the impact of Wasson's work more than Ron Shore, a sort of Renaissance mushroom man from Kingston, Ontario. I first contacted him because he owned a brewery (since sold) that created a beer containing chaga mushrooms, which have been said to lower inflammation and prevent cancer and are often used in alternative medicine and supplements. I was interested in what seemed like yet another strange new use for fungi. As it turned out, I got much more than I'd bargained for: Shore was also involved in the founding of the Kingston Psychedelic Society and recently completed a PhD in the clinical application of psilocybin mushrooms. (The beer, by the way, was delicious.)

“There's a bit of a trickster element to mushrooms, a shadow side, an underground intelligence,” says Shore, who works as a research scientist under Jane Philpott at Queen's University. He's happy to talk about the neuroscience of psilocybin-assisted therapy, the reviews he's conducted, the papers he's publishing. This form of psychotherapy is still relatively new, but studies have shown it could be very effective in treating issues like depression, end-of-life anxiety, and substance use disorders. While the sale of psilocybin mushrooms is still illegal in Canada, Health Canada has authorized the use of psilocybin in psychedelic-assisted therapy through its Special Access Program. It's still early days when it comes to any kind of treatment involving psychedelics, but initial results seem promising.

Shore's a bona fide scientist, but his interest comes across as more mystical than academic. He views mushrooms as intelligent beings, which accords with the research biologist Merlin Sheldrake did for his hit book *Entangled Life: How Fungi*

Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures. It turns out that networks of mycelium, which can stretch for miles underground, in some ways resemble brains. They're able to transmit information, respond to their environment, and adapt to change in a way that science is only just beginning to understand.

“The brain's architecture is exactly like the way mycelium grows,” Shore tells me. “It's exactly the same branching network patterns. We're all so used to this world that's somehow a duality between body and spirit and all this, but in the real world, everything's so connected. We don't even know where one species starts and another ends, or where one tree starts and another ends, or where a mushroom starts and a tree ends.”

Shore often speaks in these kinds of terms: about how fungi connect to themselves and the wider natural world, but also how they can help people connect to themselves or those around them. Kelly, who calls herself a mushroom evangelist, does the same, adding that the more she learns about fungi, the more she feels there's a spiritual component to her work. She's certainly not the only mushroom enthusiast to speak about them with a kind of holy awe.

Jay feels a similar sense of wonder about fungi and refers to their current moment as a point of “infinite possibility.” But he also worries that there is a sort of uncritical championing happening around them—a sense that people might be overpromising what they can deliver based on science that is really only just starting to understand how it exists in the world and what it can do. That feels like a fair assessment: Could anything really live up to the current mushroom hype? We want so badly to discover a silver bullet that will solve all of our problems—climate change, food insecurity, mental and physical illness—and we tend to be quick to discard ideas if they don't work out exactly the way we want them to.

Still, Jay feels encouraged by the fact that researchers could seize the “mushroom cheerleading” opportunity to create long-term plans, telling me he hopes it will lead to more funding and research into the effects on the human mind.

When most people think about the mushroom that Alice finds in Wonderland, they'll probably remember its more fantastical elements: the fact that it's the seat of a talking, smoking caterpillar or the way it causes Alice's rapid changes in size. What they might not remember is that, by this point in the narrative, Alice has already grown and shrunk uncontrollably, which is why she's on eye level with the caterpillar to begin with. Alice eats the mushroom to try to restore herself to her regular size—which, after some trial and error, she manages to do. She holds on to pieces of the mushroom as she moves on, using them as tools to help her navigate the strange new world.

With a little luck and a lot of investment, maybe fungi can do the same for us. ♦

A version of this story was published in 2023.

ANNE THÉRIAULT is a Toronto-based writer who has contributed to the *Guardian*, *Chatelaine*, and *Longreads*.

The Beef over Kosher Beef

Jewish groups say new food safety rules infringe on faith. Regulators argue they're needed to ensure animals don't suffer

BY COREY MINTZ

ILLUSTRATION BY MAIA FADDOUL



IT'S UNNERVING TO read a government document describing how to properly cut a cow's throat. But in order to understand the lawsuit between the producers of kosher meat, kosher certification agencies, and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), which regulates the health of food, animals, and plants, one has to face certain realities.

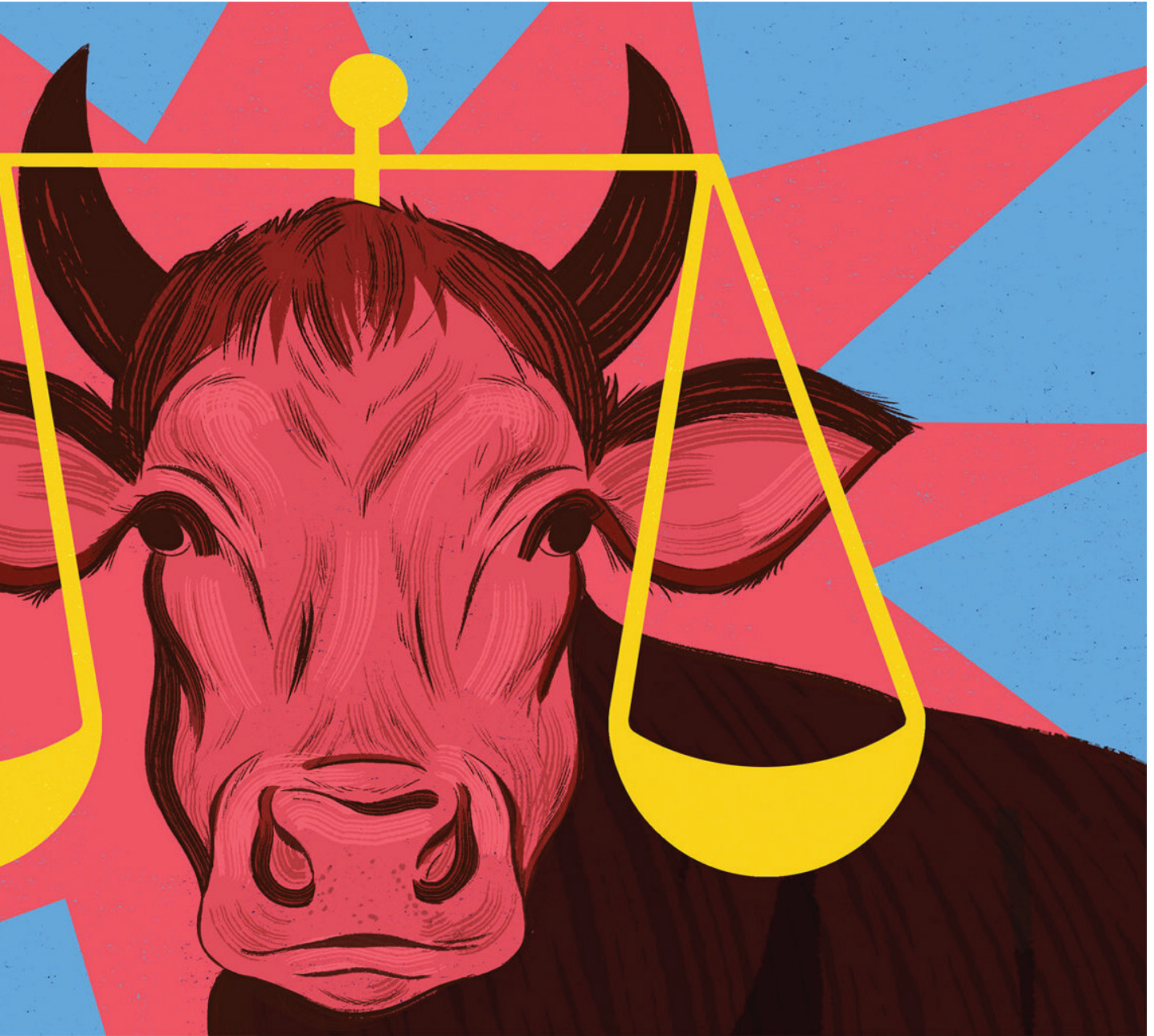
Since 2010, the CFIA's guidelines for ritual slaughter—the act of killing an animal to fulfill specific religious or cultural laws—have described in detail the method of using a knife “at least twice as long as the animal's neck width and

exquisitely sharp” to skillfully result in rapid loss of consciousness. “For adult bovines, steers, and heavy calves, the continuous cut may include several fluid sliding movements of the knife without any interruption, hesitation, stabbing with the knife or lifting of the knife off the animal's neck during the entire cut.”

To preserve religious freedoms, ritual slaughter guidelines have exempted qualified practitioners from pre-slaughter stunning. However, all other mammalian livestock must first be rendered unconscious by the method: either carried out mechanically, electrically, or by a “controlled atmospheric” system (such as gas).

After this, the animal is bled, dressed (the removal of skin, head, developed mammary glands and feet), eviscerated, and split.

In 2019, this finely tuned tension between science, regulation, and tradition changed. The CFIA, citing Canada's need to adapt to modern global standards and consumer expectations, sought to update a variety of food production rules. The Safe Food for Canadians Regulations (SFCR) required cows to either be stunned after slaughter (in the event that they are not instantaneously rendered unconscious) or else subject to a series of tests to determine that the animal is



unconscious and therefore not experiencing additional distress.

This is where that tension between law and religion becomes a conflict.

It would help if the Torah had at least a passing mention of post-slaughter stunning. But despite being an immortal being possessed of infinite knowledge and wisdom, God didn't anticipate retractable stun bolts or electromagnetic radiation. Or if he did, he didn't write it down. So it falls to various kosher certification bodies to debate whether the CFIA's new regulations for the humane slaughtering of cows can coexist with *shechita*—the ritual slaughter of animals

in accordance with *kashrut*, Jewish dietary law.

The difference is why Canada's two main kosher certification bodies, the Jewish Community Council of Montreal (MK) and Kashruth Council of Canada (COR), along with Mehadrin and Shefa (Canada's two main kosher meat distributors), and Rabbi Abraham Banon sued the federal government last year, arguing that the regulations infringe on their religious freedoms.

In Canada's highly regulated food system, how do we reconcile ancient tradition with modern law? And just how far should religious freedoms extend?

SHECHITA IS OFTEN presented as a more humane method of killing livestock. And for thousands of years, there was no doubt of that. The single, precise severing of the throat was certainly less brutal than the more common pre-industrial tools for ending an animal's life. But the tools for non-kosher slaughter have been updated since the days of the sledgehammer and the poleaxe.

The crux of the CFIA's position is that the method of ritual slaughter does not guarantee the animal's immediate loss of consciousness as dependably as stunning, and is therefore not sufficient to

guarantee a lack of suffering. The plaintiffs say these new guidelines are too arduous to ensure the financial feasibility of producing kosher beef. They also debate the CFIA's scientific reasoning, citing guidelines from the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the North American Meat Institute (NAMI) as evidence that animals do not endure undue suffering during shechita.

"We're pretty confident about the science that shechita results in such a massive drop in blood pressure that the animal loses consciousness almost instantaneously," says Jean-Phillippe Groleau, lawyer for the plaintiffs.

But, "the problem with a slaughter without stunning is if you get sloppy, it goes bad really quickly," said Temple Grandin, an authority on the humane treatment of livestock, while speaking with vegan Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz in 2018. "It requires much more attention to details of procedure than regular slaughter with stunning. You get the least bit sloppy and you can have bad stuff happening, like live cattle walking around."

Though Grandin points out that stunning is also not infallible. People miss. Accidents happen.

The SFCR guidelines, which went into effect in 2023, did not require kosher abattoirs to stun animals before or after slaughter. Instead, the SFCR asked processors to add a series of tests to confirm that the animal is unconscious, including the absence of rhythmic breathing, the palpebral reflex (eyes rolling back when attempting to close them), and the corneal reflex (blinking in response to an object near the eye).

And while there's no religious prohibition against these tests in kosher slaughter, there's a financial obstruction. They slow down the production line. Court records show that Montpak, one of Canada's major kosher meat producers, stopped performing kosher slaughter of calves in June 2023 because they could no longer maintain the pace of 70 calves per hour, a typical industry speed.

The plaintiffs argued that in 2023, when the CFIA began enforcing their new requirements, this slowed down

production so much that the number of kosher capable plants dropped from six to three, resulting in a 55 percent reduction in kosher beef and 90 percent reduction in kosher veal, denying Canadians access to a food essential to their faith.

Adding two minutes to an industrial process that takes one minute would almost certainly raise costs. However, kosher food already incurs additional cost beyond Canadian standards. New kitchen equipment must be kosherized, a process of bringing tools like mixer paddles and baking sheets to a *mikvah*: a bath used for *tevilat keilim*, the

IF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR RELIGIOUS FOOD MAKE IT PROHIBITIVELY EXPENSIVE, DOES INCURRING AN ADDITIONAL EXPENSE CONSTITUTE AN INFRINGEMENT OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?

immersion of vessels. Commercial kitchens must be regularly scrutinized by a *mashgiach*, a kosher food inspector whose duties include lighting pilot flames, ensuring that refrigerators are locked, examining raw ingredients, and the *hechsherim* (a certification that attests that a food item is kosher) on packaged products.

Kosher vegetables, washed with soap and inspected by a *mashgiach* to ensure they are free of bugs (whose presence renders greens as un-kosher as pork), are available at much higher prices. Golden Glow frozen broccoli at Toronto Kosher is about twice the price of frozen broccoli at Loblaws. Kosher feta cheese, considered *cholv Yisroel* (a higher level of kosher dairy than *cholv stam*), is available at Superstore at more than double the price.

Not every kosher ingredient costs this much more. But beef does. The kosher status of meat goes far beyond the

slaughter method, requiring a *menaker* to follow *nikkur*: overseeing the butchery to guarantee the removal of nerves from the hind leg, blood vessels, glands, and forbidden fats known as *chailev*. Mehadrin's kosher brisket averages \$64 per kilogram. That's 157 percent more expensive than Costco's \$26.43 per kilogram brisket.

This is why last summer, judge Guy Régimbald granted an interlocutory injunction, resulting in a temporary pause in enforcing these rules. "We are currently in close contact with the CFIA on guidelines that will address both our needs," said Rabbi Richard Rabkin, managing director of COR, at the time.

IN MARCH OF this year, a compromise by the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada seems to have resolved the matter. The Kosher and Halal Investment Program will provide just over \$35 million in funding to help businesses meet the requirements of the SFCA. With \$2 million available per applicant, the funds are to be used to hire efficiency experts and invest in technology that will enhance production "to meet future business conditions and consumer expectations." That sounds like a subsidy to offset the cost of regulation, but with lots of wiggle room for producers to still claim that the SFCA is a financial burden.

"The Government of Canada heard from stakeholders that investments in slaughter establishments processing kosher and halal red meat, increased training opportunities, and marketing support would help maintain, expand, and improve the Canadian kosher and halal red meat supply chains in the medium and long term."

But Rabkin believes that production of kosher meat has not returned to previous levels since last summer's injunction. "Some plants have expressed general hesitancy about being in the CFIA's crosshairs and simply want to stay away," he says.

Judge Régimbald ruled that it was possible, without the use of the SFCR's three indicators, to ensure that cattle are not suspended while still conscious. "The CFIA may use many other indicators, as it has done historically."

Groleau says that a compromise can

be found through other tests for consciousness, such as menace response (approaching the eye with a hand), which is different from the corneal reflex (lightly touching the eye with a cotton-tipped applicator), as requested by the CFIA.

“My clients are quite keen on proceeding with these tests,” says Groleau. “The point is to make it effective while respecting animal welfare.”

Though this case may hinge on it, it’s hard to argue for kashrut being more humane when it only focuses on how an animal is killed rather than how it’s raised.

“It’s not about how the animal is treated while it’s alive, only how it’s slaughtered,” says Carl Heinrich, co-owner of Toronto’s Richmond Station. *Top Chef Canada* winner Heinrich, who once worked in the kitchen of kosher restaurant Marron Bistro, practices whole animal butchery in his restaurant. “To me, what matters more is how the animal is fed, how much space it has to move around in, if it’s raised in a feedlot or how far it has to travel to get to the slaughterhouse.”

Though a special type of inspector (the *shochet* or *bodek*) does inspect cattle to approve their health after slaughter (rejecting as much as 75 percent, another labour cost for kosher beef), the protocols for kosher beef are stringent about the moment of death, yet unconcerned about the details of life.

THEN THERE’S THE question of religion. One plaintiff, shochet Rabbi Banon, argued his work wasn’t just a job—it was a sacred obligation to his community. But while Canadian courts have long struggled with where to draw the line between holy calling and commercial enterprise, in the end, animal welfare was not the focus of Régimbald’s decision. Instead, the injunction was granted largely on the basis of irreparable harm.

“The evidence, as presented, demonstrates a potential for irreparable harm that cannot be adequately compensated with damages,” reads Régimbald’s decision, which includes potential harm to Canada’s charter. “Moreover, irreparable harm has been demonstrated in the context of an impact on

minority language communities (and their culture).”

The conversation over ritual slaughter is not unique to Canada or kashrut. And while many countries have continued to allow the ritual slaughter of kosher and halal meat, in recent decades, some governments—Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, and Slovenia—have mandated that all animals be stunned before slaughter. Dan Jørgensen, Denmark’s former minister for agriculture and food, put it bluntly: “Animal rights come before religion.”

The UK had this debate ten years ago, when the British Veterinary Association argued for the pre-slaughter stunning of all animals. But today, ritual slaughter is still exempted in the UK, and the additional checks for signs of unconsciousness are not extensive.

In 2020, a Belgian court decree stated that EU members may impose a requirement for pre-cut stunning, even for ritual slaughter. This was followed by an advisory opinion arguing that the decree was unlawful.

Though animal welfare is at the forefront of this conversation, there should be no pretence that this is purely about concern for cows. It’s hard to ignore that the law in Belgium was supported by “an odd mix of animal rights groups and far-right anti-Muslim politicians,” as reported by Courthouse News Service.

Canadian halal certification groups have agreed to allow for stunning to be done after the initial cut. So, the SFCR didn’t impact halal meat production the way it has kosher beef. Though the Canadian Press reported that Shaykh Omar Subedar, a spokesperson for Halal Monitoring Authority Canada, says that they stand behind the Jewish community and its legal action.

Perhaps then, the silver lining of the lawsuit is that moment of solidarity between Canadian Jews and Muslims.

IT’S HARD TO discern the priorities of religion from those of business when they are so inextricably linked. Even the economic discussion is muddy.

In the US, there are roughly 7.5 million

Jews. In Canada, there are just over 400,000. COR estimates that about 20 percent keep kosher at home. The larger US market will almost certainly pay higher prices. So it makes sense why Mehadrin, the largest kosher meat distributor in Canada, would export 30 to 40 percent of its kosher meat to the US, while also fighting to protect its profit margins in Canada as a matter of religious freedom.

This doesn’t mean that kosher food, already costly, should be expected to bear any and all price increases. But if the requirements for religious food make it prohibitively expensive to its own consumers, does incurring an additional expense constitute an infringement of religious freedom? Or should that expense, or the welfare of animals, or the affordability for its audience, incentivize more flexibility of religious practices?

While the claim of shechita being more humane than the poleaxe was certainly accurate for millennia, over the last century, its status as a best practice has been debatable. These regulations were an attempt by the CFIA to join Nordic countries in setting higher standards for animal welfare in meat production, surpassing those of the USA and the UK. Canada tried to leave the jock table and sit with the nerds.

The kosher agencies that interpret and oversee kashrut made examinations of science and the Torah to conclude that a second layer of cling wrap is sufficient to protect a bowl of kosher soup inside a non-kosher microwave. Not one, not three, but two. Similar thinking created the shabbat elevator, programmed to stop on every floor on the sabbath, so observant Jews can avoid pressing the button, which is considered work. Such negotiation between faith and science led to sabbath mode ovens and a velcro gadget that prevents a fridge light from turning on when the door is opened.

How have those analytical minds, so eager to wed technology and theology, not opened up to the possibility that methods of slaughter may have been improved in the last 4,000 years? 🐾

COREY MINTZ is the author of *The Next Supper: The End of Restaurants as We Knew Them, and What Comes After*.

Kraft Dinner Is Canada's True National Dish

At the height of its influence, Kraft controlled more than 50 percent of cheese production in the country

BY SASHA CHAPMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY JENNIFER DANIEL

TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK OF Kraft Dinner, and I will tell you who you are. If you belong to Canada's comfortable class, you probably think of the dish as a childish indulgence and a clandestine treat. The bite-sized tubular noodles are so yielding and soft, you will say a little sheepishly, and next to impossible to prepare *al dente*. The briny, glistening orange sauce tastes a little bit sweet and a little bit sour—at once interesting, because of the tension between the two flavour poles, but not overly challenging or unfamiliar. And its essential dairyness connects it to that most elemental of foods: a mother's milk. KD is the ultimate nursery food, at least if you were born and raised in Canada, where making and eating cheese has been a part of the culture since Champlain brought cows from Normandy in the early 1600s—a tradition nearly as venerable as the fur trade. It may be the first dish children

and un-nested students learn to make ("make," of course, being a loose term; "assemble" may be more accurate). This only strengthens its primal attractions.

If you recently immigrated to Canada, you will have a very different association with KD, as a dish that polarizes family meals. Your children nag you for it, having acquired a taste for it at school, or at the house next door. And if you count yourself among the Canadians who use food banks each month, you may associate the iconic blue and yellow box with privation: a necessary evil while you wait for your next cheque to arrive, bought with your last dollar, and moistened with your last spoonfuls of milk.

The point is, it's nearly impossible to live in Canada without forming an opinion about one of the world's first and most successful convenience foods. In 1997, sixty years after the first box promised "dinner in seven minutes—no baking required," we celebrated by

making Kraft Dinner the top-selling grocery item in the country.

This makes KD, not poutine, our *de facto* national dish. We eat 3.2 boxes each in an average year, about 55 percent more than Americans do. We are also the only people to refer to Kraft Dinner as a generic for instant mac and cheese. The Barenaked Ladies sang wistfully about eating the stuff: "If I had a million dollars / we wouldn't have to eat Kraft Dinner / But we would eat Kraft Dinner / Of course we would, we'd just eat more." In response, fans threw boxes of KD at the band members as they performed. This was an act of veneration.

True, Canada is just one outpost in Kraft's globalized food system. The company's iconic brands are on the rise in emerging markets, which is to say in the ancient cultures beyond the borders of North America, Europe, and Australia. In China, another Kraft product, the Oreo, has been re-engineered for the Asian



market, with such success that it is now a favourite cookie in the market. But this is history repeating itself: our own food system was colonized long ago by Kraft, a company that has always striven to give us (or at least our consumer, magpie selves) what we want: cheaper food that is faster to prepare. We have been only too happy to drink the Kool-Aid, another Kraft brand.

KD's popularity is a symptom of a world that spins distressingly faster and faster. We devote less and less time to cooking and cleaning up three meals a day. Most of the dinners we consume at home involve a prepared or semi-prepared food. As the clock ticks, we spend more of every food dollar on these shortcuts.

But what does it mean if a national dish is manufactured, formulated by scientists in a laboratory in Glenview, Illinois, and sold back to us by one of the biggest food companies in the world? Kraft isn't

just manufacturing millions of boxes of powdered cheese and noodles at its factory in the desolate Montreal suburb of Mont-Royal. It is manufacturing taste. In so doing, it has left an indelible mark on what and how we eat, and therefore how we live. At the Canadian corporate headquarters in Toronto, the "one percent" doesn't refer to the über-wealthy, but to the tiny fraction of Canadians who do not stock a single Kraft product in their pantries.

DESPITE OUR ever-present nostalgia for the foods of childhood, tastes and recipes are always evolving. We have no definitive version of macaroni and cheese, or any dish for that matter. The word "macaroni," first coined in Italy, describes any short tubular pasta; there, the cheese of choice was often Parmesan. Although I have yet to uncover a primary source to prove the point, I would wager that macaroni, which

first became fashionable in England in the eighteenth century, most likely reached Britain in the trunks of travellers. (Thomas Jefferson is said to have introduced it to Virginia.) The dish soon grew so popular among anglophones that "macaroni" became slang for a dandy who favoured outlandish wigs, which is why Yankee Doodle "stuck a feather in his cap and called it macaroni."

The Italian recipe typically featured the noodle, rather than a cheesy sauce, in the starring role, but English cooks inverted this relationship, adding English cheeses, such as cheddar, and egg yolks, to create a creamier, more pudding-like dish. An early domestic iteration, published in *Modern Practical Cookery* in 1845, calls for puff pastry to line the baking dish. Its author, Mrs. Nourse, gives instructions to stew the noodles in a cream thickened with egg yolks, with a little "beaten mace" and "made mustard" to sharpen the flavours before grating

Parmesan or Cheshire cheese over top.

Liz Driver, the culinary historian who introduced me to the recipe, believes the macaroni Mrs. Nourse used would have been imported from Italy, and was probably far superior to much of the Canadian-made pasta available today, which Italians consider too soft for their taste. Driver is the curator of Campbell House, a Toronto heritage building where she teaches open-hearth cooking in the nineteenth-century kitchen, and keeps a collection of vintage cast iron pots piled under her desk.

She showed me into the formal drawing room, where we sat like museum pieces, surrounded by a games table and a writing desk. “Macaroni and cheese was considered sophisticated, as proven by the fact that it was served in a puff pastry-lined pan,” she noted in the hushed, measured tones of someone who has spent her life in libraries. Occasionally, we were interrupted by visitors who must have wondered why we weren’t in costume, playing whist.

Mrs. Nourse’s Cheshire cheese notwithstanding, there was plenty of local cheddar for making macaroni puddings in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the time, Canada was known for little else, food-wise, perhaps one reason we remain so enamoured with mac and cheese. As Heather Menzies writes in her excellent history *By the Labour of Their Hands: The Story of Ontario Cheddar Cheese*, commercial cheese making in Ontario took off in the mid-nineteenth century, helped along by a depression in the wheat market, and the prevalence of the wheat midge, which was devastating crops. “The milk crop never fails,” trumpeted a letter to the editor in an 1865 edition of *Canada Farmer*. In the age before pasteurization, cheese was often safer—and much longer lasting—than fluid milk. More plentiful than the English original, Canadian cheddar soon became a staple among the English working class. By the turn of the twentieth century, there were 1,242 cheddar factories in Ontario, where the bulk of Canadian cheese making happened, and cheddar exports—some 234 million pounds in 1904—were second only to timber. More than a century



later, we export only 19 million pounds of cheese, five million of which is cheddar, while we import more than 55 million. Although we cannot wholly lay the decline of cheese craft in Canada at the feet of James Lewis Kraft, it did correspond with the rise of Kraft’s processed cheese empire.

IN 1893, THE Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition displayed the blueprint for the century of middle-class consumerism that followed. North American society was changing rapidly: cities such as Chicago had sprung up seemingly overnight, and industry, not agriculture, was in ascendance. Following two decades of social, economic, and political upheaval, the public hungered for the rosy promise of progress. One cannot overstate the fair’s influence on the North

American imagination: it drew 30 million visitors when only 63 million people lived in the US. Model houses touted the new middle-class lifestyle, featuring electric stoves, washing machines, doorbells, and fire alarms. Exhibitors hawked new refrigeration technology, canned meats, desiccated soups, synthetic lard substitutes, and saccharin derived from coal tar. New food preparation technologies were marketed as more sanitary, more efficient, and more economical than anything nature or home cooks could provide on their own.

J.L. Kraft, who had grown up on a dairy farm in Ontario, headed off to Chicago a decade after the world’s fair. Fascinated by the promise of innovation, he resolved to find a modern, more profitable way to distribute cheese. Even at the height of production, the quality of Canadian

cheddar available domestically remained variable, in part because the best was reserved for export. “No matter how wholesome it was when it left the manufacturer, it often reached the market in a state of extinct virtue,” observed Kraft, who had seen the amount of spoilage and waste first-hand, while working as a clerk in a general store in Fort Erie, Ontario. He arrived in the US with \$65 and a plan to launch a wholesale cheese business.

There he joined the ranks of dairy experts who were searching for ways to make cheese production more efficient. All cheese is an ancient expression of “milk’s leap towards immortality,” as Clifton Fadiman so poetically put it, and an extremely effective method for preserving a dairy surplus. You need just three main ingredients: milk, rennet (to curdle it into a solid), and microbes (to convert lactose into acid, which deepens the flavour and prevents the curds from spoiling or harbouring disease).

Emulsifying salts help stabilize processed cheese by taking calcium from the milk protein and exchanging it with sodium. This allows the proteins to hold water, thickening the cheese. Early attempts to make processed cheese resembled a kind of re-solidified, long-keeping fondue; the Swiss, not surprisingly, were the first to figure out that these “melting salts” would keep the cheese stable (i.e., emulsified), just as a few spoonfuls of wine or lemon keep a traditional fondue runny.

By the beginning of World War I, J. L. Kraft was experimenting with a similar process, which he developed over a double boiler. His formula hinged on a combination of citric acid and phosphates (the emulsifying salts). While not the first to develop a processed cheese, he was the first to win a patent (in 1916) and, eventually, to capitalize on it. His method paved the way for Velveeta (1928), Kraft Dinner (1937), Cheez Whiz (1952), and Kraft Singles (1965). The discovery that emulsifying salts could be used to make processed cheese turned out to be the great innovation — and some would say tragedy — of twentieth-century cheese making. It standardized the process and ruled out variation, good

or bad, at every stage.

The idea for boxed macaroni and cheese came during the Depression, from a salesman in St. Louis who wrapped rubber bands around packets of grated Kraft cheese and boxes of pasta and persuaded retailers to sell them as a unit. In 1937, the company began to market them as Kraft Dinner, promising to feed a family of four for 19 cents (US). The boxes had a good shelf life and could be kept in a pantry for about ten months; back then, many Canadian households did not yet own a refrigerator.

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In 1939, two years after KD launched in Canada and the US, Kraft’s Canadian sales had already reached \$8 million. A mere six years later, at the end of World War II, sales had nearly doubled to \$14 million, helped in large part by government requisitions for the armed forces, and at home by war rationing and general privation, which made meatless entrees more common. Demographic shifts also played a part: as fewer families retained servants and more women went to work, they had less time to prepare meals. Corporate cookbooks rose to prominence in Canadian kitchens at this time. It is significant that expert cooking advice took hold when life was uncertain: the Depression, and then the war, shook the nation’s confidence, and people felt comforted by instructions from professionals.

Meanwhile, the Canadian cheese industry began to flounder. Exports to its biggest market, the UK, dropped off in

the ’20s as the standard of living rose for the British worker, which meant families could afford more meat. And the world wars, which all but halted exports, nearly killed the industry. Even so, Heather Menzies believes it would have rallied in the ’60s, had political leaders chosen to protect craft cheese. They even had a report telling them how. Instead, they chose to favour the interests of large-scale producers, a group dominated by American corporations such as Kraft. Canada’s local cheese factories watched as the British market collapsed and their own milk supply dried up.

Big American companies signed contracts with local dairies, effectively binding the suppliers to sell most if not all of their production to them. This squeezed out the smaller cheese factories, and more dairy went to making processed cheese instead of artisanal types. At the height of its influence, in 1971, Kraft controlled more than 50 percent of cheese production in Canada.

Meanwhile, demographics continued to shift. Canada’s population was growing, thanks to the baby boom and immigration. The middle class was moving to the suburbs, and still more women went to work outside the home. Food manufacturers saw opportunity in this, and flogged their products on television and in magazines and newspapers, promising status and convenience. Sales of processed cheese took off. By 1973, Kraft Canada was the largest single advertiser in Canadian magazines and, with General Foods, the biggest advertiser on television. Tom Quinn, a former Kraft Canada president, told Menzies, “If we did anything right, it was merchandising and advertising. We created the demand.”

IN THE WORLD OF modern food manufacturing, Kraft Dinner Original remains a fairly simple formula, with only ten ingredients. (My own recipe also calls for ten, if you lump together the natural flavours, as labellers do.) But KD has spawned generations of mac and cheese dinners, each one a greater feat of engineering than the last, and each one less recognizable as something we could make in our own kitchens. In 1999, the

company launched Kraft Dinner Cup, a line that now includes Kraft Dinner Triple Cheese in a microwaveable package. It contains twenty-one ingredients, including “cheese flavours.” Cheddar is eighth on the list. A version sold only in the US, described as Triple Cheese Cheesy Made Easy, contains forty-two ingredients, depending on how you count them.

Yet KD Original has not changed all that much since the 1930s, from the consumer’s point of view. What has changed is how it is engineered and manufactured. “The early sauces would have been nearly all cheese, except for the emulsifying salts,” says Art Hill, a cheese scientist at the University of Guelph, in Ontario. But as dairy became a commodity in the intervening years, profits came from manufacturing it for the lowest cost and the highest volume possible, and from developing new “cheese products” that over time were made with less and less cheese.

Today KD Original probably contains more whey than cheese. Kraft won’t say how much cheese is in the foil packet, but you can read between the lines on the label and make an educated guess. One scientist, who asked not to be quoted, estimates that cheese would account for no more than 29 percent of the sauce’s solids. Driven by the commodity markets rather than taste, processed food formulas often change according to the going rates of their ingredients: when whey powder is cheap, for example, a cheese sauce might include more of it.

“New processes come along, and we need to stay competitive,” offers Robert Gordon, a food engineer and one of about fifteen macaroni and cheese developers at Kraft’s Glenview campus. Citing proprietary reasons, he speaks in general terms about what he does; any time the conversation in our conference call gets too specific, a manager of corporate affairs in Toronto interrupts. “Our primary goal,” she says, “is to ensure it meets Canadians’ expectations for KD.”

Manufactured foods originally appealed to consumers because they were beacons of progress—which they were, if you bought in to the premise that food is just fuel, and if you measured success by

how cheaply and quickly a meal could be prepared. But as convenience foods became more common and cooking from scratch less so, people began to miss the connection they once had to how food was produced, on the farm and in the kitchen. They craved the meals their mothers once cooked, the real mac and cheese, homemade. So Kraft cannily adjusted its marketing strategy, creating an ersatz nostalgia for the very thing KD had supplanted. “Mama’s in the kitchen making mac and cheese,” ran one American marketing slogan. Another announced: “Two new Kraft home cooked dinners, the

**The universal product and
the average consumer don’t
exist, which is why you’ll
find dozens of KD products
from white cheddar to whole
wheat, and even versions
fortified with vegetables,
fibre, or flax seed.**

quick kind you cook up fresh.”

People feel a strong emotional connection to the KD label, says Jordan Fietje, senior brand manager for Kraft Dinner, who takes pains to highlight his company’s sacred covenant with matriarchs. Like many other Kraft employees, he is inordinately fond of the phrase “our promise to moms.” The slogan makes sense. Food is about ritual, tradition and conviviality, and what your mother made for Sunday dinner, which means it is also about identity. The cliché is not wrong: we are what we eat, and our choices both reflect and shape who we are.

MANUFACTURED FOOD has its attractions: it is cheaper and lasts longer, and engineers can manipulate moisture, salt, and sugar content to appeal to a broader market, or to target a social group’s preferences. But as much of our food production

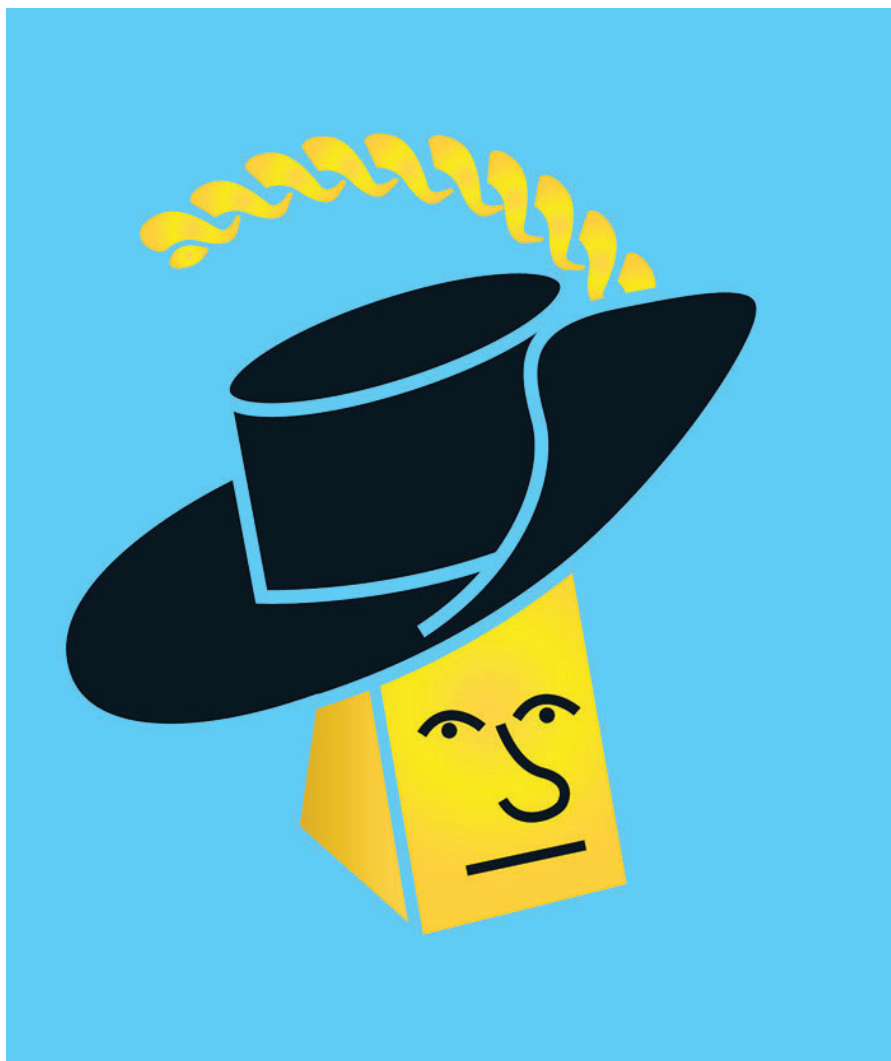
has shifted to manufacturing, products, especially the ones dreamt up by scientists and nutritionists in corporate labs, are made a long way from the consumer. We increasingly rely on professionals to teach us how to cook (if we ever learn), dieticians and nutritionists to tell us what to eat, and scientists to engineer the food we buy.

Food scientists must be multidisciplinary, with training in chemistry, microbiology, engineering, and nutrition. Immersed in their laboratories, they can forget the real goal of their experiments—which is to feed people, says Chris Findlay, the garrulous CEO of Compusense, a consultancy in Guelph. He has spent a lifetime advising multinationals on how to launch and refine food products so they will appeal to consumers, and has worked for the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization, in countries such as Sudan and South Korea. Although he does not work directly for Kraft Canada, his company has partnered with Kraft on four continents.

By the early twentieth century, manufacturers had begun using professional tasters to help ensure quality control. Technology enabled new ways of delivering nutrition, but the food developed by scientists and produced by machines didn’t always taste good. “You can break down food into protein, fat, carbohydrates, but you can’t tell just from the chemical properties what it will taste like,” Findlay says. This proved especially troublesome for the US military, which had been working to develop cheap, nutritious, and easy-to-store rations for soldiers.

In the ’40s and ’50s, the US Army Quartermaster Food and Container Institute began studying “food acceptance,” and so began the field of sensory analysis, or the study of perception. Corporations were quick to discover its uses in evaluating consumer goods. Most large food companies now have sensory analysis labs; many also employ consultants like Findlay to learn more about a product and whether there might be room for something new in its market category.

What is true elsewhere holds up in the food industry: try to please everyone,



and you'll end up pleasing no one—or, as Findlay remarks in his faint Scottish brogue, “Between two stools, fools fall through.” He boasts that if he gives test subjects three samples to taste, he can predict where on the sensory map they will fall—rather like Van Houtte’s coffee profiling surveys, which promise to determine whether you prefer your coffee bold and woodsy or velvety and fruity, by asking you whether you like jam on your toast. The universal product and the average consumer do not exist, which is why, in addition to Kraft Dinner Original, you will find dozens of KD products on grocery shelves, from extra creamy to white cheddar, whole wheat, and even versions fortified with vegetables, fibre, or flax seed.

Sensory analysis relies heavily on trained testers rather than consumers

to dissect the sight, smell, and taste of a product and its competitors by developing a list of attributes to describe them. At Compusense, this data is entered into a computer program that uses statistical methods to create a sensory map of the various traits and where each product falls on the graph. To illustrate how this works, Findlay offers to make me a map for the boxed macaroni and cheese category, with one condition: first I must spend the day as a human detector, trained (rather like a bomb-sniffing dog) to use my senses for one of his panels.

A FEW DAYS LATER, I find myself at a table in a room full of strangers, staring at a hospital tray that holds my tools for the next two hours: a cup of distilled water, a few crackers, another

empty cup with a lid, a white napkin, and a plastic spoon. The first sample arrives: a Styrofoam cup labelled number 943. One of Findlay’s employees, Sheila Fortune, stands in front of a blank whiteboard in a lab coat and demonstrates the procedure. Opening the plastic cup by a centimetre, she takes quick “bunny sniffs” to detect the aroma of the steam that billows out. Each of the testers scribbles down descriptions: butter, brine, starch, the tang of processed cheddar, a sweet aromatic. Next, we remove the lid and note the visuals: straight, thin noodles in an unctuous slick of saffron orange. A few bubbles cling to the pasta. Following Fortune’s instructions, we taste and expectorate the sample. We will have eleven more macaroni and cheese dishes placed before us over the next two hours.

The range of flavours surprises: my notes list hundreds of descriptors. At a certain point, the analysis can verge on the absurd, as in Auberon Waugh’s decree that wine writing should be camped up at all costs, and that “bizarre and improbable side-tastes should be proclaimed: mushrooms, rotting wood, black treacle, burned pencils, condensed milk, sewage, the smell of French railway stations or ladies’ underwear... anything to get away from the accepted list of fruit and flowers.”

I am reminded of Waugh as I stare at my sheet. One sample smells like baby barf—butyric acid, Findlay explains, a common attribute in Parmesan cheese. “Paint thinner” describes another. Findlay nods his head and laughs. What I am detecting, he says, is rancidity and off-flavours. “There are all sorts of reasons for that; you just have to know something about food processing,” he says, before recounting the time a panel detected the smell of exhaust in a barbecued product and everyone trooped out to the parking lot to verify the odour.

By the time the session ends, we have covered the whiteboard with a list of traits to describe the product. Fortune will feed sixteen of them into software that generates a new survey for us to fill out as we taste the products again. This time, though, we dine alone, in front of a computer screen in a white booth, under bright white light. (Some

studies use a red light, to neutralize the sample's colour so testers can't see whether a wine is white or red, or a steak is bloody or grey.) Portions appear like clockwork in the hatch in front of us as we click through the computer survey. In the afternoon, Fortune generates a sensory map of the products we tasted, to show where on the taste spectrum each one falls. KD Original is the cheesiest, yellowest, and saltiest. KD Smart Vegetables Original, made with half a serving of freeze-dried cauliflower, is distinctly pungent and sour, with overtones of boiled brassica.

From inside the belly of the food-producing beast, one thing becomes clear: this is not a way to make food, but a way to manufacture fuel—for our bodies, and for the hungry consumer

market. The food industry, like any empire, depends on expansion for success: to survive, it must continue to increase both its output and its consumer base.

OUTSIDE THE LAB, at the dinner table, taste remains the physical manifestation of memory; it is impossible to eat something without relating or comparing it to an earlier, often a childhood, experience. Taste's relationship to memory becomes especially poignant after you leave home—as immigrants, caught between two worlds, know well. Helen Vallianatos, an anthropologist at the University of Alberta, who studies the food habits of the province's South Asian and Middle Eastern communities, notes that many of her subjects remark on how their sensibilities change almost

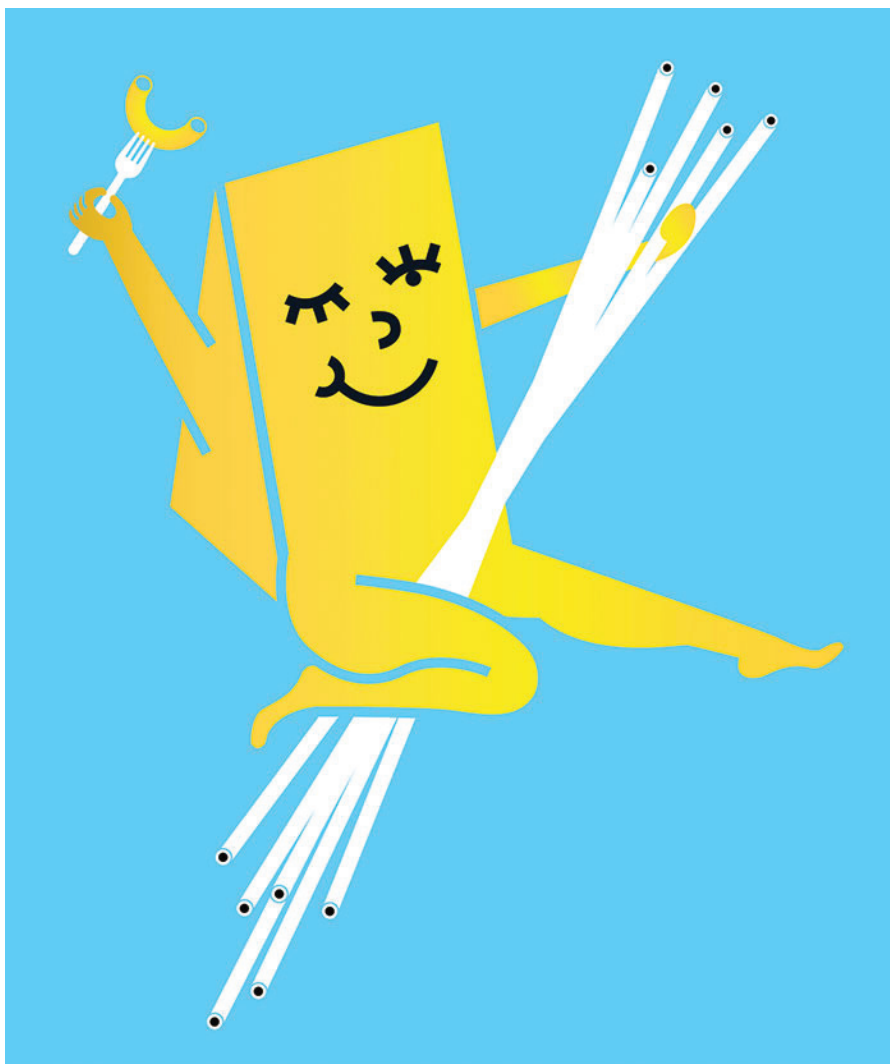
imperceptibly over time. On trips back home, she says, some are surprised to discover that the dishes they once loved now seem too rich, too spicy, too strange, now that they have become accustomed to a different way of eating. She has a special interest in how food and identity are intertwined, and how food helps construct identity: when you cannot eat the food you remember, who are you?

Another common observation among new arrivals to Canada concerns the fast pace of life. Ask immigrants to define Canadian food, and they most often name hamburgers, pizza, and pasta. But one brand turns up again and again in field studies: Kraft, as in “Dinner” and “Singles.”

Canada's emerging markets reflect similar realities to global ones: as our South Asian and Chinese populations have risen, Kraft Canada has rolled out ethnic-specific programs to appeal to immigrants, who may arrive here with traditional recipes and expectations of leisurely, old-fashioned meals, but soon discover that our food culture doesn't leave much time for tradition at the table.

Our foreign-born population is projected to increase four times faster than the rest by 2031. Because most product development takes place south of the border, Kraft Canada lacks the resources to create products specific to our country's changing demographics. Instead, it hires anthropologists and other researchers to find “modern families” (i.e., racialized people and immigrants) and send sheltered executives to observe them. The corporation has also hired spokespeople to develop and promote recipes within their own communities, and to bring new perspectives to the team of home economists who cook in the 6,000-square-foot kitchens at its headquarters in Toronto.

As befits a company that trades in nostalgia, Kraft's corporate office feels like a step back in time. Four important-looking men in suits huddle outside the concrete building, BlackBerry's drawn and at the ready. The “girls,” as everyone calls the group of middle-aged women who are the face of Kraft products, are inside working away in the kitchen. These



are the home economists and dieticians who develop recipes for the company's magazines, websites, and newsletters. The North American Kraft Recipe Library contains about 30,000 entries, enough to fill 300 cookbooks. Michele McAdoo, who has spent seventeen years cooking for Kraft, pushed out 1,000 recipes to nearly one million Canadians in her email blasts last year, to promote home cooking with Kraft products.

As much as Kraft influences and shapes us as consumers, it also spends considerable resources pursuing us. It conducts pantry studies about every five years, and has compiled a list of 1,100 ingredients and 200 kitchen tools found in Canadian homes. "We look at ingredients and tools with a 60 percent and higher incidence and then develop our recipes accordingly," says McAdoo.

Today cumin and coriander waft through the demonstration kitchen. Smita Chandra, an elegant South Asian immigrant in a gold-embroidered fuchsia top, is browning ground chicken in a wok for keema, a spiced meat dish. In a girlish voice that channels Glinda the Good Witch, she recalls how exotic macaroni and cheese seemed when she was growing up in India. She drops a spoonful of cumin from a round stainless steel tin, just like the ones you see in kitchens all over the subcontinent, and says, "Dad would make us mac and cheese when Mother didn't feel like cooking. We so looked forward to those nights." The keema she is preparing will be mixed with KD instead of the usual basmati rice.

The recipes Chandra prepares taste pretty good and are quick to throw together. But they could be done just as well without Kraft products, as in the case of a chicken dish that calls for Miracle Whip, a completely unnecessary and less healthful ingredient than the traditional yogourt. Then there's the processed aftertaste KD lends to her chicken keema, which would have been simpler, anyway, to make with rice; even the best spices and an extra dose of cayenne can't mask it.

While promoting its products to specific ethnic groups, Kraft Canada discovered another market: Canadian cooks who grew up in a multicultural

environment, exposed to many styles of cuisine at home, in restaurants, and through travel. A year after Chandra joined the demonstration team, Kraft hired renowned Toronto chef Susur Lee as a spokesperson for the Chinese community, an idiosyncratic choice if ever there was one. Lee's cooking is notoriously cerebral and complicated, and when the announcement came out last year it was hard to imagine him writing recipes that any home cook—let alone those in search of convenience—could duplicate. Yet it turned out to be an inspired choice. Omnivorousness may define modern Canadian cuisine, and the open-mindedness that accompanies it makes for one of the most exciting aspects of our burgeoning food culture. If anyone can speak to the fusion that informs Canadian cuisine, and the multiculturalism of cooking, it is Lee.

He stands out among an elite group of chefs who succeed at fusion, the over-exposed cooking fad of the '90s. The style has its critics (including me); when new combinations seem rootless and random, it devolves into "confusion" cuisine. Lee, however, keeps an open mind in the kitchen, and borrows freely from different cultures to create his dishes without ever bewildering (or, worse, boring) his guests. He demonstrates a deep knowledge of various cuisines, and an ability to uncover the connections between seemingly disparate styles, which is why he can successfully pair a Shanghai lion's head meatball with Alsatian cabbage and potatoes from Lyons.

"When I think of fusion, I think of culture, of the deep root of recipes," he says, sitting on a black leather couch at his eponymous restaurant in Toronto. "Like Peking duck." As Lee well knows, even the most classic dish begins with an adaptation. The restaurant, which still sports the kitschy red, white, and green neon sign left over from the previous Italian occupants, looks much more Chinese than any of his other Toronto endeavours, decked out inside in deep red and gold, with black lacquer. Antique prints adorn one of the walls, and at the door hangs an old black and white photograph of his extended family in

Hong Kong, and a "re-entry permit" sign above.

I ask him how immigration changed his approach to cooking. "When you arrive in Canada, you start to reflect on who you are," he replies.

Tastes are always changing. Lee does not eat Kraft Dinner, but his three sons do. It's one thing for tastes to develop organically, however, and quite another for them to be influenced by government or corporate interests. A few years ago, the Martin Prosperity Institute, at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, published a paper by geographer Betsy Donald entitled "From Kraft to Craft: Innovation and Creativity in Ontario's Food Economy," a rosy, if at times unrealistic, report about the economic benefits of an artisanal cheese renaissance in Canada. As part of her research, she interviewed Lee, who told her, "True innovative cooking comes from a deep understanding of, and respect for, different cultural roots and certain openness to new ideas. This is in contrast to the rigidity of more traditional cooking cultures like French and southern European. What I find so exciting about Toronto, and North American urban society in general, is the possibility for the betterment of the human condition through experiencing on a daily basis differentness and diversity."

Differences—whether in people, cultures, or even cheese—are Canada's greatest strength, and life would be exceedingly dull without them. They shape and define who we are. But differences can never be manufactured in any meaningful way by a large food conglomerate, which always seeks to standardize. So the question is: are we content to have our national dish come from a laboratory in Illinois, or do we want to have a hand in its (and our) creation? If we can't be the authors of our own meals, who are we? To cook and live life to the fullest, Lee tells me, "I need a good foundation. I have to know who I am." ✂

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A version of this story was published in 2012.
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SASHA CHAPMAN was previously a senior editor at The Walrus.

Who's Afraid of Country Food?

There's a way to feed everyone in Nunavut: give hunters a salary, eat more inussiutit

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
LAAKKULUK WILLIAMSON

“**W**HAT CEREMONY would you like to perform to open the exhibition?”

Inuit have created a modern ceremony that suits Western institutional special occasions and honours Inuit elders: lighting a qulliq—a traditional oil lamp, usually made from soapstone, filled with oil and lit with a long horizontal wick made from the cotton of tundra plants. The practice is soothing and teaches people about the traditional hearth of Inuit households, our source of light and warmth. That’s probably what the gallery representatives were thinking of when they asked the question—or prayers or smudging, along the lines of the practices of other Indigenous cultures.

“We would like to butcher a full seal in Walker Court,” I said. I leaned back from the boardroom table at the Art Gallery of Ontario and made eye contact with my fellow Inuit co-curators, Taqralik Partridge, Jocelyn Piirainen, and Kuzy Curley. We all nodded, and the others affirmed, “Yes, we would like to butcher a seal.”

The four of us had been brought together to create *Tunirrusiangit*, a retrospective exhibition in 2018 of Kenojuak Ashevak’s and Tim Pitsiulak’s work. It was the biggest Inuit art exhibition the AGO had ever hosted. We wanted everything to be grand, to be a gift, in order to honour these extraordinary artists.

I did not want to hear the details of how impossible all the rules and regulations of the gallery, the City of Toronto, and public health would make it; I am well acquainted with how white institutions abhor non-industrial food practices and, by default, Inuit food systems. Throughout my life, I have watched white people in particular show their distaste for the look, smell, and taste of inussiutit—Inuit cultural

**LEFT**

The writer butchering her daughter Akutag's first seal catch

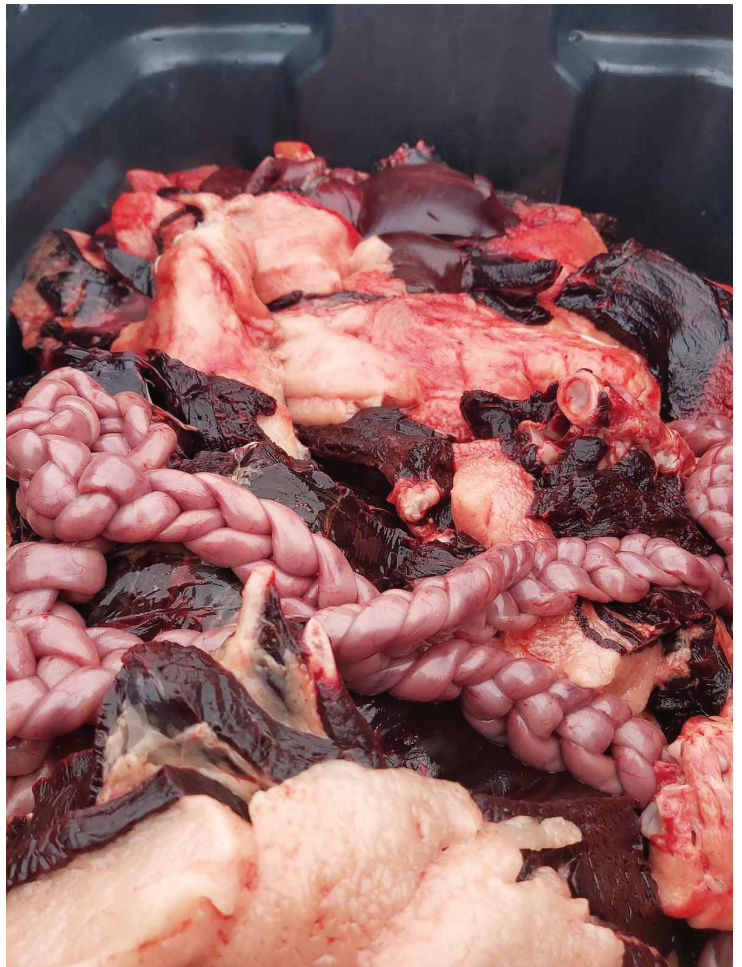
BOTTOM

The butchered meat and braided intestines from Akutag's first seal catch

food. In the months after I made the suggestion, I know that AGO staff would have liked to have shared all the details of the bureaucratic hurdles with me, but I maintained that it was not my burden to carry, so for me, all I had to do was sharpen my ulu.

Cutting up a seal is simultaneously an elevated and a mundane activity, performed on the shores all around the Arctic every day. It is a spiritual act that connects us viscerally to our ancestors, our environment, and to the animal itself. It is also as normal as picking up milk and eggs at the grocery store. Eating inussiutit that we harvested ourselves gives us great joy, satisfaction, health, groundedness, and self-determination; it is a combination of kinetic and tactile movement, spiritual accordance, and political assertiveness. Serving a full seal on the floor of Toronto's largest downtown art gallery would concurrently be a celebration of Inuit culture and an act of rebellion against the structural barriers that stigmatize our use of meat.

In Kalaallisut (West Greenlandic), we say "takanna" before a meal, in the same way the French say "bon appétit." It means "down there." This is in reference to the traditional way of preparing and eating food—on



the ground, or on a clean floor—and also reveres our sea goddess, who resides at the bottom of the ocean. Greenlanders rarely eat on the floor anymore, having taken on the colonial habit of using tables and chairs. Nunavummiut, however, regularly prepare and eat food on the floor. You can walk into any Nunavut building where Inuit are gathered, from offices to school rooms, hotel rooms to everyday kitchens, and find families crouched down, cutting up mattak, iqaluk, nikku, and quaq (whale skin, fish, dried meat, and frozen meat).

Sure enough, about a half year after the first utterance of the idea, a fat, gleaming silver-haired seal lay on the floor of Walker Court, hunted by Mathewsie Ashevak, Kenojuak's grandson. The court was packed with Torontonians of all backgrounds, some prominent artists along with many Inuit brandishing ulus and knives, excited to share the meat. Most attendees, including AGO staff who came to the occasion on their day off, some with their children, had never seen a seal, dead or alive, let alone partaken in eating one.

"I can't see what's happening! Everyone, sit down!" Rebecca Belmore, the empress of Indigenous art, cried out. "Rebecca Belmore said she can't see! Everyone, sit down!" I shouted, and hundreds of people fluttered to the floor as Kuzy, Mary Pitseolak, a couple other Inuit, and I slit open the seal, exposing the tight coils of intestines and the purple-brown slick of liver. We quickly disjointed the flippers, and the whole crowd cheered as we lifted each one in the air. Within a couple minutes, we had separated the body of the seal from its pelt and began cutting off slices of frozen meat and fat. We filled little bamboo bowls with morsels of meat, and the onlookers passed the vessels around the court until everyone was licking their fingers, their lips glistening with bright red blood. Contented sighs, delighted cries, and ongoing calls for more of the buttery, sweet-tasting meat to be cut reverberated around the room. We cut and cut until only the bones were left. We had eaten the whole animal.

As it turns out, after the event, the City

of Toronto sent the AGO a letter of thanks for the things they learned about Inuit cultural practices and how to become a more welcoming space.

AFTER YOU GIVE BIRTH and the baby is breathing and wondrously sucking on your breast and the placenta has come out and your flesh is safely tucked into little stitches and the pain has subsided and waves of love rock your entire being, you become incredibly hungry and thirsty. To think I was once given a large container of frigid river water, procured from under the ice and brought straight to my recovery room by a dear friend! The most immaculate taste travelled from the tip of my tongue to the bottom of my stomach, the cold reverberating through all my hot, exhausted muscles and healing me. I guzzled the entire container. The nurses looked the other way, as the hospital in Iqaluit did not at the time serve any food (or water) from the land.

My husband and I started having babies in the mid aughts, about six years after the establishment of Nunavut as Canada's newest territory. We were a part of the cohort of freshly educated anaanas and ataatas (mummies and daddies) that filled Nunavut's offices trying to tackle the still-unrealized task of establishing Inuit self-determination. The young moms among us quickly noticed a major gap in our ability to work: no daycare. We took over a former greasy-spoon restaurant and converted it into Tumikuluit Saipaaqivik, Iqaluit's first (and so far only) Inuktitut daycare. One fundamental program we established, along with the requirement to speak only our own language to the kids and within the space, was preparing and serving inussiutit on a daily basis to children and staff alike. We wanted the children to develop an early and foundational taste for our food—to make it a part of their normal routine to see their caregivers plucking birds, cutting up meat on the floor, and preparing intestines. We also wanted to provide local hunters with a reliable demand for inussiutit.

When I first presented the program details to a Government of Nunavut

daycare regulator, the proposal was immediately turned down, because there was no formal way of ensuring the safety of the meat—there is no authority with official credentials to inspect inussiutit. Instead, hunters use their own training, skills, and assessment criteria to deem their catch safe to eat. At the time, all food served at daycares had to be purchased from stores, where products were regulated at an institutional level. Over the course of a few months, however, the government representative was persuaded by our arguments that one cannot get any fresher, more carefully attended to, and cleaner food than game that is handed to the cook straight from the hunter. It is now permissible for all daycares in Iqaluit to serve inussiutit.

As you land at any airport in Nunavut, you are struck by how tiny each community is in comparison to the vastness of the land and sea surrounding it. The land and sea are full of food. Many people drink directly from rivers in Nunavut, with the exception of streams that go through town and mine sites. And yet 70 percent of Inuit preschoolers—children aged three to five—suffer from food insecurity, meaning they experience hunger in their daily lives. This is institutional poverty.

Currently, though hunting and harvesting have a lot of public reverence in Nunavut, at an institutional level, they are treated as a somewhat subsidized recreational activity. Some workplaces allow people to take harvesting or cultural leave from their day jobs. Otherwise, people use their precious weekends, evenings, annual leave, or leave without pay to go on the land and hunt; basically, a hunter leaves the monetary economy each time they go hunting. The considerable costs of buying or manufacturing equipment—guns, boats, motors, snowmobiles, qamutiit (sleds), clothing, and other tools—are footed by individual families.

Laisa Watsko from Grise Fiord, Joe Amarualik from Resolute Bay, Niore Iqalukjuaq from Arctic Bay, Eric Ootoova from Pond Inlet, and Nina Qillaq from Clyde River are a group of hunters and thinkers spearheading a push across

Qikiqtaaluk (Baffin Island) to establish full-time jobs for hunters through a program called Nauttiqsuqtiit (Inuit stewards). It's supported by funding from Inuit Impact and Benefit Agreements with the federal government. This program reaffirms that Inuit hunters know the land, water, and animals more intimately than any other environmental monitoring effort in the Arctic, and that they have the capacity to address food sovereignty in Inuit communities by harvesting full time.

Nauttiqsuqtiit are fully paid and outfitted to be on the land, maintain their equipment, and train the next generation of hunters. The program is successfully operational in Clyde River, Grise Fiord, Pond Inlet, and Resolute Bay. Qikiqtani Inuit Association, the Inuit organization that manages Nauttiqsuqtiit, is pushing to have the program exist in perpetuity in all Qikiqtani communities. Imagine growing up with the possibility of aspiring to become not just a nurse, a doctor, or an engineer but also a hunter.

Imagine, too, the day when a self-employed Inuk artist does not have to dig her heels in to make the magic of feeding a single seal to many hundreds of people at a Canadian gallery. Imagine when we have the capacity to feed our children our own food so that they all have enough to eat whenever they want to eat. We are making it happen. We are almost there.

Nearly twenty years have passed since we opened Tumikuluit Saipaaqivik. The first graduates of the daycare have finished high school and are achieving many of their adult firsts. Soon enough, they will be the freshly educated anaanas and ataatas filling the offices, dreaming and planning for their revolution. ❄️

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With thanks to the Gordon Foundation for supporting the work of writers from Canada's North.

LAAKKULUK WILLIAMSON is an award-winning filmmaker, performance artist, poet, actor, storyteller, and writer based in Iqaluit, Nunavut.

Equality

BY FARAH GHAFOR

My first time fishing, I flung the seizure
 back into the water after my terrible thread
 and needle wove through its silver cheek.
 I knew I would become a murderer
 the moment I hesitated, stunned by the aim
 of its serrated glimmer. Stranger, I should have

split you jaw to iridescent junction,
 reaped mercy. Were you, too,
 a child, your current parallel to mine?
 Or were you on your way home, finally,
 after all these years of enduring the cold alone?

Minute hand dammed, that hour
 echoes between my ears, and you, baffled, appeal
 to my ankles each time I slip into the cool silk
 of the lake. And when I return at the end
 of another unremarkable evening,

out of the kitchen sink your bright eyes cut—
 a body of two heavy halves.



Canada Grows a Hell of a Lot of Lentils. Why Won't We Eat Them?

It's time for the humble legume to cross the bridge from crop to cuisine

BY KHALIL AKHTAR

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ANA LUISA O. J.

FOR LENTIL GROWERS, 2016 was a heady time. Or, at least, as heady as it can get in the world of lentils. Normally, the humble, stodgy legume doesn't garner much attention, let alone celebration, at least not in Canada. But the high-fibre staple food of the hippie roommate was in the midst of a marketing push. The United Nations dubbed it the International Year of Pulses.

The UN does this every few years: they declare it the "Year" of an important food. Rice got the honour in 2004. In 2008, potatoes were celebrated for their bold conquest—only a few centuries ago, the spud escaped its Andean roots and became a global hit. In the 2010s, at the peak of kale salad and eating à la Gwyneth, the UN's picks took on the sheen of wellness: 2013, for instance, was quinoa. When pulses—the edible seeds of lentils, chickpeas, beans, and other legumes—got their turn in the spotlight, they were promoted for their nutritional value and environmental benefits.

Meanwhile, in Canada, the lentil harvest was peaking. In Saskatchewan, more land was being seeded than ever before. Exports were booming—India (the country that swallows half the world's supply) bought more than a billion dollars' worth of pulses from Canada in 2016.

Canada was well settled as the world's top lentil producer. From its infancy in the 1970s and '80s, the lentil industry has grown dramatically year after year. In 1973, production was virtually nil. By 2016, it was hard to overstate just how much of the global market was in the hands of the Saskatchewan farmer. More than 3 million tonnes of lentils were grown in Canada that year, accounting for nearly half of the total global output.

If there was a race to become the kingpin of the global lentil market, Canada had won it. A drought or infestation in Saskatchewan would be felt on the tables of Delhi, Karachi, and Dhaka. But, ironically, not so much at home.

Canadians, as a whole, are not a lentil-eating people. Yes, some of us eat dal several times a week. But others can't remember the last time they ate a lentil. How can it be that the country that grows the most lentils in the world eats so few?

The International Year of Pulses was as good a time as any to make a play for the average Canuck's dinner plate. The industry association, Pulse Canada, came up with a marketing campaign. "Take the Pulse Pledge," they said: eat pulses once a week for ten weeks to discover just how delicious and versatile the little things can be. There are iridescent black lentils used for making dal makhani. Yellow ones can be boiled with a ham bone to make something akin to split pea soup. There are tiny red lentils that cook in twenty minutes without having to be soaked. And the large, flat green ones, called Laird lentils, have become particularly popular among Prairie farmers.

Michael Smith became a pitchman. He was already known in lentil marketing circles, having hosted a globe-trotting web

series called *Lentil Hunter* for Saskatchewan Pulse Growers. The Prince Edward Island chef and Food Network regular appeared in media segments pitching fritters and dal to morning show hosts.

Smith's pitch was broad, and he delivered it with his characteristic practised enthusiasm. *Lentils are packed with fibre and micronutrients! They're easy on the wallet, easy to cook, and easy on the planet!* Best of all, Smith promised in his pitch, lentils taste great.

Needless to say, the effort didn't transform the Canadian diet. But it did get the word out. Lentils got another notable endorsement in 2019, when the newly revised Canada's Food Guide explicitly recommended eating more plant protein like lentils and beans.

A 2024 University of Saskatchewan report on consumer attitudes toward lentils cited survey data suggesting that plenty of Canadians (an estimated 6.4 million in 2018) want to eat less meat. In a survey by food policy professor Sylvain Charlebois, the majority of respondents had considered reducing their consumption. But only 32 percent were actually willing to do it in the near future. We tell ourselves we ought to be eating more beans and lentils, more plant protein, but in practice, our diets are ingrained in habit and culture, making them resistant to change.

It's a culinary oddity: we grow something consumed in massive quantities around the world but don't really consider it a staple of the mainstream Canadian diet despite decades of dominating global production. Lentils don't *read* as a particularly Canadian food. In and of itself, this isn't a problem. But it is a looming vulnerability.

The fate of Canada's lentil growers hangs on the whims of the South Asian market and the mood of foreign governments. Over the past decade, India has imposed on-again, off-again tariffs on Canadian lentil imports. Even when tariffs were lowered, the threat was always there. Saskatchewan lentil farmers plant their crops in spring, not knowing if there will be a market collapse come fall. In 2016, 5.5 million acres in Canada were devoted to lentil production, largely in the prairie province. By 2018, the number had dropped to under 4 million. The amount of seeded land has fluctuated every year since the dip, but it has never returned to the highs of 2016.

If we in Canada were eating more of our own supply, it would ease the pressure, says Tanya Der of Pulse Canada. She says finding new markets for Canadian lentils is an endless mission, and one of the biggest untapped markets is right here at home. Der adds that the growth will most likely happen in what she calls "value-added" products: lentil-based chips, crackers, energy bars, pasta.

Chef Smith's pulse taco didn't spur lentil love to new heights. But perhaps the moment is now. The lentil may still crack the

The fate of Canada's lentil growers hangs on the whims of the South Asian market and the mood of foreign governments.



patriotic grocery list amid all the “elbows up” posturing. In a time of renewed nationalism and “Buy Canadian” rhetoric, maybe the lentil has a chance to occupy a cultural space beside maple syrup or rye whisky.

The Vancouver-based chef and restaurateur Vikram Vij has been selling dal since the '90s, a time when he had to explain that lentils didn't have to play a supporting role for meat. “The French chefs would take lentils with rosemary and cream and then put a steak on top of it,” he says. “It was always a side dish.”

Now, he says, lentils are beginning to show up everywhere, from airport lounges to prepared food counters at the supermarket. “You go to supermarkets twenty years ago and you would not find a lentil salad. Now everyone has a lentil salad in their showcase.”

Think, too, of the now-ubiquitous plastic tubs of hummus at the supermarket (including a chocolate-flavoured one) that were “ethnic” oddities not even a generation ago. Now, you'd be hard pressed to find a potluck that *doesn't* feature, at the very least, a fridge-cold container of hummus alongside a plate of baby carrots.

For centuries, foreign foods have been bent to the whims of local tastes in countless ways. Consider sushi, once an

exclusively Japanese speciality; then a marker of urban elitism; now in every food court, supermarket, and airport cafe. Even pizza, now inescapable, was once unknown to even the most urbane Canadian. Now, we invent versions that would be unknown to any Italian.

We've been making local things out of foreign things for generations in Canada, a land where people have been arriving with their own culinary customs in tow for the past 400-odd years.

At my local grocer, lentils sit on a low shelf in an out-of-the-way aisle. For real variety, I skip the big-name supermarkets. The Middle Eastern and South Asian markets are where the shelves groan under the weight of dozens of types, each with its own character. Health food stores, too, offer a rainbow in wooden bins: bright orange, canary yellow, olive green, nearly black. Given enough time, masoor dal (spiked with a tadka of garlic, mustard seeds, and chilies) may become as Canadian a food as the butter tart. ✓

KHALIL AKHTAR is a CBC journalist and columnist. His forthcoming book, *How to Eat with Your Hands*, will be published by Goose Lane Editions.

Artichoke

BY RICHARD SANGER

Handsome knob, armadillo, hand grenade
of army green, armour-plated petals,
man enough to top a column
or stop a banister dead in its tracks,
you were never meant to open up and flower,
let alone explode and rejoice,
never scatter, amidst hosannas, your seed—
no, not in this barren world at least.
Here, your lot is to keep it in,
to remain tight-lipped and celibate,
nodding your bald pate wisely at the mere rumour
of pleasures you shall never taste—

the pleasures we have to drag out of you,
by teaching you to be tender, to share
with us your innermost feelings.
First, we apply boiling water,
then the full treatment:
one by one, I rip each petal
from your heart like a confession
I'll savour and discard, like a tongue
whose root I've torn and streaked,
as I tug and drag it out over my teeth.



Let Her Eat Cake: The Subversive Power of Women Feasting

*Women are told to tame their desires, stifle their appetites, and not take up space.
But, as women directors have shown, there's power in indulgence*

BY HEATHER O'NEILL

I WAS WATCHING Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog*. Rose, played by Kirsten Dunst, gets married at the beginning of the movie. She is travelling with her new husband to his ranch. She carries a box with her wedding cake in it. She stops to leave a piece with her son. Then it rides in the back of the car, untouched. She doesn't get a piece of it herself. She is too nervous and distraught by the presence of her twisted, oppressive brother-in-law to take a bite of anything.

Funnily enough, it was while watching Dunst in Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* that I began paying attention to the ways female directors present food in their

films. Marie Antoinette is sent to France as a petite fourteen-year-old girl. When she is stripped naked at the border, she is made to understand that she is a possession, a trinket for France to do with what it will. When two of the aristocratic women from court see Marie Antoinette for the first time, they describe her as looking like "a little piece of cake." She is a commodity, meant to be consumed.

Coppola brought her costume designer, Milena Canonero, a box of macarons to inspire the palette. In the scenes that detail Marie Antoinette's social ascendance and notorious decadence, there are always cakes and sweets around. She is always surrounded by her ladies-in-

waiting, their dresses making them look like layered cakes themselves, as they pop macarons in their mouths and drink champagne.

There is an inordinate amount of sweets in films directed by women. Even the chaotic world of erotic dancers in Janicza Bravo's *Zola* has its characters sucking delectable lollipops in the most perilous of situations. There is a fixation on treats that are forbidden by diets. It's as though the world, constructed of what women have been denied, looms all around them. The thing about cake is that it is almost impossible to eat tidily. You get whipped cream and icing all over your lips. There is something indecent about

it. It brings to mind the act of oral sex.

In the end, Marie Antoinette is scorned everywhere for her hedonism and rumoured sex life. (People even claimed she had been having sexual relations with her young son.) As though a woman having a really good time were evidence of sexual impropriety. She is convicted and beheaded, and the depth of her wickedness is summed up in the apocryphal statement that's followed her ever since: *Let them eat cake*.

ONCE, WHEN I was fifteen and had run away from my Montreal home, I found myself in the back of a police car. I had been picked up in New England and was being driven back to the Canadian border. The police officers were talking to each other. I was staring out the window, resenting my situation. I remember one of the officers suddenly looking in the rear-view mirror. "Do you want to stop for an ice cream?" he asked.

I was surprised. He was addressing me as though I was a child, which I was. But I did not think of myself as a child.

I was also very hungry. But I could not accept ice cream from these police officers. The idea of standing outside an ice cream shop eating ice cream with two police officers seemed too crazy to me. What in the world would we talk about? I couldn't imagine the scene being anything other than painfully awkward.

I also did not want to accept the ice cream on an ideological level. I was, effectively, in a prison. Eating ice cream implies a sort of camaraderie and festivity. The situation was anything but that. I refused to pretend that I wasn't a prisoner, that I was merely an unhappy girl in the back of a car in need of a small pleasure, as their own children might be.

Also, I did not eat ice cream. I couldn't remember the last time I had eaten ice cream. When I became an adolescent, I began to develop a disturbing relationship to food. I felt guilty about eating any of it. Food was directly related to home life. And my home life was violent. I didn't want anything to do with it.

I was so skinny back then. It passed

more or less unnoticed because of the times. You weren't just supposed to look thin in the '90s; you were supposed to look emaciated. You were supposed to look as though you had crawled out of a basement with your clothes ripped and your eyes smudged. We looked as though we had been murdered, like we were bodies floating in ponds. Those girls were everywhere in the movies. I was praised for starving myself.

IHAVE BEEN fascinated by Catherine Breillat's *Fat Girl* for years. *Fat Girl* is a disturbing portrait of two sisters on holiday: Anaïs, who is thirteen, and Elena, who is fifteen. Elena is conventionally pretty and thin. She weaponizes her physical attractiveness against Anaïs. Elena reminds Anaïs that she is overweight, that her eating is disgusting. Elena has sex in their shared bedroom, to Anaïs's great disturbance.

Anaïs is the one with inner beauty and a peculiar inner life. She sings a devastatingly pretty made-up lullaby about aching loneliness and boredom. Anaïs eats throughout the movie. She indulges in a banana split. The choice of the banana split is so childish, it reminds the audience that she is being forced to leave the realm of childhood, with its blissful lack of self-consciousness, behind. In childhood one can exist without knowing whether they are attracted to the opposite sex. Anaïs continues to eat candy like a child despite her new adolescence. She eats to exist. She eats to calm herself. She eats to reclaim her identity.

Her layers of fat are beautiful and sweet. She wants only to be told she is desirable for who she is—instead of making concessions, instead of putting herself on a sort of emotional diet.

In the end, as it is a Breillat film, both girls are subjected to violence by men. Violence comes regardless of whether one is thin or fat. They are both at the mercy of the vulnerability that comes with being in the body of a pubescent girl. It's their vulnerability that attracts the predators, not their beauty.

Or perhaps there is another moral to this story: that, no matter what your shape, you will become miserable in it

after you are scorched by the male gaze for the first time.

IHAD ALWAYS looked on turning eighteen as freedom. There would be no one to abuse me, no one to force me to do anything I didn't want to do. At eighteen, I'd have rights. Or, in any case, the police would no longer have the right to take me off the street and bring me back to live with my father.

In college, I was happy. I had always liked school and reading, and I was away from home! I got most of my clothes from the thrift store. I dressed up every day. I liked to look like a flower girl at the turn of the century or a male prostitute from the Edwardian era. I went out dancing in shabby little bars on Saint Laurent Boulevard. I sipped magic mushroom tea in smoky living rooms and recited monologues from Samuel Beckett plays. I had dozens of boyfriends.

My friends all worked in restaurants. They came home with leftover doughnuts. It was marvellous. I existed entirely on cake and pastries. There were doughnuts with cream for breakfast, brownies for lunch, and apple tarts for dinner. Every day was my unbirthday, according to the Mad Hatter calendar I was following.

MY FAVOURITE NEW wave film is from Czechoslovakia and was directed by Věra Chytilová. How to describe *Daisies*? Two young women, both named Marie, are on the cusp of adulthood. The Maries spend their days discussing absurdist philosophy in their ramshackle apartment or at the beach.

They are always ravenous. They are insatiable. They eat throughout the movie. They eat in bed and in the bathtub. They eat when they are walking. Each day they find an older man to take them out to dinner. They order massive amounts of food and cake. They drink wine as though it were water. When the meal is over, they walk the man to the train station and give him the slip through some childish antics.

Any man who falls for them is ridiculed, both for his pathetic attraction to their bodies and for his disregard for their

selves. They consume instead of being consumed.

The movie culminates with the girls encountering a banquet table laden with food. They eat fistfuls of cake. They dance on the furniture, stepping in plates and knocking over dishes. Whatever they can't consume, they destroy. The Maries' treatment of and attitude toward food was seen as the most transgressive aspect of this irreverent, iconoclastic film upon its release. In 1968, the film was banned in its home country because of all the waste.

WOMANHOOD WAS A terrible revelation for me. I accidentally became a young mother. I had always been poor, but having a baby forced me to go from a happy bohemian penury to experiencing the true difficulties of poverty. It was as though I had been eating the candy cabin in "Hansel and Gretel" only to have the witch come out furious. And the witch whose art had been pilfered was me.

I struggled to put food on the table. I no longer ate sweets for breakfast, sweets for lunch, sweets for dinner. My daughter and I ate at small food bank restaurants. I would pay something like three dollars for dinner, and my child would eat for free. We sat at our own little table. Sometimes another single mother with her child would join us.

I was enormously sad that I had to make such a sacrifice, that sacrifice was what motherhood entailed. As women, we give up so much, as though we were ourselves made up of cake that we cut into pieces and hand out to hungry mouths. Soon, it can feel like there is nothing left of yourself. But I was working toward something spiritually nourishing: a career, a place in the world. All so I could get out of poverty. All so I might one day have my own cake again.

I WENT TO SEE Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* even though I'd always had mixed feelings about Louisa May Alcott's novel. I'd always found those girls to be such goody-two-shoes who constantly moralized and were overly concerned with domesticity and their father's approval. I was attracted to the

character of Jo, who swears never to marry so she can devote her life to being a writer. But, by the end of the novel, even she ends up marrying a pompous older mansplainer.

The sister who grated on my nerves the most was Beth. She is so obsessed with the poor and with doing good that it seems weirdly pathological. I thought the sisters should all tell Beth to snap out of it. She was anorexic, in a way. She was depriving herself of time, of joy, of excess, of disobedience, of rebellion. She embodied a form of femininity as self-destruction and renunciation. She brings food to an ailing poor family and contracts scarlet fever. She wants to be so selfless and so desires to nourish others that it leads to her death.

In the movie, Beth still grated. But Gerwig makes it clear that Jo's marriage in the book was simply there at the insistence of Alcott's publisher. In the last scene, Jo is carrying a cake across the lawn of her house. The scene is intercut with images of her book being manufactured. She stayed true to her dreams, unlike her sisters, each of whom had an artistic dream that went unrealized. Jo gets to have her cake and eat it too.

LULU WANG'S *The Farewell* is centered around eating with family. Billi, who immigrated to New York when she was a child, goes back to China to visit her grandmother, who has stage-four lung cancer. The gathered family sits around enormous tables throughout the film, in kitchens and restaurants and banquet halls. They enjoy a happy meal surrounding her grandfather's grave, passing treats to one another. Billi is exposed to her family's complicated rituals through communal eating.

I never liked Christmas dinners at home growing up. They were always the scene of great discord and arguments. So, after my father passed away, I more or less gave up on them. My daughter has always been so much more social than me. One year, she announced that she had invited people over for Christmas dinner. Strays, she called them. Anyone she knew who was separated from their family. Anyone she knew who didn't

celebrate Christmas.

We ate crowded around my living room table, with mismatched plates and wine in glasses with decals of tigers on them. And everyone laughing. And nobody fighting. And nobody feeling imprisoned, as though they were there because of some obligation, feeling that they were in the wrong house with the wrong people. Everyone brought some sort of dessert. Everyone must have wondered what I would like them to bring, and I was delighted that they had all selected cake. They knew about my reverence for cake and wanted to please me. How sweet! There were cakes all over the table. They were clustered like a fairy tale village, covered in pink roses and blue ribbons.

And I thought, This is what a family dinner feels like. It's the feeling of being full.

AS A CHILD, I felt as though I did not deserve sweets. The world and everything it had to offer was not mine for the taking. I did not deserve a place at the table of life. Women are always told to tame their desires, to stifle their appetites, to not look gluttonous, to not take up space. We are to make sure our children are fed but to abstain ourselves. We are put on spiritual diets from the age we become conscious that society has deemed us women.

Like Gerwig's *Little Women*, I also see a book as a magnificent, well-earned cake. My novel, *When We Lost Our Heads*, is filled with women stuffing their mouths with cake. They are a group of women in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Montreal who, despite all the Victorian restraints put upon them, have decided to be decadent and lead lives filled with excesses of one kind or another. They take heaping seconds even when they are not offered. Similar to Coppola's Marie Antoinette, they announce with darkened lips, *Let us eat cake.* ☺

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HEATHER O'NEILL is an award-winning novelist and essayist. She lives in Montreal.

Food

BY VINCENT COLISTRO

The *amuse-bouche* was water chestnuts and duck air.
The sous-chefs came out of the closet
for us, and their courage was as palatable

as a raspberry. An aniseed was broken open
in the other room, and our wine underwent a small
change (that being its forty-second

birthday and all). We applauded the wine for this,
and, much to our surprise, our hands clapped up a micro-dust
that smelt of frozen celery and germs. A decoy

course was served, throwing us for a loop.
It was plated in a collapsible polyethylene house and diverted
our attention just long enough for the ether to kick in.

After a few hours laughing and sharing secrets,
the appetizer arrived. It was dandelion greens with
a bear-tooth enamel vinaigrette, fried giblets and giblet foam,

and two roasted hazelnuts. The horniness of the dishwashing staff
was beginning to move into the dining area, so the host wheeled
a pale eunuch through the dining room to equalize

the atmosphere. The post-appetizer was a listening course.
Canary whistles and horse hooves clacking on a paved road. It was meant
to evoke jam and peanut butter, but my partner and I agreed

it was not sweet enough. For the main course, we were given
each a Swahili name and taught a kind of rural Nyanzan dialect, the better
to enjoy the goat meat, which was prepared simply, in a car fire.

Dessert was an edible concept. A kind of white chocolate arithmetic
that was more befuddling the more you understood it. It was served with an
uroboros-shaped tile wafer, which repeatedly consumed and created itself.

On the cab ride home, we passed a theatre playing old movies,
and my partner remarked, "It's a shame that we weren't given popcorn."
And indeed it was a shame. It was a shame that the restaurant was real,
and not some old, old movie.



Why Are We So Obsessed with Pumpkin Spice?

The craze for the cozy fall flavour doesn't seem to be going away any time soon

BY CATHERINE FRANSSEN AND VANESSA HRVATIN
ILLUSTRATION BY IRMA KNIIVILA

SINCE STARBUCKS LAUNCHED its pumpkin spice latte, in 2003, love it or hate it, the flavour has become synonymous with fall. No longer limited to coffee or pie, pumpkin spice can now be found in a long list of products that includes Pringles, hummus, sausages, and cheese—and the craze doesn't seem to be going away any time soon. We asked Catherine Fransen, a neuroscientist who works at the Science Museum of Virginia, to explain the science behind our obsession with the cozy fall flavour.

There have been criticisms over calling it pumpkin spice flavour because, often, it doesn't contain

any actual pumpkin. So what is it and where did it come from?

Pumpkin spice is a blend of cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, ginger, and allspice that has actually been around for over a century. When McCormick & Company first sold a version of these spices together, in the 1930s, the idea was that you'd put them in pumpkin pie or other fall baked goods.

Around the advent of the pumpkin spice latte, there were significant developments in food technology that allowed chemists to conjure up more complex flavours that were shelf stable and could be added to a variety of new products, which boded well for pumpkin spice.

Why did the obsession with pumpkin spice really take off?

Drinking a pumpkin spice latte is a multisensory experience, involving our sense of touch, when we hold the warm cup in our hands, and of smell and taste, when we take a sip. A lot of people associate taste with the tongue, but our taste buds are only responsible for between 5 and 25 percent of the flavour we experience. The rest comes from our olfactory system, or sense of smell. Whenever something enters our mouths, smell comes up through the back part of our noses and combines with the taste receptors to create a combined flavour sensation.

Because smell is the only one of our senses directly tied to our limbic system—the part of the brain responsible for emotions and memories—scents can trigger feelings of nostalgia. MRI studies have shown that scents trigger the imagination, and pumpkin spice, specifically, can make us think of cozy fall things: feasting at Thanksgiving, spending time with family, or celebrating Halloween. If you associate happy memories with those things, you're triggering your brain's positive neurotransmitters, such as dopamine and serotonin—both of which are closely associated with feelings of pleasure, like contentedness, satisfaction, and comfort.

The second component of the success of pumpkin spice is that lattes and a lot of baked goods that contain the flavour are loaded with sugar and fat, which the brain responds to by releasing even more dopamine.

It's these two things—the immediate reward that comes from the sugar and the prolonged anticipation of reward that comes from the associated nostalgia—that make pumpkin spice, scientifically, a nearly perfect flavour.

Pumpkin spice returns every year without fail. Do you think it's here to stay?

The pumpkin spice movement is one of the most phenomenal pieces of neuromarketing that we've had in the past few decades. Fall was ripe to have something associated with it the way that other seasons and major holidays do, and pumpkin spice filled that gap. A pumpkin is a really marketable object: it's colourful and has all of these strong visual triggers that help people evoke the things they love about fall. And, of course, the sugary sensation triggers that warm and cozy feeling people keep coming back for. ☞

A version of this story was published in 2022.

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VANESSA HRVATIN is a science journalist.

Honey Crisp

BY MOLLY PEACOCK

Hello wizenface, hello apple,
understudy in the fridge
since March (it's September).
Hello wrinkly red cheeks,
I'll bet you're almost a year old,
born last autumn,
kept in the fruit storage built
half-underground on the farm,
then, in the snow, sold to me.
Hello my honey crisp (well,
my honey, no longer crisp...)
are you asking why you
haven't been eaten by now?

Because that man hewed to his routines:
an apple for lunch every day,
the same red punctuation.
You were earmarked for the date
he slipped from my arms & we both
slid to the floor, red angel, are you
listening? 911, hospital, hospice,
and ten days later (you were
about six months old then),
he died and was carried
to a cold shelf.

Hello smiley stem, hello days
moving you from spot to spot.
Hello week where I forgot
and left you at the back and
went about my new life.
Greetings new groceries!
Their jumble causes a re-
arrangement of your bin,
so I have to pick you up
—would you rather
have been eaten and
lived on as energy?
Not yet, not yet, my pomme.
Hello soft wrinkled
face in my palms.

Are Hawkins Cheezies the Snack Food of Canadian Sovereignty?

A salty ode to the cheddar-dusted beacon of “Buy Canadian”

BY SIMON THIBAUT

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN MORGAN

FUCK CHEETOS.

Go ahead, extend your orange-dusted middle finger at me. I have no interest in snacks that require anthropomorphic characters like Chester Cheetah to convince me to buy the product they shill. When all of us are wondering and worrying about buying Canuck-produced goods, I will happily forgo your American snack food, soda pop, sports drink, and bottled water conglomerate. I find the Cheetofication of foodstuffs—covering foods in Cheetos dust, like copper-dusted taco shells and flamin’ hot whatchamacallits or even, God help us, Cheetos-flavoured lip balm—to be some of the laziest forms of product development. If your product needs development, then maybe it isn’t as good as you think it is. I don’t need my food choices to be attention seekers. I am quite happy with my bag of Hawkins Cheezies. That’s Cheezies with a “zed,” not an “es,” and most certainly not a “zee.”

I’ve been writing about food for nearly twenty years now, and I am just as happy to write about donair culture in Halifax as I am to write about the lives of farmers. At home, I eat based on what’s in season, bake with whole-grain flours, and can talk about apple varieties for hours. But I am also just as likely as you to be tired on a Thursday evening, so out come the boxed mac and cheese and frozen peas, and don’t even think about sneaking one of my fries without asking. And nearly every time I go shopping, at least one bag of Hawkins makes its way into my cart. The metric by which I measure the value of Hawkins is multi-latitudinal. It is of the past and de rigueur, retro yet now in both flavour and design: quietly assured yet bold. And unlike Cheetos, it has not become synonymous with the skin tone of a certain world leader.

Canadians have had the luxury of Hawkins being a part of our lives for over seventy-five years. It would be easy to wax nostalgic about Hawkins Cheezies, but nostalgia is a cheap and ineffective flavour booster. The recent demise of the Cherry Blossom—the obnoxiously oozy cherry-filled chocolate candy your



baby boomer relatives liked—proves that sweet childhood memories do not mean actual deliciousness. Hawkins, however, still pleases.

It's important to consider Hawkins Cheezies as a historic and cultural entity. Yes, we Canadians view it as being one of us, but like Kraft Dinner, the truth is a bit more complicated. The TL;DR version is that around 1940, Ohio farmer Jim Marker figured out a way to extrude corn into sticks to feed to his cattle. Chicago confectioner W.T. Hawkins heard about this process and thought of the snacking possibilities: frying them, seasoning

of things, with a large one viewed as a rarity. When we buy Hawkins, we know that multiple large Cheezies are nearly guaranteed in each bag. We rely on that. When it comes to Canadian snack foods, we don't hope for blind luck or corporate benevolence; we expect textural variability as a given.

On the production side, very little has changed with Hawkins Cheezies since its inception. The retail size of the 210-gram bag is a general staple, as is the 420-gram Big Boy (which contains three separate bags), while many of us seek out the various snack packs

posted just over forty-five times on their account. And they don't advertise much themselves: their fans do it for them. Quick searches on Instagram yield all forms of Hawkins-related art and artifacts, many of them for sale: metal lapel pins, embroidered renderings of the product, tufted rugs, and homemade handbags using the same colours and stripes. Even I own Hawkins-related art: a beautifully rendered painting by Kim Floyd, a Halifax-based artist who did a series of paintings featuring Canadian foodstuffs.

The legacy of Cheezies extends to all forms of media. Comedian Brent Butt gave the signature bags high visibility on his TV show, *Corner Gas*. CBC Radio's *The Debaters* recently devoted an entire segment of the show to it, titled "Hawkins Cheezies are the king of the chip aisle." During the segment, pro-Hawkins debater Deborah Kimmet described how a tech guy had cleaned her computer and stated that they found "orange fuzz" in her computer, like she had been eating Cheetos. Kimmet responded emphatically and proudly, "No, sir, I was eating Hawkins Cheezies." The repair person then bowed to her and said, "I forgive you."

A recent *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* skit extolling the virtues of buying Canadian had Mark Critch enthusiastically rip a bag of Cheetos Puffs from Chris Wilson's grocery cart, vigorously yelling, "HAWKINS! War is no time for soft Cheezies!" Over in the food media instaphere, lovable food science nerd J. Kenji López-Alt was recently gifted a Hawkins bag by his production manager, where he proclaimed that "if a Cheeto is like Wonder Bread, then these are like a baguette." Amen to that.

When I reach down to grab my bag of Hawkins from that bottom shelf, I occasionally catch the eye of other shoppers. There is a knowing glance, a nod, a tip of the hat. We know what's up. We know what's good. And we do silently judge you for choosing another corn-based cheese snack. ☺

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SIMON THIBAUT is a Halifax-based journalist, food writer, and editor.

With the exception of the change from hydrogenated vegetable oil to a trade-secret trans fat-free frying medium, the flavour has never strayed. I don't want or need a ranch Hawkins. Or any other kind.

them with cheddar powder. (Cheetos inventor and Fritos owner Charles Elmer Doolin would not come out with his own extruded corn snack until 1948.) In 1949, Hawkins sent Marker to Tweed, Ontario, to run a Canadian branch of his company. The Tweed factory burned down in 1956, but Cheezies production would begin again in the nearby town of Belleville, where the company has been based ever since. Today, the company is still family owned and operated, and employees at the plant don't work on Friday afternoons or weekends.

Each bag that comes out of that plant in Belleville contains multitudes of shapes and sizes: pea-sized nubbins, twigs as thick as your thumb, and every size in between. What that means is that the Hawkins Cheezies is a delivery system of variable textural and flavour intensities. The corn snacks are still made using the same design that Marker created. This high degree of variability means that once they are fried and seasoned, the final product can vary subtly or grossly in terms of crunch and cheese saturation. There is no standard size; its platonic ideal is as individual as its eaters. Cheetos tend to stay on the skinnier side

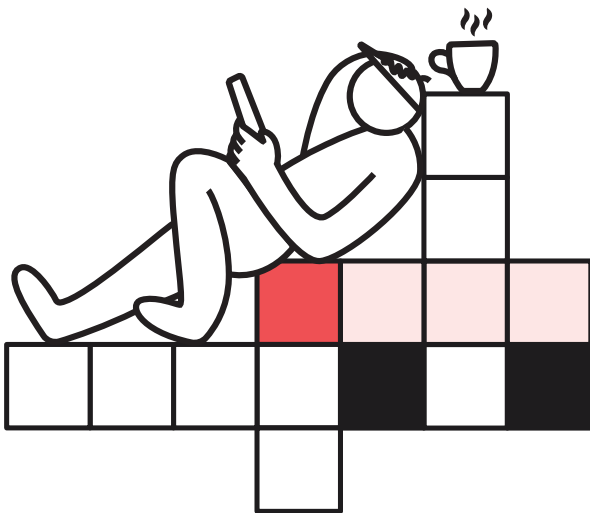
at Halloween. The packaging has been consistent for at least fifty years, with its easily spotted yet low-key red and white vertical stripes, a blue and white logo, and an orange cellophane window giving us a peek within. With the exception of the change from hydrogenated vegetable oil to a trade-secret trans fat-free frying medium, the flavour has never strayed. I don't want or need a ranch Hawkins. Or any other kind.

This low-key *modus operandi* extends all the way to the grocery store. Unlike larger brands that pay-to-play in large-scale grocery store chains to obtain maximum eye-level shelf placement, Hawkins is often found on the bottom or top shelves. But Hawkins doesn't need to pay-to-play. In true Canadian fashion, they don't attempt to curry favour or attention toward themselves. They are the embodiment of "no need to play an ace" when you know you've already won the game.

In a time when social media is viewed as a *de facto* promotional tool, Hawkins plays things cool. The website was static for nearly twenty years, and they created an Instagram account only in June 2024. As of this writing, they have

THE WALRUS

You can't ignore the news



— but you can take
a break from it.

Play The Walrus Games.
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THE WALRUS GAMES