



Contemporary Family Trends

Rediscovering the Family Meal

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Ce rapport est disponible en français*

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The Vanier Institute of the Family was established in 1965 under the patronage of Their Excellencies Governor General Georges P. Vanier and Madame Pauline Vanier. It is a national voluntary organization dedicated to promoting the well-being of Canada's families through research, publications, public education and advocacy. The Institute regularly works with businesses, legislators, policy-makers and program specialists, researchers, educators, family service professionals, the media and members of the general public.

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Rediscovering the Family Meal

by Bernard Roy, Nurse, PhD; Judith Petitpas, BSc

FOREWORD

It's a few days before Christmas, and my partner and I are busy preparing some traditional meat pies. The rest of the year, I'm usually the one who cooks. But Christmas is just around the corner and I'm delighted to see Marina, who generally doesn't feel at home in the kitchen, taking charge of the stove. Today, she seems perfectly in control. She is clearly caught up in the Christmas spirit and is looking forward to seeing all her family. Marina has decided she wants to recreate a traditional family recipe from Natashquan, a small village on the North Shore of the St. Lawrence River. There's a big smile on her face and her happiness is palpable. Our little house fills with mouth-watering aromas that evoke childhood memories in Marie-Christine, Marina's eldest daughter. Her eyes sparkle as she asks her mother if she can make galettes à trou (cookies with a hole in the middle), just like when she was a girl growing up in Natashquan. Our happy little three-year-old daughter joins in. She sifts the flour through her hands, announcing in a serious tone that she is making us a yummy cake. When the pies are done, Marina sends a few to her younger sister in Longueuil, who immediately serves them up to her family. That same night, we get a phone call from her. Her voice full of excitement, Marina's sister explains how she savoured every mouthful. "They were just like the ones Mom used to make! The smell and taste of Marina's meat pies brought back all kinds of wonderful childhood memories!"

BernardRoy

Food and family are closely tied. And nowhere is this link more evident than in the family meal—for many, an indelible imprint on the fabric of our lives. With the foods we eat as children, we are clearly not simply feeding the body in the purely nutritional sense. Food we share as a family has an emotional connection that can evoke memories, both bad and good. It is also a primary experience of a mother’s love for her child. “The smell of hot chocolate, a cake baking in the oven, the fresh scent of an orange, the comforting aroma of tea. Meals that are like mother’s hugs and watchful eye.”¹ Food and family are expressions of social ties.

Food memories consist of both tastes and aromas that are within memory’s reach. Matty Chiva writes that food memories recall the atmosphere surrounding the moment the meal was eaten, memories that can evoke feelings of well-being, friendship, and even love. According to Chiva, “Beyond, or because of, early learning, the memory of childhood foods is deeply connected with what makes us unique—and capable, at the same time, of understanding the experience of others, an experience that is both different and yet similar.”²

This article will explore the concept of “family meal,” where food meets family. Too often, in all the talk about “health” and “nutrition,” the act of eating is reduced to its most basic expression—an act serving purely to feed the biological body. In this article we will challenge this narrow perspective by demonstrating the importance of the symbolic, emotional, and cultural aspects of food.

To achieve this goal, we will have to address several questions: How do we define “family?” How do we define “meal?” How do we define the “act of eating?” These are all questions with no fast and easy answer. We will begin with a few statistics on children’s health from a nutritional perspective. The statistics are taken in large part from studies that have drawn links between the nutritional health of children and whether or not they eat their meals as a family. They also reveal that the health community believes that the role of the family when it comes to meals is primarily one of teaching good food habits, namely those set out in Canada’s Food Guide (CFG).

¹ Claudie Danziger (1992) “Editorial” in Claudie Danziger (Ed.). *Nourriture d’enfance. Souvenirs aigres-doux*. Paris: Autrement, Coll. Mutations/Mangeurs No. 129: 12 [our translation].

² Matty Chiva (1992) “Le goût: un apprentissage” in Claudie Danziger (Ed.). *Nourriture d’enfance. Souvenirs aigres-doux*. Paris: Autrement, Coll. Mutations/Mangeurs No. 129: 167 [our translation].

Secondly, we will attempt to show that the act of eating is a highly complex act, one that underpins the very foundations of humanity, values, human relations and feelings, and the ways we interact. By exploring how food tastes develop within the family, we will show that the concept of “eating habits” so prevalent in the message from the health community is like an “empty calorie”: poor in content and, when consumed in excessive quantities, likely to cause undesirable side effects.

The remainder of the article will be based on the findings of a 2005 investigation into the act of eating conducted on women from Northern communities (nordicity).³ These findings reveal that, while women in Northern regions have assimilated knowledge about healthy eating fairly well, continued poor eating habits are often linked to powerful family imprints in which the notion of pleasure plays an important role. We will put forth the hypothesis that it is unwise to dissociate family mealtime from pleasure, an element central to family life and health.

In our conclusion, we will add our voices to those of other researchers who support the inclusion of the notion of pleasure into the message on health and nutrition being addressed to families, and specifically to women, who are central figures in the family meal.

³ The word "nordicity" was invented in 1965 by geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin. It refers to the perceived, actual, experienced, and even imaginary state of the cold zone within the boreal hemisphere.

A FEW STATISTICS

The worldwide success of the American TV reality show *The Biggest Loser* is a troubling indication that more and more Westerners are afflicted with food-related health problems. Obesity, a problem that is undeniably linked to diet, is on the rise in many Western countries, including the U.S., the U.K., Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, New Zealand, and Finland.⁴ Canada is certainly not immune to this phenomenon, which the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared a global epidemic.

Indeed, in Canada, obesity prevalence rates have more than doubled in the past two decades. In Quebec, obesity also appears to be on the rise among persons over the age of 20. In 2004, in an effort to stem this problem, the WHO adopted its *Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity, and Health*. It called on all interested parties to act on a global, regional, and local level to reduce the prevalence of chronic diseases, notably obesity. The WHO targeted two primary problem areas—poor diet and lack of physical activity.

A survey by the *Institut de la statistique du Québec* (ISQ) found that up to 50% of premature deaths are linked to diet.⁵ The health community, concerned by the rapid increase in obesity rates closely linked to poor eating habits, came to the conclusion that families could play a key role in implementing prevention strategies.

Consequently, research has been conducted to try to correlate healthy eating habits with family meals by showing that meals eaten as a family are more complete and nutritious for children than meals eaten alone or in restaurants. In a study involving 534 ten-year-old boys and girls, *Université de Montréal* nutrition researcher Marie Marquis established a link between eating in one's bedroom or in front of a TV or computer and the quantity of sweet, fatty, and low-fibre foods consumed.⁶

⁴ Association pour la santé publique du Québec (AS PQ) (2003) *Les problèmes reliés au poids au Québec: un appel à la mobilisation*, Groupe de travail provincial sur la problématique du poids (GTPPP).

⁵ Institut de la statistique du Québec (ISQ) (2005) *Enquête de nutrition auprès des enfants québécois de 4 ans*. Québec: Bibliothèque nationale du Québec: 134–135.

⁶ Daniel Baril (2007) "Manger dans sa chambre est un facteur d'embonpoint!" *Forum*, <http://nouvelles.umontreal.ca/content/view/309/279/> (consulted December 15, 2007).

Gradual disappearance of the family meal

A number of research studies have shown that in North America, the family meal is an increasingly rare event. The same trend has been noted in Europe, where it is also a subject of research. Researchers have correlated the gradual disappearance of the family meal with time-pressed parents and the growing independence of young people, who are spending more and more time on social, academic, and community activities or at work. In Quebec, more and more young people are eating out or cooking their own meals.⁷

The findings by ISQ are similar to those the *Innocenti Research Center*⁸ revealed for Canada in a survey it released for UNICEF in 2007. The survey sought to quantify the well-being of children living in so-called rich countries. Over twenty countries, including Canada, were evaluated based on the correlation between a number of variables such as diet, family, social relations, and physical and mental health. While on the whole Canada had relatively positive results, in certain areas, the findings were less than stellar.

For instance, when asked “How often do your parents sit down to eat the main meal of the day with you?” 72% of Canadian fifteen-year-olds answered “several times a week.” This ranks Canada 18th, behind Ireland (77%), Hungary (75%), and the Czech Republic (73%). Topping the list were Italy (93.8%), France (90.4%), and Switzerland (89.9%). Another variable indicated that fewer than 50% of Canadian teens say they talk with their parents on a regular basis, placing Canada at the bottom of the ranking along with Germany and Iceland. These results suggest that Canada is one of the developed countries with the lowest rates of communication between young people and their parents.

IS THERE CAUSE FOR ALARM?

While worrisome, these findings must be qualified. Researchers Story and Neumark-Sztainer believe that to fully understand the modern dynamics associated with the family meal, we must take into consideration the entire social infrastructure, including the workplace and sports and youth organizations. Modern society is undergoing a sea change and the family unit is not immune. While in rural areas the traditional family is still strong, this is not the case in urban

⁷ Simona Stan (2004) “Comportements alimentaires” in ISQ (2004) *Enquête sociale et de santé auprès des enfants et des adolescents québécois. Volet nutrition*. Québec: Bibliothèque nationale du Québec: 109.

⁸ The data for these research studies was compiled in 1999 and 2000 respectively.

areas, where it comes in many shapes and sizes: traditional, extended, single-parent, same-sex parent, multicultural, blended, and with one or many children. In today's society, the time available to parents for family life has been considerably slashed. It is not unusual to see families where both parents work 35 hours a week or more to meet the financial needs of the family unit. Childcare is no longer purely a family prerogative. Childcare centres themselves take many forms and have an undeniable influence on children's education and how their food tastes and their attitudes towards eating are formed. Many individuals living in urban centres have no family, in the strict sense of the word. These city dwellers turn to other places to forge social ties that can offer them a feeling of belonging and familiarity.

The challenge for modern society is to find ways to support families so they have the flexibility and time they need to spend time together.⁹ It is possible that research conducted within a less rigid framework and relying on ethnographic and qualitative approaches can play down the alarmist tone of the above findings. The work of French sociologists Claude Fischler and Jean-Claude Kaufmann, whom we refer to regularly in this article, clearly illustrate what we mean by this. These researchers got involved at a grassroots level, taking into account the actual and perceived realities of the social actors in their everyday lives. In short, they were not content simply to conduct their research using only the categories proposed by current theory. Rather they put their ears to the ground, listened to what people had to say, and developed their own bold, new theories.

The French example is compelling. A survey conducted by the firm *Sofres* for *TopFamille*¹⁰ magazine and *Observatoire Cidil des Habitudes Alimentaires* (OCHA¹¹) found that, contrary to the alarmist and caricaturized rumour that French children and teens live on chips, pizza, pop, and sweets consumed in front of their televisions, in actual fact, the three daily meals—notably dinner—are still the cornerstone of family togetherness.¹² For the average French parent, it seems that the family meal is still a special time for passing on knowledge and values, and one

⁹ Mary Story and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer (2005) "A Perspective on Family Meals. Do they Matter?" *Nutrition Today*, Vol. 40, No. 6: 261–266.

¹⁰ *TopFamille Magazine* is a French monthly that was published from 2000 to 2007. It specifically targeted women between the ages of 25 and 45 with children under 16.

¹¹ Cidil: Centre Interprofessionnel de Documentation et d'Information Laitières (<http://www.lemangeur-ocha.com>).

¹² "À table! Des réponses surprenantes sur nos repas familiaux" Excerpt from *TopFamille* No. 29, November 2002 (<http://sts.anu.edu.au/bouilly/laCafeteria/ATable.pdf>).

where they teach their children “good table manners.” These findings led the editors of *TopFamille* magazine to write that “good manners are here to stay in the land of gastronomy, and TV dinners are far from invading our homes.”¹³

Another study conducted by Claude Fischler on 6,000 French youngsters aged 10 and 11 offers insight into the world of children and how they conceptualize meals: “a moment when the whole family comes together,” “the time of the day when the whole family gets together,” “a gathering where we can talk, have fun, and eat.”¹⁴ This research goes a long way toward playing down certain perceptions of the impact of modern life on the family meal.

The key message these studies convey is that it is essential to find ways to perceive changes and movements rather than seeking to understand the institution of the family meal using rigid measurement tools.

The French are often cited as having an attitude towards food very different from North Americans. While this statement is true, it should be qualified. For example, Canada’s English and French speakers obviously come from different cultural backgrounds. And while cultural origin is not necessarily an indicator of current attitudes toward food, it clearly has an impact on the cultural intermingling of the early 21st century, both among English and French speakers. In their volume entitled “*Manger*” published in 2008, Claude Fischler and Estelle Masson show very clearly that prevailing cultural perceptions in different countries engender food behaviours that have a significant impact on nutrition. Among other things, these researchers found that when the French talk about food, they often refer to its quality, its taste, its region, its source. When it comes to the act of eating, the French focus on origin, authenticity, and pleasure. For Americans, it is another story altogether. When they talk about their relationship to food, Americans tend to focus on the individuals’ responsibility for their own well-being and health. The American discourse is tinged with guilt if the “right choices” are not made. The researchers also found that Americans tend to think more in terms of nutrients than

¹³ “À table! Des réponses surprenantes sur nos repas familiaux” Excerpt from *TopFamille* No. 29, November 2002 (<http://sts.anu.edu.au/bouilly/laCafeteria/ATable.pdf>): 3 [our translation].

¹⁴ Claude Fischler (1996) “Le repas familial vu par les 10-11 ans.” *Les Cahiers de l’OCHA* No. 6, Paris.

foods.¹⁵ This leads us to believe that American culture with regard to food has been deeply affected in recent decades by the nutritional and scientific discourse on food.

MAKING THE FAMILY PART OF THE SOLUTION

Many nutrition specialists agree that the family is central to the prevention and resolution of a number of eating problems, and that the family meal is therefore a territory that must be won back to help instil nutrition teachings based on Canada's Food Guide (CFG). The CFG states that the single most important condition for effectively treating obesity, especially among youths, is "strong motivation on the part of the child and his or her family, and the guidance of his or her parents."¹⁶

It is increasingly suggested that to effectively change children's eating habits, health and nutrition authorities must target parents, the pillars of the family. To help parents manage and organize their family meals, nutrition specialists have developed a series of recommendations. For instance, ISQ proposes that nutrition interventions focus on the social aspect of meals. It also recommends that parents set an example by trying new foods, allowing sufficient time for eating, sitting down to eat at roughly the same time every day, and avoiding conflicts during meals."¹⁷

CANADA'S FOOD GUIDE (CFG): OFFERING SOLUTIONS FOR FAMILIES

In the view of public health authorities, the family is where inroads must be made, and the CFG is an ideal tool for teaching how to eat healthily.

Canada's Food Guide dates back to 1942, but it has undergone many transformations since then. It was originally known as *Canada's Official Food Rules* (first version of the CFG in 1942), then as *Canada's Food Rules* (1944 and 1949), *Canada's Food Guide* (1961, 1977, and 1982), *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating* (in 1992), and *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide* (in 2007).

¹⁵ Claude Fischler & Estelle Masson (2008) *Manger. Français, Européens et Américains face à l'alimentation*. Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob.

¹⁶ J.P. Sandron (Ed.) (1999). *L'obésité chez l'enfant*. Centre de documentation et d'information de la raffinerie Tirelemontoise. <http://obesity.chair.ulaval.ca/pdf/obesite-enfant.pdf> (consulted on December 20, 2007).

¹⁷ ISQ (2005), op. cit.: 133.

Despite the many transformations, the primary goal of the CFG has remained the same: to guide food selection and promote the nutritional health of Canadians. No one is questioning the value of the CFG. However, it is pertinent to question whether this nutrition education tool, by merely addressing people's ability to learn, can play a significant role in transforming Canadians' food tastes and eating habits.

In 1865, Louis Figuier (a physician, writer, and popular scientist), enlightened by the triumphant science of the 19th century, wrote that "food shall provide the fuel just as coal heats the firebox."¹⁸ His analogy between the human body and the steam engine was a reference to the laws of thermodynamics discovered by Carnot in 1824. These were the foundations for the development of the knowledge and theories behind the counting of calories. Food science continued to advance in the decades that followed. But as sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann points out, science was then to make a mistake, that of believing that "if an idea is good and has been meticulously proven through experiment, then it must have universal implications."¹⁹

Dietetic knowledge can of course be acquired through learning and tools such as the CFG. But as Fischler says, "one cannot acquire a love for *veal blanquette* at a canteen..."²⁰ In other words, mere knowledge is not enough to acquire and develop taste. According to Fischler, there is absolutely no need to propagate the notion that food is closely tied to health. In fact, this is a universal idea that has always been present in the human mind. In his view, by seeking to impose a link between health and diet, the nutritional discourse actually reinforces the notion that the modern lifestyle and diet are fundamentally harmful.²¹

Furthermore, while he considers nutritional information essential, Kaufmann²² believes that the cacophony of information from the nutrition sector creates anxiety among eaters, which

¹⁸ Louis Figuier, *L'Année scientifique, 1865*, cited by Julian Csergo (2004) "Entre faim légitime et frénésie de la table au XIXe siècle: la constitution de la science alimentaire au siècle de la gastronomie," http://www.lemangeur-ocha.com/uploads/tx_smilecontenusocha/faim_legitime_frenesie_table_int.pdf (consulted on December 31, 2007) [our translation].

¹⁹ Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2006) *Casseroles, amour et crises: ce que cuisiner veut dire*. Paris: Hachette Littératures: p.19 [our translation].

²⁰ Claude Fischler (1996) "Le repas familial vu par les 10-11 ans." Paris: *Les Cahiers de l'OCHA* No. 6 [our translation].

²¹ Claude Fischler (1995) *La cacophonie diététique, Ce que manger veut dire* (dossier), L'École des Parents, No. 5.

²² Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2006) *Casseroles, amour et crises: ce que cuisiner veut dire*. Paris: Hachette Littératures.

certainly doesn't help in their quest for good health. According to Kaufmann, in some cases it would actually be better to retain one's food and relational habits rather than change one's eating habits to comply with the diktats of nutrition experts.

REFLECTIONS ON “THE FAMILY” AND “THE MEAL”

Since the inception of anthropology, anthropologists have always been keenly interested in the concept of “family.” At a talk she gave on May 9, 2000, anthropologist Françoise Héritier²³ discussed the challenge of defining “family,” noting that there has never been a universally acceptable definition of the word. Over the ages and throughout the world, the forms “family” has taken vary considerably, even within the same country.

In his evocatively titled book *The Death of the Family* (1972), David Cooper predicted the imminent disappearance of the family. Far from disappearing, the institution has held on, and many studies have shown that family relations last, change, and survive even the most tragic events.²⁴ The family is a complex, comprehensive, and ever-changing system. It is a special place where the personal and the sociocultural intersect.” Within the family, its actors are introduced to learning, values, and the development of personal identity.²⁵ While we all believe we know what a family is, since it is essentially a matter of the course of nature, the human family is in fact pure invention. Its system of filiation exists only in the human conscience. It is an arbitrary system of symbolic representations of a certain social order.²⁶

Philosopher Charles Taylor believes that each person builds his or her identity in dialogue with his or her “significant others.” In this sense, the family is likely the primary unit encompassing these significant others. Even when an individual outlives some of these significant others, even if they are no longer in that person's life, he or she

²³ Talk given May 9, 2000, by Françoise Héritier, http://www.cerimes.education.fr/index.php?page=fiches.view,113,11,7,90,,search_this_word, (consulted on November 27, 2007).

²⁴ Robert Deliège (2005) *Anthropologie de la famille et de la parenté*. Paris: Armand Colin.

²⁵ Emerson Douyon (1975) “La famille et la délinquance dans trois sphères culturelles,” *Criminologie*, 8 (1–2).

²⁶ Françoise Héritier (1981) *L'exercice de la parenté*. Paris: Gallimard.

continues to have conversations with them for the rest of his/her life.²⁷ The family in the broadest sense of the word, and in all its polyphony, is the place where identities are truly forged.

Meals are one of the cornerstones of the family. The history of the meal dates back to the very first human societies who, in sharing food, sought, in the words of French sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann, to “become family” (*faire famille*) in order to avoid war and to structure their social world. According to Kaufmann, the history of the meal (in occident) is also closely linked to that of Christianity and, notably, to the words of Saint Paul, who believed that it was not so much the act of feeding oneself that was essential, but rather all the associated symbolism. But Kaufmann states that “in all societies, since the beginning of time, sharing a meal has been a way to seal friendship and peace, to forge social ties [...]. The primary forms of kinship didn’t fall from the sky; rather, they were concretely created by the sense of familiarity surrounding meals.”²⁸

It is therefore pointless to try to understand the act of eating without first taking into consideration all the symbolic dimensions intimately associated with it. While the family meal may not be what it once was, it is still a valued time for getting together, a time for conversation that draws in all those seated around the table. Today, individuals increasingly seek to escape the constraints on them to “be like everyone else.” According to Kaufmann, this individualism plays a key role in “deconstructing what once defined the family.” He goes on to say that while individuals want their freedom, they are lost and unhappy when they find themselves alone, hence the incessant need to spend enjoyable culinary moments in the company of their significant others.

TASTE OR HABIT?

Anyone diagnosed as diabetic is automatically urged by a doctor and a nutritionist to change their eating habits. The health professional will consult with the patient and offer detailed information based on the latest available evidence. From that point on, the health professional is convinced that he or she has given the patient the necessary information to make the right

²⁷ Charles Taylor (1991) *The Malaise of Modernity*, Ontario: House of Anansi Press.

²⁸ Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2006) *Casseroles, amour et crises: ce que cuisiner veut dire*. Paris: Hachette Littératures: 65 [our translation].

choices and adopt new and healthy eating habits. According to this logic, all we have to do is provide people with up-to-date and accurate knowledge for them to make the best possible choices for their well-being. But this concept of health raises certain questions. In the healthcare community, a healthy body is defined “in the silence of the organs”²⁹, that is, in the absence of illness; however, it appears that among the general population, it is perceived otherwise.

In intellectual circles, health is often considered on an idealistic level, from a perspective of total health, as an absence of illness. Among the general population, it is defined more as the ability to work to provide for oneself and fulfil one’s basic needs. In the general population, people experiment with health, operationalize it, experience it in the bosom of the family, which is irreplaceable in this context. These are just some of the conclusions reached by Ginette Paquet³⁰ and Bernard Roy in aboriginal and poverty-stricken communities.³¹

That’s why the eating habits in question cannot be explained by a simple economic logic that considers the social actor as *homo economicus*, that is, as a human who makes his or her choices based on strict rational criteria. Many anthropologists have demonstrated the extent to which eating is more than simply a biological act, but rather an act deeply rooted in the social dimension and closely linked to identity. A number of anthropological and sociological studies have underscored the deep-seated association between food and individual and group identity.³² Simply seeing and recognizing is not enough to develop taste. One must also feel it and be moved by it in all sorts of ways. In a nutshell, one has to experience it. The philosopher Charles Taylor writes that the general nature of human existence is “its basic *dialogical* nature.” In his view, taste is an existential experiment that is part of the dialog between human beings. Humans are social beings, beings of language and communication. And it is by acquiring the

²⁹ It was the French surgeon and physiologist René Leriche who said that good health is akin to life in the silence of the organs (“la santé, c’est la vie dans le silence des organes”).

³⁰ Ginette Paquet (1990) *Santé et inégalité sociales. Un problème de distance culturelle*. Québec: IQRSC.

³¹ Bernard Roy (2002) *Sang sucré, pouvoirs codés, médecine amère*. Québec: PUL.

³² Lucie Giard, (1994) “Faire la cuisine”: 213–352 in M. De Certeau, L. Giard, and P. Mayol (dir.). *L’invention du quotidien 2. Habiter, cuisiner*. Paris: Gallimard; Igor de Garine (1995) “Sociocultural Aspects of the Male Fattening Sessions Among the Massa of Northern Cameroon”: 45–70 in I. de Garine and N.J. Pollock (Eds). *Social Aspects of Obesity*. Wellington: Gordon and Breach Publishers; C. M. Counihan & P. Van Esteril (1997), *Food and Culture: A Reader*. New York: Routledge; A. Beardsworth & T. Keil (1997) *Sociology on the Menu: an Invitation to the Study and Society*. London: Routledge; C. Fischler (1993) *L’omnivore*. Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob; Jean-Pierre Poulin, (1995) “Goût du terroir et tourisme vert de l’Europe.” *Ethnologie française*. XXVII (1): 18–26; Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2006) *Casseroles, amour et crises: ce que cuisiner veut dire*. Paris: Hachette Littératures.

great languages of human expression that we become fully fledged human agents.³³ Language relies on the uniquely human faculty to communicate and express thoughts using speech that can be transcribed into writing. The act of eating is one of these great languages. Eating is part of a “culinary system, a language with its own grammar and its own syntax that allows us to ‘make sense’ and, in the process, to build familiarity.”³⁴ People who care for each other are also familiar in what they eat together and how they eat it. Families don’t invite complete strangers to their table, and we don’t serve just any old food from day to day or on festive or ceremonial occasions.

Learning from significant others

To understand human tastes, we must step back and carefully examine the way they are learned, first and foremost within the family, the relational unit in which, from the first days of life and throughout not just childhood but our whole lives, humans learn which foods are salty and which are sweet, and develop “our very own tastes”³⁵.

Claude Lévi-Strauss aptly pointed out that “for a food to be consumed, it’s not enough for it to taste good; it has to *think* good, too.”³⁶

Swallowing and ingesting a food is much more than a strictly individual choice or a personal decision. We learn to ingest food in our relations with others. Learning what a food is for “oneself” and for “us” is one of the first and most important things we learn.

Learning to eat is about learning what sociologist Émile Durkheim called “group ways of acting and thinking,” ways that go beyond individuals and have their own existence. Learning to eat and develop one’s own food tastes is a process that occurs within a relational framework. These are family ties to begin with, and then become more complex as we age. A study by Harper and Sanders³⁷ found that some adults, especially mothers, have a considerable influence on the development of their children’s taste. After observing the reactions of 80 children aged two to four, the researchers noted that when the adult tasted the food before giving it to the child, 80%

³³ Charles Taylor (1991) *The Malaise of Modernity*, Ontario: House of Anansi Press.

³⁴ Claude Fischler (2001) *L’Honnivore*. Paris: Odile Jacob: 79 [our translation].

³⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss (1978) *Le cru et le cuit*. Paris: Plon [our translation].

³⁷ L.V. Harper, K.M. Sanders (1975) “The effect of adults’ eating on young children’s acceptance of unfamiliar foods.” *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 20: 206–214.

of the children agreed to eat it versus 47% who were simply given the food. In addition, when the food was given without it being tasted first by the adult, the mother was more likely than an unfamiliar researcher to get the child to taste it. These findings reveal that by simply observing or imitating, young children learn to contain and overcome their “neophobic”³⁸ tendencies.

Other studies have shown that the most important factor in the development and socialization of children’s food tastes is direct peer influence, not simply because the children want to be like others, but because when the new food is consumed by familiar people, they feel reassured and their fears are assuaged.

Learning to eat to be born into the world

Introducing a food into one’s body is much more than a simple matter of assimilating fibre, vitamins, or protein. Teaching a child to eat a particular food is akin to teaching him to literally swallow a symbolic order. “Man, from his very first steps in the world, eats words.”³⁹ By eating, he learns to be —be with his family, and of course, be with himself. By learning to eat within his family, the child learns to taste the world and develop a taste for the world. At least, the authorized world.⁴⁰ He introduces into his body this world authorized by his significant others, by those who came before him, and by those in his daily entourage.

He symbolically incorporates the world, thereby becoming part and parcel of this world. “It is but a short step from the taste for food to the taste for company. To eat is to meet. It is a social rite. It is a place where the child can feel like a grownup, where he learns to get to know others and to share, where he learns about human emotions, differences, and constraints.”⁴¹ The mere fact of acquiring new knowledge is not enough to bring about change in the way we eat. If we take that idea to the extreme, one could hypothesize that the inclusion of new and unauthorized

³⁸ In his work *L’Homnivore*, Claude Fischler writes that neophobia is a key characteristic of the eating behaviour of omnivores. In humans, it is manifested first among children by a strong resistance to new, unfamiliar, or somewhat familiar foods.

³⁹ Gérard Haddad (1992) “Manger c’est apprendre” in Claudie Danziger (Ed.). *Nourriture d’enfance. Souvenirs aigres-doux*. Paris: Autrement, Coll. Mutations/Mangeurs No. 129: 118 [our translation].

⁴⁰ Mikhaïl Bakhtine (1970) *L’oeuvre de Francois Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Âge et sous la Renaissance*. Paris: Gallimard.

⁴¹ Claudie Danziger (1992) Editorial in Claudie Danziger (Ed.). *Nourriture d’enfance. Souvenirs aigres-doux*. Paris: Autrement, Coll. Mutations/Mangeurs No. 129: 14 [our translation].

foods into the domain of the “edible” of a given family or group could even lead to the disintegration or fracturing of family and social ties.

To eat is to grow

“If you eat well, you’ll grow up to be big and strong,” parents say to their child to encourage her to finish her plate. By “eating well,” the child grows physically, but she also learns to grow within her family. She learns to become a socially acceptable being, a fully fledged member who fits into her living environment, into the world that surrounds her, and into the circle of her significant others. By “eating well” she learns to open up to the world but also to fold into herself as needed. She learns to discern enough from not enough, acceptable from unacceptable, included from excluded, and friend from enemy.

“We trust only those who eat the same things as us.” This is how Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú expressed her trust in her biographer Elisabeth Burgos. “At that moment,” writes Burgos, “I knew I had won her trust. This food-based relationship is proof that between Indians and non-Indians, there is a place we can agree and share: We were united by tortillas and black beans because these foods evoked in us the same pleasure, the same impulses.”⁴²

By eating, children learn the prevailing taste standards in their world, their region, and their community. They learn the very definition of food. A child born in the United States learns that dogs are pets, not food. A child born in Asia learns that dogs are an animal that can be eaten.⁴³

By feeding their children, parents also teach them about life. For parents, giving food is about giving life, giving love, integrating their child into their group, and inviting them to be part of their tribe.

Eating as a family and learning to live in society

The discourse put forth by the nutrition community generally focuses on the purely rational aspects associated with taste acquisition, widely known as “eating habits.” But is it possible that by prescribing for individuals new ways of eating, we are actually helping to break the family tie?

⁴² Elisabeth Burgos (1983) *Moi, Rigoberta Menchú*, Paris: Gallimard: 19 [our translation].

⁴³ In Asia, dog meat is consumed primarily by the middle and upper classes. The breeding of Saint Bernard dogs is a burgeoning industry in China, where this dog (symbol of Switzerland and mountain rescues) is prized for its culinary virtues.

Social context and the relational framework in which the food is eaten are indissociable from the process of acquiring, developing, and maintaining tastes. Change to what are commonly known as “eating habits” cannot be brought about simply by addressing reason.

“Over and above the purely cognitive aspects of taste learning and the innate pleasure of taste sensations, it is imperative to take into account the general relational, affective, and emotional context surrounding eating behaviour. This context plays a fundamental role not only in the learning of tastes, but also in their maintenance.”⁴⁴

“I never thought I’d see the day when my daughter would eat like a white person.” This is how a Quebec aboriginal woman reacted when one of her daughters seated at the family dinner table was about to tuck into a mixed salad,⁴⁵ a meal the mother clearly did not associate with the aboriginal and family world. A simple sentence uttered by a mother to her daughter, but one with deep consequences. With one cutting remark, the mother made it clear to her daughter that she no longer recognized her in her eating behaviour as a “real aboriginal” since her daughter was choosing to eat a food associated with the world of the white man. When she saw her daughter ingesting (or rather, incorporating) a food that was not part of the contemporary dietary syntax of the aboriginal people, was the mother indicating to her daughter a breach in trust, a breach in their mother-daughter relation?

One thing is certain: the aboriginal mother’s remark to her daughter was not an invitation to stay at the family table. One consequence of such an “accusation” is the removal of the right to remain within the “human singularity” at the heart of one’s family. Once excluded, the individual is at risk of being sucked into a kind of black hole of identity.

The same holds for women and men who suffer from eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. Eating is a social act. But what happens when this act, denied to the extreme, becomes a sickness? What happens when someone refuses outright to eat? Eating disorders are claiming more and more lives in our society. They are a source of great suffering for victims and their families, who often feel powerless in the face of the individual’s self-destructive behaviour. In

⁴⁴ Matty Chiva (1992) “Le goût : un apprentissage” in Claudie Danziger (Ed.). *Nourriture d'enfance. Souvenirs aigres-doux*. Paris: Autrement, Coll. Mutations/Mangeurs, No. 129 [our translation].

⁴⁵ For a more in-depth analysis of this example, readers can consult the volume by Bernard Roy (2002) *Sang sucré, pouvoirs codés, médecine amère*. Québec: PUL.

this situation of a *non-eating act* or an *eating non-act* that people suffering from eating disorders put themselves in, it is clear that eating can be a factor in destroying family ties.

Food therefore plays an important social function.⁴⁶ Families possess their own notion of what is edible and what is not; they have their own culinary classification rules, and rules to identify who shares the group's identity. In every society and in every family, the act of consuming a food classified as inedible, one that is not associated with the "us," one that is impure, may be interpreted by peers as an unspeakable and unacceptable act.⁴⁷

SUMMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

With the help of a grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) obtained under the Northern Rural Health Research Initiative in 2005–2006, Bernard Roy conducted an investigation into the act of eating as an identity builder among populations in northern areas. Nearly 50 women between the ages of 25 and 55 with children living at home were interviewed. The study was limited to women since they are generally the ones in charge of planning and preparing meals⁴⁸. The author met with six *Macaquaine* women from Natashquan, four Innu women from the community of Nutakuan, six *Cayen* women from Havre-Saint-Pierre, fifteen aboriginal women living in Val-d'Or (Abitibi), and lastly, thirteen Cree women from the community of Mistissini.

The findings of this research revealed that the discourse from the health community, specifically with regard to Canada's Food Guide, has been widely assimilated by these women in the North. It has been not only assimilated but also put into practice, in part or in whole, in the management of family grocery shopping. The research also found, as had Ginette Paquet,⁴⁹ that the family remains a core value for these mothers and that the act of eating is a way to keep family ties strong. Some of the findings of this study will be discussed in the following pages to support the arguments of this article.

⁴⁶ Claudie Danziger (Ed.) (1992) *Nourriture d'enfance. Souvenirs aigres-doux*. Paris: Autrement, Coll. Mutations/Mangeurs No. 129.

⁴⁷ Claude Fischler (2001) *L'Homnivore*. Paris: Odile Jacob.

⁴⁸ The authors are well aware that the family dynamic has undergone profound changes and that more and more men are taking on meal preparation tasks. For the purposes of this research, which was conducted primarily in remote rural areas far from large cities, we postulated that in these locations, these tasks are carried out primarily by women.

⁴⁹ Ginette Paquet (1990) *Santé et inégalité sociales. Un problème de distance culturelle*. Québec: IQRSC.

To eat healthy is to... follow Canada's Food Guide

As mentioned above, if there is one major concern in the health community, it is how best to promote the knowledge based on evidence on healthy eating. In every region in which the research was conducted, it appears that the teachings associated with the CFG have, for the most part, been well understood by the interviewees. While it may appear unremarkable at first glance, it is worth pointing out that every woman interviewed for the study was familiar with the CFG. This fact alone is testament to one of the great successes of this health promotion tool, namely its dissemination and penetration into the very fabric of popular knowledge of women in the North.⁵⁰

According to each and every woman interviewed, healthy eating is equated with “following the CFG and the recommendations of health professionals.” Naturally the interviewees were aware that the focus of the research was the act of eating and ways to manage grocery shopping and the family meal. It is therefore likely that some of the women interviewed had a tendency to provide the answers they felt the researchers wanted to hear, or to provide answers they felt were socially correct.

Nonetheless, the answers the women gave reveal that they have assimilated large chunks of the information conveyed by public health authorities in recent decades, and that they feel a responsibility to apply this information for the benefit of the health of their families.

According to these women, eating healthy means “following the guide to the letter,”⁵¹ and “eating the right quantities of dairy products, meat, fruit, vegetables... I’ve got a copy at home.”⁵²

Moreover, for these women, eating healthy is a matter of finding the balance between the food you eat and the energy you burn. “Eating healthy is all about balanced meals! Soup, meat, salad—often, but not too often. Just one steak, not two. One meatball with salad or rice, often with salad.”⁵³ Many of the women said eating healthy means eating fruits and vegetables on a regular basis. Others insisted on the importance of planning and preparing homemade meals.”

⁵⁰ It should be pointed out that its success has also been widespread across Quebec and the rest of Canada.

⁵¹ Informant H4

⁵² Informant N3

⁵³ Informant V13

On the whole, the women associated the fact of being healthy with following the recommendations of the CFG.

What about the grocery cart?

The health message conveyed by the various public health and government authorities appears, in large part, to have been integrated into the fabric of popular knowledge. But do these women follow up and put this information into practice? What do they put in their family grocery cart?

It appears that, in all the regions visited, the women go to great lengths to fill their family grocery cart in keeping with the CFG recommendations and in the best interests of their family. While they don't necessarily always manage to respect the guidelines to the letter, they do seem to at least ensure the four main food groups are represented.

Children's tastes and desires

While they are concerned with the health of their children, these women also highlighted the importance of keeping their families happy, and the challenge of juggling CFG recommendations and family happiness.

For these women, their children's tastes are one of the factors, if not *the* most important factor, influencing the choice of foods they put in their grocery cart. The parents' tastes often appear to take a back seat to the tastes and desires of their children. "When I shop for groceries, I always think in terms of my daughter, what she likes, what she'll eat, and what's good for her."⁵⁴ "Usually when I shop I think more of the food that my children will eat, but then after, because of having five kids, I tend to forget about my weight, my diet, I always keep postponing."⁵⁵

The women noted that they feel responsible for the nutrition education of their children: "Eating healthy is important and I want my kids to understand this. We don't always set a good example, but it's important. I want them to eat well so they get everything they need to stay healthy and they understand it's important to have foods from all four food groups on their plate."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Informant B2

⁵⁵ Informant V9

⁵⁶ Informant N5

Sometimes the opposite occurs and it is the children who act as motivators or who keep an eye on their parents' eating behaviour: "Sometimes my daughter gets mad at me and calls me up to check that I eat a proper meal."⁵⁷

According to the interviewees, monitoring the well-being of the family, drawing up the grocery list, and managing the budget are the woman's responsibility. When their children demand and pester them for certain foods, the mothers admit they sometimes have to put their foot down. On occasion, they will come between the child and the father, whom they judge too permissive: "I rarely send my husband to do the groceries because his daughter has him wrapped around her little finger. When she decides she wants something, she will hound him until he gives in and buys it! With me she knows the answer is 'No.' No means no!"⁵⁸

In recent decades, the place of the child within the family has changed considerably, and with it, the dynamics of mealtimes. In the early 21st century, we are a long way from the disciplinary model in which children were seen and not heard. Children no longer play a secondary role. While the family model has not changed across the planet in the same ways or at the same pace, it is undeniable that in Western families, children are a central part of the conversation, even if some families are still influenced by the old, hierarchical disciplinary model.

According to the mothers interviewed, being in charge of grocery shopping and preparing family meals is sometimes a challenge. Buying groceries means choosing foods that hide much larger challenges than simply preparing "healthy meals for the family." Juggling the tastes and desires of each family member while keeping in mind health considerations, the mother imagines how family life will play out. In filling her grocery cart, the mother is already creating in her mind moments of family life.⁵⁹ It appears that for these mothers, the meal is a cornerstone of the family, always an opportunity to "be as a family," avoid conflict, and even wars. Mothers are constantly negotiating between social morality, which demands that we "eat healthy," and the members of her family, who each have their own tastes and personalities.

⁵⁷ Informant N3

⁵⁸ Informant V4

⁵⁹ Jean-Claude Kaufmann "Le repas est le petit théâtre des familles" *Dossier: Comment va votre famille ?* - <http://www.psychologies.com/article.cfm/article/3560/Jean-Claude-Kaufmann-Le-repas-est-le-petit-theatre-des-familles.htm> (consulted on December 20, 2007).

The family meal is a dialogue with one's significant others, whether they are present or absent, living or deceased, which is to say that the "eat healthy" message taught by health professionals must be modified, transformed, and adapted to the eating practices taught, handed down, and conveyed by our ancestors: "My kids are more likely to eat what my parents cook than I am."⁶⁰

The challenge for these mothers in preparing the family meal is to concoct dishes that make each and every member of the family feel they are part of the family unit.

Solitary or social act?

While healthy eating, as taught by the CFG, is a daily concern for these women, the quest to stay healthy appears to be above all an individual commitment and an act of discipline. The women see it as an individual responsibility.

Eating healthy is therefore a "solitary" as opposed to a "social" act. Eating healthy requires "making an effort" and "being disciplined." In the words of these women it involves "going without," "making do," "controlling oneself," "self restraint," "planning," "applying and sticking to the regimen." According to philosopher Michel Foucault,⁶¹ "regimen" refers to a series of desired behaviours, a rule of life, a governing of daily life. It impacts our day-to-day lives and our bodies. Behaviour stemming from a set of rules tends to dictate eating practices.

Eating healthy therefore requires sticking to the CFG and "making an effort." There is generally little pleasure involved and it can unfortunately interfere with family bonding and happiness. A "healthy regimen" can also come up against the primary mission of the meal—that of "being a family," creating a place of togetherness, peace, and enjoyment. Eating healthy, in this case, stems more from asceticism than hedonism.

Putting pleasure back into "being a family"

Another finding brought to light by this investigation was the recurrence of the term "junk food" in the testimonials of the women interviewed. It came up repeatedly in every region visited, in each case in reference to the same foods. The words "junk food" were used in reference to any food with a negative or undesirable connotation according to the CFG and the health community, and included chips, soft drinks, chocolate, candy, popcorn, ice cream, cake,

⁶⁰ Informant N2

⁶¹ Michel Foucault (1984) *Histoire de la sexualité 2. L'usage des plaisirs*. Paris: Gallimard.

poutine, pizza, fries, juice, popsicles, and cookies, among others. Only once a certain level of trust had been established with the interviewer did the interviewees “admit” to eating some of these foods.

Invariably, all the women interviewed “admitted” with an embarrassed but complicit smile that they ate junk food. However, what was noteworthy was the fact that they often consumed these “junk foods” with others or with family, and that it brought them pleasure. Junk food helps create moments that can be qualified as Edenic, moments that provide an occasion to “be a family.” In these moments, one must necessarily be able to let go and set aside the standards and rules prescribed by the good health creed.

According to these women, junk food is for weekends when the family is all together at home. Everyone sits down in front of the TV to watch a show or a movie: “In the evening we watch TV. A quiet evening at home is an evening with popcorn, chips, and pop.”⁶² “Saturday is our junk food day! Since the kids were born, that’s how it is in our house. It’s a real food orgy! They know they’re allowed chips on Saturday. I don’t want them eating chips all the time. We don’t eat them all day long, just when the movie starts.”⁶³

It therefore appears that junk food, in the contexts described by these women, provides an opportunity for commensalism, that is, a coming together around a communal meal. This look at the world of junk food opens a window on family life that is created around events that allow us to set aside the prerogatives of the health community’s normative discourse. According to Ginette Paquet,⁶⁴ attachment to the family home is one of the foundations of popular culture. Within the family, “doing together” and “seeing together” are prerogatives that come before dietary choices.

⁶² Informant BV5

⁶³ Informant HSP2

⁶⁴ Ginette Paquet (1990) *Santé et inégalité sociales. Un problème de distance culturelle*. Québec: IQRSC.

CONCLUSION: PLEASURE AS PART OF THE FAMILY MEAL

The purpose of this article has been to demonstrate the indispensable power and nature of the family meal. We have shown that the family is a complex institution undergoing major transformations, and that the family meal is still one of the cornerstones of this institution. We have also shown that the act of eating is a complex act, one that is not merely biological, but also imaginary, symbolic, social, cultural, and emotional.

The evidence from advanced research studies is incontrovertible. Food-related health problems are clearly on the increase, and it appears that families can and should play a front-line role in fighting diseases related to poor diet. Nutrition researchers generally agree that meals eaten as a family can significantly help in transmitting healthy eating habits.

That being said, it has also been shown that when the health community takes a purely rational and restrictive approach, it can divide families rather than strengthen them. This article puts forth the idea that meals should be a time for peace and should be used as a means for pacification, not confrontation.

The interviews conducted with women in Northern communities revealed that for mothers, planning meals that comply with the standards set out in the CFG requires that they take into consideration the needs and demands of every family member. These women also consider family tradition when managing grocery shopping and meal preparation, rekindling the voices and presence of long-lost ancestors in the family kitchens of today.

One of the conclusions of this article is that the family meal is an ingredient essential to the act of “being a family”—an eminently human act that fosters the creation of social ties between significant others.

However, it appears that pleasure is a secondary value in the eyes of nutrition scientists. At least, this is the opinion of Michelle Le Barzic, a psychoanalyst at Hôtel-Dieu de Paris, who believes that “nutrition science virtually condemns the pleasure of eating” and that the “pleasure discourse has been replaced by the health discourse.”⁶⁵ Authors including Claude Fischler and Jean-Claude Kaufmann have also noted that this phenomenon.

⁶⁵ Sylvie Riou-Milliot, Olivier Hertel (2007) “Bien manger entre plaisir et santé,” *Sciences et Avenir*. No. 724. (<http://sciencesetavenirmensuel.nouvelobs.com> – consulted on December 15, 2007) [our translation].

It should also be pointed out that according to the health and nutrition discourse, eating has become a multirisk activity. Eating can make you fat, trigger disease, and even kill you. The medicalization of eating could lead to unwanted side effects that will ravage the health of families rather than helping them improve. According to Le Barzic, one of these side effects could be to “prevent the transmission of the symbolic values associated with eating, values that are handed down from one generation to the next to ensure family health and togetherness.”

The CFG promotes the inclusion of foods from each of the four food groups in every meal. While we have no argument with this and agree that the four food groups are the key to good physical health, it goes without saying that the authors of the guide seem to have forgotten an indispensable ingredient—pleasure.

Claude Fischler⁶⁶ writes that “obesity is increasing as fast as nutrition can deal with it”. Jean-Paul Laplace,⁶⁷ for his part, notes that “eating mustn’t be a sad and solitary act in front of the refrigerator.” Eating is therefore the key not only to our biological survival, but also to our affective destiny and belongingness to humanity, all thanks to pleasure!

Pleasure in itself is an obscure concept and a luminous sentiment. According to biologist Jean-Didier Vincent,⁶⁸ it is a positive reinforcement for the individual and the driving force behind the learning and evolution of our species. While it is difficult to define, pleasure is much easier to experience. This article, while it does not oppose the idea that children must eat foods from all the food groups, does promote the idea of culinary pleasure.

In a context of constraint and prescription, there can be no family meal. Rather, the family meal must be part of “being a family” and gathering one’s significant others around the same table. This article in no way promotes a backward-looking view of family meals of bygone days, a view that often tends to gloss over or exaggerate certain realities not necessarily worth reviving. Rather than going back to a time when children were seen and not heard, this article supports the notion that the family, like the family meal, is in constant flux.

⁶⁶ Claude Fischler (2001) *L’Homnivore*. Paris: Odile Jacob [our translation].

⁶⁷ Jean-Paul Laplace (2005) “Oui, mais... réflexions libres d’un nutritionniste à propos de politiques nutritionnelles.” OCHA (<http://www.lemangeur-ocha.com> - Site consulted on November 14, 2007) [our translation].

⁶⁸ J.D. Vincent (1986) *Biologie des passions*. Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob.

It would be preferable to teach parents to negotiate with “all the people who matter to them” and who, in either a formal or symbolic manner, gather around the same table. The meal must not lose its primary anthropological function—that of sharing food to “be a family.”

Recommended reading:

- Claude Fischler (2001) *L'Homnivore*. Paris. Odile Jacob.
- Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2006) *Casseroles, amour et crises: ce que cuisiner veut dire*. Paris. Hachette Littératures.
- Bernard Roy (2002) *Sang sucré, pouvoirs codés, médecines amères*. Québec. Presses Université Laval.
- Claude Fischler & Estelle Masson (2008) *Manger. Français, Européens et Américains face à l'alimentation*. Paris. Odile Jacob.