

How Consumers Think

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Food is a wonderful thing. I love it. And I especially love making it. My husband says that food can be (and I stress “can be”) sexier than sex. I mean, think about it, you’re sitting across from your partner and in front of you is the lightest, richest, most sensual chocolate mousse that’s ever crossed your lips. Next to this heavenly creation is a glass of Canadian ice wine – rich and syrupy with aromas of apricots and honey nectar. With each spoonful of chocolate your heart beats a little faster. You follow each bite with a sip of ice wine, then gaze into your partner’s eyes, and... well, need I fill in the blanks?

I think it’s this association, and other feelings of pleasure that is really behind the entire food movement. Cooking has become entertainment. And it is sexy. Just take a look at some of the hot hosts on the Food Network.

Yes, it’s true that more and more consumers are heating up dinner in the microwave, but for the most part, they still cook, do most of the cooking for others and like to entertain at home. It’s a pleasure to watch the latest cooking show, go to the Internet to look up the recipe, drive to an upscale supermarket to pick up fresh ingredients (and let’s be honest – a few prepared or semi-prepared ones too) and then stop by the local butcher for a specialty cut that creates this whole experience. Many people go even further and research which wine or specialty beer they want to serve with the meal.

Did you know that the name for **eating local is called *Locavorism***? *Savour Life Magazine* was writing about local long before the trend really took off. I started the publication because I saw the interesting foods and producers here that no one was really writing about. I hoped that if I was so passionately interested in what was going on here, maybe others would be too. It turns out I was right. The publication has grown from 50 friends to 7000 subscribers and as many as 36,000 page views a month over the past six years. The bulk of my readers are baby boomers just like me, and let’s face it, we all know that when it comes to trends, **baby boomers are in the head chef in the kitchen.**

Talk about **the power of profiling local businesses**. Several years ago, we did a story on a local cherry grower in Lumsden, called *Over the Hill Orchards*. Owners Dean and Sylvia Kreutzer several years ago began experimenting, with the help of the *University of Saskatchewan*, with hardy cherry varieties, you know, fruit trees that can actually survive our frigid winters and then grow and ripen in the blazing Saskatchewan sun. The story was a huge hit with readers. They were especially intrigued with these little chocolates called *Prairie Cherry Chocolates* that are filled with a single Carmine Jewel cherry. These are so luscious and delicious that they were served to the Queen at a luncheon during her trip here several years ago.

This year, we honed that direction even further at *Savour Life Magazine* to include even more profiles of local growers and food producers, as well as articles by **chefs who support serving local to their customers**. We have even entered into a partnership with Sasktel's Max Local on Demand to feature local restaurants on their Channel 48. The show is called *On The Menu*, and will feature about 19 restaurants across Saskatchewan. *Bon Appetit*, an American mainstream publication that's been in business for eons is also placing more emphasis on profiling local. Starting in January, they are including more articles on eating local and how to do it.

In keeping with this theme and of course a desire to show off what Saskatchewan producers are doing, I'm **cooking with local products** this month on *The Wheatland Café*. I should also mention that people are so passionate here about eating and supporting local farmers that I nearly always get letters when I use anything but canola oil on the show. So, let me go on record right here and now – I like canola oil... but I also like other oils too and use them according to what my cooking needs are.

But the whole concept of eating local is not just a Saskatchewan thing. **Locavorism is happening all over the western world**. Food writers like me, chefs and food magazines are all talking local. It's not unusual to hear buzz words like *The Slow Food Movement* and *The 100-Mile Diet* – they sound fancy but they are all about the same thing – eating local.

Farmer's Markets are growing in popularity. I don't think it's my imagination when I say that there were more people shopping at the Regina Farmer's Market last summer. And demand has been so great that Saskatoon is opening their market more days of the week during the warmer months. White City, just outside Regina started their first farmer's market this past summer. It was held on Friday afternoons from 3-7 pm. While small, the pickings were local and delicious and fresh. Lajord, the local Hutterite colony was there selling produce that always seemed to be a week ahead of other producers. There was also one baking stand that sold sensational cheese bread and another that sold their own naturally raised beef. A friend who purchased 50 pounds of beef from this producer remarked to me just how important it was for her to look the beef producer in the eye and know that the beef she was going to eat was raised in the same manner as she would feed her own family. Which illustrates so well not just the **consumer's desire to buy local and additive-free**, but also the **consumer's desire for traceability**. Knowing where your food came from. And you know, consumers are being so vocal about traceability, that they are even boycotting foods from other countries because of how they treat their workers, their animals or their excessive use of toxic chemicals.

Farmer's Markets also give the consumer the assurance that they are buying products without additives or preservatives in their food as nearly everything sold at farmers markets is small scale and homemade. But this **demand is putting pressure on food processors to reduce all those additives**. Pretty soon more and more food labels are going to start looking more like a home recipe than a chemical shopping list.

Farmer's Markets also tend to have vendors who grow organically or at least with fewer pesticides. **Although my readers are less vocal about eating organic, this is a dynamic sector and one that is growing the most rapidly.**

It always amazes me that in a province with the most organic producers and most acreage dedicated to organic production that we don't see more organics on store shelves. Of the 3,618 certified organic farms in Canada, **Saskatchewan has the most certified organic producers with 1,230 farms.** The reason we don't see more produce is probably because of two things: most people don't know that we have the most organic land, and because we grow mostly Durum wheat, grains, pulses and some beef.

Organics is one trend that *Savour Life Magazine* needs to cover more thoroughly including educating the reader about what is reality and what is not. According to a report in *Cosmos Magazine*, a magazine about the science of everything, the mass migration to **organic food has not been backed by scientific evidence.** Modern farming techniques today have changed a lot over the years and in many respects are starting to look a lot like organic farming. The magazine further reports that a comprehensive review of some 400 scientific papers on the health impacts of organic foods found that there was no evidence that eating organic food was healthier. The nutritional content of fruit and vegetables is more likely to be affected by freshness and varietal differences. But no matter what the facts are, the trend is not going away. Growth of this market in the coming years is expected to be 20% a year.

You know, we've had some interesting responses to various columns I've done on CBC Radio on the *Morning Edition with Sheila Coles*. One very popular column was one we did on yogurt. **Health is top of mind with the consumer today** and yogurt is a healthy product. But, to be perfectly honest, I really did not expect people to go out and start making yogurt from scratch. But we did the column and I gave listeners the recipe for a Hutterite yogurt I learned how to make at Arm River Colony. Now talk about sex in a bowl. You've never tasted yogurt like this yogurt. We got a huge response from readers who wanted to clarify every step in the recipe. You see, **living a healthy lifestyle is important today especially as baby boomers are so obsessed with staying young.** Just look at the proliferation of "good for you products" on grocery store shelves. Yogurts enhanced with probiotics, the good bacteria that fight the bad bacteria to keep your gut healthy. And don't think that probiotics are going to stop at yogurt. You're going to start seeing probiotics in cheese and chocolate!

We did another health related radio column on oats. The main thrust was to get people **eating more whole grain products**, but I also talked about a new line of gluten-free oat products processed by Farm Pure Foods here in Regina. Again, Sheila received many e-mails but this time, less favorable ones. You see, consumers today are much more knowledgeable than ever before and in some respects see themselves as lay-nutritionists. They lambasted me saying I was irresponsible to recommend oats to celiacs. The controversy was so great that Sheila had to have a follow-up story with Shelley Case, North America's nutrition expert on Celiac disease and based in Saskatchewan. Thankfully, she was able to back up my statements and endorse the Farm Pure products.

With regard to eating healthy, **watch for Canadians to gravitate toward more functional foods - foods with health promoting properties.** Expect to see more products with whole grains like barley (which we incidentally did a radio column on at the end of January), wheat berries, buckwheat, bulgur, and many other whole grain foods. Superfruits that have antioxidant powers are also popular. These are typically exotic fruits like goji berries, pomegranates, and some new ones such as noni and yumberries. I suspect this trend will die down somewhat however, these new fruits will allow for the creation of some interesting new products.

Here's a real success story for you. You know, when I moved here from Ottawa 5 ½ years ago, I was craving these incredible turkey sausages we used to buy at a local butcher. They were amazing. They were made with 100% turkey (or chicken depending on what was available that week) and seasoned with the butcher's own special spice blend. I remember asking various butchers in Regina if they carried a 100% turkey sausage. No. Virtually every sausage on the shelf is pork and has been that way for a hundred years. But I just knew that there had to be demand for this product – especially in an age with so many **consumers concerned about health and fat.** Last year, I asked the owner at *Italian Star Deli* here in Regina to make me some. I didn't care how much he made or the cost, I would freeze them in batches. He ordered them for me but when I went to pick them up, I told him my story about the popularity of turkey sausages down east. He said, "CJ, you know what, I'm not going to sell you all these sausages. I'm going to keep some and see if consumers want them." We agreed that he'd package the new sausages with the Savour Life web address. That day I published an article in my magazine about the new sausages and where to buy them. Without a lie, before he opened the next day, there was a customer standing at the door wanting to buy those sausages. Everything was sold out before the end of the day! Now the amount he orders each week continues to rise and he can't keep them on the shelf. **Customers are demanding alternatives to old standbys – ones that appeal to their perceptions about health.** But they also want local – and these sausages were a great example of a healthy product prepared and sold locally.

This year *Savour Life Magazine* introduced a new column called "On the Hot Plate." It's a restaurant review column. For the past several years, my readers have been complaining about the quality of restaurant reviews in this province. Why are they always so favorable? They always get 3 or 4 planets or prairie dogs. Every time I would raise the idea of writing reviews that expose the warts and all, I would hear, "Oh, you can't do that in Saskatchewan. It's just too small a province for that." But this year, we decided to be the first publication in the province to have the guts to call it the way it is and write **real restaurant reviews.** And really, this is what consumers want. Think of the massive number of reality shows on TV. It's flooded with them, which **reflects the younger generation who likes the raw truth, and can tell when you're trying to pull the wool over their eyes.** This year, the *Food Network* will be airing many more reality TV shows. And if you don't believe me, they just kicked "Emeril Live!" down a notch and cancelled the show. It had been on the air for 10 years. If you see Emeril Live! now, it will be reruns. Anyhow, we debuted the first restaurant review on The Ivy in Saskatoon. The

response has been very positive by readers who see this type of writing as a refreshing change from the predictable.

Now speaking of restaurants, let me ask you all a question. How many times have you had poor service in a restaurant? Raise your hand. I'd be astonished if there were someone who didn't. Of all the issues I write about in *Savour Life*, service is the topic where my readers are the most vocal. Food writers and trend watchers can talk all they want about this emerging trend of chefs preparing dishes with pig's tails and cow's tongues but **what customers really care about is service**. Sure, they'll try deep fried pig's tails served with Saskatoon berry chutney... once. I don't know about you, but I doubt this is going to become my favorite comfort food. But give them bad service and they'll won't back and they'll tell all their friends about it. In fact, they'll even get on a culinary forum on the Internet and tell the world! I tell you, a restaurant can serve consistently mediocre food, but consistently bad service is a mortal sin! Consumers don't like it and are going to get more and more vocal about it. And that doesn't just pertain to restaurants. It applies to every business.

You know, **baby boomers today want to experience life**. Their children are, for the most part, grown up and it's time to indulge. **They are indulging in all sorts of life enhancing activities**, including gourmet cooking classes and wine tasting workshops. The demand for my gourmet cooking classes not to mention the food and wine pairing seminars is extraordinary. Without any exaggeration, they sell out in hours, or at most a couple of days. The gourmet cooking classes are completely hands on and held in small groups of 6-8 people. Participants prepare, completely from scratch, a range of dishes relating to a specific cooking style, ethnic food or technique. And just to illustrate how popular these classes are, I ran a class together with the Executive Chef at the *Conexus Arts Centre* on East Indian cooking. It sold out in 20 minutes, and we ran two classes over two nights! But that seems very reasonable given the rising interest in ethnic cooking. The food and wine seminars are focused in a different direction – namely on the wine. Each wine is paired with a specific dish that I prepare during the seminar. People experience, along with guidance from a wine educator, the different flavours and nuances the wine and food bring to each other.

And this desire to expand their horizons also includes an **increased demand to travel to a different country and experience it in a hands on way. This is what is called Culinary Tourism and it's a huge trend right now**. A year and a half ago, *Savour Life* hosted a culinary tour to Tuscany. It was amazing. Twelve of us stayed in a charming hotel nestled next to an old castle, we visited several vineyards, attended various cooking classes, and learned about the history of the area and of course... we ate and drank a lot. We even dined at two Michelin starred restaurants. It was an amazing experience and one I know people won't forget. This fall, we're planning a similar type of tour to the Napa Valley in California.

People love to explore the flavours of the world even if it's vicariously. If they can't travel there, well... at least they can eat new dishes right at home. There has been a real increase in ethnic restaurants across the province and I'm not just talking about Chinese

or Sushi. I'm referring to Mexican, Belizean, African, East Indian, and Thai. As well, as baby boomers age they are becoming more interested in wine, so even if you can't travel to Tuscany, you can at least purchase a bottle from Italy at your local liquor store. And the passion for wine doesn't just stop there, if they can't drink it, they'll read about it. We have two fantastic wine writers at Savour Life. Both have exceptional palates and believe me, they taste a lot of wine. Rob's Dobson's column called *The Back Label*, and Steve Hurlburt's *Yum-Yum* column have quite a following. The new *Yum-Yum* column, for example, is often the first article read every week. And as we like to push trends and be at the forefront of change in the food and wine world, SL is the only publication in Saskatchewan talking about wine on a regular, dedicated basis.

Eating comfort foods is a big trend. People want a taste of home. *The Wheatland Café* is all about making a wholesome meal or a made-from-scratch recipe in the shortest amount of time possible. Yes, we do pre-chop a few things ahead of time, but the show is only seven minutes long and most of the recipe is made and completed in that time.

People are looking for wholesome, home-style recipes that are quick and convenient. We've made some fancy ones over the past two seasons, and yes, they're fun for viewers to watch, but it's the comfort food recipes they relate to, the ones they can actually see themselves making that appeals the most. To be perfectly honest, we should change the name to *Soup on the Wheatland Café* because I could make soup just about every week on the show. I can almost guarantee that when I make a soup, the visits will be much higher than for other recipes. And this trend isn't going away. Last year I noticed more and more restaurants serving comfort food dishes. Remember the calf's tongue that your grandmother used to make? Chefs are starting to use all parts of the animal in dishes for their customers. Some are using pork belly and others are using tougher cuts to make in-house sausages. They are also making patés, charcuterie and rillettes. Across the country there has been a growing fascination among chefs to make classical dishes in a more modern way - braised shanks, thick steaks and ribs, artisan breads, home-style meatloaf, mac and cheese, even with a twist such as the addition of truffles.

Consumers want food to be healthy, fulfilling and life-enhancing. They want food to taste delicious, be different and yet give a sense of comfort. They want to feel a connection to the food they eat. In short, they want to savour life to the fullest.

And I wish each of you the same richly fulfilling experiences with food so that each of you savours life too.