



## Original Research Article

**“Aboriginal isn’t just about what was before, it’s what’s happening now”: Perspectives of Indigenous peoples on the foods in their contemporary diets**

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## Abstract

Health promotion materials for Indigenous peoples generally recommend that Indigenous people incorporate more “traditional” foods into their diets, referring to foods that are hunted, fished or gathered from the local environment. Little scholarly attention has focused on which foods Indigenous peoples themselves consider to be traditional, or the socio-cultural significance of their contemporary food patterns. The purpose of this project was to hear the voices of Indigenous peoples about the significance, meanings, and values of foods they eat, and what they consider to be traditional foods. Participants self-identified as Aboriginal people living in or near Terrace, BC were asked to photograph everyday foods, which were then used in semi-structured interviews. Themes identified in preliminary analysis were shared with seven of the original participants in a focus group. Key issues included barriers to access and use of locally gathered foods, and concerns about environmental contaminants in wild food. Participants spontaneously spoke of food in terms of health, but had to be prompted to discuss traditional food. While locally gathered, fished and hunted foods were clearly seen as traditional, the status of other foods was more contested. Case studies of specific foods revealed how participants imagined traditional foods, and also how these were combined with store-bought foods in inventive ways to produce culturally-significant fusion or hybrid foods. Our findings reflect the vibrancy and resilience of Indigenous cultures, and suggest that we reconsider some of the dominant assumptions that inform research and health promotion activities targeting Indigenous peoples.

**Keywords:** Indigenous; qualitative research; traditional foods; fusion foods; cultural change; Northwestern British Columbia

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## Introduction

One of the ongoing effects of settler colonialism on Indigenous peoples in Canada is disproportionately higher rates of chronic diseases, including diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Adelson, 2005; Reading & Wien, 2009). As a result, the diets of Indigenous peoples have come under increased scrutiny in efforts to find ways to decrease disease rates and increase longevity. Health promotion guidelines to treat and prevent chronic disease among Indigenous people generally recommend the inclusion of more traditional foods—foods that are available from local natural resources and possessing cultural significance (Earle, 2013; Willows, 2005). Traditional foods have been shown to be healthier and more nutrient-dense than store-bought, market alternatives, and an antidote to acculturative forces that are undermining Indigenous health, cultures, and foodways (Dietitians of Canada, 2012; Egeland & Harrison, 2013; Kuhnlein & Receveur, 1996).

While health promotion recommendations urge Indigenous people to incorporate more traditional foods into their diets, we wondered what counts as traditional. This research began with the first author's observations as a dietitian working in northern British Columbia communities that many of her Indigenous clients included many items as “traditional food” or “Indian food” that would not officially be recognized as such. These foods included rice, chow mein, China Lily soya sauce, and bologna. The first author noted that *Tsimshian*<sup>1</sup> community feasts held in the Kitsumkalum reserve community often featured West Coast “fusion” foods—locally gathered food combined with store-bought foods, often in inventive ways. For example, an “Indian style” Chinese New Year community dinner featured seaweed chop suey, curried bologna suey, fish lo mein, shrimp chow mein, and fried rice. The dynamism of such fusion food suggests the lively incorporation of foods from other cultures into a First Nations feast, while making creative and economical use of local resources.

It is significant that fusion food would be part of a community feast. Community feasts are a contemporary version of the potlatch, a culturally and politically important ceremony for the Pacific Northwest First Nations that was banned under the Indian Act between 1884 and 1951 (McDonald, 1995). McDonald (1995) argues that the revitalization of feasting activities among the Tsimshian is a decolonizing activity that involves the creation of “a world structured in a Tsimshian way, a world that allows Tsimshian thoughts and practices,” and a way to build and integrate the community by revitalizing cultural tradition and values. As such, one would expect that the food served at a feast, an integral part of the ritual, would also reflect community values and cultural practices.

As a white settler who grew up in western Canada, the first author realized after she moved to Terrace, BC that what little she knew of Indigenous peoples was based on popular stereotypes, in which they were either romanticized or vilified. As she worked and lived alongside

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<sup>1</sup> Tsimshian First Nation is located on the Skeena River in northwestern British Columbia.

Indigenous people, she became increasingly uncomfortable with racist stereotypes and undertones in her work as a dietitian, and in the community more generally, and the representations of Indigenous peoples in health promotion research, literature, and activities. The second author is also of European settler descent; she continues to be shocked by the ongoing violence of settler colonialism, and is humbled by the resilience and generosity of Indigenous peoples despite racism, adversity and colonial attempts at genocide. Honouring the truths that were laid bare by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission about the history and legacies of the Indian Residential Schools, the authors hope this research can be part of the difficult work of reconciliation, of coming to know each other and living in mutually respectful relationship.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of Indigenous people living in and around Terrace, BC regarding culturally meaningful food in their contemporary diets. The research set out to privilege the voices of Indigenous people themselves, and to disrupt stereotypes of Indigenous peoples and traditional foods.

### *Location*

The research was undertaken in late 2008 and early 2009 in and near Terrace, BC, which is on the traditional territory of the Tsimshian First Nation, and the home of the first author. Terrace is located on the Skeena River in northwestern British Columbia. It is categorized as a small urban centre, with a population of 15,723 people in 2016, 23 percent of whom identified as Aboriginal persons (Statistics Canada, 2016). Indigenous people from a variety of nations live in and near Terrace, particularly from the nearby *Gitksan*, *Nisga'a*, *Tahltan*, *Haisla* and *Kitasoo* Nations. Situating the research in this urban centre means that the results may be relevant to the more than 50 percent of Indigenous people in Canada who also live in urban centres, with easy access to market foods from grocery stores and restaurants. However, unlike those who live in larger urban locations, Indigenous residents of Terrace may have easier physical access to a variety of wild harvested foods from the nearby land and water, and to the rich Indigenous cultural practices in the local community. This makes an ideal setting to explore ideas about which foods count as traditional for local Indigenous people.

### **Methods**

The first author conducted photo-elicited, semi-structured interviews with eleven people who self-identified as being Aboriginal persons<sup>2</sup>, and a follow-up focus group with seven of the

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<sup>2</sup> Although we are primarily following contemporary use of the term “Indigenous,” an inclusive term used internationally to refer to the original, pre-contact inhabitants of a territory, it was not in wide use at the time the research was conducted. At that time, the term “Aboriginal” was considered the most inclusive, covering First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

original eleven participants. The Queen's University General Research Ethics Board approved the study protocol. Two local Indigenous women, one of whom worked for the Kermode Friendship Center and the other for the regional health authority, acted as community advisors. They helped with recruitment, answered the researcher's questions and gave advice. Participation was limited to participants over the age of 18 with the ability to converse in English.

Prior to individual interviews, the first author met with each participant to explain the study, obtain informed consent, provide instructions for taking photographs, and collect demographic information. Disposable cameras were provided to those who needed them; otherwise, participants used their own digital cameras. Participants were asked to take photos of a variety of foods, including favourite foods; typical foods eaten with family members; foods for special family occasions like birthdays; foods that are part of family traditions; foods served at community feasts and gatherings; food that is traditional for the community; and a food that is valuable or has status for the community. Participants took photos of an average of 11 different food items or meals, and signed a photo release to give permission for which photos the researchers could use and for what purposes. Photographs were used to facilitate the interview process (Power, 2002).

Interviews were arranged at a time and location convenient for participants, and lasted on average one hour and 45 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded, with informed consent of each participant, and transcribed verbatim. As an honorarium, participants were given a \$20 gift card to the grocery store of their choice. Transcripts were sent to participants who wished to receive one, but no participant asked for their transcript to be modified.

During the initial meeting, participants gave signed consent to be contacted regarding participation in a follow-up focus group. The focus group involved a shared meal cooked by the first author; a review of some of the key topics identified in the individual interviews; and participant reflections on the identified topics. The session was held at the Kermode Friendship Centre and took approximately two hours. Participants received an honorarium in the form of a \$10 gift certificate. With consent, the session was audio-recorded and the recording transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis began with the first interview and continued throughout and after the data collection process. A post-interview summary, including main topics and themes, was prepared immediately after each interview (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and used to guide subsequent interviews and the focus group. Using Atlas.ti, version 5.5.9 (© 1993-2008 ATLAS.ti GmbH, Berlin), a qualitative data management software program, the first author performed line-by-line open coding of each interview and the interview transcripts (Charmaz, 2006). Transcripts were coded again with more conceptual codes, and categories and themes identified (Morse & Field, 2004). The first author also kept memos in Atlas.ti and kept a journal to document observations and reflections. In her journal she also asked questions of the data, cross-checked her interpretations to ensure they were well supported, and explored negative cases and contrasting perspectives (Patton, 2002).

## *Participants*

Nine women and two men participated in research interviews. Seven of these original participants were also members of the follow-up focus group. Four participants were between 25 and 40 years of age; four between 50 and 60; and three were in their 70s. Most participants identified primarily with local First Nations: six participants identified with the Tsimshian nation, one with the Haisla nation, and one with the Nisga'a nation. Other participants identified with Indigenous groups whose territories are distant from Terrace: one participant identified as Cree, one as Cherokee, and one as Inuit. Two participants spoke of reclaiming their Indigenous heritage as adults, having grown up without connections to their Indigenous communities. All had lived in or near Terrace for many years. Those from more distant territories had strong connections with people from the local First Nations.

## Results

### *Overview*

Although we were especially interested in exploring participants' perspectives about food in relation to traditions, culture and cultural change, analysis of the individual interviews was striking in that all participants spontaneously described different foods and food preparation methods in relation to health. It was surprising because there were no questions about health in the interview guide. Overall, participants' understanding of the healthiness and unhealthiness of food strongly aligned with the dominant healthy eating discourse found in documents such as Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating, an observation that others have also found to be ubiquitous in Canada (Beagan et al., 2015; Hammer, Vallianatos, Nykiforuk, & Nieuwendyk, 2015; Ristovski-Slijepcevic, Chapman, & Beagan, 2008). Many participants exhibited a fairly sophisticated understanding of the nutritional qualities of food, describing components of food such as fat, fibre, vitamins, and sugar. Some also worried about chemicals in food, including pesticides, herbicides, hormones, preservatives, nitrosamines, MSG, and other "junk," and actively tried to avoid food that might contain these substances. Participants with chronic disease diagnoses, or who had family members with chronic disease, were especially careful with preparation methods, food choices, and portion control. Participants' comments also contained conventional ideas of balance, variety, and moderation.

Participants had nuanced views of the healthiness and unhealthiness of market and traditional foods. Participants recognized that some market foods, such as fruit, vegetables, whole grain products, and dairy products, are essential components of a healthy diet, and appreciated the ready availability of these foods in their community. They also recognized other market foods, especially highly processed foods, as unhealthy. Conversely, while recognizing the

health benefits of hunted, fished, and gathered food, participants also worried about the possible health hazards of environmental contaminants in wild meat, fish, and berries.

### *Traditions, culture and cultural change*

There were several specific questions near the end of the interview guide designed to explore participants' views on traditional foods, a primary focus of the research. With few exceptions, participants did not speak of traditional foods until specifically questioned. Most participants rarely used the term "traditional food," and some did not use it at all. When participants did spontaneously discuss traditions, traditional ways or traditional foods, they did so in a casual manner. Characteristics like taste, cost, familiarity, versatility, and healthfulness were at the forefront of participants' discussions, instead of the more abstract ideas of tradition and culture.

When asked specifically to give examples of traditional foods, many participants included fish, seafood, wild meat, seaweed, and berries. Some stated that these are foods that are hunted, fished, and gathered, "from the land and the water," or that they were eaten before European contact. As Myra, 31, stated, "so-called traditional foods [are those] that they would eat prior to contact with Caucasians."

However, closer analysis of the interviews suggested more complex views. Beyond these initial responses, there was debate about what foods could or couldn't be considered as traditional. We have developed four food case studies, which offer a closer look at participants' perspectives on specific foods: seaweed, potatoes and rice, bologna, and chow mein. These case studies were developed from analysis of the individual interviews and then further explored during the focus group. These case studies aptly demonstrate the themes of the research analysis, including access to traditional foods and fears about loss of knowledge about hunting, fishing, and preparing traditional foods, and reveal the diversity of views that participants hold about these foods.

#### *Case Study #1: Seaweed*



**Figure 1:** Seaweed and rice

That's fresh frozen seaweed. I fried some bacon and onions, and some clams, frozen clams... and then I just cooked the seaweed in there, with some rice....

(Ruth, 77)

The Indigenous peoples of northwestern BC have a long-standing practice of gathering seaweed; it is so significant that the month of May is known as *Ha'lilaxsilá'ask* in the Tsimshian language (*Sm'algyax*), translated as “the time for picking seaweed” (‘Na Aksa Gyla Kyew Learning Center, 2008). Like *oolichan* grease (congealed fat from a small fish), this food is eaten almost exclusively by Indigenous residents, and seldom by non-Indigenous people in the Terrace area. Many participants spoke of seaweed in the context of discussing “Indian food” or “traditional food.” Academic researchers and health practitioners would also have no trouble categorizing it as a traditional food.

This case study raises concerns about access to traditional foods—the difficulty participants had incorporating it into their diet because of its cost, their distance from the ocean, and their limited knowledge and experience with gathering and processing this food. This case study also illustrates some of the creative ways that people combined locally sourced and market foods into dishes that blurred the boundaries between traditional and non-traditional in the development of “fusion” food.

Seaweed was a popular food for all participants and among Indigenous residents more widely. Ruth, 77, provided evidence of this popularity when she talked about having prepared food for a feast and said, “I cooked a pot of rice and a pot of seaweed. That really went.” Fiona, 27, simply stated, “I love it...” while Garnet, 58, echoed this sentiment and added, “...my wife and I both eat it like popcorn.” Participants explained that seaweed is popular on its own or added to other dishes. Marcie, 38, stated, “It's...very versatile. You can put it on soup—fish soup—or eat it on its own. Some people like to fry it, and I have to admit I like eating it that way sometimes.” Participants also described adding seaweed to clam chowder (Lorna, 57), mixing it in with herring eggs (Marcie, 38), having it with salmon, potatoes and “stink eggs” (fermented fish roe) (Ruth, 77) or salmon, rice and vegetables (Myra, 31). Some of these combinations are so established as to have proper names; when the researcher said something about “fish, rice and seaweed,” Bridget, 36, offered a correction, saying, “You got that backwards. Seaweed, fish and rice.” She also mentioned that “seaweed and oolichan grease and China Lily [soya sauce] is a dish.” Seaweed was paired with non-fish foods too. Ruth, 77, shared that she has seen chow mein prepared with seaweed, and Fiona, 27, offered, “I like it on popcorn.” Lorna, 57, described how her husband sometimes prepares it, “He makes a specialty seaweed dish...with chopped bacon.”

Several participants also discussed seaweed's nutritional properties and health benefits. Both Fiona, 27, and Garnet, 58, spoke of its iodine content, while Myra, 31, stated more broadly, “...it has trace minerals in it that are good for us.” Rona, 53, discussed her wish to see a regional Aboriginal food guide for the northwest coastal peoples, giving seaweed as an example of an item she would like to see listed and explained in such a guide.

But the strongest theme about seaweed concerned access. Despite its popularity, participants' comments suggested that many of them do not eat it as often as they would like. While seaweed was served at feasts and community gatherings, Marcie, 38, admitted that this is not something she often eats at home. Things had also changed for Fiona, 27, since she moved away from her grandmother's home in Kitamaat village. She said, "...this is my little zip lock bag my mom gave me. It was bigger then, it was like full. Now...well, you see it's almost empty.... That's the first time I've had it in almost years." Even though Bridget lived on reserve, her access to seaweed was also limited, "I've been out of seaweed for two months. Until the guys from Metlakatla drive through with it, with a thing of seaweed, I'm hooped for seaweed." She also stated that in Kitsumkalum access is largely dependent on having the time and resources that are required to harvest such foods.

While most participants did not gather seaweed themselves, some were able to obtain it through their personal connections. Ruth, 77, explained, "My son gave me that bag of ... fresh seaweed and I just stuck it in the freezer...." Similarly, Myra, 31, described that she received fresh seaweed from a friend: "...she gives us like a bag of seaweed when it's still wet and then we dry it ourselves..." However, many participants could only obtain seaweed by buying it. "Now if we want seaweed we have to find someone to buy it from. It's not that easy to find" (Barb, 58). Garnet, 58, explained that First Nations people came to Terrace from villages on the central coast to trade or sell seaweed, saying, "there's a lot of people from down there ... that actually come up here to the northwest and they'll park at the mall or they'll start advertising ... or just talking to people and say 'hey, we've got some seaweed'...." While he spoke of trading oolichans or oolichan grease for seaweed in the past, "in the Nisga'a way," he admits that recently, it is more common to purchase seaweed. "You can get a big gallon bag for fifty bucks, which isn't bad, but it's a little expensive." Because Terrace and Kitsumkalum lie inland from the ocean, seaweed cannot be picked locally, and for this reason, Louie, 73, rationalized the cost of buying it at a local shop in Kitsumkalum by noting, "20 dollars for a big square...it's cheap because that's a lot of money in gas to run your boat."

Irene, 72, commented that nowadays not as many people are "putting up their own food," and wondered if this trend may be, in part, due to a lack of education and exposure. Supporting her perspective, Bridget, 36, presented her views as a younger participant:

I don't know where to go for any of this stuff. I wouldn't even know how to pick seaweed or what kind of seaweed to pick. You know, I'm sure my mother must have known because she grew up on a boat with my Ya'ez [grandfather], but she worked, and we didn't live here....

She was concerned that, in addition to the other barriers that exist in terms of gathering food, that the knowledge needed for the harvesting and processing of seaweed and other foods is not being passed down from the older to the younger generations. Lorna, 57, Louie, 73 and Irene, 72, recognized the need for education as well, and spoke enthusiastically about a recent seaweed



gathering excursion in which students at the ‘Na Aksa Gila Kyew Learning Centre had participated.

Participants’ comments about seaweed reinforced that it is a long-standing traditional food for coastal First Nations, and a food that continues to be popular. Participants described it as a versatile food, with health benefits, but illustrated that many individuals have difficulty accessing it because of its cost, their distance from the ocean, and their limited knowledge and experience with gathering and processing this food. Therefore, while many individuals wanted to include this food more often in their diets, they described significant barriers that prevent them from doing so. Participants’ stated that there were similar barriers to obtaining and processing other locally sourced foods as well.

### *Case Study #2: Rice and potatoes*



**Figure 2:** Participants’ photos of meals including rice and potatoes

While the first case study showed how a traditional food has been incorporated into contemporary dishes, the second case study illustrates how introduced foods, potatoes and rice, have become mundane, unquestioned dietary staples, integrated into everyday eating patterns. When questioned directly about whether these foods were traditional, participants held different views. In the absence of direct questioning, these foods seemed relatively uninteresting to participants, unworthy of too much attention.

Participants described potatoes and rice as playing a supporting role to fish, meats, and other dishes, in many possible combinations. In the case of rice, they described pairing it with chili, chicken cacciatore, salmon, seaweed, fish, curried bologna, seaweed, deer mulligan, salmon patties, clam fritters, stir-fries, and moose ribs. In some cases, participants explicitly described rice as being part of a dish, as in “you have the rice, the jarred fish, dried seaweed... a tablespoon of oolichan grease, and flavour it with some China Lily [soya sauce]” (Bridget, 36). Similarly, participants listed a number of foods they frequently paired with potatoes: turkey, herring eggs, fish, pork chops, meatloaf, roasts, and other meats. Some also described flavouring their potatoes with oolichan grease, or adding them into common dishes, such as fish soup, moose soup, and salmon patties.

Rice and potatoes seemed to be taken-for-granted ordinary staples. For example, Fiona, 27, talked about the foods she cooked on a day-to-day basis: “...just regular, potatoes and pork chops and stuff like that...” Likewise, Garnet, 58, and Bridget, 36, both described rice as a “staple,” and Bridget implied that this had long been the case in her family:

...we grew up poor, right, my family, so sometimes we didn’t have a loaf of bread but we always had China Lily [soya sauce] for our rice ... it was just one of those things. It was like the big bag of rice, the big bag of flour, the big bag of sugar and the bottle of China Lily, and then the big bucket of lard in the fridge and then with some salt...as long as you had those staples you weren’t hungry, you weren’t poor and you weren’t out of food.

For older participants, rice and potatoes had always been staples. Irene, 72, who grew up in Port Essington<sup>3</sup>, laughed when she said, “...we always get teased, saying we’re Chinese people because we live on rice...” She also mentioned that her mom grew potatoes in their garden, and said, “we have to eat what mom grows—potatoes—so everybody lived on that ... it’s always potatoes, it’s always rice.” Similarly, Ruth, 77, talked about her childhood, and stated, “...in Port Essington we learned to get things that’ll keep. We had potatoes but rice will keep, so we used a lot of rice.” Rice and potatoes appear to have been permanent features of the diets of both younger and older participants.

When asked specifically if these everyday foods were traditional, participants’ comments were revealing. For example, Irene, 72, had described having foods such as rice, potatoes and homemade bread since her childhood, and when asked if these were traditional foods, she responded by saying, “probably some people will say yes, because you were raised on it.” However, Rona, 53, had a different view. In the following quote, she appeared to say that potatoes have been a long-standing part of local Indigenous diets, but then she seemed to catch herself.

Potatoes have always been a part of ours- but we call it, in our language, we call it *skoosee*. Yeah, because we never had the seed, right. We never had the potato seeds until the Irish came...gosh, in, I think in my great grandparents’ time, maybe even a generation before that, when the Irish started coming to the Nass and to the Tsimshian country. And so we never had potatoes, and so...since that generation that have potatoes growing in the basement, like they’d fix up a place and you’d grow potatoes there, so you’d grow up eating potatoes...it’s just a thing that you had with your fish.

When I asked her directly about potatoes, she responded with another comment about Irish influence and followed with, “It’s not traditional...the fish is traditional. Moose isn’t even

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<sup>3</sup> Port Essington was a salmon cannery town, founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century at the mouth of the Skeena River, about 100 kilometres from Terrace. European-Canadians, Japanese-Canadians and Indigenous peoples worked there, but most of the population did not live there year-round because employment was seasonal. It is now a ghost town.

traditional.”<sup>4</sup> Later, she spoke about the foods in her current diet and said, “We have all the vegetables, lettuce, potatoes, that are new to us...rice, that’s new to us.” While she acknowledged the culinary changes that have occurred over time among the local Indigenous peoples, and that she herself has long consumed many of these “new” foods, in this context she seemed to be working with a strict, “pre-contact” definition of traditional foods.

However, her take on potatoes was challenged in the focus group. Garnet, 58, seemed to object to the idea that potatoes were not traditional, saying, “Potatoes didn’t come from Ireland ‘cause they did come here too. The ones we used to pick were really small and little, and we used to take them, and used to have to really dig hard for them...” Garnet had also spoken about rice and potatoes in his individual interview; in describing the traditional diet on the prairies, he included a description of “all the roots and the wild potatoes and rice we used to pick...” While he acknowledged that today’s potatoes and rice might be different from what Indigenous peoples harvested in the past, he still seemed to view them as being “basically quite traditional.” Perspectives on whether potatoes and rice could be viewed as traditional foods were clearly mixed.

Participants’ off-hand comments are potentially more revealing. On a number of occasions, participants included rice and potatoes in descriptions of meals that they labeled as traditional. Ruth, 77, started off her interview by telling me about a meal she wished she had taken a photograph of, saying, “I baked potatoes and then burned fish, fried fish—you burn it over a fire ...that’s the traditional foods, eh.” Similarly, Garnet, 58, described a fish stew made with potatoes, onions and, if available, seaweed and oolichan grease as follows: “...this is what we call mulligan ...it’s like a traditional [meal]... the West coast people have been eating this kind of food for years.” Similarly, Fiona, 27, included rice in a comment about food traditions, namely, “...I grew up with our food traditions, and I would always have [seaweed] in salmon soup, and seaweed and rice...” In these comments, participants implied that rice and potatoes could be viewed as being traditional foods or, at the very least, that they have a welcome place alongside many of the more indisputable “Indian” foods.

Participants’ comments about rice and potatoes suggest that they did not view these foods to be exciting in any way. However, it is precisely because they are mundane that they shed light on our understandings of food, culture and tradition. Just as a meal of seaweed and fish might not seem complete without rice, mulligan just wouldn’t be the same without potatoes. These foods were practical additions to the traditional diets of Indigenous peoples. Potatoes could be locally grown, and had a long storage capacity. Although not grown locally, rice was relatively inexpensive, filling, and could be stored indefinitely, like flour.

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<sup>4</sup> This participant believed that moose had come to the region relatively recently.

### *Case Study #3: Bologna*

Much like the previous case study of rice and potatoes, bologna has become thoroughly integrated into local diets or “indigenized.” However, its meaning has shifted over time. Once considered a luxury food, it is now more commonly associated with poverty, and eaten less often because of widespread awareness of the unhealthiness of processed meat products. Despite the shift in meaning, bologna is still considered “Indian food” and part of community feasts, for example, as “curried bologna suey” in a community Chinese New Year dinner in Kitsumkalum.

Many participants spontaneously discussed bologna in their individual interviews, even though no one took a photo of it. The oldest participants described bologna as a popular food, especially in their younger years. The three oldest participants each talked about how much they liked it. In these cases, they described bologna as a treat, a “luxury” and a break from the everyday. Ruth, 77, described moving from camp to camp to gather different foods throughout the year, saying, “then we’d move back to [Port] Essington, then we’ll have a big treat—bologna.” Louie, 73, also spent his younger years in Port Essington and shared a similar story: “...years ago in Essington, we didn’t have a deep freeze or a fridge...bologna and wieners...it’s a real treat once in a while...and I used to love eating that.” Bologna was so popular in this generation that Irene, 72, described that her uncle would buy three or four rolls for feasts, “Every time there’s a feast, he makes sure there’s bologna.” These participants’ comments depict that when they were growing up, bologna was relatively rare, exceptions to the daily fare. However, this was also true for the youngest participant, Fiona, 27, who talked about growing up with her grandmother in Kitamat<sup>5</sup> village, saying, “I always used to like to have it besides always having fish every day....”

In the past, bologna was considered a high status treat because it had to be purchased and was not always readily available. The preserved meat, a relatively affordable luxury, could survive long distance transportation, even without refrigeration. Rona, 53, spoke about her experience living in the coastal village of Kincolith, where for years, they only had access to larger centers by boat.

We never had roads. Like, Kincolith just got roads ... what, five years ago? So that was ... the other luxury thing ... Hopefully the bologna would make it, so there would be bologna if you’d have enough money to have it.

Similarly, Ruth, 77, described how bologna was perceived in Port Essington, saying, “... that was rich man’s food, bologna. It was the only thing we could buy.” Further south, in Kitamat village, Fiona, 27, talked about how her grandmother thought bologna became increasingly expensive over time, but described a time when they were less financially constrained:

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<sup>5</sup> Kitamat is a town located on a deep-water fjord about 60 kilometres from Terrace. It was a small Indigenous fishing village until the 1950s, when Alcan developed the town and built a hydroelectric dam, a deep sea terminal and a smelter.

My uncle, he used to do really well because he's was a carver and for the time I grew up there he was making a lot of money so he'd would be able to make the bologna a little bit thicker. ...Gran thought that was pretty fortunate for us to have really big bologna steaks.

In these ways, participants described that bologna was a luxury because of the financial and geographical barriers involved in accessing it, making it relatively rare but still affordable on occasion.

On a different note, several participants spoke about bologna in relation to residential school experiences. Rona, 53, told a story of her husband giving a speech at a feast attended primarily by residential school survivors:

He was listing off all the food that that they brought and they were gonna serve and everything and then he said, "and fried bologna," and everyone was like cheering like crazy...yeah, they were all excited about having fried bologna and curried bologna.

She described that it was "definitely uncommon" for First Nations students to have had bologna in residential schools, an observation supported by Irene, 72. When she spoke about her year at a residential school, she mentioned that the high school students could cook for themselves on the weekend, "We could eat what we want, what we used to eat at home. Everybody hollered for bologna and rice and corn." For residential school survivors like Irene, bologna was a food that was associated with home.

Some of the younger participants did not share the older participants' nostalgic views of bologna, associating it instead with poverty. At the focus group, Bridget, 36, reacted to a description of bologna, rice and corn, with, "I really thought until I just read this that my mom had made that up because we were poor. I didn't really realize other people ate that too." She also added, "I noticed at school that there was things like ham, salami... I noticed rich kids had ham and salami with lettuce and stuff on their sandwiches...and I got bologna and bread." Her comments resonated with Garnet, 58, who said, "I've always related bologna...with the poor side of town too...I always associated bologna with not being able to afford good kinds of meats and stuff. Good red meat." His view of bologna as a substandard food was also evident in a comment he made about growing up in foster homes, where he was sometimes treated differently from the "regular kids," as in, "the family's having a roast or something...They fed me stuff like bologna and macaroni...." These comments show a shift in views of bologna over time: for older participants it was once a luxury, but younger participants considered it a "poor food."

Participants discussed other negative associations with bologna as well. One participant stated that while she used to eat bologna, now she thinks about "how much isn't really meat" (Myra, 31). Similarly, while Louie, 73, had previously described bologna as being a favourite food, since meeting his wife of several years, he no longer eats it because of "all the junk they put in there." Lorna, 57, pointed out that it contains additives, and is concerned that "you're getting nitrosamines produced in your stomach, which is a cancer causing chemical." Whether

participants may have previously associated bologna with being rich or being poor, it appears that over time, they have become increasingly concerned with the quality of these products and their potential ill effects on physical health. The additives that once enabled access to such products, when refrigeration was uncommon, are now understood to have ill effects for health.

Despite the shifting meanings of bologna, participants' comments suggest that this food is associated with Indigenous peoples and their communities. The language some participants used exemplifies this association; several described bologna as "Indian steak" or "Indian round steak." Bridget, 36, used this language when she shared the story of when she moved to Terrace:

I didn't grow up around here...I came here and everybody was talking about Indian round steak...I didn't know what that was going to be and it sounded good, but it was bologna!

Rona, 53, also described bologna as "today Indian food," and provided some insight on why she felt it remains common among Indigenous families, saying, "...there's no alternative...when you can pay three dollars for some bologna, but you've gotta pay 50 dollars at the butchers for a piece of moose meat, which one are you gonna to get?"

However, there may be more to bologna than its relatively low cost and accessibility. After a hearty discussion about bologna in the focus group, Bridget, 36, shared some thoughts that suggest that bologna may also provide links to family and ancestors:

Well, I feel like I was being raised more traditional than I thought. I had no idea. I really thought, you know, that I was the only one being subjected to bologna, rice and corn. Now, I feel almost privileged that my mom did share that. I feel bad for all the times I snubbed my nose at it and criticized her for feeding it to us. Here she thought she was giving us something from her home, from her past.

Fiona, 27, also used the term "traditional" in speaking about how her gran prepared bologna, saying, "She would always like it fried, with rice and creamed corn. That was pretty much a traditional side dish..." Her comment, and those of other participants, suggests that bologna is a long-standing food item in their families and communities.

This examination of participants' views on bologna exemplifies how the meanings of food are context dependent. For the older participants, this food was once a rare treat or luxury, but today it is more likely to be associated with poverty and poor health. Bologna's denigrated status may explain why although most participants discussed bologna, not one person took a picture of it for this research. Despite this and the self-deprecating humour implied in the term "Indian steak," it appeared that there remains something "Indian" about bologna. Consider, for example, the menu for a community Chinese New Year dinner in Kitsumkalum, where "curried bologna suey" is offered alongside other fusion dishes like herring egg chop suey and seaweed chop suey. In this case, the bologna, much like the clam fritters, is an example of the "Indian" contribution to this celebratory meal. This menu, and participants' comments about bologna, makes a case for the "indigenization" of bologna into the local diet.

*Case Study #4: Chow mein*



**Figure 3:** Chow mein and China Lily soya sauce

Chow mein's like a comfort food, you know, it's like something my mom made all the time...it's one of the foods that [my aunt] and my mom learned how to cook from my grandmother....

(Bridget, 36)

Chow mein is a common fusion food, a versatile stir-fried dish, with noodles forming its base, and various combinations of meat and vegetables added in. It has been adapted to reflect regional tastes and locally sourced ingredients in many countries (Lim, 2006; Newman, 2010). Several participants confirmed that chow mein is a common meal for Indigenous families in the area. Fiona, Bridget, and Marcie described that they often ate it at home, while Garnet, Irene, and Ruth stated that it was a popular meal with local Aboriginal families. The popularity of chow mein was emphasized by Irene, 72, who described making it for fundraising events in Kitsumkalum and declared it was one of their “number one sellers.” It is also a special food for Fiona, 27, who described that chow mein was a break from her daily fare of seafood when she lived with her gran in Kitamat village,

Part of it was like a treat, like, whenever we'd go to town we'd always go to a Chinese restaurant ... it has all [my favourite vegetables] in it and just a different flavour instead of having what I grew up on.

Participants described chow mein as economical, easy and quick to make, versatile, healthy and tasty. Bridget, 36, emphasized its low cost:

Chow mein's like a quick and easy one-pot dish that my mom used to always make for us, and there's a lot of vegetables in it and it can feed large numbers of people. ...You can feed like fifteen people for like twelve bucks, right, so my mom used to make chow mein quite often, chow mein and rice, and then that would be our meal at least twice a week.

Bridget also appreciated its versatility,

You can put whatever vegetables...that you have, right. It's a good use of vegetables...and whatever meat or seafood that you have goes well in chow mein. You can even make chow mein with herring eggs on kelp.

Garnet, 58, also talked about “herring egg chow mein,” and other participants described chow mein made with other locally sourced foods. Garnet mentioned that he also liked to make it with moose meat, while Ruth, 77, observed, “I seen where people put seaweed in, chopped seaweed, just mix it....” Clearly, for these participants, chow mein is a popular meal that can be prepared in many different ways.

The popularity of chow mein is also evident by its regular appearance at feasts and other community dinners. Bridget, 36, mentioned “at a feast or community gatherings, potlucks, people will bring it.” Later, she listed foods that are commonly served at such events, and includes chow mein again, “Herring eggs. China Lily. Chow mein is always there. Somebody fries up fish, lots of different kinds of fried fish. Oolichans, spaghetti, KFC, mixed berries....” Garnet's comments support her observations; he mentioned that in addition to fish and seafood, “you see a lot of roast beef, chow meins - different types of chow meins.” I asked what he thought of seeing such foods at feasts and community dinners, to which he replied, “today it's sort of normal.” Based on these comments, it appears that chow mein is a normal part of both family meals and community dinners.

Participants illustrated that chow mein is a popular, economical and versatile dish that is frequently consumed by local Indigenous families. Some families had eaten it for generations. This has become another indigenized fusion food, now considered “Indian.” This notion is supported by the fact that participants described making it with locally sourced ingredients, such as herring eggs on kelp, seaweed and moose.

## Discussion and conclusion

Analysis of these results suggest that the Indigenous participants in this study thought about what to eat in ways that most Canadians do—a complex mix of health concerns, affordability, availability, tastes, and cultural and family habits and traditions. In the ordinary, day-to-day navigation of food provisioning, cooking and eating, participants didn't appear to think about whether foods were traditional. But when specifically asked, what they considered as traditional



food was not always simple or straightforward. For the most part, participants understood traditional foods to be those that are familiar and meaningful to their families and community, though they couldn't always classify them with certainty. Participants definitely categorized as traditional local foods that are hunted, fished and gathered, just as academic researchers and health practitioners would. These foods were highly valued; participants bemoaned the relative inaccessibility of many of these foods because of cost, lack of geographic access and lack of knowledge about how to harvest, preserve or prepare them. They also worried about the potential of environmental contaminants in wild foods.

Many participants also considered as “traditional” foods that they or their families had eaten for a long time and were not indigenous to the area. Some of these foods, like rice and potatoes, were practical and filling, important for families who were forced into poverty by colonial disruption of their cultures. Similar to what Walsh (2014; 2016) has described for the Dene in remote regions of the Northwest Territories, these foods have become “naturalized” or integrated into the diet because of their practicality and are now taken-for-granted and unremarkable. Others, like bologna, achieved high status because they had to be purchased, and provided variety and change from the usual diet. Other foods sometimes considered traditional, like chow mein, were inventive fusion foods that combined locally sourced and store-bought ingredients.

This hybridization of the diet demonstrates an openness to change, suggesting that change does not threaten but rather enlivens cultural traditions. This ability to absorb, incorporate and indigenize new foods is a sign of cultural dynamism and strength. As cultural critic Edward Said describes, “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic” (Said, 1994, p. xxv). The blurring of boundaries in Indigenous fusion food, mixing locally gathered, fished or hunted foods with non-local ones disrupts the dichotomy of “traditional-nontraditional.” This dichotomy tends to freeze “authentic” Indigenous culture in the past and delegitimize as “inauthentic” the changes that vibrant and resilient cultures make to adapt. Such dichotomies can unintentionally reinforce a “self-other” distinction that supports colonial ideas of Indigenous people as exotic, close to nature, and primitive (Said, 1979).

Thomas King (2013) argues that there is a pervasive North American myth (presumably among non-Indigenous people) that Indigenous peoples and cultures are “trapped in a state of stasis.” Only three participants spoke of culture and tradition as “static”—something that can be lost, taken away, eroded, brought back, remembered, or learned. They understood cultural change as “loss” or decay, and understood cultural survival as a return to pre-contact cultural and dietary practices. For example, Garnet, 58, who came to know his Indigenous heritage as an adult, explained that, “Once the Europeans came here...our traditions and our culture started dying.”

Nevertheless, most participants spoke about social and cultural change in more positive tones, suggesting that culture was flexible and dynamic. For example, in discussing China Lily soya sauce, Bridget, 36, invoked a notion of cultural evolution, growth and change:

It may not be something that people would consider traditional if you're strictly looking at...our culture, say, a hundred fifty years ago, but that's looking at culture in a more stagnated way. I believe that culture evolves and grows and changes with peoples' environments, so I consider traditional food one that my mother and my grandmother used that I still use. So if I go back two, maybe even three, generations, China Lily was there....

Myra, 31, one of the youngest participants, most poignantly summed up a view of Indigenous cultures as fluid and evolving, “Aboriginal isn't just about what was before—it's what's happening now.” Such comments suggest that what is deemed to be culturally relevant or traditional need not be limited to what existed prior to European contact; it can also include practices and traditions that have developed in response to ever-changing circumstances.

A positive view about cultural change allows Indigenous peoples to be seen, and to see themselves and their ancestors, as creative and resilient human beings, with dynamic, lively cultures that are capable of change, not fixed in the past or static. Like other peoples, they draw from the past to creatively adapt to the present and the future. This more hopeful view of cultural change is in line with Indigenous goals of self-determination, because it takes for granted that Indigenous peoples themselves know what is in their own best interests in shaping their futures. This must be respected in research and health promotion activities targeting Indigenous peoples. In fact, the implications for working with Indigenous peoples are no different than when working with any other group: one needs to know about their specific needs and concerns before acting. Their priorities, agency, creativity and resilience must inform all endeavors that aim to address the food and health-related issues they face.

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