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Book Review

Speaking in Cod Tongues

Lenore Newman
University of Regina Press, 2017: 275 pages

Review by Ellen Desjardins

This work is book-ended with banquets: in the first and final chapters we are treated to an historic description of the grand meals that accompanied the final negotiations of Canadian Confederation in Halifax, Nova Scotia—a most appropriate way to reimagine Canada's birth 100 years ago. It lends a fascinating social dimension to the politics and place of that event, showing how food served to "break the ice" and to whip up "eloquent, champagne-fueled" speeches among the founding fathers. It also showcases a smorgasbord of status food locally available at that time, dominated by seafood and both wild and domestic meat and poultry.

Newman is a geographer, and she builds her Canadian culinary journey around the notion of *sitopia*, or food place. Sitopias, she says, "have a wide reach, and beneath this practical surface food exhibits a deep cultural complexity" (p.20). This is in fact how she frames her material throughout: the practical surface takes the form of the myriad of restaurants, markets and street vendors across Canada that served up her subject matter—complemented by the complex stories that reveal how these foods became locally typical. It is a mélange, as she says, of the geographical and the cultural. The result is a kaleidoscopic parade of foods-in-place that help us explore the question, "what is Canadian cuisine?" (hint: it's more than maple syrup and poutine), but also "how did cuisine in Canada come about?" and "how is Canadian cuisine continuing to change in the modern world?".

Newman is up front about the scope of her work, stressing that this book is about *cuisine*, not sustenance. In a chapter devoted to the concept of cuisine, Newman makes the argument that restaurants and other public food places, distinct from the home kitchen, are the main locales where food identities are forged, where active intersection of food cultures occurs, and where personal "place" is made significant and memorable through eating together, travelling, relaxing,

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or working. More than tradition, cuisine is—as Newman points out—more like a *language* "that exposes the soul of a place" (p. 229). Hence, "cod tongues": food speaks, and people speak through food. This brings in the possibility of the on-going global influence from which various food cultures are selectively incorporated into existing ones, all becoming part of Canadian cuisine. In this manner, cuisine creates place as much as place creates cuisine.

This book is more than the discoveries and tastes emerging from a personal, 40,000 km journey across the country. Newman introduces and explores food-related concepts destined to join the lexicon of food writers and researchers, such as "Canadian creole", meaning food that has gone beyond "fusion" and has entered the mainstream. Human geographical concepts like Lefebvre's *rhythmanalysis* become meaningful when applied to seasonal eating. Similarly, Bourdieu's *habitus*, Tuan's *topophilia*, Soya's *sociospatial dialectic*, Cook & Crang's *geographical knowledges*, and Appadurai's argument against authenticity…. these all come alive in the context of place-based food culture. In the spirit of place-over-time, Newman offers a final insightful chapter on "an uncertain future", in which she expounds on key foods or crops (like salmon, cod, maple syrup, etc.) that are at risk due to climate change.

Newman's captivating, colourful writing style is what makes this book so much fun to read. In an idiosyncratic way, she introduces us to her favourite (and newly-discovered) food places, and invites us to learn why they matter so much. It is not a compendium of Canadian foods, nor is it a travel guide for newcomers to various parts of the country, although it could serve those purposes. More intriguingly, if you can visualize pemmican as a "early protein bar" (p. 42), or imagine why you could find the Newfoundland dish "Jigg's dinner" (a pudding of salt beef, potato, turnip, carrot, cabbage, and split peas) in Fort McMurray, Alberta (p.163), then you are filling in the blanks of Canadian cuisine.

A culinary journey cannot be exhaustive, and it is unfair to critique it for overlooking certain places. However, Newman must have crossed the 650 kilometers of Saskatchewan's width either in the dark or by air, because food places in this province are absent in her book. While an entire page is devoted to exciting sitopias in the tiny Maritime island of Fogo, the only reference to Saskatchewan is the existence of a city named after the Saskatoon berry. Newman does engage the very relevant question of "what is a region?", insisting that regions are not defined by boundaries, but are "spaces of conversation where culture and nature interact…" (p. 116). In that line of thinking, Saskatchewan is subsumed mutely into The Prairies, without a chance to voice its historical status as "breadbasket of the world", never mind the countless public spaces—rural and urban—where people blend their culinary experiences. It does beg the questions of inclusivity and elitism in assembling a language of Canadian cuisine; but Newman freely admits to other limitations as well: a broader exploration of food places in the vast Canadian North was understandably beyond the scope of this volume, as is a "full account of Canada's varied Indigenous cuisines" (p.15).

What stands out about *Speaking in Cod Tongues*, overall, is the immense amount of research that has poured into it, making it a rich source of information for anyone interested in food, including itinerant foodies or students of food culture. This is a considerable feat, given

that many authors have written about various aspects of Canadian cuisines and food history—many of which Newman cites throughout. Hopefully it will inspire more such research, as the growing cultural, religious and ethnic mix of Canada's population continues to be reflected in its cuisines.

Ellen Desjardins has a PhD in human geography, obtained after her career as a community nutritionist in Ontario. Her research has included cultural, socio-political, geographical, and agricultural aspects of food and the food system as they are linked with human behaviour.