



Original Research Article

**Honouring the grandmothers through (re)membering,
(re)learning, and (re)vitalizing Métis traditional foods
and protocols**

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Abstract

In Canada, Métis cultural restoration continues to advance. Food practices and protocols, from the vantage point of Métis women who were traditionally responsible for domestic work, qualify as important subjects worthy of study because food and food work are integral components of family health and well-being. This qualitative grounded theory study explored Métis cultural food in Manitoba, Canada, with the intent to honour Métis women. In-depth interviews were conducted with Métis residents of urban Winnipeg and southern rural Manitoba. Results indicate that women were traditionally the keepers of culinary knowledge and practices in Métis families, and were highly resourceful in feeding large families and often other community members. Traditional foods were often land-based (wild and cultivated) and frequently enhanced with market foods. There is a strong sense of history, pride, identity, and desire for revitalization through cultural activities such as food practices; however, disrupted cultural knowledge translation around food and the nutrition transition to unhealthy Western diets present challenges. Results of this research will provide Manitoba Métis people with opportunities for critical reflection on food and their identity as Métis; food origins; the role of food in our lives; and how ecological and political structures affect the production and consumption of food. In addition, this research will provide an alternative discourse as it relates to Métis food, supporting a holistic approach to overall health and well-being that is self-affirming and strength-based.

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Introduction

We Métis carry the stories our grandmothers told. We carry them and we survive. (Mayer, 2007)

Food practices and protocols, from the vantage point of Métis women who were traditionally responsible for domestic work, is an important subject because food is both medicinal and cultural. When cultural knowledge associated with foodways¹ is shared within and among communities, food has the capacity to heal and nourish the human spirit and create shared identities. Métis people, the children born of the coalescence between First Nations women and European traders during the Fur Trade (1600-1800s), are one of three recognized Indigenous groups in Canada under Section 35(2) of the Canadian Constitution Act [Canadian Constitution, 1982, s35(2)], and are (re)asserting and (re)vitalizing Métis cultural identity. Exercising Métis rights and identity have been important goals of past and present pursuits, which have paved the way for further exploration regarding Métis cultural health in Manitoba (Préfontaine, Dione, Young, & Farell Racette, 2003). Métis are shedding the layer of shame that has inflicted our people over the last century due to racist and oppressive policies meant to keep us down as a nation. Despite the heresies of colonial oppression, Métis collectively stand in solidarity with pride, consciously vocalizing a readiness to (re)assert cultural roots.

The purpose of this research was to investigate Métis people's perceptions and experiences of food practices and foodways taught from women in their families. Importantly, by exploring women's work, Métis participants were given a platform to honour Métis women for their unique role in nurturing family life, specifically in the domain of foodwork. Throughout this research, questions were asked such as: What do urban and rural Métis people consider traditional foods? How are these traditional foods linked to Métis identity and well-being? What important cultural lessons are associated with Métis traditional foods? How can traditional foods be (re)learned, (re)remembered, and (re)vitalized in rural southern Manitoba including urban Winnipeg? What are potential barriers and/or opportunities to accessing and consuming Métis traditional foods?

Background

Métis women are the culinary vessels in their homes. Food is essential to sustaining Métis health and family life, which are intrinsically connected. Yet, neither subject has been empirically explored. Consequently, a cultural-health gap exists. In Canada, Métis cultural restoration continues to advance within the Canadian narrative, where we as Indigenous² women aim to

¹ Foodways - the production, preparation, serving and eating of food (Parsons, 2014)

² The term Indigenous carries political implications for the First Peoples of the world, respecting that Indigenous peoples are bounded by similar worldviews yet our cultures are uniquely distinct.

create space and capture the fruitful seeds of our epistemologies in their many spheres, including food and foodwork, because as Smith (2012) so eloquently asserted “Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our ways, for our own purposes” (p. 29).

Moreover, prior to the emergence of female Indigenous scholars in recent decades, women’s roles were absent from the literature, or where present, contained white-male biases (Van Kirk, 1980). Importantly, contributions of Indigenous research and epistemological worldviews that are not written in the spirit of collaboration *with* Indigenous peoples *for* Indigenous peoples arguably lack meaningful posture. Consequently, in keeping with principles of Métis ethics, this research was conducted by a Métis scholar with other Métis community members.

Furthermore, although Indigenous groups share similar worldviews, Métis culture is a fusion of diverse cultural sources and is celebrated as unique (Saul, 2008). Importantly, recognizing, respecting, and addressing distinct needs of all three recognized Indigenous groups in Canada are key components of reconciliation as outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). It becomes vital then, that pan-Indigenous perspectives are avoided that may otherwise stifle Métis representation, self-determination, and cultural identity (Evans et al., 2012).

Métis philosophies

Métis philosophies are based on Métis cultural values and principles that have been laid out by Métis Elders. The Métis philosophies outlined below informed this research, and were derived from *In the Words of Our Ancestors: Métis Health and Healing* (Métis Centre, National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2008). The Métis philosophies suggest that:

- women are the life-force behind the centrality of family;
- knowledge must be shared;
- people should seek the knowledge from those who have the knowledge;
- Métis are encouraged to learn the Michif language from oral histories and traditional knowledge;
- acknowledging the person who shared the knowledge is to honour the person and their oral traditions; and
- learning and recording the Métis cultural protocols is important in order to pass the knowledge down.

Methods

This qualitative research was informed by Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology to explore Métis foodways and cultural protocols while at the same time honour Métis women.

CGT aims to explore social processes where prior theories do not adequately exist. It captures the fluidity of on-going interaction between researcher and participant and thus actions and meaning are shaped (Hallberg, 2006). CGT was suited for this research because it “located the research process and product in historical, social, and situational conditions” (Charmaz, 2016). This critical inquiry investigated Métis historical foodways, their social context, and how these manifest in people’s lives today. CGT also acknowledges the roles of participants as well as the researcher in knowledge construction (Watling, 2012). This is consistent with the Métis philosophies outlined above. CGT has also been identified as suitable methodology for Indigenous research (Elers, 2016; Kandasamy et al., 2017) as well as investigating sociocultural aspects of food (Blow, Patel, Davies, & Gregg ., 2019).

The population of interest for this study was Métis people who reside in Winnipeg, Manitoba (MB) and surrounding rural communities in Manitoba. Participant recruitment utilized purposive and snowball sampling (Braun & Clark, 2013). The lead researcher contacted members of the Métis community who she knew were cultural knowledge keepers. They recommended initial participants as part of the sampling process. The sampling process led to women and men who could provide insight into family food traditions.

A semi-structured interview guide was generated with the help of four Métis community members. In-person feedback was collected at individual meetings and incorporated into the final guide. Prior to the interviews, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire. In addition, participants were asked to name the women in their lives who have had the most impact in their families as it relates to culinary preparations, food knowledge, and cultural protocols.

All interviews took place in participants’ homes using the Kitchen Table reflexivity approach (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2014). This approach shifts the interview dynamic to allow greater agency over their narrative because the dialogue occurs in their familiar setting. Interviews ranged from one hour to three hours, not including time spent getting to know each other. All interviews except two were digitally recorded. Two participants preferred not to be digitally recorded, however, were comfortable with note-taking during the interview. With permission from participants, note-taking was practiced during all interviews.

All interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim by the researcher or trained transcriber. NVivo software was used to organize the data and facilitate analysis. Within hours of the conducted interviews, detailed reflexive memos were recorded in a journal which contained personal reflections on the researcher’s experience of interviewing members of her Métis community. For this study, open and complete coding, by hand, allowed for core categories to emerge. Open coding is the initial process to begin assigning codes (labels) to excerpts whereas complete coding is the process of assigning labels to the entire data set (every excerpt) (Charmaz, 2006). The two approaches worked in tandem with each other. For example, all sentences, one at a time, in the transcription were carefully scrutinized while asking “how does the data relate to the research questions?”

Next, the constant comparative approach was utilized which compares transcript data in order to explore variations, similarities and differences which help move core categories into

themes and sub-themes (Dick, 2000). Flipping back and forth among the data sets, distinct themes from the core categories emerged. Themes are the *central organizing concepts* that have answered your research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Lastly, axial coding served to collapse relationships between themes and sub-themes. Axial coding serves to connect relationships between themes and sub-themes based on similarities in the categories (Hallberg, 2006). This can be interpreted as unveiling the story. For this research, five themes and eight sub-themes emerged.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Manitoba Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board and individual consent was obtained from all participants. In addition, approval for this project was granted by the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) to ensure the project and methodology employed were culturally appropriate.

Results

A total of 21 in-depth face-to-face interviews took place throughout rural and urban Winnipeg, Manitoba. Three dyads included mother and daughter, brother and sister, and cousins. One triad consisted of a mother and her two daughters. A group consisted of five females, of whom four are Elders. Eighteen women and three men ranged in age from 37 to 79 years old. Eleven people resided in urban Winnipeg, whereas, the other ten lived in rural areas surrounding Winnipeg including locations such as: Lorette, Stonewall, St. Laurent, St. Anne, and St. Malo. Findings of this research were based on personal experience and memories of food and the important women in participants' lives. All participants in this study could vividly recall childhood memories associated with the foods and recipes prepared by women in their families. Participants described their personal or family food history over multiple generations. These memories provided a lens on the Métis "foodscape" in Manitoba.

In the upcoming sections five themes are described and include: powerful memories; Métis women at work; matriarchal culinary vessels; Métis food heritage and identity; wanting a resilient food system. The first theme describes various foods that made up participants' diets including foods deemed traditional. The second theme describes *how* such foods and dishes were prepared, followed by the third theme which describes how foodwork played a role in relationships and space. The fourth theme links food practices to identity, and the final theme provides a platform for self-determination.

Powerful memories: Métis food landscapes and protocols

For Métis families in this study, powerful childhood memories were associated with hunting, harvesting, gardening, farming, fishing, and neo-traditional³ recipes that combined both land and

³ Neo-traditional foods are market foods/ingredients that contribute to cultural recipes that are viewed as traditional

market foods. Discussing memories for participants also revealed how certain *types* of foods or meals came to be understood as *traditional*. The term traditional was connected to factors such as: if it were hunted; its deliciousness; familiarity; if prepared for special occasions; if prepared in abundance; and importantly, the stories attached to the recipes that their grandmothers prepared.

Many ingredients were purchased from the store including flour to make bread and bannock, which for many participants was served daily. Urban and rural participants grew up consuming primarily the same foods but not necessarily at the same time in their lives. This is because, at one point or another, all participants had stated that they either lived with their families in rural communities or maintained ties with family members who lived in rural communities. When families migrated to Winnipeg foods such as wild game, water fowl and fish became less accessible.

Wild game such as moose, muskrat, venison, and rabbit were reported as traditional as were water fowl such as duck, geese, and muskrat because of their presence in participant' diets. Three participants reported also eating beaver, however, their responses suggested that beaver was not necessarily a desirable meat and was consumed when other game was unavailable. Fish such as jack, pickerel, sucker, and white fish were the most commonly mentioned fish that were consumed.

Within Métis families, a large part of women's work was gardening. Although a variety of vegetables were viewed as an essential part of participants' diets, the term traditional was used to describe only potatoes. Some families reported harvesting two gardens, while for another family had three gardens, producing potatoes, vegetables, and flowers. Contrarily, one family reported that they did not have access to a garden and felt that only families "with money" had gardens.

Saskatoon berries, raspberries, low bush cranberries, mossberries, and strawberries were referred to as traditional foods by several participants because they were often available, delicious tasting, and reminded participants of their mothers. Gathering berries was laborious and that duty was assigned to children.

Many participants reported living on a farm and raising livestock, which provided chicken, pork and beef, ingredients in several family recipes. For example, chicken pot pies, cabbage pork soup thickened with flour, and pork stew were family favorites. Cattle were of importance because they provided milk, cream for butter, and ground beef for hamburger, considered a versatile ingredient. It was used in soups, mixed in with gravy and poured over boiled potatoes, or made into meatballs known as "les boulettes" all of which are still viewed as family classics and enjoyed by some participants today.

Wild rice, a plant crop, was also referred to as traditional food. It was a dish that participants vividly remembered eating because of the rigorous process involved to harvest it. Often participants spoke of meals that combined traditional foods (grown, harvested, or hunted) with purchased goods such as dried peas, macaroni, rice, and processed meats and cheeses. These 'neo-traditional' recipes became popular 'go-to' dishes for many Métis families because

of the volume they provided, inexpensive ingredients, good taste, and convenience they afforded busy mothers. These dishes became staple foods in the diets of Métis families and have since attained traditional status among Métis families.

Yeah I don't understand it but his favourite is bologna and jam, bologna and strawberry jam. You cannot get more Métis than bologna and strawberry jam sandwich, like you can't. [F, Urban]

Other purchased foods included bacon and fats such as lard and butter, which were used for baking and frying. Bacon fat drippings were saved and stored in cans to reuse for spreads, re-frying, or flavouring. Often, warm grease was enjoyed with a slice of bread or bannock, where the texture of the bread made it easy to soak up the fat.

For participants, discussing bread and bannock brought positive memories associated with their mother or grandmother's delicious recipe. A positive memory for many participants included watching their grandmothers leaning over a large table while making several loaves of bannock or bread for the week.

Celebratory meals & desserts

For participants, memories of celebratory holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's included a great deal of special food when grandmothers pulled out their best recipes. Some food terms were described in Michif, the Métis language. "Les boulettes" (oversized boiled meatballs) were deemed a Métis specialty by several participants and usually only served during holiday gatherings due to the amount of work required to prepare the recipe. Rabbit's brains, headcheese, "boudan" (blood sausage), and pea soup were also remembered as specialty Métis foods.

Additionally, holiday celebrations meant that special desserts were made. According to one participant, pies were often made by a designated woman in the family whose specialty was baking. The technique required for mastering lemon meringue pie from scratch required specific culinary skills; hence, participants expressed that only women who were deemed *great cooks* could successfully make meringue pie. Three families expressed that, despite the dessert being a family favorite, lemon meringue pies were no longer made from scratch because of lack of skill and/or time, or the recipe had not been passed down; therefore, pre-packaged pies were opted for instead.

"Potato sac" or "pudding in a bag" was a favorite Métis dessert served at Christmas dinners and included dried fruit such as raisins or currants. The sweet dessert had the texture of fruit cake and was eaten warm with a brown sugar sauce poured over it. This was made from brown sugar and butter and heated on the stove. Bread pudding was another cherished recipe made with brown sugar. The labour and process it took to make these desserts, in addition to their deliciousness, is why they were deemed traditional specialty dishes.

“Tourtiere” was another common specialty savoury pie served during holiday meal gatherings; however, the ingredients for what makes this pie traditional were controversial. Some participants argued that traditional tourtiere should only be made purely with pork, and never to include beef, whereas, others stated that a combination of beef and pork ingredients still constituted a traditional pie.

When I grew up it was a big deal about meat pie was whether you put 100 percent pork in it which is the French recipe or if you mixed in the beef to cut the porkiness, and what percentage was the sweet spot if you believed in mixing the two and there was no other kind, like I was quite a bit older before someone snuck in an onion or a mushroom. [F, 58, Urban]

Métis women at work: Culinary methods and preservation

Participants described how their mothers prepared and preserved foods for their families. Such knowledge provides insight into Métis culinary methods, which were described as laborious and time consuming. Large intergenerational Métis families meant women had to batch cook in large quantities to provide the food volume to meet their family’s dietary needs. Bread and bannock along with vegetable or meat soups or stews were foods made frequently and in abundance. Meats were usually served with potatoes (boiled, fried, or mashed) and a combination of other garden vegetables that had been boiled or pickled. One family particularly enjoyed the taste of boiled cow neck bones, a process that took several hours.

Families caught their own fish, which was prepared and eaten in several ways including sandwiches, fish cakes, and soup. Fish soup was made by boiling the head of the fish. Women canned fish, which was prepared at home, mixed with mayonnaise and used as a tasty sandwich filling. Additionally, fish was smoked in outdoor smokers, baked whole with the scales removed, or steamed directly on top of potatoes.

Various ingredients were added to wild rice dishes including butter, onions, celery, mushrooms, and at times bacon. Bacon, a high cost commodity, was viewed as a speciality item and therefore held a prized status in dishes. For example, one participant explained that her family only purchased bacon on pay days, representing relief from weeks of hardship.

Granny would put mushroom, celery, onions, mushroom soup... sometimes, uh bacon. It was always, we knew that she got paid if there was bacon in it. [F, Rural]

Berries were gathered and eaten fresh or mothers preserved them into jams and jellies. They were enjoyed in many ways including ice cream topping, in pies, or eaten with milk.

Traditionally, women cooked with only salt and pepper or minimal spices, which some participants described as the “Métis way of cooking”. For some, this bland cooking is still preferred in their adult life. Sometimes more flavours and spices were introduced later in life, usually by the children of families who moved into urban centres and had greater access to a wider range of foods.

Preservation methods

Pickling, canning, and cold storage were the most common preservation methods reported. Commonly, women prepared a variety of pickles such as dill, sweet, bread, and mustard. Meat and fish were also preserved through a process of canning in salt and vinegar. According to one participant, using vinegar to can meat was necessary to soften bones. The same participant stated that a high level of culinary skill was necessary to can meat otherwise, if done incorrectly, it could cause illness. Additionally, whole cleaned fish were preserved by freezing it in empty milk cartons filled with water. Berries were canned in jars with sugar and referred to as “preserves”. Berry recipes that did not gel properly were used for other purposes such as syrup because food waste was rarely practiced. One participant referred to this un-gelled syrup as “failed jam”.

Matriarchal culinary vessels on the home front: Roles & relationships

Community building and family bonds were established and strengthened as a result of the workings within the kitchen, where Métis women asserted their territorial influence. Food teachings occurred through the complex web of intergenerational kinship among women and their families.

Party’s in the kitchen: Métis women embrace family and community

For Métis women, food work was a conduit to family connectedness and community bonds. Women, as the main family food providers, were busy from morning to night orchestrating the meals for family and friends. The kitchen was deemed the place to connect, laugh, and share stories. Kitchens were community hubs and food was the centre of this hospitality. Regardless of who you were or the reason for the visit everyone was welcome in Métis homes. Participants acknowledged that despite the impoverishment of many Métis families, whatever food was available was shared with family and guests. Some participants felt that such gestures signified the “good old days.” Cultural food mannerisms included staying to eat, regardless of how short the visit was intended to be. To decline an invitation would have been construed as rude.

And you can’t say no either, even if you go drop something off and you owed someone money and you’d go.... they’re eating and it’s like—oh

darn they're eating...here's the money, quick and go. Nope you sit down here...oh ok I gotta eat. [F, Rural]

Some participants expressed that they were considered a “*favourite*” grandchild, which was conveyed each time they were selected over others to partake in kitchen work. The time spent alone with grandmother in the kitchen, in silence, was representative of the strong relationships that existed between them. Kitchen-time awarded to grandchildren was deemed prestigious and held in high regard because it was an opportunity to bond.

Additionally, family bonds were also evident in the role that an aunt played. Aunties were viewed as loving and nurturing individuals who provided foundational “glue” among families, often gifting desserts and other sweets to nieces and nephews. Many participants mentioned that their aunts provided culinary guidance in ways their mothers did not and played a key part in the process of transmitting cooking skills. Aunties were viewed as affectionate and gentle when answering food-related questions, whereas mothers' responses to foodwork were at times deemed strict or abrupt, thus participants described that they would seek culinary advice from an Aunty. Through the language of edification, it was evident that these women played an important role in transmitting culinary knowledge to nieces.

Grandma's kitchen was her domain

Participants' personal accounts expose that kitchen territory was understood to be strictly the matriarch's domain, and kitchen access was granted according to age. Young children were not allowed in the kitchen and were often told to go play outside. The responsibilities of the more tedious tasks of peeling, chopping, and or washing dishes were assigned to older female children.

I guess I've been cooking since I was very young. Like I've been cooking for my family since I was 9 years old. It is because I'm the oldest. [F, Rural]

A common perception for several participants was that they did not learn how to cook from their mother simply because they were not allowed in the kitchen. Some participants report that learning to cook was a skill developed later in life, after they had married. However, some participants expressed negative emotions and feelings of inadequacy because of missed kitchen-work opportunities, due to dismissals. For example, one participant projected frustration towards her mother when sharing her personal experience of being ousted from the kitchen at a young age. For her, feelings of rejection, anger, and disinterest in kitchen work have manifested throughout adulthood.

When I was growing up I remember trying to do dishes when I was three years old and I dropped one...never, ever allowed to touch dishes again. To this day I can't stand doing dishes and she gets mad because I don't

like doing the dishes – ‘you’ll break it’! She would never let me touch the dishes growing up and I don’t like doing dishes now. [F, Urban]

Another participant felt that, had she been allowed to participate in the food work as child, she may have become a stronger cook as an adult and perhaps would enjoy the task more than she does. Her rationale is based on the differences she sees between herself and her sisters, who she feels are better cooks because they were allowed to help in the kitchen.

Métis food heritage and culture provide further insight into Métis identity

Study results demonstrated that Métis communities were diverse, and therefore, it was common to incorporate ingredients or swap recipes shared by other women in the community. Throughout interviews, at times, there was a pull from participants directing comments into either their Indigenous heritage or towards their European heritage. For example,

“Do you want me to access my Métis side through all of it?” [F, Rural].

Another participant expressed uncertainty whether cucumber sandwiches, a food he grew up eating, could be classified as a Métis food because it was recognizable as European:

“Cucumbers though, we thought that was our English heritage not our Métis heritage.” [M, Urban].

Participants also identified important cultural food values and beliefs rooted in land knowledge, hunting practices, and ceremonial practices.

Fusion cuisine

Several participants discussed how their grandmothers “borrowed” recipes from their neighbors or married into lineages that would introduce them to recipes from other heritages, typically European. This was the result of settler immigration to Manitoba from predominantly European countries and living in close settlements in the Red River Valley. Participants who grew up in St. Laurent reported that holiday celebrations with community members included various Polish and Ukrainian dishes such as perogies⁴ and holopchi⁵. One participant’s family favored a dessert

⁴ Perogies are a small dough dumpling with a filling such as potato or cheese, typically served with onions or sour cream.

⁵ Holopchi are Ukrainian cabbage rolls made from hamburger (or sausage), rice, and onion rolled into a cabbage leaf.

called *vinartartar*,⁶ which originated from Icelandic traditions and how the dessert came to be absorbed in her family is described below.

...and on my Grandma's side because we lived in the Red River Valley and so there was lots of Icelandic people there back in the day. And so it was a delicacy. [F, Rural]

Some participants expressed dual identities when discussing their food experiences. For example, participants would describe foods such as wild meats specific to their Indigenous heritage; whereas European foods were often connected to their European heritage. Because of their Métis heritage, people frequently categorized food as being from one world or the other.

Rooted land-based food values and beliefs

The analysis of Métis foodways and protocols showed that participants had strong intrinsic connections to the land. Many participants felt that spending time in the bush, whether picking berries, hunting, or cooking outdoors, evoked a sense of rootedness to a preferred way of living. For one of the elderly participants, her childhood memory of travelling far distances to a remote island that lodged her family's small cabin meant staying connected to what was an important part of her childhood—outdoor camping and distant relatives. She expressed that, for her, those experiences in the “bush” provided opportunities that were inaccessible in the city.

Deep embedded values and protocols revolved around respectful ways to honor the hunting process including the tools required and the cultural processes adhered to after the animal was killed. For example, it was important to ensure that guns and ammunition were protected and securely stored. Also, it was important to avoid killing does (female deer) to ensure the life-cycle flourished. Several participants explained ways to utilize all parts of an animal to show the animal respect and honour for giving its life. For example, eyeballs could be used for fishing and bear fat could be used for baking or skin cream. Additionally, meat was never to be wasted, left to spoil, or sold; rather you took only what you needed to feed your family and gave away the rest.

I mean 'cause you have to respect everything. Like, I mean like you don't want to waste, to say like bagging a moose and losing half the moose... like you never want to do that. You have to be respectful because you don't want to waste anything because that moose gave its life. [F, Urban]

Additionally, participants unveiled important spiritual customs that governed food traditions during community gatherings, events, and holidays. Some participants stated that they grew up in small towns referred to as *Missionaries*. *Missionaries* were designated Catholic rural

⁶ *Vinarterta* is Icelandic cake made with multiple layers and fruit filling in between.

communities, which is why some Métis families' faith is rooted in Catholicism. However, others revealed that they preferred to practice spiritual beliefs from their Indigenous heritage. Still, one family felt most comfortable attending a Catholic church in Winnipeg, which amalgamated both Christian and Indigenous beliefs. Regardless of which faith was practiced, giving thanks before a meal to show gratitude for food was a practice that the majority of participants partook in as children and still practice as adults. For example, some participants would make the “Sign of the Cross”, a Catholic practice, before a meal, whereas one participant stated that for her, she smudged⁷ throughout the process of preparing, cooking, and serving foods to loved ones at a feast⁸.

We want a resilient food system: Giving rural & urban Métis a voice

For Métis participants, this research was a way to express their identity, as well as identify challenges and barriers in our modern food system. A strong desire to (re)learn, (re)member, and (re)vitalize Métis food stories was expressed.

The road we are walking

Some participants discussed barriers to accessing traditional land-based foods such as wild meats. Limited access to wild meat within city limits was a primary concern among participants who expressed feelings of doubt and despair regarding viable solutions that would otherwise overcome their grievances. For example, participants who lived in urban locales reported that in order to acquire wild meat or fish they rely on family members who lived out of town to bring it in when visiting. Other participants complained that receiving meat and fish was becoming more seldom as years passed and therefore went without because accessing wild meat was difficult and costly within city limits.

There was one lady we used to get cream from and the government stopped her from selling her cream because it was some kind of regulation, health regulation. I said what health regulation; I grew up on a farm. We ate dirt and we are still here! Yeah, it's very frustrating when it comes to that. [F, Urban]

Participants identified health benefits that traditional land-based foods provide, yet expressed both concern and shame when discussing their current diets, which consist mainly of less than nutritious processed market foods. Participants also expressed sadness, guilt, and regret because food work, recipes, and cultural knowledge were being replaced with hectic schedules and loss of desire to “scratch” cook.

⁷ Smudging is a First Nations ceremony, where sage is burned during the act of praying.

⁸ A feast is First Nations term used to represent a food gathering.

Many participants were concerned that Métis food practices were not being taught to youth, and therefore felt that the fate of Métis foods and protocols prompted the need for immediate action. Some felt that the responsibility of teaching food skills should lie with parents whereas others argued that children must also be held accountable for the transfer of knowledge to be successfully maintained. One mother felt that the problem with today's youth is their lack of interest in cooking and that they are instead choosing processed market foods over taking the time to learn about traditional foods and cooking methods. The same participant, who was frustrated at her daughter's unwillingness to cook, felt defeated trying to teach her daughter to cook. One family expressed regret that they had not learned some of their favorite recipes from their grandmother prior to her death and felt those recipes were now lost.

I wish that I would've learnt that or been old enough where now cause I'm so interested in knowing and into food and baking and stuff I wish that I would have been old enough to learn when it was being taught. But now that everybody's older...passed away, you don't get that. [F, Urban]

The road we want to walk

Participants expressed the need to act, recognizing the importance of preserving Métis food work. As a measure to teach Métis recipes and share important cultural stories, several participants had offered their services to assist in reasserting Métis foodways through cooking, knowledge sharing, or hunting. As one participant put it, the solution to ensure the survival and revitalization of Métis food culture entails women taking the lead.

Some participants expressed the importance of actively becoming involved in their food system as evidenced by their desire to move away from packaged and processed foods, recognizing how impersonal the food process had become. One woman said she despised grocery shopping because for her the idea of food as a commodity that was transferred through several hands and venues was an unnatural process, which left her feeling angry.

Somebody made it, then they put it in a package...then moved all those packages and took them to the store and then somebody moved all that and put it on a shelf. And then I'm gonna get it and I'm putting it in here. Like how many times has this stuff been moved around? Like that just irritates me! [F, Rural]

Participants wanted to ensure that important messages such as “cook with minimal spices” and “eat together” and “don't be ashamed of your identity” were voiced to youth. Another participant strongly felt that Métis culture must be reasserted in the mosaic of Canadian culture if dignity was to be restored.

Discussion

Relationships built upon food

This research demonstrates the importance of Métis traditional and neo-traditional foodways in revitalizing Métis identity and the interconnectedness among women (grandmothers, mothers, and aunts) in Métis families. Through remembering how the matriarchs governed food work, forging the bonds of family and community, a path is opened to relearn about Métis women's roles in the home and how such roles shaped families. Additionally, transferring knowledge means that questions about heritage can be answered and relationships can be established. Importantly, participants' love of their grandmothers and aunts was evident through memories of food work, which strengthened familial bonds. Children had fond memories of traditional foods being prepared but there were challenges with respect to how culinary skills were and continue to be (or not to be) transferred.

Bonds among Métis women were multi-faceted and complex. Further exploration of bonds between female family members may provide context into the reciprocity of food work between sisters and their children. Additionally, exploring the familial roles among Métis women would serve as an intricate element towards further understanding how women work within their own groups. For Indigenous women in Canada, reclaiming matriarchal roles, as was once practiced, would be of paramount service to self-healing and empowerment. Indigenous women, given the platform, have the ability to spearhead conversations of reconciliation within Canada, beginning within the necessary changes needed to advance familial and community healing.

Despite impoverishment, Métis women demonstrated that they were highly resourceful and capable of nourishing their families and communities. This sharing was how Métis communities were formed in the midst of the harsh social landscapes that tried to marginalize them. Métis identity was, in part, formed through the creation and sharing of food customs. Offering visitors home cooked meals was how women fused community and exercised neighborly good will. Bhawra, et al (2015) determined that relying on family to share food was in fact a coping strategy used to mitigate food insecurity for Urban-Métis living in London, Ontario. Such strategies are indicative of the tight-knit bonds within Métis families and the integral role of food.

For Métis families in this research, recipes and food work were associated with healthful diets; however, participants felt that urban living has negatively impacted access to preferred foods such as wild meat and other land-based foods. If colonization began with the intent to acquire land then reconciliation with Indigenous peoples must include the restoration of land to Indigenous peoples. In this way geographical space provides access to food and food ways, thereby creating opportunities to restore cultural values important to Indigenous groups.

Traditional foods (re)visited

Traditional Indigenous foods, although no one definition exists, are rooted in the concept that food should be: accessed from natural sources (Kuhnlein, 2014), consumed by a regional population (Kim, 2003), wild-harvested (Power, 2008), and culturally accepted (Kolahdooz, Nader, Yi, & Sharma, 2015). While these definitions satisfy in part how the Métis families of this research identify traditional foods, these definitions fail to acknowledge other important factors that make up Métis food ways.

The rhetoric surrounding *traditional foods*, while important, is flawed. The literature suggests that traditional foods are solely cultivated from the land, which fails to acknowledge foods and recipes that have evolved into traditional meals throughout generations, mainly with the incorporation of bartered or purchased ingredients, such is the case with the Métis families interviewed in this study. For example, berry jams, hamburger soup, and tourtière (meat pie) are Métis traditional dishes that incorporate not only purchased ingredients, but also land based foods such as berries and wild game. Importantly, these dishes also embody the duality of Métis identity.

Most likely, neo-traditional recipes have been overlooked in the discourse of traditional foods because of the consequential link between health and negative outcomes for Indigenous people. There is a plethora of literature that suggests energy-dense and nutrient poor foods have attributed to diet-related chronic diseases that disproportionately affect Indigenous populations compared to non-Indigenous groups (Bhawra et al., 2015; Bowser, Utz, Glick, & Harmon, 2015;; Nakano, Fediuk, Kassi, Egeland, & Kuhnlein, 2005; Power, 2008;). For several reasons, market foods for Indigenous people are associated with negative emotional consequences. For example, market goods namely flour, lard, pork, and sugar were, historically, the rations provided to on-reserve First Nations people by government officials. This provided families with minimal and often sub-standard food, which many consider a form of “weaponized hunger” that left many emotional scars (Martens, 2016). More so, the same ingredients listed above, in addition to alcohol, are better known as the “five white sins” according to Indigenous youth in British Columbia (Provincial Health Services, 2011). However, these foods did become woven into the fabric of Indigenous, and in particular Métis life, representing the incredible resiliency that has been exhibited to overcome centuries of oppression. These foods cannot be dismissed, but must be understood in the context of Métis histories.

Additionally, the partisan definition(s) leave little escape from the stigmatization and prejudices associated with recipes and foods that are not otherwise acknowledged under the demarcation of the term. For instance, Devon Mihesuah (2016), a highly acclaimed Navaho food activist argues that “Many Natives continue to act on their insecurities by making bad dietary and lifestyle choices” (p. 56). Although Mihesuah’s work underpins important necessary steps required to reconnect Indigenous people to ancestral land knowledge, thereby circumventing diet

related health problems, her message may be construed as offensive for Indigenous families who choose to identify nuanced recipes as traditional.

The last noticeable flaw in the discourse of traditional foods is there is no mention of shared-stories or lessons learned from the kitchen. The literature suggests, urges, and even demands that Indigenous people speak for themselves about themselves (Cardinal, 2006; Kuhnlein, 2014; Power, 2008; Smith, 2012;). The discourse surrounding Indigenous food culture has only begun to uncover an array of untapped cultural recipes, knowledge, and stories from the kitchen. For the Métis participants of this research another story exists. Flour, lard, and sugar, are demonized ingredients, however, these same ingredients created cherished recipes such as berry pies, heartier soups, and baked breads. These recipes were made from scratch by women who worked hard to provide sustenance to their families, while at the same time building familial and community bonds. This work deserves respect and freedom from shame.

Giving credit where credit is due

The performance of food work provided the opportunity for women to assert their power within the domain of their kitchen. Food work, as a conduit of power, adds a new element of gendered authority that “suggests women have more agency and autonomy than might otherwise be assumed” (D’Sylvia & Beagan, 2011, p.285). Métis women were physically and emotionally strong, which is evident in the way wives and mothers successfully accomplished overwhelmingly multiple tasks of making a home, usually with little financial means.

From a feminist perspective, the constructed gendered role of women’s domestic work has well been documented and scholars continue to argue against the rhetoric that portrays women’s domestic labor as less than important, subordinate, and inferior work (Lewis, 2015; Tolleson-Rinehart & Carroll, 2006). In an effort to advocate for women’s important domestic roles, Deborah Simonton (1998) in her manuscript titled *A History of European Women's Work 1700 to the Present*, argues that stereotypes that demean women’s work are a Western concept, absent of cultural ontologies and *women’s* perspectives, and therefore does not accurately represent the whole picture. She argues that research linking domestic work and family from the perspectives of women, outside the economic domain, is relatively a new area of research (Simonton, 1998). Research aimed towards Indigenous women, emphasizing their abilities rather than *dis*-abilities, is well overdue and would serve as an excellent contribution to the literature.

Food, well-being, and identity

Métis food was an expression of this group’s unique identity which, for the participants of this study, was directly linked to personal and cultural health and well-being. Many participants stressed the centrality of food to celebratory meals, which held significant importance because holiday celebrations were deeply rooted in family togetherness. Further, when similar food

practices arose in interviews that other interviewees also mentioned, participants felt this synergy was a cultural connection which reinforced Métis identity and belonging. These shared food ideologies reinforce a sense of belonging (Cantarero, Espeitx, Lacruz, & Martin, 2013; Woolley & Fishback, 2016).

The importance of transmitting Métis food ways to youth is a direct reflection of cultural pride. Knowledge translation to retain cultural knowledge has been widely understood to be of significant importance for Indigenous communities (Adams, et al., 2012; Hammelman, & Hayes-Conroy, 2015; Kuhnlein, 2001, 2014; Power, 2008; Provincial Health Services Authority, 2011). Asking Métis people to share stories related to their culture inevitably draws out discussion related to identity, and for some, an opportunity to grapple with their identity. Reasons for the identity gap are directly related to Canada’s oppressive historical acts of violence towards Indigenous peoples (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012). Many participants vocalized some form of displacement regarding their Métis identity, whether it was directly related to parents’ who masked their identity due to shame or stereotypical patterned political and societal messages, that according to Bhawra et al. (2015) have excluded Métis as being accepted as either fully Aboriginal or European people. In many ways, this *in-betweenness* and uncertainty has left open wounds for some participants. Yet, despite the attacks on identity and historical challenges that Métis have faced and still do, there is a strong pushback from Métis families and communities to remain grounded in their pursuit to restore Métis identity, and to do so with pride.

Moving forward

Overwhelmingly, the Métis people in this study expressed dissatisfaction regarding the disconnect between their current diet and the diet they grew up on that they felt was healthier on multiple levels—for themselves, the environment, and their communities. Many expressed the need to have autonomy within their food systems, for example, wanted greater access to wild meat. Several reasons that contribute to the decline in accessing traditional food systems have been documented in the literature including: dwindling of species availability and harvesting areas; time and energy constraints due to employment that also interrupts knowledge transfer to youth; the influx of inexpensive low nutritional market foods that sacrifice quality over quantity (Kuhnlein, 2001); and ecosystem threats (Food Secure Canada, 2011).

Importantly, participants were also very concerned with losing valuable cultural recipes and knowledge, if these are not passed down to the next generation. As one researcher put it, “cooking styles” of various global Indigenous populations are increasingly becoming threatened, in favour of mono diets, which inevitably will lead to adverse health impacts (Kim, 2003, p. 223). Furthermore, the number of Métis youth is increasing, however, the Elderly population is declining, (Statistics Canada, 2011) and along with them valuable cultural knowledge. The need for immediate action cannot be overstated in this context.

Conclusion

For the Métis families in this study, food from the land obtained through gardening, gathering, hunting, and harvesting, and prepared by important women in their lives was deeply connected to their sense of familial and cultural identity. This was reflected in their values, beliefs, and intimate knowledge of the land which is central to Métis history and distinctiveness, as well as kinship. The discourse of food and the way it was used has long-established meaningful connections to Métis heritage. Despite their many hardships, Métis communities in and around Winnipeg had a wholesome vibrant food culture with celebrations, ceremonies, and rituals, some, not enough of which continue today.

Reminiscing, sharing stories, describing food roles, and honouring the important women in participant's lives is a positive dimension of Métis history. For participants, family and food underpinned the role of the family matriarch, and food was a powerful connector and symbol of identity. This research demonstrates also that food is a powerful lens through which Métis people can assert cultural pride.

As a result of historical policies of marginalization, however, Métis peoples' migration to urban areas negatively impacted their diets, specifically through reduced access to traditional land and lack of space to grow gardens. Participants want solutions to reverse this. In addition, they are concerned about teaching cultural food knowledge to future generations. The matriarchal *culinary vessels* are passing away and traditional foodways and cooking are disappearing. Access to traditional land and food production methods, along with traditional food education strategies, are necessary to help Métis peoples maintain cultural food sovereignty. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) Recommendations, if upheld, become an integral and pragmatic step in a positive direction

Limitations and future work

Although there is much strength in this project there are limitations. This project interviewed 21 participants in Manitoba. Interviewing Métis people from another region, as a comparative study, has the potential to add a unique rich perspective to the literature.

This project has provided the first evidence-based research on Manitoba Métis food traditions and protocols, which have the potential for inclusion in curricula and programming. To date, much of the school-based Indigenous programming throughout Manitoba is First-Nation centric, yet a Métis perspective is critical for Indigenizing educational content and contributing toward *reconciliAction*, as recommended in the Truth and Reconciliation Call to Action (The Truth Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

In addition, this study will provide educators with an alternative discourse as it relates to food. Rather than focusing solely on nutrients, although an important subject, culturally-based food education provides an important holistic approach to overall health and well-being.

Furthermore, this research adds to the Indigenous philosophy pushing important Métis epistemologies into the literature and academic instructions.

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