



Film Review

First we eat: Food sovereignty north of 60

A film by Suzanne Crocker

Drift Productions

<https://firstweeat.ca/>

Review by Catherine Littlefield and Patricia Ballamingie*

Suzanne Crocker's (2020) *First we eat* chronicles the efforts of one family to explore greater food sovereignty in Dawson City, Yukon, on the traditional territory of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. Crocker instigates this experiment and her family obliges, accepting significant changes to their diets with humor and grace. She explains that she is “planning to spend an entire year eating only food that can be grown, gathered, and hunted around Dawson” (2020, 2:02). *First we eat* offers an educational look at the topics of local northern food security and food sovereignty.

La Via Campesina (2021) an international farmers' rights organization, coined the concept of food sovereignty in the 1990s to assert “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods”—including the right “to define their own food and agriculture systems” (para. 8). As a counter movement to

the neoliberal food system, its proponents privilege the vision and needs of people over profits and recognize the diversity of peasant, rural, and Indigenous communities engaged in food systems.

First we eat highlights significant challenges to northern food sovereignty. Living 300 km south of the Arctic Circle, with 97% of food trucked into Dawson City, residents remain vulnerable to supply chain disruptions. A road closure into the territory due to a landslide served as a “wake-up call” for Crocker: grocery store shelves ran bare within forty-eight hours. Food insecurity in northern communities is a complex issue related to logistical, environmental, socio-economic, and political challenges, including high costs, limited access to appropriate foods, and climate change (Blom et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2019, 2020). These challenges, coupled with supply chain disruptions, highlight the need for increased food systems resilience and

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DOI: [10.15353/cfs-rcea.v10i1.575](https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v10i1.575)

ISSN: 2292-3071

redundancy, building lasting capacity to provide sufficient food at multiple levels (Mahoney et al., 2022). Blay-Palmer and colleagues (2020, 2021) call for increased connection between production and consumption as well as redundancy in the supply chain—multiple, overlapping supply chain sources that help maintain resilience through diversity.

Yukon producers face unique challenges and unpredictable hazards, including a short growing season and the potential for an early frost, drought, hail, or locusts. Disproportionate climate change impacts in the north, including shifting animal patterns and more frequent and severe weather events, represent additional stressors (Auditor General of Canada, 2017). *First we eat* highlights these challenges while demonstrating openings for increased capacity, creativity, and community in the local food system.

Crocker realizes early on in the film that she cannot do this alone and develops personal connections with local producers—she knows their names, locations, practices, and challenges. The film highlights the critical role played by local farmers and producers—sustaining the Crocker family through their journey, sharing not only food but also the knowledge and skills to grow, gather, hunt, process, and store it. Connectedness and cohesion across the food system facilitate greater innovation and resource sharing (Mahoney et al., 2022). Lessons from Crocker’s experiment suggest a need for increased knowledge-sharing and community connection in efforts to localize food systems and augment food sovereignty.

The film demonstrates the level of food literacy required to achieve a higher degree of self-sufficiency, showing just how intensive food production, preparation, processing, and storage can be—including such tasks as churning butter, killing and defeathering a chicken, and milling flour. Crocker and her family expand their diets by harvesting wild edibles such as

spruce tips and juniper berries, trying lynx meat and burbot liver, and receiving gifts of salmon eggs and moose nose—both delicacies—from Indigenous friends. In fact, much that the Crocker family learns reflects knowledge embedded in local and Indigenous food practices.

The Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in have lived in and around the area now known as Dawson City for generations and hold ancestral knowledge of how to gather, hunt, fish, process, store, and share local foods. Indigenous food sovereignty is critical for the continuity of knowledge embedded in local food systems. Proponents of Indigenous food sovereignty (e.g., Morrison, 2020) emphasize the importance of self-determination and customary food practices for sustainable and equitable food systems. Traditional food practices have multiple benefits, including for spiritual, cultural, social, and physical health (Batal et al., 2021). For Crocker and other northern settlers, there is much to be learned from Indigenous peoples in the Yukon, who maintain a relatively high consumption of traditional foods, important for health, community well-being, culture, ecological integrity, and sovereignty (Koberinski et al., 2022; Pratt, 2020). The film highlights the multidimensional values of food and the importance of connecting and learning through communal food networks.

Increased connectedness in the food system facilitated innovation at the household level for Crocker. The quest for salt and sugar—two critical items often taken for granted—offered an interesting sub-plot. Sugar proved less elusive, with sweetness derived from honeycomb, birch water, and sugar beets. But the lengths to which Crocker went for salt demonstrated both its scarcity and its necessity. From drying and burning coltsfoot (a flower whose tissues bioaccumulate salt, making it a wilderness seasoning), to cooking mineral licks (the mud animals lick for essential minerals and

salts), to evaporating salt from a friend's dried blood serum, the journey to acquire salt took some unexpected turns. Crocker's support from her immediate family and wider community surely aided her in making it through the challenging yet rewarding year, as did her position of privilege as a settler with a presumed degree of affluence. Crocker's daughter muses that if it can be done here, it can be done almost anywhere (2020, 1:30:33)—an implicit invitation to all eaters in local, regional, and global food systems to eat more locally. The changes needed, challenges encountered, and creativity required to do so for one year reflect the disconnect between consumers, producers, and land in contemporary and settler food systems. *First we eat* inspires reconnection with food, land, and community, encouraging a healthy

curiosity toward the foods that grow, or *could* grow, all around us. Further, the film prompts critical reflection on how Indigenous land, food sovereignty, and knowledge are central to discussions of localizing food systems.

First we eat holds pedagogical value and serves as a springboard for discussions about food security, localizing food systems, and food sovereignty. The film encourages viewers to be more mindful of where their food is coming from and to reflect on how they might become more connected to their local food system (*What can I do*, 2021). Eating entirely locally for one year in Dawson City is ambitious, but this feat contains many tidbits that inspire smaller steps one could take to support local and community-level food systems.

Discussion Questions

Drawing on [La Via Campesina's \(2021\) definition of food sovereignty](#), which aspects of this concept does the film illustrate?

What would eating locally from your current foodshed look like? If you were to frame your consumption of local food along a continuum, what steps might you

take to become less reliant on global supply chains and more locally self-sufficient?

The Yukon is heavily subsidized by the rest of Canada through transfer payments. How might some of those resources be spent on developing greater local productive capacity?

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