

Canadian Food Studies

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Choux questionnaire: Elaine Power

A riff on [the well-riffed Proust Questionnaire](#), the CFS Choux Questionnaire is meant to elicit a tasty and perhaps surprising experience, framed within a seemingly humble exterior. (And yes, some questions have a bit more *craquelin* than others.) Straightforward on their own, the queries combined start to form a celebratory pyramid of extravagance. How that composite croquembouche is assembled and taken apart, however, is up to the respondents and readers to determine. Respondents are invited to answer as many questions as they choose.

The final question posed— *What question would you add to this questionnaire?*—prompts each respondent to incorporate their own inquisitive biome into the mix, feeding a forever renewed starter culture for future participants.

Our Choux Questionnaire respondent for this issue is Elaine Power. One of the founders of the Canadian Association for Food Studies (CAFS), Elaine has spent much of her career researching food insecurity and other issues related to poverty, class, food, and health. She is an advocate for a guaranteed basic income, an income floor that would provide all Canadians with adequate income to meet their basic needs, including food. Her current research is exploring arts-based knowledge mobilization for effective solutions to food insecurity.

What is your idea of a perfect food?

One that is intensely flavourful, produced in a sustainable and just way, and served with love.

Of what food or food context are you afraid?

Place settings with lots of cutlery.

What word or concept describes an admirable food system?

Nourishment

What word or concept prevents many food systems from becoming admirable?

Greed

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Which food person do you most admire?

I have a special place in my heart for the late Joan Dye Gussow, who taught nutrition education at Columbia University. I met Joan a few times at AFHVS/ASFS conferences in the U.S. (before there was CAFS). I loved that she was thinking about the whole food system, and corporate domination in the food system, at a time when other nutritionists and dietitians rarely did. I also loved her commitment to living her values. She was way ahead of her time on so many things. Her 2002 memoir, *This Organic Life: Confessions of a Suburban Homesteader*, is a locavore classic. And her recipe for pear chutney, one of several scattered throughout the book, is fantastic.

What do you consider to be the most overrated food or food context?

The current fad for protein in everything.

What do you most dislike about dinner tables?

How they organize dinner guests, making it difficult to have conversation with those who are not close by, and, conversely, making it impossible to escape conversation with the person in the neighbouring chair.

What is the quality you most like in a fruit?

Juiciness!

What kinds of gardens make you happiest?

Contemplating this question brings me happiness! Gardens inherently make me happy. Vegetable gardens, flower gardens, herb gardens. Formal gardens, English cottage gardens, wild gardens, backyard gardens (though I suppose they can be a bit sad if completely overgrown

or suffering from drought). Nothing makes me happier than picking vegetables, flowers, and herbs from my backyard gardens—especially those few weeks in August when I can make Ottolenghi recipes without buying anything extra. I also love everything about growing garlic—I love planting it in the fall (a radical act of hope that spring will come), harvesting the scapes and making pesto, and then digging up and drying those beautiful bulbs, to last through the winter.

If you could change one thing about nutrition, what would it be?

I wish we didn't think about nutrition. I wish food was just nutritious and nourishing, and everyone had adequate access. I remember years ago having a conversation with an Inuit woman who told me about an elder who had grown up on the land. He said that when he was growing up, it was inconceivable that food could be harmful to health. All his food, from Nature, was healthy. I wish we lived in a world more like that.

What do you consider your greatest edible achievement?

I don't know if this is an “achievement” *per se*, but when I lived in southwest Newfoundland in the late 1980s, I overcame extreme hesitation about eating cod intestines to discover that they were melt-in-your-mouth delicious. I've never forgotten my delight, and I'm very sorry I only once got to eat this unusual regional speciality.

If you were to die and come back as an (edible) animal, vegetable, or mineral, what would you like it to be?

I'd like to come back as a fruit tree, like the beautiful old pear tree in my backyard. Of course, the tree itself is not

edible, but it produces annual edible abundance for humans, birds, butterflies, insects, mould, and bacteria. I also love hanging bird feeders in it in the winter and watching the birds bring the dormant tree alive with their movements.

Where (and/or when) would you most like to dine?

I thought about this question for a long time, perhaps because I don't have any particular yearning for a dining experience. I decided I would like a locally harvested (Canadian) meal while sitting somewhere with a view of the ocean. This led me down an internet rabbit hole of looking up restaurants on the East and West Coasts, including some that are very expensive. I realized that I feel uncomfortable in these exclusive spaces! And then I remembered picnics on ocean beaches with homemade food and friends on warm summer evenings, and that seems just about right. But one summer, I would also love to check out Michael Smith's farm-to-fire-to-fork Fireworks Feast in Fortune, PEI.

When do you have no appetite?

After eating!

What is your most treasured kitchen implement?

My Kitchen-Aid frozen dessert maker. Homemade ice cream and frozen treats have brought a lot of pleasure to many friends and family members, and that makes me happy.

What do you consider to be the most processed kind of food?

When pondering this question, I realized that I have moral judgements about "processed food" even though I know that not all processing is "bad". The processed food I really despise is sugary breakfast cereal. I dislike how it looks and tastes, the vast sums of money spent on advertising, and the corporate manipulation of children's tastes. I never bought sugary breakfast cereal for my kid and whenever they would try it elsewhere, they would leave it after a few spoonfuls. This made me happy. Oh, and there were some other "children's foods" that I didn't buy either. Lunchables. Sugary, flavoured yogurt. Maybe it was luck that my kid always loved strong flavours (raw kale, olives, beer) and never really liked sweet things.

What is your favourite aroma?

Cinnamon, especially with apple. Freshly ground and brewed coffee. Homemade bread.

What do you most value in your friends?

I most value friends who can help me see things in a new light or (gently) challenge my perceptions of things.

Who are your favourite food scholars?

Oh! I love the Canadian Food Studies community!

What are your favourite agricultural, culinary, or gastronomic words?

I love that garden plants "volunteer" from year to year! They are not exactly a weed because the parents of volunteers were deliberately planted at one point.

What is it about composting that you most dislike?

What's not to love about composting?

What would you eat as your last meal?

What I would eat as my last meal would depend on the season. If it were mid-late summer, it would be tomatoes from the backyard with basil, buffalo mozzarella, some good olive oil, bread, and a bowl of fresh strawberries, juicy mango, and homemade vanilla ice cream for dessert. If it were fall, it would be curried butternut soup, some good bread, blue cheese, and a perfectly ripe pear. Winter might be some variation of the fall menu or maybe homemade pizza. Or shakshuka. Always good bread. Apple crisp. I hope my last meal is not in spring,

unless it is already time for sugar snap peas. And the rhubarb is ready for upside-down cake.

What foodish epitaph would you assign to yourself?

She shared bountifully.

What question would you add to this questionnaire?

What food from your childhood do you now eschew?