



## Editorial

**Embracing tradition: Lessons from Bhutan**

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Perusing the titles in this issue's articles, the following words jump out at me: alternatives, innovations, transitions, calls to justice, change. While the subject matter differs from piece to piece, there is a clear emphasis on spaces of transformation, where new ideas and practices are actively experimented with and examined. It generates a spirit of optimism that the agri-food industry behemoth can be challenged successfully, bit by bit. Collectively, the authors are seeking fresh perspectives and efforts to enhance inclusion and participation where there were gaps.

Spaces oriented around quests for improvement gain significance when contrasted with places that naturally—and deliberately—have not embraced change. I witnessed this recently in my travels to Bhutan. For two weeks in the fall, my husband Michel and I journeyed across the mountainous country with two Bhutanese guides. Landlocked Bhutan is nestled below the Himalayan Alps, and bordered by Tibet, Nepal, and India. About the size of Switzerland, it has a population close to 760,000. Beyond the capital city, people are spread across the country in small towns, villages, and farms, which can be isolated

when the rains arrive and make travel by road difficult. In many ways, it is like going back in time.

How can a country be attuned to the present age, resist poverty, support education and health care for all, and yet avoid the manufactured excesses that we in Canada bemoan? We saw a paradoxical co-existence of both modern conveniences and practices from another era. Most people drive cars or scooters, use cell phones, and enjoy electricity in their homes—even in remote locations. Indeed, hydro-electric power is Bhutan's main export, thanks to cascading rivers from mountain glaciers. At the same time, rice in the fields and terraces is mostly harvested by hand. And in general, people wear traditional Bhutanese clothes every day, made from colourful, durable hand-woven fabrics.

The food! It's local, seasonal, simple, and mostly plant-based. Aside from some shops in the capital city, you will not find highly-processed, packaged edibles or fast-food venues. A key ingredient of most dishes is visible in the fall: brilliant carpets of red chilies drying on the rooftops and strung from the eaves. Everywhere you will be served "ema datshi", a creamy mix of whole chilies and yak cheese.

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DOI: [10.15353/cfs-rcea.v13i1.796](https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v13i1.796)

ISSN: 2292-3071

This is complemented with red rice, dumplings, and seasonal local vegetables (also spiced with chilies). Hot yak butter tea is a staple, providing energy during cold winter months. Breakfast might be buckwheat pancakes and eggs (no syrup). Local markets are a visual delight: endless stalls with different rice varieties and heaps of vegetables, both fresh and dried for winter preservation.

The socio-political and spiritual contexts offer clues to the stability of the Bhutanese infrastructure and food system. Most visibly, this country is dominated by a Bhutanese version of Tibetan Buddhism. Scenic temples can be reached along mountain paths, and white stupas dot the landscape. At key locations, such as mountain passes, long strings of colourful prayer flags criss-cross and flutter in the wind. Large brass prayer wheels turn continuously in fast-moving creeks. The Buddha and many other Guardian Deities in the temples are honoured by food offerings of special items like fruit and ornate sugary creations. Red-robed monks and even young novices are a common sight in the streets. All this seems to bring a sense of calm, regularity, peace, and security to the landscape.

Secondly, the country is a constitutional monarchy, lauding ethical and environmental principles and cultural preservation. The Bhutanese love their king like a benevolent father figure. They would be incredulous at the idea of a “no kings” protest. King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk created a parliamentary democracy in 2008, handing over government leadership to the prime minister, while remaining the head of state. People voted for the first time<sup>1</sup>. In 2009, the king enacted land reform, promoting widespread rural settlement to support local, sustainable agriculture.

While much of this seems positive, there are, of course, flaws and the inevitable problematic outcomes. For example, we joined a group of disgruntled farmers at

a remote farm who were sitting on the ground, chewing paan, and discussing a petition to the government for an overdue upgrade to their narrow, winding, badly rutted mountain road. Still, the fact that they felt they had a voice was good! We also heard about the substantial emigration of young people, especially to Australia, for higher-paying jobs. Immigration is strictly limited, but recently Indian migrant workers have been let in to overcome labour shortages. No one could tell us which indicators are used to measure Bhutan’s famous Gross National Happiness, but it is a thing.

We wondered (while sipping local Red Panda beer in Punakha): what can we learn from this unique society, to understand what influences Bhutanese agriculture and diet? We suggest two major factors: geography and religion. Both are constraining and enabling.

Geographically, the country is striated by north-south mountain ranges descending from the northern Alps, with fertile valleys and rivers in between. This has an isolating—but also community building—effect for those in more easterly parts of the country. Crops are planted in terraces, so harvesting by hand becomes a family effort. Cold winters prevent the survival of fruit trees, except in the southern parts. However, the woolly yaks are well suited to roaming around and grazing along roadsides. (Do not open your car window to take a photo.) Arguably, adherence to the traditional seasonal diet, involving home cooking and preservation, contributes to the population’s health and strengthens their national identity. Domestic policy aims to preserve this food culture. Certainly, the importation of large quantities of food, processed or otherwise, would threaten the local food economy and undermine culture and agriculture.

Buddhism has been a pervasive force for centuries in Bhutan; it evolved into a specific form that is believed to

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Monk and the Gun*, a film by Pawo Choyning Dorji, 2023.

protect the people. Stories and myths abound, depicted vividly on walls inside public buildings and temples, of heroes and deities who have struggled valiantly against outside invaders to preserve peace in Bhutan. Some of these deities live in the snow-capped mountains, hence skiing and high mountain climbing is prohibited. The Buddhist belief in reincarnation means that eating meat is avoided, as mammals are considered sentient beings. Violence is never glorified nor seen as a solution. The Bhutanese experience of religion for the most part reinforces a strong relationship between people and the land. This in turn supports personal and environmental health, ethical forms of governance, and strong family life.

Upon reflection, there is an overlap between Bhutanese values and certain food trends within our own country, ones that promote commensality, small-scale

and organic farming, a plant-based, less processed diet, seasonal eating, and a close connection between producers and consumers. For Bhutan, it means protecting the status quo, while in Canada we are perhaps rediscovering, or actively transitioning to, more sustainable, healthier approaches to food along the entire food chain. Our food system includes multicultural diversity and global trade, as well as industrial agriculture and the hegemony of multinational companies. The Bhutanese have so far tried to steer clear of those factors. But it is likely only a matter of time until they too will transition, alter, innovate. Meanwhile, we can appreciate our differences and learn from each other's strengths.



Michel and Ellen with our two Bhutanese guides



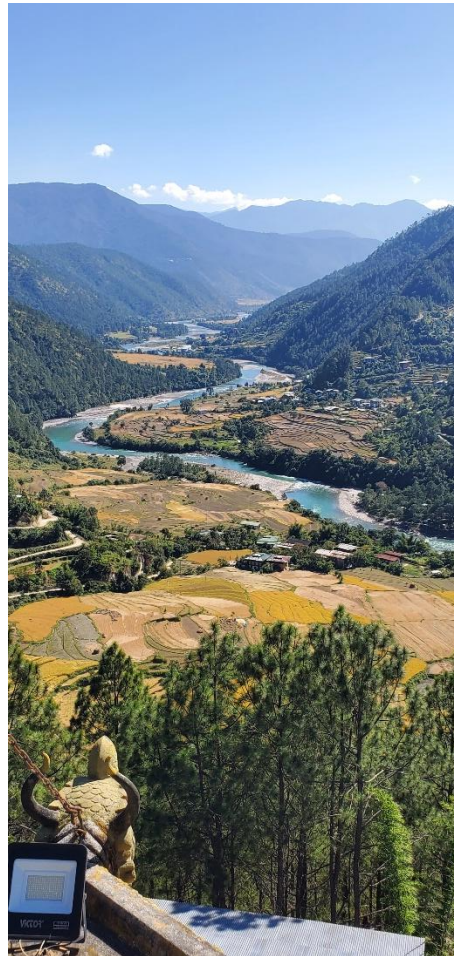
Having fun with some young monk novices.



Yak butter tea



Yaks grazing under high altitude power lines.



Bhutanese river valley with terraced agriculture.



A monk offers food to the Buddha in a temple



Typical Bhutanese dishes on our table



Carrying vegetables to market.



A Bhutanese weaver.