



## Canadian Food Radio

### Conjuring Nourishment for Canadians Out of Thin Air

*Nathalie Cooke*

"It is fairly safe to say," wrote Sidney Katz about Canada in 1955, "that the most fascinating subject in the country today is neither sex nor politics, religion nor women's hats—but eating" (11). He based his conclusion on the results of an experiment in which a women's magazine ran two different covers to see which would have greater appeal. One cover displayed a model in an "exotic hat," and the other, "an exotic cake." It seems that the cake stole the show. It also seemed to Katz that "eating" was of literal and conversational interest to a very broad cross-section of Canadians in mid-century Canada and not just a subject to pique the interest of housewives. He denigrated Canadians' tendency to eat 3,200 calories per day of very poor-quality food and, in doing so, joined the expanding conversation about the potential, practical realities, politics, and pitfalls of the way Canadians eat. "Eating," Katz noted, "has become a subject for everyone from psychiatrists to politicians" (11).

Published in 1955, Katz's *Macleans* article coincided with the steady invasion of television screens into living rooms and the subsequent demotion of radios from pride of place.<sup>1</sup> While appetite for conversations about eating and food preparation influenced the choice of magazines' cover pages and articles' subject matter in mid-twentieth-century Canada, conversations about eating and preparing food had been part of the staple

diet of radio programming since its beginnings in the 1920s. Magazines, though, had the advantage of being able to describe and provide images of the foods being discussed, whereas radio could offer its listeners only the discussion itself. Nevertheless, the enduring and consistent presence of radio food shows in programming, from the pioneering programs of the 1920s to the contemporary moment, offers evidence that Katz was not wrong to think that Canadian audiences had an appetite for food talk. The broad question I pose in this chapter is, why do audiences listen to radio programs showcasing conversations about food and eating, and how has food radio nourished Canadian listeners?

In what follows, I offer tentative answers to this broad question by rephrasing it slightly and breaking it down into several more specific queries, which I will address in turn: How did food radio develop in Canada in its early decades? What meanings are ascribed to food when it is served up on the airwaves? How and why did food radio survive the television revolution? And what is the particular appeal of hearing about food without having the opportunity to experience it with the other four senses?

#### FOOD SHOWS AND WOMEN PIONEERS IN CANADIAN RADIO

Radio itself was arguably born out of the human impulse to communicate, and Canada can boast a significant role in launching the medium. Canada was host to historical landmarks such as the first wireless transmission across the Atlantic, which was received in St. John's, Newfoundland, in 1901 (Sterling 2004, 1:258), and the first commercial broadcasting operation, which opened on 20 May 1920 in Montréal.<sup>2</sup> And while Guglielmo Marconi, who is often recognized as the father of radio technology, was the one to successfully receive that 1901 transmission (of the letter *s* in Morse code), it was actually a Canadian, Reginald Fessenden, who transmitted voice recordings on 24 December 1906, while also treating his audience to a violin rendition of "O Holy Night" as a nod to the Christmas season (Stewart 1985, 1).

Food radio, however, is also the product of female pioneers in the industry. With radio channels available in the 1920s, producers quickly realized that content was needed for daytime hours, when audiences were typically female. This need coincided nicely with a supply of highly trained personnel in the form of women educated in the emerging disciplines of

household science and home economics, who could supply radio stations with content that was appealing to the daytime audience. As T. J. Allard explains in unequivocal terms, the result was a positive step forward for women entering the workforce: "Earlier than any other industry, private broadcasting provided senior employment opportunities for women. Few stations did not have one or more women's commentators who quite literally ran their own show" (1979, 54). One such woman in a senior position was Elizabeth Long, who, as Marjorie Lang records, "in 1938 became the first woman hired in an executive capacity by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to direct the women's programs. Her expertise earned her a mandate to run her department on her own authority" (1999, 154).

The full story of women's advancement in radio is considerably more nuanced than Allard's unequivocal statement suggests. It is also a story worth telling, since it offers insights into why women listeners were interested both in what the female radio hosts had to say about food, eating, and women's roles and responsibilities in a world experiencing an increasing rate of change, and in what was said through the very fact of their being given such senior and public roles in the world of radio.

Despite Allard's sense that women's advances in the radio industry were unambiguous, there were significant limits to women's advancement to the senior ranks, and the nature and extent of those limits were, not surprisingly, the subject of curiosity, conversation and sometimes fierce debate.<sup>3</sup> Consider the example of Claire Wallace, a journalist who became the very popular broadcaster of the *They Tell Me* series on Canadian radio. According to Lang, the National Radio Committee proposed, unprompted by a request from Wallace, that the National War Finance Committee, the program's sponsor, raise her salary from \$170 to \$200 per week, at a time when many newspapermen were earning between \$40 and \$50. The proposal caused a media "furor" known as the "Affaire Financial," and the "timorous National War Finance Committee" discontinued the broadcasts as of 23 June 1944 (Lang 1999, 130–31). Hence, Wallace lost not only the potential raise in salary but also her regular role as the show's star personality.

Another check on women's advancement came in the common practice of airing radio programs that created a starring role for a pseudonymous personality. Listeners developed loyalty for the program and the product information it provided, but they also engaged directly with the individual personality through regular listening and mail correspondence. At first

blush, of course, it seems that such radio personalities had significant sway and influence. Upon closer inspection, one comes to recognize that women working under a pseudonym were very vulnerable to layoffs and the societal pressures of their day, since their coming and going from a particular role was not as obvious as it would have been had they developed their professional careers under their own names. Nevertheless, there were many very popular pseudonymous female personalities who wielded considerable influence, such as Susan Agar, known to friends as Mrs. G. R. A. Rice but better known to audience members on the prairies as "The Chatelaine of the Air."<sup>4</sup>

Radio listeners, who developed preferences for the style and characteristics of a particular personality, paid close attention to the individual as well as to her message. In later years, women developed professional personae using their own names, but even during those early decades of radio, there were exceptions to the general pseudonymous rule. On a New York City radio station, the pseudonymous "Martha Deane," supposedly a grandmother from Missouri, was portrayed by the Missouri-born journalist Mary Margaret McBride. But famously McBride managed to keep up the pretense for only three weeks. After this, recounts Christopher Sterling (2004, 2:913), "she gave it all away on the air and admitted that she was no grandmother, merely 'a reporter who would like to come here every day and tell you about places I go, people I meet.'" McBride's subsequent long-standing popularity suggests that audiences appreciated her candour and regarded her forthright and evidently quite genuine enthusiasm as credential enough for their attention.

Canadian listeners also had available to them many programming options from their neighbour to the south. One might well wonder, then, to what extent food radio was affected by US programming. Pierre Pagé, in his entry "Canadian Radio Programming" in Sterling's *Museum of Broadcast Communications Encyclopedia of Radio*, puts the issue in a nutshell. "Much of the development of Canada's radio programming may be seen in light of the country's wish to avoid total domination by US radio," he explains. "Although Canada's French tradition in Quebec made distinct programming easier, English-language programming faced a stiff challenge from the beginning" (Sterling 2004, 1:266). Paul Rutherford (2012) argues that even in radio's first decade, the 1920s, audiences were attracted to the "more polished products of American radio" and by the end of the

decade, roughly 80 percent of the programs available to Canadians were American.

In part, the infiltration of American programming into Canadian airwaves was a function of a certain level of regulatory chaos south of the border that disadvantaged Canadian interests. In Canada, the government established control of the licensing of both radio stations and radio sets as early as 1919. Commercial broadcasting began in 1921, and throughout the decade, negotiations between Canada and the United States over control of radio channels were relatively heated. At times, American operators controlled all the channels, and at other times, when American regulation mechanisms were established and effectively enforced (as in 1921 and again in 1924), six clear channels were freed for Canadian stations (Weir 1965, 97).

In 1926, the same year in which Canada called for a treaty with American regulators, one of the most popular radio shows of the period in terms of women's programming was introduced. On 4 October 1926, fifty women in fifty radio stations across the United States became "Aunt Sammy" (yes, "Uncle Sam's" wife) by reading identical scripts prepared by home economists working for the United States Department of Agriculture (Smulyan 1993, 8). Certainly, both Canadian and American listeners regularly tuned into Aunt Sammy's show, which would become the huge daytime hit *Household Chat*. So, too, did Canadian listeners enjoy such popular American shows as *The Betty Crocker Cooking School of the Air*; indeed, Canadians, like Agnes Quamme Higgins, were among those who personified Betty Crocker on the air, in correspondence, and in stage demonstrations.

There is a robust body of commentary describing the nature and variety of radio programming in the 1920s and 1930s, known as radio's golden age, and recounting a growing sensitivity to advertising as early as the 1930s. This commentary rightly suggests that programming in Canada and the United States was similar. Morleen Getz Rouse, for example, summarizes radio programming for the homemaker during the early decades of radio as "shows to entertain, shows to teach, shows to help raise children, shows that offered conversation, and shows on cooking and shopping" (1978, 316). Soap operas like *Ma Perkins* and *The Guiding Light* fitted into the entertainment category. Cooking shows, though, were more difficult to categorize, and Rouse describes them as some of the "informational" (323) offerings designed to target the housewife's "very special needs"

(316). Part educational programming, part entertainment, cooking shows in radio's early decades were also part marketing ploy. Rouse, with tongue firmly in cheek, explains that Procter and Gamble, the manufacturers of Crisco, launched the Radio Homemaker's Club and "Club members heard Ida Bailey Allen, of cookbook fame, give Monday morning chats about this, that, and Crisco" (323).

Despite the excellent commentary on radio programming, however, what deserves closer scrutiny is how Canadian broadcasters succeeded in casting a very wide net of influence despite limited air space and a much smaller audience than that in the United States. Perhaps the best example of this is the Canadian home authority Kate Aitken.

Aitken was a farm-raised and homegrown radio personality who broadcast under her own name on Canadian-owned and -operated stations. She was successful at maintaining multiple roles and had a significant presence in print media, corporate-sponsored book publishing, cookbook authorship, and cooking stage presentations, in addition to addressing topics ranging from food preferences and preparation to issues of the day. She was the director of the Women's Division of the Canadian National Exhibition in 1927, where she developed programming related to cooking. In 1941, the *Montreal Standard* hired her to become women's editor of the magazine supplement. It is estimated that during that year, her income was as much as \$25,000 from her multiple roles and professional activities (Lang 1999, 187). Gordon Sinclair notes that by 1950, Aitken was receiving some 260,000 letters per year (an average of about 1,000 each weekday) and was giving "about 600 broadcasts and 150 speeches" annually (1950, 8). Sinclair goes on to marvel that "although she's helped somewhat in the above chores by a corps of 21 secretaries Mrs. A. writes her own scripts, hires her radio casts, selects the music and produces the show" (9).<sup>5</sup> In other words, Aitken really *did* unequivocally run her own show. Women tuned in to listen to her radio broadcasts not only to benefit from the information she provided but also to hear from a woman who had turned domestic expertise into a paying career—and who used her own name in a professional capacity.

One can compare the reach and influence of Aitken with that of an American pseudonymous counterpart, Betty Crocker. We know more about the character guidelines for Betty, who was created in 1923 by the advertising department of General Mills's predecessor, Washburn Crosby Flour, than we do about most other corporate cooking personalities. In his

history of General Mills, James Gray (1954, 173) writes that Betty was to be "the eternal and supreme housewife, all-wise, generous of time, advice, sympathy," and "the stalwart, reliable essence of the maternal."<sup>6</sup> Everyone who represented her was trained in "a Betty Crocker literary style, written and spoken, a Betty Crocker idiom, a Betty Crocker set of values" (174). But the text in which Betty Crocker figures is considerably larger than the radio drama, and considerably more dynamic. Crocker is a character developed to reflect the changing times. Her portrait, for example, has been revised at least eight times (in 1936, 1955, 1965, 1968, 1972, 1980, 1986, and 1996), each revised image reflecting the contemporary vision of a warm and authoritative figure.<sup>7</sup>

In order to compare mail volume and audience numbers for Betty Crocker with those of Kate Aitken in 1941, an unpublished document from General Mills written in 1948 is helpful.<sup>8</sup> It reveals that in 1941, there were, associated with Betty Crocker, ten staff members, forty-five radio stations, 46,148 cooking school registrations, and "135,819 mail volume." Between 1939 and 1940, when the radio show discussed pioneer covered-wagon days, "which were a good background for discussions of thrift as it can be practiced today," there were sixty-five radio stations, 35,389 cooking school registrations (even though a "fee was charged for registration") and "151,952 mail volume."<sup>9</sup> Although astounding, these numbers pale in comparison with those of Canadian Kate Aitken, especially when one adjusts for relative population size. So, to answer the question about the American influence on Canadian listeners: they certainly were tuning in to American programs starring pseudonymous hosts like Aunt Sammy and Betty Crocker, but they were also, in significant numbers, listening closely to Canadian talk radio programming and communicating actively with radio hosts such as the beloved Kate Aitken. As they listened to the information offered by these hosts, women surely also saw the irony in the fact that these female radio personalities moved toward greater responsibility and status in the paid labour force and public sphere by embodying significant expertise in the domestic arts of the private sphere?

#### THE MEANING OF FOOD SERVED UP ON CANADIANS AIRWAVES

Even in radio's earliest days, one primary objective of talking about food on radio involved marketing commercial food products. Listeners quickly

became attuned to the often fuzzy distinction between commercial text and trustworthy unbiased counsel. Earnest Weir (1965, 100) writes that "in the early thirties there was a rapidly mounting sensitivity to commercials. There were even agitations against them, though in length and number commercials were shorter and much less frequent than those cluttering the airwaves today." Advertisers also worried that daytime audiences were too easily distracted and that precious care and revenue dollars might be wasted on audiences paying too little attention. Sponsored programming was one solution to both of these concerns. Such programming contained oblique references to the sponsors' products through "sensory appeals," so that the program itself, rather than merely the commercial breaks, served as the marketing tool. "Successful radio programs reminded [rather than told] listeners of the sponsor's product—the 'tinkling' and 'refreshing' music of the Clicquot Club Eskimos suggested Clicquot Club soda to listeners—without direct mention of the product" (Smulyan 1993, 6). Educational programs went one better, because they provided instructions for the use of the sponsors' products, so "the sponsor could advertise in both the commercials and the program for the same price" and, in turn, "advertisers found in radio a chance to control the material which surrounded their advertisements" (7). What rendered these programs palatable, even enjoyable, was the central personality. When Mary Margaret McBride revealed to her audiences that she was not really Martha Deane, it was surely her warmth and charm that carried the day. The same principle applied to radio "instructors" who portrayed pseudonymous personalities so well that they not only seemed to *be* the personality they portrayed but also, armed with know-how relating to the products they endorsed, seemed like experts who could provide useful information for the homemaker. Betty Crocker herself was one such success story, with "her" parent company, General Mills, launching one of the first radio stations in the United States: WCCO in Minneapolis.

Kate Aitken, writing with her characteristic blend of good humour and optimism in the late 1950s, describes the technique of the integrated commercial from the perspective of one who not only hosted her own show but also wrote all her own broadcasts and commercials. Even as she lays bare the rhetorical politics of product endorsements, where the overly explicit marketing plug ran the risk of discomfiting listeners, she nevertheless

defends her own practice on the basis of her endorsing only "excellent" products:

Commercials have become such a controversial subject that this statement will probably sound incredible. *We enjoyed doing the commercials.* We never took a contract unless we were certain it was an excellent product, one with which we were proud to be associated.

Our sponsors permitted me to write the commercials, and I followed the line of the soft sell. It was always a game throwing in the commercial so that it sounded like part of the news. In radio this is called an integrated commercial. Indeed one indignant listener called the sponsor to complain bitterly, "I'm never going to listen to that woman again. She sneaks in those commercials before I know it." The sponsor didn't fire me! (Aitken 1959, 143)

What distinguished Betty Crocker from the other corporate spokespersonae and loyalty mechanisms was the clever innovation of a radio talk show that fashioned itself as a cooking "school" and the elaborate execution of its "course development." In this reformulation, food talk seemed less like product endorsement than like the primary subject matter of a household science class. There were, admittedly, other cooking schools available to Canadian listeners through the airwaves, such as the Radio Cooking School, run by Consumers' Gas. The program, broadcast on CKCL in Toronto, starred Jessie Read, until she left Consumers' Gas in 1934 to begin writing a regular food column for Toronto's *Evening Telegram*. Read went on to star in the first movie devoted to culinary instruction, *Kitchen Talks*, in 1936.<sup>10</sup> What distinguished Betty Crocker's "classroom of the air," however, was that it involved both a formal registration process and a written examination at the end of the course. In turn, Betty Crocker's students benefitted through both a mailed packet of recipes and the opportunity to ask Betty Crocker directly about any particular issue of concern. Mrs. Wm. Zander, for example, asks, "Does meringue always fall some after taken from the oven?" Betty's response gently reminds her to use a cool oven for meringue and also not to place it too near a draught when removed from the oven.<sup>11</sup>

The educational analogy was explicit. James Gray, in his corporate profile of General Mills, comments that G. S. Kennedy, who supervised the Buffalo broadcasts, used to call himself the "Dean of Betty Crocker University" (1954, 177). Schooling was also the order of the day for all those

who portrayed Betty Crocker. Blanche Ingersoll first personified Betty, playing the role of teacher when *The Betty Crocker Cooking School of the Air* aired each Friday. Ingersoll went on to train other apprentices in the fine art of portraying Betty on the air. "Miss Ingersoll urged the Buffalo interpreter to be 'chatty' and 'offhand.' What she wanted was the tone of the 'friendly visit.' And, she added crisply, 'for goodness' sake avoid the sickening, sweet tones affected by some women broadcasters. Betty Crocker is a sensible sort of person" (177). All those who portrayed Betty, in other words, were held to strict standards.

On the part of the audience members, there was a certain willing suspension of belief. Looking through personal papers of Agnes Quamme Higgins, who herself portrayed Betty Crocker and worked for General Mills before moving to Montréal to take up the directorship of Montréal's Diet Dispensary, one notices that letters are addressed to "Miss Betty Crocker" despite an evident understanding on the part of the audience members that the radio personality was a constructed identity. Indeed, the correspondence between Betty and her listeners contains a number of letters evaluating the quality of an individual's portrayal of the Betty Crocker persona. In one response, Betty seems to position herself as a teacher of those women "now broadcasting my talks." She writes, "I am preparing them just as I always have, and . . . they've tried to give talks just as I would give them, as nearly as possible."<sup>12</sup> Although she signs the letter as Betty Crocker, the pseudonymous nature of her role is nevertheless rendered explicit in the last sentences, when Crocker notes that the listener's "frank criticisms" will surely be of interest to the show's "advertising manager" and the "radio adviser."<sup>13</sup> That is, while writing as Betty Crocker and responding to a letter addressed to her under that name, she does acknowledge the tacit understanding that she is personifying a marketing concept.

The pedagogical model constructed by Betty Crocker's "Cooking School of the Air" anticipated the online classroom of today, where, for example, students can register through an educational technology company like Coursera or EdX in university classes that are offered entirely online. Indeed, a comparison with today's online courses or MOOCs (massive open online courses) can be taken one step further. While EdX is based on a nonprofit model, Coursera runs on a for-profit model. However, Coursera's business model means that profit comes not so much from tuition fees, as would be the case in a traditional educational model, but

rather from corporate clients who are interested in the demographic information and contact information for the best students graduating from the courses. Similarly, for General Mills, the value of Betty Crocker's "classroom of the air" lay less in tuition fees (although the program's success allowed for a nominal fee to be charged in later years) than in the wealth of demographic information that students provided about their cooking practices, food tastes, and particular culinary anxieties that might one day be remedied by product innovations.

Interestingly, the value of this information to the company is articulated very explicitly in the correspondence and did not seem to deter listener engagement. For example, Betty Crocker writes quite openly of this to the aforementioned Mrs. Zander, one of her "students," who was sent a small gift in return for filling out a questionnaire. Note, however, that she positions the information as valuable to her lesson plans rather than to the product development and marketing strategies of her parent company. In other words, she positions herself as teacher rather than as corporate spokesperson: "Perhaps by this time the little relish dish has reached you, so you know that we received the questionnaire all carefully filled out. I was very glad to have these personal comments as they help me so much when making plans for future lessons etc."<sup>14</sup>

That Betty Crocker here positions herself as a teacher is significant for another reason as well. Both the women who portrayed Betty and the persona herself were focused on serving their community. The sheer volume of correspondence, often providing advice that goes well beyond the specific parameters of product marketing, suggests a genuine willingness on the part of the individuals and the company to provide a service. The reality, however, was that these women were working in a corporate setting and served as vehicles of a remarkably effective marketing strategy that relied on well-educated and articulate women to portray corporate spokespersonae; ironically, these women straddled the separate spheres by working in the corporate sector yet mentoring best practices of home food provision for women operating in the domestic sphere.

What intrigues me about this paradigm is not so much the corporate rhetoric of service to the consumer, which can easily be understood as marketing and loyalty development, but rather what seem to be genuine gestures of community building on the part of the individuals who signed their name as "Betty." In part, of course, these can be understood as

generous offerings of one woman to another. However, I suggest that the service impulse was also a key component of the increasing professionalization of women in roles shaped by the emergence of home economics, a social force that unfolded in Canada in the early decades of the twentieth century. Educational reformer Adelaide Hoodless, best remembered as founder of the Women's Institutes, worked to define, shape and promote the discipline at the turn of the century, putting into practice some of the lessons she had gleaned from educators and the American social reformers and philanthropists whom she so admired. Hoodless's interventions brought about curriculum reforms even in the first decade of the twentieth century, including the founding of the Macdonald Institute at Guelph in 1903. In the next few decades, home economics organizations sprang up across the country, and the national Canadian Home Economics Association was founded in Winnipeg in 1939. By mid-twentieth century, then, home economists perceived themselves to be professionals, with the associated responsibilities and advantages that designation implied. One can think of a profession as being characterized in three ways, as involving high qualifications and standards, self-regulation, and service to the community. The role of corporate spokespersons like Betty Crocker provided one way for highly qualified women to fulfill the third imperative of the professional order—at least for as long as they perceived their corporate role as serving the general community rather than their parent company more specifically.

What, then, can we conclude about possible meanings ascribed to food served on the airwaves? At first glance, it might seem that food talk had much to do with product endorsement, an objective rendered explicit within advertising text and more oblique within the paradigm of radio-based classes. However, under closer scrutiny, one suspects that a genuine service imperative prompted highly skilled women such as Agnes Quamme Higgins or Kate Aitken to share with the broader public their expertise in the domestic arts associated with the private sphere. The meaning of radio food talk for them, in other words, was that it was one viable venue through which they could fulfill the service imperative of what was being increasingly understood as a professional career by mid-twentieth century. For their listeners, the meaning of radio food talk and related correspondence was that it provided valuable information about home food production during a time of rapid soft and hard technological

innovation. Surely, too, it provided important opportunities for outreach and possibly, advancement. Women were able to listen to other women on the radio, providing a welcome opportunity for housewives isolated by practical realities of work-in-the-home to listen in on conversations of interest. In addition, the very popular cooking schools of the air provided them with the opportunity to become students and to participate in a form of advanced education directly related to their vocation.<sup>15</sup>

#### SURVIVING THE TELEVISION REVOLUTION: THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION

Another aspect of the radio landscape in the mid-twentieth century was the definitive march of drama, a staple of evening radio programming, from radio airwaves to television screens, which soon became common in family homes. But did food programming make the same journey? Certainly, the overwhelming popularity of food channels in today's media landscape suggests that Canadians and others communicate about food through television, with the many food-related genres of competition-based and demonstration-style programs. One might justifiably suspect that with the trajectory from radio to television, food disappeared from daytime radio programming. In Canada, the career of Jehane Benoît—a culinary author, commentator, and broadcaster—accelerated as she moved from radio to television, illustrating the impact of the advent of television on food programming. Recently, however, there has been a surprising, pivotal, and largely undocumented return to food programming in radio, even since the advent of Food Network, which became available in Canada in 1997, with Food Network Canada licensed by the CRTC in 2000.<sup>16</sup> What accounts for this enduring popularity of communicating about food on radio, despite the availability of information about food in multiple other communication media?

Kate Ramos, associate editor of *Chow* (San Francisco), argues that food radio is making a comeback because food television has privileged entertainment over education. She writes, "As the selection on TV became more varied, food programs on the radio eventually fell by the wayside. In recent years, however, as the hosts on the idiot box have become more interested in sizzle than substance, radio and podcast food shows have flooded the airwaves" (Ramos 2008). By way of examples, she points to ten shows, including National Public Radio's *Hidden Kitchens* and *Food* podcasts,



American Public Media's *The Splendid Table*, and BBC's *Food Programme*. This same tendency to rebalance the scale to favour educational programming is evident in other US food-oriented radio shows as well, including those on commercial stations. For example, one might think of *Tonia's Kitchen: All Things Foodie* on Corus Radio; *Good Food on the Road* and *Good Food* on KCRW; the excellent *Blue Lifestyle* on CRN Digital Talk Radio; *Slow Living Radio*, *Flavor HD*, and *What's Cookin' Today* on CRN Talk; *Cooking with Marilyn* (Marilyn Harris) on 55KRC; and *Hot Grease* on Heritage Radio Network, as well as the various shows on Food Service Radio.

Radio food shows in Canada also seem to tip the scales toward education and away from pure entertainment. CBC's weekly show *The Main Ingredient* focuses largely on mindful eating: across Canada, local audiences can tune in to hear their favourite personalities offer counsel on eating with due consideration, including Vancouver's Tony and Kasey (of *Tony and Kasey's Best of Food and Wine*, airing since 1997), Manitoba's Larry McIntosh (*Food and Friends with Larry McIntosh*), and Toronto's Christine Cardoso (*Cravings, with Christine Cardoso*). In addition to offering sound food advice, French-language offerings provide insight into the franco-phone community's love affair with cooking and culinary culture. Radio-Canada's popular *Bien dans son assiette*, for example, airs each evening from Monday through Thursday, with selections replayed in early morning hours. And while *Épicerie* is part of Radio-Canada's television offerings, its hosts are regarded as celebrities and often appear on both English- and French-language radio to discuss food-related topics.

In short, then, one can credibly argue that food radio is alive and well in Canada and, at the risk of oversimplification, that it offers education-oriented programming that complements the television food shows. At the very least, it is inaccurate to suggest that food programming slipped off the airwaves with the advent of television. However, this does raise the question, what is the particular appeal of hearing about food without the opportunity to see or taste it?

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the appeal of cooking shows was surely the practical information they provided. At a time when young brides often lived far from their mothers and with rapid societal change that brought with it technological innovation that eclipsed traditional culinary wisdom, corporate spokescharacters provided valuable insights. Changing times brought challenges. During the Depression, for

example, the radio audience for Betty Crocker's radio show increased exponentially because it provided economical solutions to the dilemma of putting adequate nutrition on the table.

Today, however, when we have so many ways of accessing information, when technological innovation and the fast rate of change have become the new normal, surely the appeal of food radio—and food talk more generally—is not just the information it provides. While there is scant literature on the pleasures of food radio specifically, existing literature addressing the appeal of food conversations on television and of recipes in books offers useful points of entry into the inquiry.

Puzzling over the appeal of food television specifically, Polly Adema notes its ability to offer vicarious pleasure, to blend education with entertainment, and to trouble the waters of social and cultural norms. She argues that "food television incorporates the vicarious pleasures of watching someone else cook and eat; the emulsion of entertainment and cooking; the jumbling of traditional gender roles; and ambivalence toward cultural standards of body, consumption, and health" (2000, 113). But the same does not hold entirely true for food radio, where listeners *cannot* watch someone else cook and eat, the physical body remains *unseen*, the quality of broadcasters' health unknown, and questions of gender roles are often marginal to the conversation. Indeed, food described on radio is removed from the listener, something to be imagined, anticipated, but never tasted.

Adema (2000, 119) argues that we "can read food television as a symptom and a product of our culture's obsession with control, health and ideals of physical beauty." Surely, food radio is different in kind as well as in degree, for the pleasures of food described on radio have almost entirely to do with imagination and anticipation. As such, they seem much more consistent with the pleasures identified by Adam Gopnik in his meditation on the inevitable appeal of reading recipes. "We reanimate our passions by imagining the possibilities," muses Gopnik, "and the act of wanting ends up mattering more than the fact of getting. . . . The desire to go on desiring, the wanting to want, is what makes you turn the pages" (2009, 112). Cheri Ketchum's broader analysis of notions of the pleasure and goals of consumer societies such as our own serves to extend Gopnik's case; however, she does seem to suggest that there is pleasure both in anticipating an event and in realizing it. Pointing to Colin Campbell's notion of "mentalistic hedonism,"<sup>17</sup> she argues that the "defining features" of consumer



societies are “symbolism and communication” rather than “simply materialism.” “The ultimate goal is often to experience in reality what people conjure up in their minds” (2005, 222).

How can these observations support our understanding of the enduring popularity of food radio? Taking a cue from Gopnik, one answer is that food communicated through the medium of radio allows readers to anticipate and imagine food as they would like it to be. Ketchum might add that food radio provides information and impetus for listeners to prepare in reality the dishes they have anticipated and imagined, and contributes to listeners’ understanding of food’s symbolic and communicative potential.

#### CANADIAN FOOD RADIO: SERVING UP IDENTITY THROUGH DIVERSITY

The consistent appeal of food radio suggests that it offers something more than immediate pleasure for its listeners. It seems entirely appropriate to use the notions of appetite and nourishment to explore this topic. Indeed, the consistent popularity of food radio speaks to listeners’ appetite for conversation about food sourcing, selection, and preparation. But how, precisely, has Canadian food radio nourished its listeners past and present?

As American women’s diaries have suggested (see Riney-Kehrberg 1998), radio food talk established a common sense of identity and provided outreach to women isolated by rural lifestyles. Betty Friedan argued in 1963 that even women living in urban environments and playing the role of home service provider in the private sphere felt distinctly isolated. One might imagine how radio—and later, television—provided a welcome outreach for them. In Canada, by contrast, there are indications that food radio played, and continues to play, a slightly different role. Rather than uniting listeners with a common sense of identity, Canadian food radio serves to underline key elements of the taste of place in a very diverse country. If there is a common Canadian identity communicated through food radio, then that identity is one of diversity, of a gathering of different food practices.

Foundational here are the contributions of radio celebrity Kate Aitken and the Québec food authority Jehane Benoît. Indeed, the combined legacy of “Mrs. A” and “Mme B,” as they were known, is a definition of Canadian foodways that remains predominant today: they are defined by a wealth of diverse and distinctive food products and production techniques. More

specifically, Aitken, who was paid on a flat-fee basis and spent much of her budget allocation on travel (Aitken 1959, 173), brought insights from across Canada and around the world to her Canadian audiences. In the mid-twentieth century, she underscored the regional nature of Canadian cuisines. Jehane Benoît, through her “conseils culinaires” on the long-standing Radio-Canada radio program, *Fémina*, and related recipe books, provided specific examples of cooking locally in Québec and some of the traditional recipes of her region.<sup>18</sup>

Contemporary food radio seems to continue this tradition of emphasizing the diversity of foodways across North America. While discussion of local food and regional foodways by Aitken and Benoît tended to be largely informational, discussion of local foods in the contemporary context takes on symbolic resonance. With the growing popularity of the Slow Food movement and the increasing influence of the gospel of “mindful” eating, sourcing of local ingredients and detailed descriptions of regionally based food preparation techniques are part of the drive to eat mindfully, to eat against the grain of processed foodstuffs and homogenized foodways. By definition, of course, the drive toward mindful eating suggests a perception of the significant presence and momentum of “mindless” eating, and, not surprisingly, the case in favour of “mindless” eating is very seldom made on radio (or anywhere else, for that matter).

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, what has been sidestepped throughout this chapter remains to be said. We began with Sidney Katz’s observation, made in 1955, that the topic of “eating” was on the tip of many Canadians’ tongues, and this is all the more evident in Canada today. However, food talk can never approximate the very primary, personal, and sensory act that is eating. While food consumption can be influenced by radio discourse and advertising, and even anticipated as a result of food talk, food—unlike music, for example—cannot be consumed or experienced through radio. It can only be anticipated, and herein lies its specific pleasure. Is it really so surprising, then, that we are now witnessing an increasing fascination with food—and food conversations—during an increasingly mediated and media-saturated era, as the sensory act of unmediated living seems to be slipping slowly and steadily from our grasp?

Ketchum and Gopnik seem to provide two different explanations for our fascination with food talk.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, Ketchum suggests that we embrace anticipation as a prelude to the real thing, that food talk promises food consumption. In turn, in Ketchum's notion of consumer society as driven by the impulses of the communicative and symbolic as well as the material, food consumption is foundational to consumer society. Not only is the act of eating a material one, but also, through our choice of foods and our understanding of their symbolic potential, food consumption itself becomes a form of communication. On the other hand, by arguing that "the act of wanting ends up mattering more than the fact of getting," Gopnik suggests that we have come to savour and draw nourishment from anticipation, imagination, and the deferred potential that is food talk. If, in Ketchum's formulation, food can be understood as a form of communication, then, in Gopnik's formulation, communication seems to function as a food. One cannot help but wonder, of course, to what extent and for how long a mediated version of food is or will be nourishment enough. However, a significant overlap exists between the two in terms of their assumptions. Most obviously, both acknowledge our insatiable hunger for communication and conversation about food as well as for food itself, which accounts for the continued popularity of food radio. By broaching the subject, both also remind us that this appetite for food talk is not unique to the Canadian context.

#### NOTES

- 1 Radio's dominance was jeopardized soon after the end of the Second World War, with the arrival of television. While television emerged in Britain and the United States as early as 1946 (Allard 1979, 203), it came to Canada only in 1952 (Rutherford 2012). More accurately, one might say that it *returned* to Canada, because television transmitters were operated briefly in Canada as early as 1923, by both CFCF and by CKAC in Montréal, before being "closed by government order" (Allard 1979, 203).
- 2 Robert Armstrong (2010, 23) notes that, "What was later to become the first commercial broadcasting operation in Canada began on 20 May 1920 when the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company, operating with an experimental broadcast licence for Montreal radio station XWA (later called CFCF), participated in the demonstration of a musical performance in Montreal that was broadcast in Ottawa."

- 3 Kate Aitken, herself a formidable force as a female journalist and radio personality, was perhaps the most outspoken critic of the double standard in broadcasting. As late as 1957, upon her retirement, Aitken called the role of women in Canadian broadcasting "deplorable" (Ferguson 2005).
- 4 Despite the limitations of a pseudonym, women could still build up varied, interesting, and significant careers while portraying pseudonymous personalities, engaging audience members across a variety of communication media. Pearl Clarke is one excellent example of an individual who seemed to control her pseudonymous personalities rather than allow them to control her. Trained in food sciences, and living in Montréal in the 1930s, Clarke wrote a syndicated column for the *Montreal Standard* and the *Edmonton Journal* under the name of Mary Moore. In addition, she wrote advertising copy under the name of Harriet Hubbard Ayres for Canada Limited. When she moved to Hamilton, she continued to write under the name of Moore but took up a third pseudonym to write publicity for Mary Miles Fine Foods (Lang 1999, 184).
- 5 Gordon Sinclair is, however, relatively sanguine about the cost of Aitken's hectic pace. He writes, with characteristically dry humour,
 

Some critics have suggested that Mrs. A.'s recent around-the-world tour was a little *too* fast for a good reporter. At one point she told her radio audience that she'd left Shanghai's Cathay Hotel just ahead of the invading Red Army and dashed to the airport by rickshaw. This reporter was in Shanghai seven weeks later and the Reds still hadn't arrived. And it would take the fleetest rickshaw coolie a good day's trot to get from the Cathay Hotel to the airport. (1950, 67)
- 6 Gray (1954, 182) writes that one psychologist, consulted about Betty's "development," "offered, as model, the concept of the 'mother figure' to whom normal men and women turn all their lives to find the springs of confidence."
- 7 As Susan Smulyan (1993, 9) reminds us, "When General Mills invented Betty Crocker, they copied a trend already widespread in radio. Many radio performers remained unknown. The identity of the Goodrich Silver Masked Tenor was a closely guarded secret, as were the identities of Paul Oliver and Olive Palmer who sang for the Palmolive Company, and Goldy and Dusty, the Gold Dust twins, hired by a cleanser manufacturer."
- 8 This document is three pages in length and was sent to Agnes Quamme Higgins in 1987 from Jean Toll, corporate archivist at General Mills Inc. My thanks to General Mills archivist Joyce Lopez who recently confirmed that this document is entitled "Betty Crocker Chronology" and was created by Mae Chesnut, a one-time employee of the Home Service Division, in 1948.

- 9 This information is derived from an untitled record of the audience size of Betty Crocker radio programs, written by a Betty Crocker staff member ca. 1940 and contained in a private collection (with grateful acknowledgement to Holly Jonas and family).
- 10 See "Telegram Dietician Signs Film Contract," *Evening Telegram*, 11 March 1936, 14. See also "Three Meals a Day," *Evening Telegram*, 28 March 1934, 48; and Helen Allen, "At the Movies," *Evening Telegram*, 19 June 1936, 36.
- 11 Both the query from Mrs. Wm. (presumably William) Zander, dated 20 December 1935, and Betty Crocker's reply, dated 4 December 1936, are from a private collection (with grateful acknowledgement to Holly Jonas and family).
- 12 Letter from Betty Crocker (written by either Neilsine Hansen or Agnes Quamme Higgins) to a listener, titled "Concerning a New Voice or Person on the Air," undated (but possibly 1936), private collection (with grateful acknowledgement to Holly Jonas and family).
- 13 There are a number of typos in the original text—a function both of its draft status and the practical realities of the era of typewriters. Since they may be distracting for the reader, I have corrected them in the text given here.
- 14 Letter from Betty Crocker to Mrs. Wm. Zander, dated 4 December 1936, from a private collection (with grateful acknowledgement to Holly Jonas and family).
- 15 My thanks to Joyce Hildebrand for these insights.
- 16 Even as I made this assertion, I received an email from Erin Fairbanks, of Heritage Radio Network, celebrating a series of radio programs detailing student food activism during the summer of 2013 and confirming the value of radio as a medium for food communications in the contemporary moment:
- Heritage Radio Network is proud to share a recap of the first annual *Summer of Food*, a compilation of remarkable stories from our Nation's emerging network of student leaders. From New York to California, students left the classroom for the frontlines of the food world, using their summer break to radically rethink our country's food landscape. HRN documented the summer experiences of students of all ages, creating a snapshot of the good food movement during the summer of 2013. ("Heritage Radio Network's 2013 Summer of Food. Brooklyn, NY, 30 August," email from Erin Fairbanks, 13 June 2014)
- 17 Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 89.

- 18 These include *Les recettes "Fémina,"* which includes recipes aired on shows of the 1958–59 season, and *Recettes et secrets "Fémina,"* which includes recipes aired on shows from September 1959 through April 1962. Both were published in Montreal by Radio-Canada, and bear no details of publication date.
- 19 I am indebted to Pamela Holway for challenging me to provide answers to what I was tempted to leave as a rhetorical question and for offering her valuable insights.

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## Of Men and Cupcakes

### Baking Identities on Food Network

*Irina D. Mihalache*

Anthony Bourdain hates cupcakes. When asked by the *Seattle Times* to comment on the cupcake craze in North America, Bourdain said, with gravity and annoyance, "Enough" (Tsong 2009). In fact, Bourdain's dislike for cupcakes is not a surprise for those familiar with his type of performed masculinity: edgy, rough, mysterious, and characterized by "a rejection of domesticity" (Ashley et al. 2004, 165). For Bourdain, endorsing cupcakes—the quintessential symbol of domestic femininity—would act against his performed identity, which has been carefully crafted through various media, from books to reality television. Yet, despite the chef's dissatisfaction with the frosted dessert, the cupcake remains a very powerful presence within the North American foodscape and in various Food Network kitchens.

Bourdain's comment on cupcakes is a suitable entryway into discussions about food, representation, and identity because it highlights the fluidity with which a culinary cultural object such as the cupcake can circulate within multiple registers of meaning and inform diverse identities. If, for Bourdain, the cupcake represents a culinary joke and the sum of many things he dislikes—daintiness, domesticity, and nostalgia—for other celebrity and noncelebrity chefs who perform on television, the cupcake can be deconstructed and reassembled in order to signify a range of things—from retro domesticity to hypermasculinity. Therefore, I argue that the baking of cupcakes on food television, specifically Food Network, represents an