Canadian consumers are becoming more discerning and concerned about the food they eat. Currently, seven major new trends in consumer food preferences can be identified. Each represents a market niche that community organizations – CED initiatives, social enterprises, nonprofit or charitable entities, local food businesses – need to be particularly well-positioned to act upon.

By connecting to these consumers – linking with this “piece of their mind” – community-based initiatives can become major drivers of change.

1 Buy Local

Safeway’s produce aisles are still stuffed with broccoli from California and tomatoes from Florida. But things are changing. Nature’s Path Foods, an organic food distributor, has recently launched “Harvest to Home” to market local produce to the middle-income food buyer, a market they say is growing 20% annually: “Consumers increasingly want to feel connected with the food they eat. They want to understand how it was produced and where it originated and they also want to know that the process of growing it did little or no damage to the environment.” That demand for the Inside Story on food production is most easily met by nearby producers.

“Harvest to Home” is just one of hundreds of initiatives picking up on this trend. Direct farm marketing associations are providing seasonal guidebooks for consumers interested in farmgate sales. Local Flavours Plus, an Ontario nonprofit, has recently gained a million-dollar investment to help them develop and market locally-branded produce. In B.C. and Alberta the Small Scale Food Processor Association (SSFPA) developed the Local Flavours Products and Services Co-op to brand and market the specialty foods that member businesses are making with local ingredients.

To assist these entrepreneurs, communities can provide manufacturing infrastructure, distribution networks, and market channels. In Nanaimo, B.C. the We Feast program (funded by the Canadian Women’s Foundation) provides business services as a means to incubate new entrepreneurs in the food sector.

2 Buy Convenience

Canadians have more money, fewer cooking skills, and little time for food-related chores. As a result, 30% of the Canadian food dollar goes to the food service industry. When convenience foods were first introduced, however (remember those TV dinners?), consumers were willing to accept a lower quality and poorer taste in return for quick preparation.

Not any more. Today, ready-to-eat meals must offer nutrition, flavour, and perceived value as well as ease in preparation and clean-up. A recent feature article in Western Grocer says that home meal replacements (HMRs) are an opportunity for grocery stores that can prepare them in-house and use high quality private label branding to meet “a demand for a combination of convenience, nutrition and quality taste.” The Canadian Grocery channel has recorded an increase of 25% in the dollars spent on HMRs for the year.
previous to March 2005, and an increase of 19% in units sold. (An indication that there may be more profit in selling less.)

3 Buy Specialty

Producers often cannot compete with the prices on mass-produced food items. With specialty foods the story is different. Select groups of customers are often willing to pay a premium for foods produced to suit specific ethnic and cultural tastes. So side-by-side with concentration and consolidation in the food industry, businesses are blossoming that offer foods tailored to the interests or desires of a relatively small group.

Parmesan is just one of hundreds of regional foods that the European Union (EU) protects from imitation through Quality Food Designation – a certification that the cheese is produced, processed, and prepared in a given geographical area and meets rigorous standards (northern Italy).

One study has estimated that designation can add an 18% premium to the price of a product. A recent ruling by the World Trade Organization may result in regions outside Europe applying for EU designation in order to protect their own food specialties.

Since 1996, companies in Québec have been able to apply to the Conseil des appellations agroalimentaires for designation by destination, certificate of specialty, for a protected geographical indication, or for an organic designation. In Ontario, Niagara Presents is a going concern. From a project launched in a housing co-op, it has developed into a commercial co-packing kitchen that provides development, training, and marketing services to women engaged in small-scale food businesses.

4 Buy Healthy

Canadians are both getting older and expecting to get older – a lot older. They want to enjoy that time in better health than their parents or grandparents. That has implications for recreation, medicine, and all kinds of consumer purchases, including food.

Government health ministries are recognizing that they need to promote healthy food consumption and lifestyles or their budgets will burst. In partnership with the Canadian Food Producers Association, several health organizations have launched “5-9” programs to promote good health through higher daily consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables. Even the fast food industry is touting “trans-fat free” products.

In Toronto, that awareness has given rise to the Salad Bars in Schools program. Working from a U.S. model, since 2002 Canadian Feed the Children (and more recently, the Ontario Trillium Foundation) and FoodShare Toronto have been helping schools to offer salad bars to their students as an alternative to regular school cafeteria fare. FoodShare supplies a training manual and recipes and oversees the food orders. (See p. 28 for more on FoodShare.) The participating schools create their menus and prepare fruits, vegetables, proteins, and whole grain breads for presentation at lunch time. The guiding principle is to offer mouth-watering food, not serve it.

KIDS – and grown-ups – donate $2-3 and go down the table, choosing what and how much they will eat. Fifteen Toronto schools are now participating. Take that, Big Mac.

5 Buy Organic

In 2001, the size of the organic retail food market in Canada was estimated to be $650 million. While this represents only 1-2% of the total food market, the demand for organics is estimated to be rising at 20% a year. Health (and taste) is also driving this exponential growth. Of current and prospective organic food purchasers in B.C., 84% believe that organic food is healthier than non-organic.

Unfortunately, much of this demand is going to foreign countries. As a result of trade deals, much of the organic produce that is imported is grown in the United States and Mexico.

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Local, Convenient, Healthy, Organic, Safe, Environmentally Responsible – these are all attributes that different consumers take into consideration when they make their food purchases nowadays.

Photos: farmers market (p. 33), bread (p. 34), carrots n’ cukes (p. 35). Courtesy of Laura Berman.
aesthetics (like weeding) troubled them, and their neighbours were recognizing certified organics as a legitimate niche market. It took seven years to get their whole property certified, but now they have 2800 acres in grain and hay, and an organic cow calf operation. The benefits? Their crop rotation is better and production is more diverse. The cost of chemical inputs is gone so the operating loans are less. Learning and sharing with other farmers about growing organic has also knitted their community closer together. All in all, "it was a very good move for the farm," concludes Nettie.

Recent events, especially in the beef and chicken sectors (salmonella poisoning, "mad cow" disease, and Avian Flu come to mind) have raised the awareness of consumers to food that is unsafe to eat. As an antidote, Conscious Consumers are taking the time to get to know and trust the people who grow and prepare their food. That's the reason behind the growing popularity of Consumer Shared Agriculture (see p. 22) as well as farmers markets and farmgate sales. People feel safer when they know the grower.

The ranchers of Peace Country Tender Beef Co-Op (Peace River, Alberta) aim to test every animal to ensure that consumers have full safety documentation. To fulfill a promise of "excellence from pasture to plate," they are also financing their own state-of-the-art processing facility. Like them, other groups of ranchers across the country have realized that vertical integration doesn't just reap the margins from processing, it reduces a producer's exposure to the food safety concerns that reliance on the major meat processors has brought in its train.

Increasingly, food industry producers, processors, and retailers are seeking to differentiate their products and services through claims to higher levels of environmental stewardship. More consumers are seeking out these products and paying premiums for those that offer high quality and good presentation. This can be as simple as an assurance that "dolphin friendly" fishing collected the tuna. Or it can involve rigorous, external verification of standards like the Humane Society, Heritage Farms, and Fair Trade eco-certification programs. Ducks Unlimited is working with federal agricultural organizations to recognize Ecological Goods and Services (EG&S) so as to compensate farmers for expenses contributing to EG&S. In B.C.'s lower mainland 37 restaurants participate in the Vancouver Aquarium's "Ocean Wise" program. Restaurant patrons can choose to eat sustainable seafoods by noting which menu items carry the Ocean Wise logo.

David Van Seters, founder and major shareholder of Small Potatoes Urban Delivery (SPUD) has configured his whole food business to appeal to the environmentally-aware consumer. SPUD purchases half its fresh produce within a 800-kilometre radius of its stores in Vancouver, Victoria, Calgary, and Seattle. It works with nonprofit organizations to develop supply chains with local farmers and small-scale food processors. To reduce "food miles" still further, SPUD encourages food shoppers to "commute" to its website and then home delivers their purchases with a fleet of trucks.

Food Secure Canada (FSC)

FSC is a nonprofit alliance of organizations and citizens that assists its members in collaborative action to explore and advance food security in Canada. It strives to achieve three things:

- **Zero Hunger**: All people at all times must be able to acquire, in a dignified manner, adequate quantity and quality of culturally and personally acceptable food.
- **Sustainable food systems**: Food must be harvested, produced, processed, distributed, and consumed in a manner that maintains or enhances the quality of land, air, and water for future generations. Also, people who grow, harvest, produce, process, handle, retail, and serve food must be able to earn a living wage in a safe and healthy working environment.
- **Healthy and safe food**: Nourishing foods must be readily at hand (and less nourishing ones restricted); food (including wild foods) must not be contaminated with pathogens or industrial chemicals; and no novel food may enter the environment or food chain without rigorous independent testing and ongoing tracking and surveillance to ensure its safety for human consumption.

FSC also works in solidarity with communities throughout the world that are striving for justice, equity, and environmental sustainability in the production, processing, and consumption of food.
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