



ENGAGING THE  
COMMUNITY:

The Canadian Food  
System and You!

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# Engaging the Community: The Canadian Food System and You!

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## Abstract:

The purpose of this project was to interact with my community members on the subject of food; what they bought, where they shopped and why. I wanted to engage the community in consideration what food they choose to consume. I prepared a set of questions to ask randomly selected individuals I would interact with day to day: classmates, family, coworkers, coffee shop patrons, etc. Most of these people had no idea of my intimate connections with the Spoon. Those that I would interact on campus with, I would take to the rooftop garden on the environmental sciences building and show them the garden, then point across the river where it was prepared and consumed. After a discussion of the garden, we crossed the bridge and dined on soup at the Spoon. Conversations among various groups, as well as between myself and participating individuals, would ensue, covering a wide array of topics surrounding food issues.

## The Canadian Food System

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## **Engaging the community: an introspective of connecting people with food**

The Seasoned Spoon Co-operative Café (the Spoon) is a student run organization which provides vegetarian and vegan food produced using ingredients that are as local and organic as possible. This must be achieved within the means of the Spoon and at an affordable price to the consumer. As the Spoon responds to demand and grows with it, there is always a need for an increased knowledge base of the consumer's habits and demands in order to meet their needs - nutritionally, educationally and with respect to accessibility. The Spoon acts on a premise that promotes the health of our bodies, communities, economies and environment. ✓

The Seasoned Spoon Café is committed to the following principles:

- 1 to serve healthy, organic, locally grown, affordable food
- 2 to be a student-run, co-operatively structured, not-for-profit organization
- 3 to offer student learning opportunities through paid staff, volunteer work, and Community Based Education courses
- 4 to encourage the diverse use of pre-existing student space on campus
- 5 to strengthen university links with the Peterborough community
- 6 to increase community awareness of food issues through educational outreach
- 7 to be accountable to our members by continuing to serve their interests and remaining true to our mandate
- 8 to be as accessible and inclusive as possible; this will include active outreach to inform our membership of our services and to seek their input
- 9 to have a decision-making process that is based on consensus and that promotes respect
- 10 to respect the diverse opinions that will exist within the group and encourage active debate

(The Seasoned Spoon Café Board Kit 2003)

*Methodology*

The purpose of this project was to interact with my community members on the subject of food; what they bought, where they shopped and why. I wanted to engage the community in considering what food they choose to consume. I prepared a set of questions to ask randomly selected individuals I would interact with day to day: classmates, family, coworkers, coffee shop patrons, etc. Most of these people had no idea of my intimate connections with the Spoon. Those that I would interact on campus with, I would take to the rooftop garden on the environmental sciences building and show them the garden, then point across the river where it was prepared and consumed. After a discussion of the garden, we crossed the bridge and dined on soup at the Spoon. Conversations among the various groups, as well as between myself and participating individuals, would ensue, covering a wide array of topics surrounding food issues. At this point, all participants were aware of my affiliations of the Spoon, and I was able to sit back and take in their responses, contributions and participation in the study groups. Upon reflection of all the new information I had collected on food choices, I was able to process this with the inherent knowledge of the Spoon's mandate and principles in order to come up with an applicable format for this information in regards to the food provider aspect of the operation.

Upon first interaction with the participants, I inquired if they had some time to participate in a little study, and upon consent, would ask them the following questions:

- 1 What are the top 5 items you buy on a regular basis?
- 2 Where do you buy these items?
- 3 Why do you buy these foods?
- 4 Do you consider location of the source?
- 5 Do you consider the environment?
- 6 Do you consider organics?
- 7 Do you buy a specific or familiar brand?

I would use examples of the items they had stated in order to determine the responses to some of these; i.e. If choosing potatoes, does it matter if some are from P.E.I. and some are from the U.S.? If buying bread, do you look at ingredients? Such conversations

occurred in many different environments, however when on campus, it would proceed as we approached the garden.

After some discussion of the purpose of the rooftop garden, which includes scientific study, environmental consideration and food sourcing, further discussion would take us to some warm soup and table talk of a variety of topics. These included:

- 1 The Seasoned Spoon Co-operative Café (i.e. mission statement, policies and goals, obstacles and successes, history)
- 2 Diet restrictions (i.e. celiac disease, vegetarianism, allergies)
- 3 Food ethics (i.e. meat and dairy industries, fair trade)
- 4 Co-operative organizations (i.e. membership, mandates)
- 5 Transportation of foods (ie distances, pollution, fuel)
- 6 Organics, pesticides and inputs
- 7 Roof top garden (i.e. benefits, compost, organic matter, community food)

After the meetings, I would reflect upon what I had heard. I spoke to many participants after the initial meetings and responses varied. Most participants enjoyed the groups, learned some things, and made some connections from the growth process to the consumption process. They generally enjoyed the experiences, and often approached food choice habits from different perspectives; some with more thought than others.

I was able to facilitate the discussion with my knowledge of the Canadian food system, gained in CAST/ERST 334h, between participants and regarding their own personal experiences. I was also able to answer a lot of questions regarding the Spoon, including benefits:

- ✓ To build university and community links (i.e. public space for students, staff, faculty, etc.)
- To create innovative research potentials (i.e. community based education)
- To offer paid employment and career opportunities to students
- To model high environmental standards (i.e. green cooking, rooftop urban gardening)
- ✓ To renovate and revitalize student space (i.e. JCR in Champlain)

(Dobyns, J. Aug 2002: 4)

(Keep this with  
appropriate text!)

## Results

In synthesis of the variety of responses, I found the following themes emerged:

Personal experiences and habits primarily affect food choice

- 1 work experience with food (produce mart, farmers, etc)
- 2 family habits (meat and potatoes, vegetarian, etc)
- 3 lifestyle and food preferences (munchies, chocoholics, exotic fruits)
- 4 menu planning
- 5 appearance and smell

Cost is a big factor

- 1 as students, what is affordable
- 2 resident students DON'T have the money, only flex dollars

Health is also a big factor

- 1 meats with less fats
- 2 whole grains, organics, etc

Local is not often a concern

- 1 source area is rarely considered, unless many options are available

Why people use the Spoon

- 2 atmosphere! Good to work in; communal and friendly
- 3 good quality food; healthful food that makes you FEEL good and satisfied
- 4 affordable

Why people don't use the Spoon

- 1 don't know where it is (lack of engagement with public and appropriate

advertising)

2 general un-interest (no meat, don't want to, don't care, content with other food)

3 too *alternative*

### *Conclusion*

There are a plethora of reasons influencing individual and family food choice. Constraints exist in our everyday lives which impede our ability to make appropriate decisions about our food choice. And what is appropriate is a subjective choice often based on personal experiences, cost and healthfulness. It was important for me to be able to create these distinct aspects in food choice in order to be able to target areas to improve the Spoon's connection to the community. In my opinion, the Spoon is an organization which attempts to achieve goals much greater than any current working force, however its power over time can effect much change. In order to realize the important connections that food has with sustainability and the development of healthy and progressive communities, it is important to offer a wide array of aspects which different individuals can connect with on different levels. Today, our food system is wrought with excessive chains of inputs, transportation, and processing; the food webs in our society are so widespread and intricate that they are virtually invisible to the average consumer. But food is so fundamental to our bodies, social makeup and traditions that it is important to reconnect these values within our communities. And those things that people are passionate about, they will discuss and promote; if the Spoon offers values that connect with the consumer, they will promote the Spoon.

The value of this project for the Spoon is qualitative. Like Lyson, 2004, through interacting with these individuals, I provoked thought and created a wider connection, thereby demonstrating the capacity of this interaction to elicit rich qualitative data (p.151). The organization can use this information to target more specified groups in the hopes of appealing to all different people on all different levels. Perhaps individuals won't go to the Spoon because of its "alternative" reputation; however, if one appeals to the health benefits and affordability of the Spoon, then perhaps a passion for food, and another customer, will emerge.



## Reflective Paper: Engaging the public through the Seasoned Spoon Co-operative Café

Undertaking such a project was of great interest to me. I have been a board member, working volunteer, patron and employee of the Spoon and it is important for me to see it succeed, not only in an idealistic fashion of altering peoples viewpoints and fostering alternative habits, but also has a function<sup>ing</sup> business. The Spoon provides ethically-minded fair, from local and organic sources, at a fair price to the consumer. As a member of the <sup>LD food?</sup> co-operative, my share is important and I wish to maximize my contribution to the space as much as possible. For this reason, I felt it was necessary to do some research into the present clientele of the Spoon, as well as its potential for new members. It was eye opening to listen to people's thoughts on the Spoon, of food, and daily constraints affecting food choice.

My inherent knowledge of the Spoon through years of experience offered be a good knowledge base to allow my methodology to depend on<sup>e</sup>. It was not necessary for me to outsource to a large extent, as I had been present for many memorable events over the years, and this was of benefit to my interactions with the public. When participants would ask a question, I was able to answer these questions from a personal knowledge that has not been documented. My passion for the Spoon allowed me to share with others and for some, spark some thought into daily routines that often go by undetected.

My initial thoughts of this project were exciting and enthusiastic. I was confident that individuals in the community would want to engage in such a project, which also provided a bowl of free soup as appreciation for their time. I put up posters all over campus, including some more obscure spaces such as the business and math departments, chemistry and the library. However, after some time, there were no responses. It was obvious that people didn't have time or didn't care to participate; clearly offering free food was not the answer. So my job became more intense, as it was apparent that individuals weren't willing to engage themselves in this project. ✓

My new method became a sporadic and flexible approach which used informal discussion in all forums to engage the community in thinking about the food system. ✓  
Daily interactions on the bus, at school, around the dining table, and in the kitchen were

all informal places where I would ask my questions and inquire about other peoples' food habits. It was important to me to listen to my peers and try to understand where they were coming from without imposing on them where I was coming from, at least not until after they had answered the questions.

Responses to my questions were various. Some individuals were quite surprised by my questioning and it was obvious that they were beginning to think about food in a different light. Others were very abrupt, not wanting to bother with the questioning, and certainly with no interest of seeing the garden and dining at the Spoon. Others still were very excited by the idea of a rooftop garden and were intrigued by the option of free food. To some, it was a surprise that the garden even existed and just wanted to learn more.

Bringing such random assortments of people together was also a great experience for me just as much as the others. Conversations based on personal food experiences emerged and discussions which reached beyond the scope of my questioning and discussion facilitation. Personal experience and values is an overarching theme implicated in food choice, and it was interesting and eye opening to see others engaged in a dialogue about food, separate from my suggestion. Obscure topics discussed included Celiac's diseases, differing degrees of vegetarianism and reasons behind it, fair working conditions, the co-operative system vs. traditional kitchen working environments, and an array of topics surrounding the roof-top garden.

This project was intended for me to engage the public in the Canadian Food System. I feel as though for those who participated, my expectations were exceeded for them. I wanted to engage them in a dialogue and thought process that is so integral to the daily lives of every living person. Everyday consumption of foods is a biological need and a cultural act. We make choices about the food we buy and the food we eat based on past experiences, ideas of health and nutrition, specialty markets and cost. Personal connections were also made, as those with different dietary or other food concerns could communicate in an open setting, with other inputs available for consideration. Connections previously unmade in the minds of many consumers were actualized, especially when people were able to stand on the ground where the food was grown and be able to see where the food was then produced and consumed. Individuals were also

able to see the benefits to the environment which this assumes, which is something that everyone should be aware of.

This project allowed me to realize that I am a food citizen actively involved in shaping the way people view their food. According to Field, 1999, as a woman I have an important role, just as women have traditionally offered leadership to alternatives that have promoted the socialization of food needs. And according to Lyson, 2004, I am also an engaged food citizen within the civic agricultural network, which by his definition is an independently wealthy, well educated individual. In my personal life, I am a cook, a food lover and consumer, and an advocate. This course, and especially this project, has allowed me to realize my active role and unbounded passion for feeding people food that is ethically and environmentally minded, as well as good for body and mind and affordable for the pocket. I was able to gain a clearer picture of my role and the power I have in influencing and evoking thought in others. This is an important role to realize in order to effect positive change.

I really enjoyed this project because it allowed me to communicate with my peers on a platform distinct from the Spoon. Although the purpose was for the benefit of the Spoon, I was able to approach it from a personal angle. I realized that everyone has a variety of priorities which they base their value decisions on. For me, the quality and source of my food is important; for others, not so much. Each individual has the right to choose, and it is my role to help them distinguish and understand these choices; their decisions beyond that are subjective, respectable and justifiable. However, it is also important to challenge those around you, and if by interacting with other people about the knowledge I hold, perhaps they will open my eyes to some knowledge that I didn't previously have. I enjoyed learning the limits and allowances of individuals in engaging the food system around them, and even if I don't agree with some of these choices, I have to respect them just as I would expect them to respect mine.



Submitted to the Arthur  
by Ashley Marshall  
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### Engaging the Community through Food

#### Free Food for Your Time.

Interested? Well, your chance has been missed. Posters were up but nobody bit. And this is the problem. It's a good idea. I offer good food in exchange for time and thoughts. All it takes is a little initiative. But becoming engaged is clearly more challenging. What does it take?

CAST/ERST 334h: The Canadian Food System challenged me to engage you. So I went out and plucked you from the Trent landscape. Business, biology and math students; peers, co-workers, and mentors; family, friends and strangers. I went out there, and engaged you about what you eat and why you eat it.

Food choice. What exactly is it; what influences it in each one of us? Food is a fundamental biological need which is integral to our social interactions and cultural identities. We eat foods we are familiar and comfortable with, in favourable atmospheres. Cost is always a factor affecting our food choices, and diet and nutritional value is often a consideration as well. These are value judgements made by each one of us to differing degrees every day, whether or not we are aware of it.

On campus, there is a garden. This garden serves as a place for scientific research and as a food source. It employs students for study and labour; it provides food for community meals and kitchens on campus. It makes use of sustainable agricultural practices in an urban setting, without the use of pesticides, mechanised labour or extra land. The garden is a public space open for the Trent community to share. The rooftop garden, characterised by the groundhog trail leading up to it on the ERS building, is a contribution to lessen the Trent University ecological footprint.

The garden sources <sup>the produce</sup> the Seasoned Spoon Café, located in the north end of the Champlain College Great Hall. The food is grown and harvested by Trent students, and is transported by them on foot across the bridge. The produce is cleaned and prepared by students in Champlain <sup>at the Spoon</sup> to feed all sorts of people at Trent. The energy put in is paid work as well as volunteered. It supports a small specialized economy by generating funds from

Trent soil and putting it into the pockets of the students and the public space it inhabits. The Spoon has used the money generated from café sales to improve the space it inhabits now, in Champlain, as well as improve the quality of its service and food provided.

The Spoon also pays in credits. Joint community-based education opportunities are available; students can gain credits for research and service-learning projects. As a student run operation, the Spoon empowers students to take on business initiatives, make connections with the community and get involved in the food system. It provides an opportunity for alternative education, employment and food service.

As students, we pay a lot of money for the quality of the institution we attend. We deserve a high standard in our education and in the services provided to us by the University. We are paying to gain understanding, a knowledgebase and empowerment; by understanding the world around us, we can collectively own it and contribute towards it. If we are not satisfied with what we are being offered, then it is up to us to change it. And the Seasoned Spoon is just one student-run initiative to effect change in the community.

An alternative food source is important; it allows us to make choices which are essential for daily value based judgements. It gives us the opportunity to comparatively shop for quality of food, service and cost to the consumer. It offers a smaller, more accessible system which connects the garden to the table, via the student and community, to create an economy of monetary and non-monetary value. It offers a forum for us to become more involved in a system that we take for granted yet rely on for so much.

So next time you have the opportunity, engage it. Take the opportunity to learn something new. You never know what could intrigue you, who you might meet, and what you could learn. Choices are all around you and the power is in your hands to make the ones that are right for you, and hopefully right for the surrounding community and environment as well. For me, I choose to engage you. Think about what you put in your fridge and in your mouth. It might change the way you feel and the way you see the world around you.