

acquired

WHY
FAMILIES EAT THE WAY
THEY DO

tastes

BRENDA L. BEAGAN | GWEN E. CHAPMAN

*Josée Johnston, Deborah McPhail, Elaine M. Power,
and Helen Vallianatos*



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introduction

HOW DID YOU decide what to eat today? How did others in your household decide? How is your daily approach to eating determined by your budget? How is it affected by what foods are locally available, in stores and restaurants? More deeply, how is the way you eat influenced by what is seen as normal in your community? Among your friends and peers? How do you think your eating patterns may be affected by (largely unspoken) expectations about social class?

If various ways of eating are understood as normal for people from certain class backgrounds, how do you suppose you might use class-based expectations about food to display your identity as a member of a particular class? Similarly, if certain ways of eating are understood as normal for men and women, boys and girls, how might you use your everyday food practices to convey messages about your gender identity? Given that healthy eating is preached at you from virtually every magazine at supermarket checkouts, how do you engage with those messages? How is your engagement (or non-engagement) influenced by who you are – in terms of gender, geography, class, race, ethnicity, and age?

These questions lie at the heart of this book. We spoke with adults and teenagers from 105 families to discover how they talked about

food, how they defined themselves through it, and what shaped their cravings, food aversions, and health aspirations. In the chapters that follow, we explore differing ways of thinking about food and why we eat what we do. But first, meet 2 of the 105 families on whose stories the book is based!

FAMILY FOOD PRACTICES: TWO CASE STUDIES

The Valverde Family

Bernice and Basil Valverde live with their seventeen-year-old son, Bart, in a renovated character home on the East Side of Vancouver, British Columbia.* Bernice (forty-three) holds a graduate degree and is an urban planner. Basil (forty-five) is a high-school teacher. They are a comfortable upper-middle-class family with an annual income of about \$120,000.

Food is an important part of their life. They make a point of eating meals together at least three or four times a week, and Bernice describes cooking and eating as “so central to what it means to be a family ... We’ve built time into our schedules to make food. It’s important to us.” All three Valverdes are good cooks. Basil is perhaps the most skilled – he cooks dinner most week nights and specializes in Indian food. But Bernice enjoys reading recipe books, grocery shopping, and cooking on weekends, and Bart says he’s “pretty good at” certain dishes such as tuna melts made in a waffle iron. He proudly states that he can cook a “mean steak.” They share their interest in food and cooking with neighbours, who often join them for meals: “Cooking is a big part of our social scene ... It’s a big part of how we gather socially.”

The Valverdes are adventurous eaters who enjoy experiencing food from a variety of cuisines and who prioritize quality. Bernice notes that “we spend more money on food than most people ... We just decided that it’s worth it.” Concerned about the environmental impact of the industrialized food system, she prefers to buy local foods. She is also careful about what she and her family put in their bodies, buying mostly organic foods and avoiding highly processed ones: “I don’t like

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* As will be explained later in this chapter, we employed pseudonyms for all study participants, selecting their initials to indicate their location. Here, the initials BV indicate British Columbia, Vancouver.

the chemicals. I don't like ingredients that I don't know where they come from ... Why wouldn't you choose something fresh and organic over something that is full of chemicals and colours and additives?" Bernice and Basil do periodic detoxifying cleanses to "cycle stuff out of your body, get rid of things ... It's really important that your body is balanced and things are cleaned out and given rests."

Even though Bernice describes Bart as "an incredibly healthy eater" who "will eat a wide variety of foods," she also acknowledges that as a teenager, he has been going through a period of dietary independence, eating white bread instead of brown, enjoying "low-brow" processed foods such as Miracle Whip, and convincing his parents to move back to eating meat after years of vegetarianism (Bart reports this latter change as one his father happily embraces!). Bart himself is unconcerned about healthy eating as he eats "a lot of fast food" and chooses to prioritize taste.

The Austin Family

Amy (forty) and Anthony (forty-two) Austin live with their children, Archie (fourteen) and Angelina (thirteen), in a small community in northern Alberta, about 150 kilometres north of Edmonton. Both parents have university educations; Anthony is a teacher and Amy works in an office. The annual family income is approximately \$100,000. The Austins own a well-maintained ten-year-old split-level home near the edge of town.

For this family, food represents comfort, stability, and tradition. To the extent that their busy schedules allow, they try to eat evening meals with everyone together several times a week "because we need to still be a family sometimes" (Archie). Amy often prepares the meals, which she describes as "stay[ing] with the fundamentals" and her children describe as including "potatoes and a meat and then vegetables." In the past few years, since Amy took a job with longer hours, Anthony has more frequently prepared meals. Although he can be a more creative cook than Amy, he is "a little bit more relaxed" than she in his weekday preparation, using more prepared foods and serving "simple suppers like fish and chips and burgers." Overall, family members feel that what they eat is "normal food" and "not over the top." They often share meals with Amy's parents, who live nearby, but they rarely entertain friends. When Amy does cook a special meal for company, the

menu is quite traditional for a rural Alberta family with a Ukrainian heritage, typically including turkey, perogies, “lazy *holubtsi*” (cabbage and rice casserole), two vegetables, Caesar salad, and a dessert.

When grocery shopping, Amy and Anthony prioritize low-cost food that meets their quality standards and preferences. Amy says, “I rarely, if ever, buy anything that’s not on sale. Like rarely, rarely, unless it’s an absolute essential that we need, like milk.” At the same time, she also “look[s] for quality and how it’s going to affect the body as well, yet we’re not really stringent about it either.” She repeats this relaxed approach to healthy eating in noting that family meals are “pretty balanced” but adds that “we don’t count how many fruits and vegetables the kids have during the day or anything.”

For Amy and Anthony, concerns about environmental and ethical issues do not enter into daily food decisions, although they acknowledge that living in a small farming community does shape how they think about food. They do some of their grocery shopping in local stores to support local businesses, and they always use canola oil because Amy’s father is a canola farmer. However, they do not deliberately look for “local” or organic foods, and for much of the year, they eat produce from the garden that Amy maintains at her parents’ home: “I freeze my vegetables for the winter. When I run out, I have to buy, but I’m not into the organic thing at all. I am into the fresh fruits and vegetables from the farm, though. I would *much* rather have something that I grew than what someone else grew, because I know what went into it.”

Overall, for Amy, home-cooked meals are essential: “I would not feel like I was giving my family what they should have, and I would feel like I’m raising them to be unhealthy if I wasn’t preparing their food for them.” Anthony acknowledges that “it’s not as important to me,” but he and the two children also appreciate the family’s traditional, relaxed approach to food.

WHAT SHAPES HOW FAMILIES EAT?

The Valverdes and Austins are real families who participated in the study presented in this book, although their names have been changed. Their approaches to food and eating display an interesting mix of similarities and differences. On the surface, the families seem quite alike, as both are headed by a heterosexual white couple in their forties,

with similar educational backgrounds, professions, and incomes. But though both families value eating meals together and consider food to be important for health and enjoyment, their overall approaches differ markedly. The Valverdes are happy to spend money on an eclectic mix, emphasizing local, organic, and plant-based foods as much as possible. The Austins, who are much more frugal, do not mind using processed food and stick to a fairly traditional “meat and potatoes” diet. When they do eat local organic produce, it is because they or other family members have grown it in their gardens, not because of political or health concerns.

How did these similarities and differences develop? The Valverdes and Austins live in comparable economic contexts, where the costs of living and median household incomes are similar. They have access to equivalent education and media, and both represent the dominant Canadian cultural group. However, their geographic settings do differ – the Valverdes live in a metropolitan, multicultural, coastal city, and the Austins reside in a small, relatively homogeneous Prairie town. To what extent does this difference shape what they eat and how they talk about food? In what ways have other individual, social, or environmental factors been equally or more influential?

This book explores such questions. It examines the everyday food practices of families from a variety of social and geographic contexts, examining how they talk about what they eat and the beliefs, values, and concerns that shape their food practices. It uses a sociological lens to address the question “Why do we eat what we eat?”

These questions are of interest to a variety of audiences. Much of the interest relates to health, as scientific and popular literature clearly links diet with illnesses such as cancer and cardiovascular disease, in Canada and globally. Increasing rates of overweight and obesity, frequently accompanied by claims regarding the health risks of fat, have fuelled concerns about the need to improve the healthfulness of diets. There is growing evidence that understandings of the negative long-term health implications of obesity are at least as much social construction and moral panic as medical reality (for more on critical obesity studies, see Flegal et al. 2007; McPhail 2009; Biltekoff 2013). Nonetheless, with government, industry, and public support, extensive nutrition education has been provided through schools, social marketing campaigns, and the media, and policies have been developed to

effect changes in food availability and access to nutrition information. Most Canadians report that nutrition is a “very important” consideration when they choose food, and up to a third see themselves as “very knowledgeable” about the subject (Canadian Council of Food and Nutrition 2009). Despite such overwhelming interest in health and diet, surveys show that few Canadians meet current nutrition recommendations (Garriguet 2006). Clearly, a more nuanced understanding of food choice processes is needed to address diet-related health problems.

Understanding how people make their food choices is also of interest to a growing “food movement” that promotes environmentally sustainable, healthy, and socially just food systems (Food Secure Canada 2014). These concerns arise from the realization that what people eat affects not only their own health, but also the health of the planet – for example, greenhouse gas emissions are produced through food production, processing, and transportation; soil and water are contaminated by industrial farming practices; and sensitive ecosystems are destroyed to provide land for intensive farming. As well, the economic well-being of rural communities and the physical, social, and economic well-being of food producers around the world are affected by the choices that people make when they buy (or refuse to buy) certain foods. Players in the food industry are equally interested in what people eat. Farmers, food processors, the grocery industry, restaurant chains, and the supporting infrastructure depend on people buying the food that they provide.

And, of course, fundamentally, food matters to everyone. Almost all of us eat every day. We spend money on food. We devote time to buying, preparing, and eating it. It can give us pleasure, it can help keep us healthy, and it can make us sick. It can be a source of stress and anxiety if we don’t have enough money and if we worry about its effects on our bodies or our ability to provide the “right” food for the people close to us. Within families, it can be a source of tension when family members have different goals and expectations relating to food.

The authors of this book share an interest in understanding how and why people make their food choices. As academics with expertise in sociology, anthropology, gender studies, health studies, and nutrition, we all believe that food choice is not just an individual process, a matter of personal taste. Individuals make decisions in the context of

their social situation, their family and community, their cultural environment, and their local food milieu. Clearly, material realities such as availability of diverse, affordable, and high-quality foods and the economic means to purchase them are key determinants of what people eat. Yet other social and cultural processes are also at play. Foods carry differing meanings and associations for people in different social contexts, influenced by gender, race and ethnicity, age, class background, income, and education. These meanings are often place-specific, learned through locally available social discourses that constitute some foods as “good” or “bad,” “healthy” or “unhealthy,” “appropriate” or “inappropriate” for members of specific social groups. Food may be about physical sustenance, but it also has profound symbolic resonance, signifying one’s class status, masculinity or femininity, family cohesion, caring, community, independence from parental authority, and resistance to cultural assimilation. Thus, individuals from differing social groups and specific places may employ distinct “cultural logics” when they are deciding what to eat.

Despite this theoretical understanding, however, insufficient empirical research has explicated the cultural logics at play in food decision making in specific places. We thus embarked on the research presented in this book – a study of how local food cultures, socio-economic status, and the family context interact to produce everyday food practices in urban and rural Canada. Our decision to explore these questions in families with adolescent children allowed us to examine how food meanings and habits are formed, transmitted, resisted, and transformed through multiple levels of social relationships – that is, not only through relations embedded in specific regions and communities, but also through the intense relationships *within families* between children and parents and among adults. Our focus on family food socialization is especially significant given what sociologists know about the role of parents in socializing their children to consume and appreciate certain kinds of culture and to reject other kinds as inappropriate, including food.

EATING PRACTICES AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT: CONCEPTUAL TOOLS

Usually, people think and talk about eating practices as being individual choices or habits. Certainly, food practices are influenced by

personal preferences, nutrition knowledge, practical concerns about time and convenience, and hunger and food intolerances, among other things. These factors are all important. Food activists and health promotion advocates are quick to point out that financial and material resources also affect what people eat: if they can't afford something, they are unlikely to eat it. Are there nearby grocery stores? Do they offer affordable, high-quality products? Can they be accessed by people who do not have cars? Do they carry items from a range of ethnic cuisines? Do they sell locally produced foods, organic foods? Is there a farmers' market nearby? What kinds of restaurants are close? Do people have access to land where they can grow some of their own food? In these and many other ways, material resources shape food practices.

The focus on individual, economic, and environmental influences, however, often overshadows attention to more social and cultural aspects that shape how people eat. It is clear that people are not guided solely by individual tastes, preferences, and rationales about food, or by how these interact with financial and material resources. Research shows that food habits of groups differ in patterned ways, including by age, gender, cultural background, and education (O'Doherty Jensen and Holm 1999; Johnston, Taylor, and Hampl 2000; Raine 2005; Garriguet 2006; Prättälä et al. 2007). As well, food habits differ for rural and urban people, and in varying parts of the country (Garriguet 2006; Shields and Tjepkema 2006). Although some of these latter dissimilarities may reflect differences in food environments, in our market-based globalized food systems, differences in food availability often reflect differences in local consumer demand.

In addition, what people *say* they know and believe about eating is not always what they *do*, even when a variety of foods are readily available to them (Caplan 1997). The measurable individual traits that are thought to predict consumption often fail to do so. And it is not always easy, or even possible, for people to explain their choices. The gap between what they say about food and what they actually do every day, their difficulty in articulating their decisions, and the patterns of eating habits of people in different social locations (the intersections of age, gender, race, ethnicity, class, education, income, and migration status) suggest that eating practices are affected by multiple, not-always-conscious, socio-cultural factors. We focus on these

conscious, semi-conscious, and unconscious socio-cultural rules in this book.

In recent decades, social scholars have explored – both theoretically and empirically – the ways in which people’s everyday actions reflect conscious and unconscious knowledge of society and their place in that society. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984) explains this as the interplay between practical and discursive consciousness. Practical consciousness is about tacit knowledge and understandings, knowledge that makes it easy for people to go about their lives in their usual social contexts, but that is not easy to articulate. This kind of knowledge is about things that are habitual or routine, such as many aspects of eating. It involves taken-for-granted common sense, and it allows people to act without conscious thought. Discursive consciousness, in contrast, involves knowledge that people can readily put into words. When drawing from it, they can articulate what they are doing and why, offering specific rationalizations. Importantly, both practical and discursive knowledge are shaped by the society in which people live.

The explanations that people provide for their actions reflect the discourses circulating in their society. These discourses, or ways of thinking about an issue or phenomenon, come to define what can be said about something, or even considered possible (Foucault 1979, 1988). Discourses can be produced and circulated by powerful social institutions such as government, universities, industry, and the media, but they are also disseminated, reinforced, resisted, and transformed through people’s everyday actions and beliefs (as in Bernice Valverde’s description of processed foods as “full of chemicals and colours and additives”). When people articulate rationales for their everyday actions that draw on a certain knowledge, belief, or understanding, that discourse is reinforced, recirculated, and made available to others as reasons for their own behaviour. Thus, the relationship between the knowledge available to people in a society and their actions is reciprocal: people act using socially available knowledge, and their actions inform the knowledge that is readily available.

The habitual, common sense, or unconscious nature of many activities has been explained by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) through the concept of *habitus* – the internalized social and cultural influences that shape people’s everyday behaviour. Focusing

particularly on social class, Bourdieu argues that tastes and preferences learned during early childhood in a specific cultural context become internalized, embodied, unconscious, and part of one's common sense. The social settings of childhood – family, school, friends, piano lessons, hockey practice – evoke particular ways of being and teach particular understandings, tastes, and preferences. Each setting demands certain responses and teaches certain predispositions, which shape how individuals perceive and act in the world, even what foods they like and dislike. Bourdieu helps us to appreciate how individuals are predisposed to act in accordance with the social contexts that shaped them. These dispositions, or tendencies toward particular ways of being, become internalized in the habitus, which can be thought of as the sedimentation of social distinctions (such as class, gender, and ethnicity) within the individual. More concretely, the habitus concept helps us understand why certain eating spaces and foods just *feel* right, whereas others don't. Though one's tastes and preferences are enacted individually, elements are shared by others from the same social location. Thus, for example, both the Valverdes and the Austins emphasized that regularly sitting down together for family meals felt essential for good eating and strong families.

Although Bourdieu's habitus notion is useful, we also know that people have a considerable degree of agency when it comes to culture. There may be group tendencies, but choice remains possible. For example, some lower-income individuals take up French cooking, whereas some higher-class groups eat only fast food. The notion of *cultural repertoires* developed by Ann Swidler (1986) helps us conceptualize how individuals make choices within socially and culturally patterned ways of being. Swidler sees culture not as a monolithic "thing," but as a multi-faceted *set* of skills, habits, styles, and knowledges learned in particular contexts. Individuals acquire a cultural "tool kit," or repertoire of strategies of action based on learned capacities and resources (akin to the set of songs in a musical repertoire). Although people from differing social locations tend to acquire distinct cultural repertoires, they can apply other tools if necessary. They can use numerous elements in their repertoire and can add to it. In many contexts, they draw unconsciously from the repertoire, and they may creatively employ various cultural tools to make sense of the contradictions in their lives and their daily practices. (For example, they may see food in

terms of health when they order a salad for lunch but may perceive it as an indulgence when opting for cookies and hot chocolate.) In most everyday settings, people know how to act without thinking about it. It is usually only in unfamiliar settings that they must think about suitable behaviour or consciously learn a new strategy to add to their repertoire. For many people, this rarely occurs, as they gravitate to familiar social settings in which their repertoire provides them with the appropriate cultural tools. However, in times or places of significant adjustment, such as with geographic migration, shifting social or personal circumstances, or periods of rapid social change, people may find themselves more or less consciously going through a period of cultural “retooling,” expanding their repertoire to adapt to the new situation.

Swidler’s differentiation between conscious and unconscious use of cultural tools provides one example of the relationship between conscious and unconscious influences on actions. French theorist Michel Foucault’s ideas regarding the operation of power relations in society are also useful in understanding relationships between conscious and unconscious social actions, as well as how habitual ways of acting can change over time. In contemporary liberal democracies, power commonly functions through discourses, which produce effects by shaping what people do with their bodies, time, and lives (Foucault 1979, 1988). Dominant discourses that establish some foods as good or bad, for example, set up normalizing standards for the behaviour of responsible citizens. As those standards are internalized, they become an ethical or moral compass by which people assess themselves and each other. (Consider Amy Austin’s comment, “I would feel like I’m raising them [my family] to be unhealthy if I wasn’t preparing their food.”) In modern post-industrial societies, force is not normally required to govern a populace; people do the job themselves through a variety of not-always-conscious processes such as surveillance (of self and others), inspection, examination, and confession. These processes simultaneously encourage them to discipline their own behaviour, even as they enable them to present or constitute themselves as good and worthy people.

The multiple discourses in circulation interact in varying ways for people in different social locations. For example, the normalizing standards that define how an upper-middle-class white woman such

as Bernice Valverde is expected to behave in Vancouver may differ from the standards internalized by Archie Austin, a teenager in rural Alberta. Both have access to a range of standards (analogous to Swidler's idea of a cultural tool kit), so both can constitute themselves in particular ways to convey certain social identities – as a responsible upper-middle-class mother or as a masculine teenage boy. Social practices such as food habits, then, are not only socially coordinated, but are also performances that convey identity to others (Warde 2005; Halkier 2009; Bildekoff 2013). Certain food practices come to signify who people are and how they wish to portray themselves in terms of social identities. Social categories and distinctions such as gender and class are reproduced or transformed through repeated performances of such practices (Halkier 2009), including those involving food.

In performing their identities, people rely on established distinctions to mark boundaries between social groups. One way of thinking about this is through the concept of “cultural capital,” which was developed by Bourdieu (1984). He argues that the tastes, preferences, knowledge, and skills of dominant groups will always be most highly prized and legitimated. People seek to gain such cultural capital to acquire dominance and advantage in a particular social context. This form of capital can consist of knowledge (such as knowing the best kind of vinegar to use in a salad dressing), but it can also take an institutionalized form (such as participating in a class at the prestigious Cordon Bleu school of cooking) or an objectified form (owning an expensive set of Le Creuset pots). To put it simply, the ability to perform, own, or display cultural capital affords higher social status to individuals. Those who cannot display highly valued cultural capital, perhaps because they were raised in a family whose capital was low, may feel a consequent sense of shame and social exclusion, knowing that they do not belong to a high-status cultural grouping. In turn, people may make decisions that are economically unwise but that can bring a sense of belonging, however fleeting, to mainstream consumer society. With regard to food practices, this might occur when people with little money buy highly marketed processed foods that can be seen as symbols of mainstream “normal” consumption, even though public health practitioners and those who hold high cultural capital may frown on such foods as unhealthy and in bad taste (literally and figuratively).

Hierarchies of tastes, where some sets of preferences are more highly prized than others, not only allow people to establish their own identities through social performances, but also to create boundaries between “them” and “us,” often with a sense of moral or cultural superiority connected to “us.” Sociologist Michèle Lamont (2010, 134) suggests that members of particular socio-cultural groups may share understandings – “cultural scripts concerning what is a worthy person that are partly defined in opposition to scripts perceived to be valued in other groups.” Groups construct their own rankings, establishing themselves as worthy on specific grounds in comparison to those who are perceived as higher and lower than themselves. Essentially, though individuals draw boundaries to distinguish themselves, they are also a sign of group membership. The concept of boundary work is vitally important for a study on food because it helps us understand how food consumption defines parameters of inclusion and exclusion across social groupings (see Johnston, Szabo, and Rodney 2011). In other words, deciding to eat a certain food or dine at a certain restaurant is not just about what we feel like eating at a particular moment, but also speaks to who we think we are, which groups we feel a kinship with, and which groups we want to distance ourselves from.

Together, these theoretical approaches form the general framework used to explore and interpret family food practices in the chapters that follow. We view people’s eating habits as everyday practices that are moulded by a mix of conscious, semi-conscious, and unconscious influences, many of which are grounded in the social context of their lives. People can explain some aspects of why they eat as they do, drawing on discourses that are available to them in their society. Bernice Valverde, for example, discussed at length why she sometimes chose local, seasonal, conventional produce over imported organic produce, sharing information about the energy used to grow and transport imported or greenhouse crops, as well as the chemicals found in various types of produce. But many food preferences, styles, and decisions reflect internalized norms or understandings that have gotten “under the skin,” evoking seemingly automatic strategies of action relating to food. This was illustrated by the Austins, who did not provide a rationale for their traditional frugal approach to eating what the teenagers described as “normal” food that “puts meat on your bones,” just as the Valverdes felt no need to explain their adventurous, more costly approach.

Although these families may not be consciously aware of how they acquired these preferred strategies of action or food tastes, sociological analysis suggests that they are a product of – and communicate about – the families’ social locations, including aspects of class, gender, ethnicity, and the culture of the places in which they live. A special meal for the Austins involves Amy preparing a feast that reflects their Ukrainian heritage and rural Alberta culture. For the Valverdes, the special meal might be an Indian-themed dinner prepared by Basil and his brother-in-law, both of whom “love to cook,” reflecting the cosmopolitan culture of Vancouver and perhaps a particular urban middle-class version of masculinity.

It is particularly important to note that the less-than-fully-conscious influences are not entirely scripted; nor are they immutable. Individuals have a range of behaviours – or, for the purposes of this book, eating styles – that feel comfortable for them in their social contexts. Their repertoire of eating styles will probably change over time as they are exposed to new discourses about food, new environments, and new social groups, or as their own social location and aspirations change. The Austins, for example, have opened their home to a series of Japanese exchange students, with the result that Amy “learned the art of sushi making,” and now the whole family loves sushi. Nonetheless, overtones of their traditional tastes remain: according to Amy, they do not like sushi “with raw fish. We like it with crab ... avocado or egg, that type of sushi.” But clearly, the Austins’ food repertoires have expanded to include a number of items from a variety of ethnic cuisines, other than the typical meat-and-potatoes fare of rural white Canadians.

Some dietary changes may be conscious, as people opt to eat in certain ways in response to new information, beliefs, health issues, or overt social pressures. For example, believing that Bart’s growing adolescent body needed meat, Bernice Valverde decided to reintroduce it to the family diet. But other changes may be less conscious, as people observe the behaviours, beliefs, and values demonstrated and communicated by those around them and internalize them as new social standards (such as the Valverdes’ enthusiastic embrace of diverse cuisines). People may also resist change, retaining the patterns of childhood, which may no longer fit the social contexts in which they find themselves, resulting in feeling out of place or being seen by others in unfavourable ways.

This points to the relationship between eating practices and identity. What and how people eat communicates to others who they are – what kind of man, woman, parent, or child. Without being fully aware of their actions, people may eat in differing ways in varying social settings because they want to be seen in a certain light by those around them. Identities, as communicated through social performance, are typically not value-neutral, and they are often subject to moral judgment. Certain ways of being are seen by self and others as morally superior, what a “good” person does, whereas other ways of being are seen as irresponsible or lower in status (Biltekoff 2013). Bernice Valverde, for instance, alluded to this kind of hierarchy when she claimed that the diets of the teenagers she knew were not like those of other teens:

In our social network, I think they’re all well-fed, well-exposed kids who get a lot of variety in their diets and try all sorts of different things. Do they eat a typical diet that’s making kids obese? I don’t think so. I don’t think that we fall into that demographic. And I think it is a demographic thing, and it’s definitely connected to income and what you were exposed to as a kid.

Bernice went on to talk about the importance of parents being “aware of food issues” and thinking “about where their food comes from.” Although she will probably never meet the Austins, one might predict that she would criticize their food practices – that they buy food on sale and, as Anthony stated, are “not too concerned about where it comes from or whether it’s organic or anything like that.”

Although many everyday practices can shape and convey social identities, food also has a unique place among socio-cultural practices. What we eat is literally incorporated into our bodies, causing physical sensations, responses, and changes. It is experienced through our senses: each dish has a unique combination of scents, tastes, and textures. What we eat affects how we feel, including pleasant sensations of satiation and unpleasant feelings such as excessive fullness, bloating, indigestion, and nausea. We also understand that it has longer-term effects on our bodies. Some of these are visible, such as body size and shape or allergic reactions, whereas others are harder to detect, such as blood sugar or cholesterol levels. These embodied

aspects of food are not separate from the social issues considered above, as our experiences and understanding of our bodies are filtered through cultural lenses and cognitive processes. We learn socially what tastes are pleasant and unpleasant, and we also learn that preferences for particular kinds of tastes may distinguish us from others in terms of social hierarchies of class, gender, and ethnicity. And, like “social performances through eating, our sensory experiences of food are deeply embedded in how we express who we are and our relationships with others. What is remarkable is that something so bodily and individual – food – is simultaneously so social.

Despite the rich possibilities offered by the theoretical approach introduced here, in-depth studies that apply it are still much needed. Earlier foundational studies solidly established the understanding that food practices are inherently social and that tastes are collectively constituted. In the United Kingdom, for example, Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr (1988) showed that food consumption could not be extricated from social relations of gender, class, and age, and was central to the construction of particular versions of family. In the United States, Marjorie DeVault’s (1991) classic study documented the invisible work of shopping, cooking, and serving meals through which women constructed not just family, but also their identities as women and mothers. In Australia, Deborah Lupton (1996) brought the emphasis more fully back to the body, asking how food was experienced in the body through emotions, tastes, memories, and preferences. Alan Warde’s (1997) research productively examined food and taste to explore practices of class, consumption, and consumer behaviour. Most recently, Charlotte Biltekoff (2013) documented how authoritative guidelines and discourses about eating shaped how people understood diet and health, as well as how they saw themselves as good and moral individuals.

This book builds on all these earlier insights, through a study that aims to make sense of people’s eating practices while attending to gender, class, and family dynamics, the meanings of consumption patterns, and the embodiment of food practices and taste. More specifically, we explore how social location affects the ways in which people think, talk, and act with respect to food. Similarly, we examine how geographic location – whether people live in a large city, a small town, or a rural area; whether they live in Central Canada, the East

Coast, or Western Canada; whether they have migrated to Canada or moved across it – affects food practices, both through what is or is not available to them locally, and through how other people in the local environment think and talk about food. We examine dominant social discourses about food and eating, but we also ask how people take up, modify, or resist those discourses, according to social and geographic location. Exploring these questions within families allows us to examine how food meanings and habits are formed, transmitted, repelled, and transformed among teens and their parents at the family table.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

To reach these goals, our study employed qualitative social science research methods, with in-depth interviews as the main method of data collection. (For full details about our methods, see Appendix 1.) Participants were recruited from ten Canadian communities, which are described and compared in Table 1. Halifax and Kings County are on the East Coast, in Nova Scotia; Kingston, Prince Edward County, and Toronto's South Parkdale and North Riverdale neighbourhoods are in Central Canada, in Ontario; Edmonton and Athabasca County are in the Prairie region, in Alberta; and Vancouver and the District of Kent are on the West Coast, in British Columbia. Toronto and Vancouver are large, multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan cities; the two Toronto neighbourhoods were chosen to provide contrasts in economic and ethnic diversity within the same city. Edmonton and Halifax are mid-sized cities, and Kingston is a smaller city. Rural areas, comprised of farms, villages, and small towns, were represented by Kings County, Prince Edward County, Athabasca County, and the District of Kent.

The communities varied in terms of household income, with five having incomes above the 2006 Canadian median of \$63,600 (Statistics Canada 2011, 2012). The poorest community was South Parkdale in Toronto, with a median family income of \$38,145, whereas the most well-off was Toronto's North Riverdale, with a median family income of \$94,204 (City of Toronto 2006a, 2006b). As Table 1 shows, the basic costs of living tended to be higher in the cities than in rural areas, though costs in Nova Scotia were higher than elsewhere except Toronto.

The communities also varied in ethnic diversity. One marker of this is the prominence of people whom Statistics Canada classifies as “visible

TABLE 1 Research Sites

Community	Province (region)	Population ^a	Visible minority (%) ^a	Median family income ^a	Market basket measure ^b	Pseudonym initials
Halifax	Nova Scotia (East Coast)	372,858	7.5	\$66,892	\$32,303	NH
Kings County	Nova Scotia (East Coast)	47,814	2.0	\$48,483– 53,254 ^c	\$31,820	NW
Kingston	Ontario (Central Canada)	152,358	7.1	\$67,908	\$29,510	KK
Prince Edward County	Ontario (Central Canada)	25,496	1.3	\$60,792	\$29,221	KC
Toronto (South Parkdale)	Ontario (Central Canada)	2,503,281 (21,005)	“Bit higher” than 46.9 ^d	\$38,145	\$33,177	TP
Toronto (North Riverdale)	Ontario (Central Canada)	2,503,281 (12,430)	“Lower” than 46.9 ^d	\$94,204	\$33,177	TR
Edmonton	Alberta (Prairie)	1,034,935	22.9	\$69,214	\$31,120	AE
Athabasca County	Alberta (Prairie)	7,587	1.6	\$63,270	\$30,912	AA
Vancouver	British Columbia (West Coast)	2,116,581	51.0	\$58,805	\$31,789	BV
District of Kent	British Columbia (West Coast)	4,738	2.9	\$51,579	\$29,789	BF

a Except for South Parkdale and North Riverdale, data are from Statistics Canada (2011). For South Parkdale and North Riverdale, data are from City of Toronto (2006a, 2006b). For comparison, the 2006 data for Canada as a whole are as follows: population 31,241,030, visible minority 16.2 percent, and median income \$63,600.

b Statistics Canada (2013). The market basket measure represents a modest basic standard of living in each location. It includes the costs of food, clothing, footwear, transportation, shelter, and other expenses for a family of two adults and two children.

c Kings County census data are reported separately for four subdivisions. The highest and lowest median family incomes are shown here.

d Specific data for South Parkdale and North Riverdale are not available. The City of Toronto (2006a, 2006b) reported the percentage of visible minority people as a “bit higher” or “lower” than the overall Toronto statistic of 46.9 percent.

minority” (Statistics Canada 2011). In all the rural areas, less than 3 percent of the population consisted of a visible minority. Halifax and Kingston also had quite homogeneous populations, with 7 to 8 percent visible minorities. In Halifax, the most prominent minority is the black African community that has lived there for about four hundred years. In Kingston, the largest visible minority groups are Chinese and South Asian immigrants. Edmonton, with a visible minority population at 23 percent, is somewhat more diverse than Canada as a whole, and Toronto and Vancouver are both highly multicultural, with 47 percent and 51 percent visible minorities respectively. Toronto is arguably the most diverse, with very large Chinese, South Asian, black, and Filipino communities, whereas the Chinese community is clearly the dominant minority group in Vancouver, making up 29 percent of its population.

In all these places, we recruited 9 to 13 families to participate in the study. They had to have lived in the local area for at least two years and had to include at least 1 teenager. “Family” meant whatever it meant to participants, but at least some members were required to live in the household, since we were interested in how people influenced each other. In every family, we interviewed at least 1 teenager (aged thirteen to nineteen) and 1 adult. Across the country, we interviewed members of 105 families, including 123 adults (105 women and 18 men) and 131 youth (77 girls and 54 boys). Among the families, 30 were headed by single mothers, 10 were multi-generational, and 65 included an adult female, an adult male, and 1 or more youth. More detailed demographic information about the sample is provided in Appendix 2.

Each participant was interviewed twice. Interviews were normally conducted separately with each family member, but sometimes teen siblings preferred to be interviewed together, and many of the male parents or guardians preferred to be interviewed with their female partners. In the first interview, which usually lasted one to two hours, people were asked about what they and other members of their family ate; how they decided what to eat; how their eating habits related to their culture, community, and health concerns; and how they made food-related decisions, including who made the decisions and how family members influenced each other.

The second interview probed more deeply into the relationships among place, gender, class, ethnicity, age, and food practices, using two visual research methods to help “get at” the taken-for-granted

practical consciousness, or aspects of habitus and cultural repertoires that people may hold instinctually but struggle to articulate. Several scholars suggest that multiple research methods are needed to discern multiple levels of socio-cultural influences on practices (Vaisey 2008; Brown 2009; Silva, Warde, and Wright 2009). Visual photo-elicitation methods, which we used, can be particularly powerful (Power 2003).

After the initial interview, the first photo-elicitation technique was initiated: participants took photographs of foods and eating places in their homes and local community. They were given a list of possible subjects, including foods they did and did not like, foods they ate at home or away from it, places where they would or would not eat out and where they did or did not purchase food, and healthy or unhealthy foods, as well as the interiors of their kitchen cupboards and fridges, if they were willing. If they used the disposable film-based cameras that we supplied, a duplicate set of prints was developed (one for us, one for them to keep) prior to the second interview. Many participants preferred to use their own digital cameras, in which case images were viewed on a computer during the second interview, when we also obtained digital copies. The second interview began with a careful review of the photos, with participants describing them and interviewers asking probing questions.

Although the inclusion of photos taken by participants gave us a good sense of their food worlds, we knew that the exercise would primarily inform us about the foods and ways of eating with which they were comfortable. It would not push them to discuss unfamiliar aspects of food or areas of discomfort. Also, because each participant's set of photos would be unique, comparing the experiences of individuals would be difficult. We therefore included a second photo-elicitation activity, using two sets of stock photographs that we provided. The first set included shots of fifteen types of restaurants, ranging from informal cafeterias and fast-food places to very formal restaurants. We included restaurants that served various types of ethnic cuisines. Participants sorted these photos into piles, indicating where they would feel comfortable eating and where they would not feel comfortable. Some people created a third "neutral" pile. The images were intended to get at a gut-level sense of belonging or not belonging in particular food environments, a sense of comfort or discomfort that might be connected to habitus or cultural repertoires.

The second set of images included twenty-six shots of various foods and meals. We included fast, fancy, and simple foods, foods from various ethnic cuisines, and vegetarian and meat-based meals. Selecting photos of an adequate range of food types, but not making the exercise excessively long, was challenging. It was equally challenging to label them in ways that provided adequate information for the exercise, given the wide range of potential knowledges or cultural repertoires. Participants in large cities or from certain cultural groups might be familiar with many cuisines. Yet people from small towns and rural areas, especially if they hadn't travelled much, might have no idea what some dishes were. Thus, we labelled most typically Euro-Canadian foods by their specific names (beef Wellington, hot dog, grilled cheese sandwich), whereas others were labelled according to their ethnic origin (Korean food, Japanese meal, Ethiopian food, North Indian thali). Not only would many Canadians be entirely unfamiliar with *kimchee*, *okazu*, *injera*, or *dhal*, but those photos also included six to twelve dishes in a single meal, making it difficult to name each one. Other "ethnic" foods were labelled more precisely (roti dinner, butter chicken, hummus, falafel, soft-shell tacos).

We asked participants to sort the photos according to which foods they would be comfortable or uncomfortable eating. They also sorted according to whether they thought foods were healthy or unhealthy, adult or teen, typically male or typically female, and whether they were or were not comfortable with preparing them. Again, some people created neutral piles every time. Most importantly, we asked them to talk about *why* they categorized the photos as they did. This activity was designed to overcome challenges noted in our previous research (see Beagan et al. 2008), where direct questions about gender and food were met with silence. The photo-sorting technique was intended to "de-centre the text" (Power 2003), allowing participants to tap knowledges and social rules that might be hard to put into words or awkward to discuss.

Word-for-word transcripts of all the interviews were prepared and entered into a software program (AtlasTi) to help organize our analysis. Key photographs and field notes recording the interviewers' reflections on the interviews were also entered into the software. The main activities of data analysis consisted of reading and rereading transcripts, comparing one person or family with another, comparing patterns by

gender, class, place, and ethnicity, and paying attention to people who seemed not to fit in. We collectively developed a list of codes – words to label themes or patterns in the data – such as “tensions” or “cosmopolitanism” or “healthy eating.” Once all the data for each family were coded, the analyst wrote a summary “family memo,” recording the main themes in the family’s food practices. Further analysis for the chapters that follow involved detailed review of specific codes or code combinations, and of the family memos and original transcripts.

Because the research addressed the ways in which social class shapes family food practices, we paid careful attention to how we identified class, which we wanted to be based on the traditional markers of income, education, and employment. In a study based on people’s stories rather than survey data, assigning class status was complex. To ensure consistency, we made several key decisions. We assigned class according to household, rather than per individual. Teens were automatically allocated the class status of their parents, since they do not themselves have the traditional markers of class. Where two adults seemed to have differing statuses, we opted for the higher of the two. Our categories focused primarily on occupation (which to some extent incorporates education level and income) and the occupations of the person’s parents (how someone grew up). We combined several ways in which class has been defined in the United Kingdom (see Marshall 1998, for the Goldthorpe Typology), the United States (Lamont 1992; Gilbert 2008), France (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont 1992), and Canada (Macionis and Gerber 2011), developing five categories:

1. Upper class: live off existing wealth, top 3–5 percent of the population
2. Upper middle class (high-status white collar): managers, professionals, business people
3. Lower middle class (lower-status white collar, highly skilled blue/pink collar): lower-level administrators and managers, nurses, executive assistants, skilled tradespeople
4. Working class (lower-skilled blue/pink collar): manual and clerical jobs with less formal skills, training, and education
5. Working poor/impooverished: precarious work and insecure incomes that fall at or below the poverty line; reliance on income assistance.

Many families were easy to categorize. In other instances, when education, occupation, and income did not match, or when a family had experienced significant changes in occupation or income over time, we eventually reached consensus after detailed discussion. In most of these hard-to-categorize cases, participants' employment and educational background were consistent with groups 2–4 above, but due to unemployment or disability, they had been living in poverty for some time. Ultimately, we classified these families as “working poor/impoverished” because living in poverty was so dominant in their food practices. We also flagged these (and other) families as having experienced a class trajectory in which they moved from one class to another over time. These families are a focus of Chapter 6. In a few families, the adults did manual labour but ran small businesses to provide it; we categorized them as lower middle class.

Throughout the study, we were attentive to ethical aspects of research practice. The research was reviewed and approved by ethics boards at the five universities where we were employed. All adult participants provided informed consent. For interviewees who were under the age of consent, their assent and parental consent were obtained. Because of the intersectional nature of our analysis, we reveal some demographic details regarding participants but have done our best to remove identifying information: all names are pseudonyms, and some details such as occupations have been changed (though always remaining in the same class category). Participants in any given site were assigned names that began with the same letters. So, for example, all British Columbians who lived in Vancouver, such as Bernice Valverde, were assigned the initials BV. Interviewees who lived in Alberta's Athabasca County, such as Amy Austin, were given the initials AA. Using this scheme meant that everyone's geographic location could immediately be discerned from their names. The pseudonym initials are listed in Table 1.

Like class, ethnicity is notoriously difficult to define. We have provided the age, ethnicity, and class of all participants whom we quote in this book. We asked people to self-identify in terms of ethnicity. Generally, however, dominant social groups (such as white-skinned Canadians of European heritage) don't tend to see themselves as members of a group at all. They are just “Canadian.” Yet we know that race and ethnicity make a difference to people's experiences. So, for those

participants of white European heritage who were born in Canada and simply called themselves Canadian, we used the label “white.” This is an imperfect category. For individuals who were born in Europe and who self-identified as, for example, British or German, we used that label. Thus, someone who moved to Canada from Germany would be a “German Canadian,” whereas someone whose grandparents immigrated from Germany was simply described as “white.” In this scheme, people with vastly different ethnic heritages, and vastly different relationships to their heritages, are lumped together as “white,” yet the approach also recognizes the power of white-skinned privilege. Whiteness is not all the same, but white Canadians do collectively experience an advantage that their darker-skinned counterparts do not share. We used the term “white” in recognition of this unearned (and often unintended) advantage.

Also, in terms of ethnicity, it is worth noting that we chose not to study an Aboriginal community. Some Aboriginal families did participate, especially in the cities, but we did not specifically select an Aboriginal study site. Given the unique situation of Aboriginal peoples – the distinctive history of colonialism, the ongoing racism, treaty rights and negotiations, land claims, legal battles over food procurement, displacement from traditional lands, and widespread government-supported conditions of poverty – contemporary Aboriginal food practices warrant their own independent study. There are excellent Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) scholars embarked on exactly that research (see, for example, Boulton 2004; Ferguson 2011; Martin 2011).

Finally, as feminist scholars, we want to acknowledge our own position as white, upper-middle-class, urban-living women researchers. The task of making sense of practice, exploring how ways of eating are based in the material and cultural aspects of people’s lives, can be especially challenging when the analyst’s (or reader’s) class location or logic of practice differ from those of the subjects. The usual unreflexive tendency is to impose the analyst’s logic and unwritten rules of social practice on research participants, which often results in judging their practices as inferior, thus potentially causing harm. Our study method called for rigorous reflexivity to constantly question and account for the distance between our own social positions and those of participants, and to understand the logics of their practices, even (and especially) when it was hard to agree with or condone them.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In the following chapters, we draw on interview data gathered across Canada to examine in depth how social and cultural factors influence food practices in families. We attend to the ways in which food practices are influenced by gender, social class, race, ethnicity, age, and family roles. We explore the ways in which people are affected by deeply engrained, unconscious, or semi-conscious approaches to food, and how they interact with and use discourses about food in more conscious ways. We also scrutinize how these social and cultural influences may differ by geographic place, in cities or small towns, in one neighbourhood or another, on the East Coast or the West Coast. Cultural repertoires are shaped by local culture, and the discourses that circulate concerning food are at least partially moulded by the local environment.

The first three chapters lay out prominent discourses regarding food practices and beliefs, showing how they connect to gender, class, and place. Chapter 1 takes up one of the most influential contemporary normative discourses concerning food – healthy eating. This is promoted everywhere – in magazines, on television, through schools and health care providers, and on food packaging. People have no choice but to engage with this institutionally sanctioned discourse. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss more emergent food discourses. Chapter 2 deals with ethical eating, a relatively recent subject for the mainstream media and one that has tentative institutional support. Yet it is obviously expanding (even Tim Hortons has begun to promote a fair-trade coffee).^{*} We ask how engagement with ethical eating is shaped by class and place.

Cosmopolitan eating (Chapter 3) is the most implicit of the three discourses. It prizes breadth and variety across cuisines from many ethnicities and is evident in the food sections of newspapers, on television food shows, and in cookbooks. When fast-food restaurants add chipotle chicken to their menus, and gas station diners put Thai chili

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* For more information on the Tim Hortons Coffee Partnership, the stated intent of which “is to improve the lives of small-scale coffee farmers by increasing the productivity of their farms and the quality of their beans in an environmentally sustainable way,” see <http://www.timhortons.com/ca/en/difference/coffee-partnership.html>.

sauce on the table with the ketchup, cosmopolitan eating is gaining ground. News headlines may not exhort people to engage in it, as is the case with healthy eating, but it is clearly becoming an important way of thinking and talking about food that shapes and is shaped by people's everyday practices.

Chapters 4 through 8 centre on family, gender, class, and place. They ask how these social factors shape food practices, but they also ask how food practices are used to simultaneously *construct* family, gender, class, and place. Chapter 4, on vegetarian eating, focuses on *family* dynamics and highlights a unique aspect of our study – the inclusion of interviews with teens. In part, it examines how the discourses of healthy and ethical eating are applied in family contexts and how they are affected by social class. Chapter 5, on body image, keeps the spotlight on teens, but concentrates on *gender* and its intersection with healthy eating. It shows that though eating for weight loss remains overwhelmingly the purview of women and girls, teen boys may also adopt it under the guise of healthy eating. The chapter reveals that a dominant discourse, such as healthy eating, can expand its reach in numerous directions, even challenging gender norms for food consumption.

The following three chapters scrutinize change, and resistance to it, when the social, cultural, and/or geographic context is altered. Chapter 6 brings the theme of *class* to the fore, exploring food practices and tensions in families where the financial situation of one or more members differs significantly from that of their upbringing. Here we specifically examine how the discourses of healthy, ethical, and cosmopolitan eating may be used to convey particular messages about belonging in terms of class. Chapters 7 and 8 centre on the theme of *place*. The first explores food practices among those who have moved within Canada, particularly how they use talk about food to draw boundaries between self and Other. We found that participants referred more often to rural-urban distinctions than to regional differences. They constructed images of rural and urban ways of eating – and of rural and urban people – by talking about local food practices as healthy (or not), ethical (or not), and cosmopolitan (or not). Chapter 8 looks at eating practices and food-related identities when place is disrupted through migration to Canada from elsewhere. Relationships between ethnicity and place are clearly central here, but

equally critical are the ways in which ethnocultural identity intersects with gender expectations and generational differences in families.

Chapter 9 brings everything full circle, asking how food preferences and distinctions, which feel so thoroughly individual and are so thoroughly embodied, are created through social processes in families. In the book as a whole, we argue that food practices are never solely individual, resting on personal tastes, preferences, and bodily reactions. Our empirical data show that social discourses about food not only shape everyday eating in families, but also become part of how people construct and convey their social and cultural identities. Food is inextricably social, affected by and affecting social categories and hierarchies. In Chapter 9, we return to the individual self through embodied sensations. We explore how social rules, tastes, and distinctions become embodied through culturally informed everyday sensory experiences. The chapter inevitably returns to the family, with all its distinct gendered roles in cultural groups, asking how families teach the very food tastes that are used in so many ways to distinguish social groups.

Through food practices learned at the family table, people enact class, place, and gender. Social class forms food practices in ways that reach far beyond the mere availability of resources. To put it bluntly, this study shows that poverty and lack of resources make it very difficult to eat with dignity. For participants who lived in poverty, following the dictates of healthy eating was a significant challenge, and pursuing other food-related practices that can indicate higher social status, such as ethical and cosmopolitan eating, was even more difficult. Geographic place also made certain ways of eating more or less readily available, and customary, with the result that urban food practices were seen as sophisticated and righteous, whereas their rural equivalents were imagined as backward, unsophisticated, unhealthy, traditional, and bland. Though migrants to Canada were least engaged with mainstream discourses about food, they were influenced by gender and their own relationships to ethnic and national identities, and had adjusted their eating practices accordingly. Gender was centrally implicated in engagement with healthy eating and with body image projects. Many adult female participants constructed self-identities, subject positionings, as “good mothers” in part through ensuring healthy eating at the family table.

Relationships to food and food discourses were widely used, not only to construct the self, but also to judge the Other. This study shows that notions of healthy, ethical, and cosmopolitan eating are not morally or socially neutral. In drawing on, transforming, resisting, or rejecting them, people's everyday eating creates and maintains deep, inequitable social divisions on the basis of class, place, and gender. When people engage with food, there is a lot going on beneath the surface – thus, changing eating practices is socially and morally fraught. Eating is not solely about fuelling the body: it is also about conveying to self and others particular social identities and positions in numerous social hierarchies.