

The Top 7 Food Trends

What are the latest food trends? I caught up with three of Canada's leading foodies to get the scoop.

Food might just be the stuff you put in your mouth every day. But for three leading food gurus - Bonnie Stern, Dana McCauley and Jennifer Low - food is their passion and their livelihood. Each has traveled the world, and here, they shed some light on what's hot on the food front.

1. Food as medicine

For Bonnie Stern, one of Canada's best-loved cookbook authors, a key trend is the use of food for disease prevention and health promotion. Working with the Heart and Stroke Foundation for twelve years, Bonnie knows the importance of eating well for a healthy heart. "It's hard to change factors like stress or smoking; it's easier to change the foods you eat," she says.

Berries, pomegranates, flaxseed, probiotic yogurt, psyllium fibre-enhanced breakfast cereals, and omega-3-anything are just some of today's popular "functional foods" - foods that have health benefits beyond just the basic nutrients they provide.

Food concept architect and author Dana McCauley feels that these functional foods have special appeal to the baby boomer who has buying power, and to the Lulu Lemon yoga mom who only wants the best for her family. "People want more bang for their buck," McCauley says, "When they see something positive highlighted [in the food], it's like a free pass."

2. Convenience counts

Things have changed in the kitchen. We simply don't have time to cook the way our parents or grandparents did. Today, it's all about convenience. And that means relying on foods that are semi-prepared or pre-cooked. "Cooking today is more like an assembly of foods rather than cooking from scratch," muses Jennifer Low, a chef trained food editor and author of the best-selling cookbook *Kitchen for Kids*. "Every day cooking has really become 'survival cooking'."

McCauley agrees, "People like to get involved in cooking and don't feel guilty using assembly foods like deli chicken or bagged lettuce. Moms don't feel guilty anymore using cake mixes."

The need for fast, convenient food is re-shaping our physical environment.

According to McCauley, cars [like the UK's Škoda] are sporting air-chilled glove compartments to keep food cool. The US hamburger chain, Jack in the Box, offers a unique packaging for foods that are ordered as "take-out". "When you order take-out, the burger is wrapped more easily so that you can eat it with one hand. The wrapping folds out almost bib-like to cover your lap and catch any drips," says McCauley.

3. Organic and "Alternative" Foods

Each of the food experts agrees that organic food is booming. Low herself, has almost switched totally to organic meat for her family, "The feeling is that if you're going to cook from scratch, you may as well do it right." "Even Walmart is going organic," says McCauley, who actually worries that big companies are squeezing out the original, smaller, artisan organic companies. Stern also notes that fast food outlets, like burrito joint Chipotle in the States, uses all organic meat and meat grown using healthy and humane practices.

"Alternative" foods, such as tofu, soy beverage, rice beverage, and flax products are becoming more greatly accepted by mainstream consumers. "These products used to be on the fringe and geared at the extreme, Birkenstock-loving health nut," chuckles Low, "Now we're seeing flaxseed added to salad dressings, and soy beverages right in the dairy aisle."

4. Cultural Cuisines

Ethnic eating gets thumbs up from each of the food experts. Middle eastern cooking is trendy because "it's naturally low in fat, and has lots of grains and legumes," remarks Stern. Look for restaurants and stores offering hummus, tabbouleh, tagine with pressed lemon and dried fruits, bulgur, wheat berries, and finally Israeli couscous, which Stern describes as "more like pasta in the shape of a ball."

The lesser-known Asian cuisines stand out in Low's mind. "Chinese, Thai and Japanese food is already mainstream. Malaysian and Vietnamese cuisines are big now." Low has seen Vietnamese-inspired

soup broths and soup bases. She's excited to actually see the words "Vietnamese" right on food packages, rather than the generic descriptor "Asian". "Indian food is finally coming into its own," says McCauley who is seeing more mainstream Indian flavours in non-Indian restaurants.

5. Flavours to Savour

The spotlight is on a few flavours in particular. Stern says seasonings like chipotle, chili and Tabasco sauce are literally hot, "They help to lower the fat, but retain taste." "Hot in their own way," Low feels that ginger is the latest and greatest flavour. In her travels, she has seen ginger teas, ginger marmalade, ginger honey, ginger dressings and ginger marinades. In addition to hot chimichurri sauces, McCauley thinks caramel, banana and coffee are key flavours to watch for. "Dairy Queen introduced a Banana Cream Pie Treat, and Starbucks has a new Banana Coconut Frappuccino which take us back to the retro metro trend," she notes. Coffee flavoured everything is also big, according to McCauley. Last year, both Coca Cola and PepsiCo launched coffee-flavoured versions of their colas. And, earlier this spring, Wrigley's tested a coffee-flavoured gum in the USA.

6. Provenance

"Provenance, also sometimes called 'Taste of Place', is likely to be much discussed in the next few years," McCauley shares, "In Europe and on Canadian menus, provenance is already a well-developed trend." This trend, McCauley feels, is fueled by fear and concerns about the origin of food as well as health issues such as the Avian flu and mad cow disease. Whether it's a pork chop from Smith's farm, all Canadian beef, or Driscoll strawberries, McCauley says she's already seeing grocery stores and high-end restaurants highlighting the actual source of the foods.

7. Decision confusion

Stern feels that there has always been some confusion around what foods to buy and eat. First, it was the butter versus margarine thing. Then, it was chocolate, nuts and salmon – good, then bad, then good again. Now, food has become political. According to Stern, consumers are becoming more socially responsible in their food choices. They're wondering, "Should I buy the best tasting food, or the most politically correct food, or organic food, or the cheapest food?"

Stern believes that consumers are struggling between food choices like buying delicious coffee versus free trade coffee, or omega-3 eggs versus organic eggs. Indeed the decision is not an easy one, and likely boils down to a matter of personal choice.

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