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Culinary Land Claims: The Representation of Indigenous Foodways in Canada

How do Canadians imagine political and national identities through food? There are over eight thousand restaurants in Toronto, the country's most populous city. Until the Pow Wow Café opened in 2016, only one offered Indigenous cuisine: Tea N' Bannock. However, in 2017, the year of Canada's 150th birthday and two years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report concluding that residential schools committed cultural genocide, two more Indigenous restaurants opened: NishDish Marketeria and Ku-Kum Kitchen. Across the country, in the efforts being made by Indigenous communities to reclaim languages, traditions, and culture, food plays a central role.

According to John Ralston Saul, nations and national identities are built around conversations about what to remember and what to forget.ⁱ Concerning Canada, the common narrative is that this conversation took place between the British and the French. Saul, however, argues that it is misleading to view Canada solely through a European lens, and that Canada is, in fact, an Indigenous-minded society—a "Métis nation." If food acts as an expression of identity, how does Saul's claim translate into cuisine? Which foods are associated with Indigenous communities across Canada and how have they—and their role in the Canadian conversation—changed over time?

Food cultures change, yet we associate certain foods with particular places and peoples. However, because of an extensive history of globalized food, even ingredients that are deeply entrenched in a specific regional or national kitchen are products of international trade and conquest. This makes cuisine a cultural and historical product. The past decade and a half has seen the development of the new Nordic food movement, which I argue, because of its focus on wild foods and ingredients indigenous to northern climates, has been influential on recent interpretations of Canadian food.

In 2003, René Redzepi opened the restaurant Noma in Copenhagen, Denmark. A portmanteau of the Danish words *nordisk* (Nordic) and *mad* (food), it won first place in *Restaurant* magazine's Best Restaurant in the World competition in 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2014. Considered to be the protagonists of the reinvention of Nordic food, staple restaurant ingredients such as tomatoes are banned from the menu. Instead, the restaurant only cooks and serves ingredients that are native to the region, which provides great insight into how Nordic foods—and landscapes—are conceptualized today, and which ingredients are allowed to take part.

My doctoral dissertation traces both the presence and absence of Indigenous restaurants in Canada and contextualizes this history in light of the new Nordic food movement, the global relocalization of cuisine, the emergence of Canadian restaurants, and changing imaginations of the relationship between food and place.

ⁱ John Ralston Saul, "The Aboriginal Peoples and New Canadians: The Missing Conversation," Lecture at Chan Shun Concert Hall, University of British Columbia (22 April, 2009). Broadcasted on *CBC Radio's* "Ideas" (25 June, 2009).