TASTE-TESTING CANADIAN FOOD OPTIONS:

Media Coverage of the Conference and of Food Options in February 2006[1]



ABSTRACT

This paper looks at Canadian media coverage of the conference in particular, and of food-related issues during the month of February 2006 more generally. It notes the emergence of two 'trigger' issues that captured the attention of the conference audience and media alike: obesity and the deskilling of the home food producer. Both discussions ultimately lay the burden of responsibility on the home food producer and consumer to make educated, conscious and responsible food choices. The question is, while a number of conference speakers focused on the responsibility of the government and industry to shape and better redirect consumer food choices, did media coverage ultimately place the onus for change on the shoulders of the individual consumer?

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article propose une analyse de la couverture médiatique canadienne de la conférence et de certaines questions d'ordre alimentaire au cours du mois de février 2006. Nous étudions deux sujets « chauds » qui ont attiré l'attention des médias et des participants lors de la conférence : l'obésité et la déqualification des personnes responsables de la préparation de la nourriture. Nous avons déterminé dans les deux cas qu'il incombait à la personne qui consomme ou qui prépare la nourriture de faire des choix alimentaires à la fois éclairés, consciencieux et sains. Certains conférenciers ont mis l'accent sur la responsabilité du gouvernement et de l'industrie dans la réorientation des choix alimentaires des consommateurs. Cependant, nous nous demandons si les médias, au bout du compte, n'ont pas placé la responsabilité du changement sur les épaules de chaque individu.

NATHALIE COOKE, Associate Dean, Faculty of Arts, McGill University

Judging from the media response to the conference, Canadians are deeply concerned about what they are eating.[2] Significantly, we received as much, if not more, media coverage for this conference than for our other annual conferences – despite some really hot and timely topics addressed in those other conferences ("Who Controls Canada's Media?" in 2004 for example, or "Canada and the World" in 2005). This conference was the first time, too, that we have had organizations asking to come and film the event (rather than being asked, and being paid, by the conference organizers), as well as asking permission to post video clips on their website.[3] During the last days, our list of speakers expanded in scope. Aline Dimitri, from the Food Safety Directorate of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, joined the Friday morning panel, which included Marc Fortin (Assistant Deputy Minister of the Research Branch of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada) and Hélène Goulet (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister of the Health Products and Food Branch of Health Canada). In terms of industry representation, last-minute changes involved a shift towards greater seniority of representation: for example, Louis Frenette, President of Danone, was a substitute for his VP. In terms of government engagement, there were two changes: Carolyn Bennett, former Minister of Health, and Wayne Easter, former Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (to our delight) were both eager to remain part of the event and the discussion surrounding the shaping of food choices in Canada, even though they were no longer part of the newly appointed Federal Cabinet.

Significantly, the 2006 conference also garnered media attention despite the fact that it took place while journalists might well have had other things on their minds: the Winter Olympics and the scandals of its Hockey Team manager; Stephen Harper's selection of a controversial cabinet; and Quebec's announcement about its long-awaited position on the privatization of Health Care.

Why such pressing concern? Clearly, people do care about food policy in Canada. There's no Ministry of Food; instead food policy issues fall between what Carolyn Bennett called the "silos" of government – that is, Health, Agriculture, Education, even Environment, and Northern Affairs. Another reason Canadians are concerned is because, so far, there hasn't really been much statistical information about specifically Canadian (as opposed to US) food practices. In February 2006, we did not really know what Canadians were eating – something underlined by Mary Bush, Acting Director-General of Health Canada's Office of Nutrition Promotion and Policy, who was responsible for producing (and defending) the new Food Guide. What did we know? Heart and Stroke Foundation Canada, in early February 2006, released evidence that the Baby Boomer Generation will be the first "generation to turn back the clock and experience a decline in quality of life."[4] The new Food Guide, announced in 2002, was still very much on the drawing table at the time of our conference in 2006 despite promises of a release date going back to 2005. In fact, until March 24, 2006, one could participate in the consultation process of the Food Guide by going to the Health Canada website and completing a questionnaire. In other words, Health Canada's interactive website is one recognition of people's past and present concern with food policy and the reality that there are questions but few answers.

The media coverage of the conference privileged two trigger issues at the bottom of all this concern: namely, obesity and poor eating habits among Canada's youth. Who's to blame? Well, conference presenters, and vocal audience members, all pointed the finger in predictable directions: industry and government (and in that order). We didn't even approach Coke to participate in the conference; and it was the right call: Coca-Cola figured in many, many powerpoint presentations, which implicitly cast the product and effects of the most highly-sugared products in the company's product line in a negative light. McDonalds pulled out of the conference a week before – having promised all along to send us a VP. However, Louis Frenette of Danone presented a credible case for the potential of industry to shift consumer behaviour for the better and remain profitable or, in other words, for industry to become part of the solution. He spoke of his company's counter-intuitive and, in hindsight, ingenious from the point of view of profitability, idea to bottle water; and he also articulated the specific benefits of Activia yoghurt, which has subsequently taken impressive market share in Canada.

Perhaps more surprisingly, in assigning responsibility, a significant number of participants pointed their finger directly at families – and specifically at the home food provider – whose deskilling, misconceptions about the unavailability of adequate time for food preparation, and lack of commitment to providing healthy food were seen to be symptomatic of our times. Of course, they are also symptomatic of decisions about educational curriculum. However, that blame was assigned to families rather than government supports recent findings by the Decima Group that "75% of Canadians said it was up to parents to make sure their children eat well, while only 22% favored government regulation."[5] And the proposed solution that got standing ovations was to reintroduce "homec" in the classroom, teach cooking skills to girls and boys, and go back to cooking simple, healthy meals in the home, and to eating them together. This was overwhelmingly the solution of choice, and one that continued to generate follow-up articles – as, for example, one printed in a journal distributed to all of Nova Scotia's 15,000 teachers.[6] When Nutritionist Christina Blais mentioned that we're not sure that there's a nutritional cost to whole meal replacement over home-cooked meals, the provocative comment went almost unheard.[7] When Ricardo Larivée, Quebec's answer to Jamie Oliver, said we shouldn't blame fast food industries, we should instead blame parents who model bad eating habits, everyone gasped. But he caught the attention of the Chagnon Foundation, who brought their TV cameras; and his conclusions were repeated throughout the conference.

Elbert van Donkersgoed mused: Who do consumers trust? His answers: Americans trust celebrities, English Canadians trust nutritionists, and French Canadians trust chefs.[8] At the conference, however, both chefs and nutritionists became the media darlings of the event: Ricardo (during the Wednesday evening public event), and later Paul Finkelstein (of the Screaming Avacado

Café in Stratford Northwestern Secondary School), Elizabeth Baird (*Canadian Living*), and Louise Lambert Lagacé. Without exception, they promoted the virtues of healthy eating and home cooking, a sentiment shared by the audience and, it appeared, by Canadians more generally.

For example, in an initiative endorsed by the former Canadian Prime Minister, as well as 2 provincial premiers, 7 Mayors, and one MPP, Canadians from coast to coast were asked to participate on the 3rd November 2005 in M&M Meat Shops' National Family Dinner Night. Families were not only challenged to dine together (and M&M did offer some suggestions about menu), but also to make dinner a symbolically worthwhile experience. M&M's tips for this include muting the sound on the TV or turning it off, smiling, talking, and that means (M&M Meats points out) with the kids too.[9] The motivation for this kind of initiative, not to mention high-level political support for it, was surely our concern for the disintegration of the tradition of the family meal in Canada and the corollary: our firm conviction that it is valuable. Wrote then Prime Minister Paul Martin in his endorsement: "This is a perfect occasion to promote the fundamental values that lie at the heart of Canadian communities, and that are essential to the well-being of our nation."[10] Recent studies from Columbia's National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse and from Elsie Taveras of Harvard's Pediatric Health Services (published in October's *Pediatrics* journal) cite the "family-dinner deficit" as a contributing factor to "childhood obesity, teen substance abuse, poor academic performance and increased household stress."[11] The reasons why families don't eat dinner together seem to involve lack of time (with so many two-career households in the 21st century, and kids enrolled in oodles of after-school programs).[12] In the United States, Gallup Poll reported in October 2005 that "[a]ccording to the most recent Bureau of Labour Statistics, 78% of women with children between the ages of 6 and 17 work outside the home."[13] In February 2006, the NPD group reported that "65% of Canadian women were in the work force" and, at the same time, "in 80 per cent of households, women are the primary grocery shopper and in 81 per cent of households, they are responsible for meal preparation."[14] In short, it's a function of what Canadian journalist Misty Harris, in an article entitled "We don't eat together, and are paying for it," calls the reality of the "modern family."[15]

Interestingly, according to January 2004 Gallup Poll data, there is a statistically significant discrepancy between food practice in Canada and that of the United States, and Britain – where a quarter of Britons no longer even own a dining room table, and 31% only use theirs for special occasions.[16] Whereas only 28% of Americans said they eat dinner together as a family 7 nights a week, 38% of British people and a full 40% of Canadians claimed to have such regular family dinners. In addition, another 40% of Canadians in 2004 said they ate dinner together with their family 4 to 6 nights a week. In summary, then, only 20% said they had fewer than 4 dinners with their family each week.[17] That's not as bleak as the 2005 newspaper byline, "We don't eat together" might suggest.

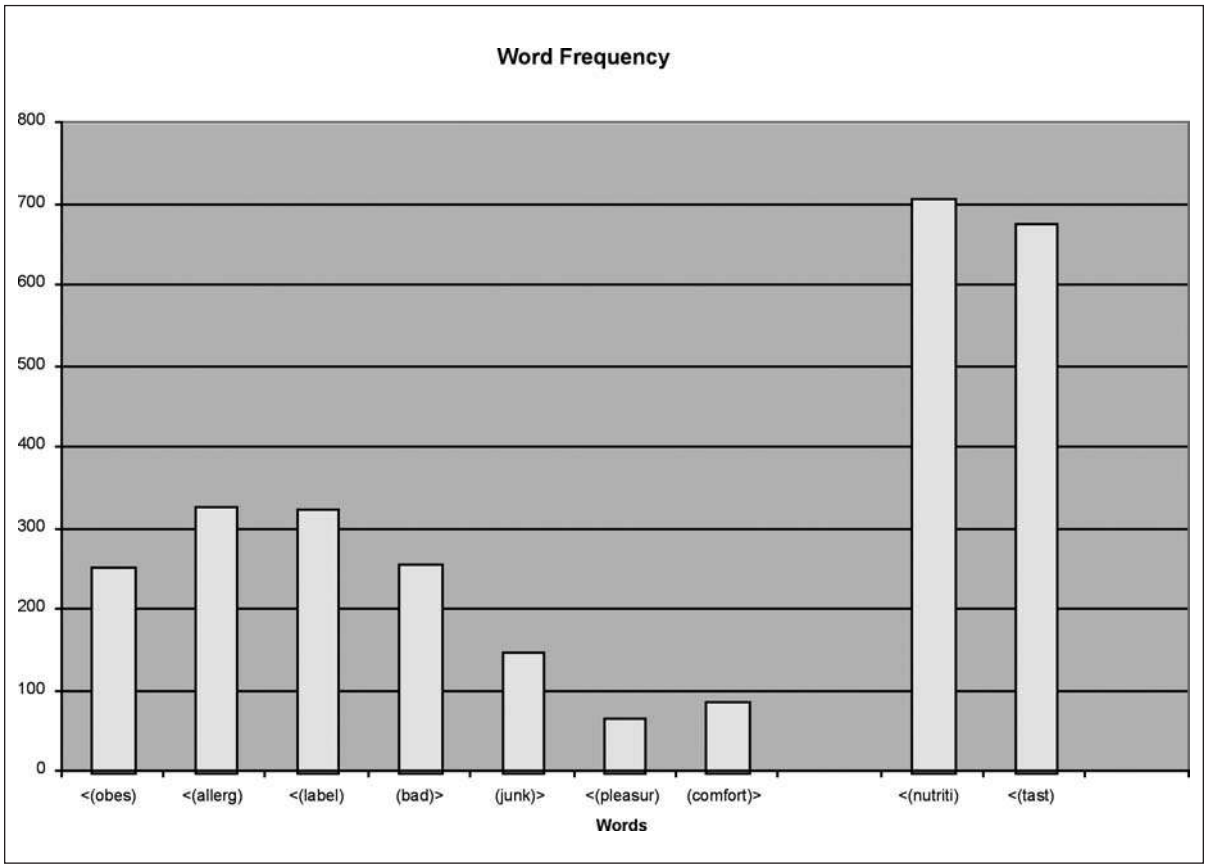
The NPD Group released data early in February 2006 that revealed similar findings. Working from a sample group of 1 300 "households reflective of the Canadian population" they found that "70 per cent of dinners are eaten at home" in Canada." That "53 per cent of Canadian dinners included at least one prepared or semi prepared food item, such as pre-seasoned frozen chicken," suggests that the Canadian home food provider has found alternatives to restaurant fare. Statscan data, compiled from 8,400 households, confirms the figure in the NDP findings: 70% of the household food budget in Canada, during 2001, was spent on food purchased from stores; the other 30% was spent on food purchased from restaurants. In 1982, only 25% of the household food budget was spent on food purchased from restaurants.[18] The Achilles heel of my argument here is actually some research generated by conference steering committee member, Marie Marquis of the Department of Nutrition at Université de Montréal, which focuses specifically on eating habits of 534 ten year-old francophone Quebecers. She found that 25% of the boys and 18% of the girls regularly eat in front of the TV, with the boys making worse food choices than the girls, even though they were more likely to consider it important to choose foods that helped them to control their weight (40% to 31%), and almost as likely to consider it important to choose foods that helped them to stay healthy (70% to 77%).[19] But this is a very small and homogeneous sample group that does not seem to be indicative of Canadian food practice more generally.

What is indicative of Canadians' perceptions of food practice, if media representation is itself

an indication, is a focus on the "afterlife" of food – that is, how it affects the body size, shape and health of Canadians. In an informal survey designed to find evidence of this emphasis on food's "afterlife," we surveyed (using the search engine Proquest) all articles appearing in the *Globe and Mail* during the month of February 2006. 310 contained the word "food" in the title; 343 contained the words "food" or "eating," and 424 contained the word "food" or "eat." Of these 424, we found that 76 linked these terms with "health" (21 articles if we eliminate repeats); 30 with "diet" (18 eliminating repeats); 23 with "labeling" (13 eliminating repeats),[20] 6 with "allergies" (5 eliminating repeats). In other words, the *Globe and Mail*, during February 2006 (a month that often privileges chocolate over other food groups), presented food as something that consumers should be concerned about, rather than something that might afford pleasure.

Using a different search engine (Infomart), which does not survey the *Globe and Mail* but does capture text from the CanWest papers, the *Toronto Star*, as well as CBC, CTV transcripts, magazines and all wires, we found 3426 hits for "food" or "eating." Once again, concerns about obesity (indicated by the search phrase obes*) topped the list with 54 hits (25 eliminating repeats), followed by concerns about allergens (allerg*) with 58 hits (22 eliminating repeats), and concerns about labeling (label*) with 32 hits (3 eliminating duplication).

A slightly different search method produced a more finely-focused picture of the media portrayal of food fears and fashions.[21] We searched the full text of all articles from Infomart for particular words: one cluster of words was selected for its ability to signal concerns (obes; allerg; label); the other group of words was selected for its ability to signal the pleasurable associations with food (tast; nutrit; comfort). The words themselves are truncated in order that the search can find variations: for example "nutrit >" would include nutrition, nutritious, nutritive etc. The words "good" and "bad" proved to be ineffective; in particular, "good" proved to be a word used ubiquitously and in association with a wide variety of nouns, few of which were related to food or eating. The results appear below and reveal, very clearly, the media's reliance on terms like "tasty" or "nutritional" as positive adjectives that have the potential to counterbalance fears about the negative



content ("junk") and negative connotations of food ("bad"). The relative infrequency of words like "wholesome," "comfort," and even "pleasure" further conveys the level of concern about food. The pairing of "nutritional" and "tasty" suggests a Mary Poppins approach to food choice: an awareness of the necessity of the nutritional and a desire for something to make nutritional go down more easily.

Ultimately, then, a survey of the media coverage of conference and food-related issues during the month of February reveals an insistence on the consumer's own role and responsibility in food selection. While conference presenters insisted on the ability of various sectors to shape and influence consumer decisions – and specifically on the responsibility of media to provide conscientious and comprehensive coverage of the issues, on government to insist on rigorous standards of production and labeling, and on industry to explore the benefits of best practices – the media looked to consumers to effect change. And the emphasis of food-related coverage on the afterlife of food, on its constituent nutritional elements as well as the pleasure and lifestyle benefits food can offer, reflected not only Canadians' hunger to make informed food choices, but also the possibility of Canadians cooking their way to a healthy and tasty future.

Endnotes

[1] Discussion of the media response to the conference formed part of a talk given at Harvard's Weatherhead Center on 20 March 2006, "Beaver Tails, Bannock and Butter Tarts: Practices and Politics of the Daily Meal in Canada"; and this paper benefits from the very helpful feedback I received following that talk. I would also like to acknowledge the support of SSHRC in funding research related to Canadian food history; the Max Bell Foundation for its support of inquiry into Canadian food policy ongoing at McGill's Institute for the Study of Canada; and Lorna Hutchison for her diligent and conscientious help with the copyediting of this article and the preparation of this issue more generally.

[2] The Federal government is too. In fact, subsequent to February 2006, Jean-Denis Fréchette, Director of Research for the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, alerted the MISC that he was looking for witnesses to appear in front of the committee to discuss food policy issues. E-mail sent 14 March 2006, 3:38 p.m.

[3] <http://www.passeportsante.net/fr/Actualites/Nouvelles/Fiche.aspx?doc=2006022310>.

[4] See <http://ww2.heartandstroke.ca/Page.asp?PageID=1613&ContentID=21437&ContentTypeID=1>.

[5] This opinion relates specifically to questions about whether government should do more to regulate advertising of junk food aimed at children. "Kids Eating Habits Up To Parents, Not Government" based on a phone survey of 1,014 adult Canadians conducted between January 19th and 23rd. Decima News Release. <http://www.decima.ca/en/pdf/news_releases/050125E.pdf>. Accessed March 16, 2006.

[6] Kathryn E. Graves, "Taking Food Seriously In and Out of School," *The Teacher*. 2006. See also detailed list of conference coverage in the media printed in this issue.

[7] It was mentioned in only one article by Julian Armstrong.

[8] Elbert van Donkersgoed is Strategic Policy Advisor, Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario, Guelph.

[9] <http://www.mmmeatshops.com/en/index.asp>. Accessed October 28, 2005. Premiers of Nova Scotia and PEI, and MPP Mary Ann Chambers.

[10] <http://www.mmmeatshops.com/en/aboutmm/mediaroom/pdf/Prime%20Minister%20Paul%20Martin.pdf>. Accessed 28 October, 2005.

[11] "We don't eat together, and are paying for it," by Misty Harris, *The National Post*. 17 October, 2005; A2. See also Elsie Taveras, *Pediatrics*, October 2006, in which she calls for doctors to prescribe family dinner as a health initiative.

[12] Misty Harris, ("We don't eat together, and are paying for it") writes "A survey released this week by Decima Research for the Holmes Group (marketer of Rival and Crock Pot slow cookers) indicates more than half of Canadians believe they don't have time to plan or execute a dinner event for family and friends. A full 30% cited dinner preparation as the most stressful element behind such a gathering.

A separate survey of Canadian women, released this week by Leger Marketing for Palm Canada, similarly found 21% of married mothers consider putting dinner on the table to be the most stressful activity in their day" (emphasis mine; see above for citation details).

[13] Heather Mason Kiefer, Contributing Editor, "Empty Seats: Fewer Families Eat Together." *The Gallup Poll*, January 20, 2004. <http://poll.gallup.com/content/default.aspx>. Accessed October 28, 2005.

[14] "Canadians Embrace Eating in Moderation." Release of the NPD Group, 1 February 2006. <http://www.npd.com/dynamic/releases/press>. Accessed 3 February 2006.

[15] "We don't eat together, and are paying for it,"[National Edition] Misty Harris. *The National Post*. October 17, 2005. p. A2.

[16] "La table de salle à manger disparaît en Grande-Bretagne." *La Presse* samedi 14 janvier 2006. This article expands upon results of a study conducted by the firm Mintel.

[17] Heather Mason Kiefer, Contributing Editor, "Empty Seats: Fewer Families Eat Together." *The Gallup Poll*, January 20, 2004. <http://poll.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?>. Accessed October 28, 2005.

[18] "The Daily; Household Spending on Food" Friday, February 21, 2003. <www.statscan.ca/Daily/English/030221/d03022la.htm>.

[19] Marie Allard, "Malbouffe: les garcons pires que les filles." *La Presse* 25-05-2005. See also Marie Marquis, *Revue canadienne de la pratique et de la recherche en diététique*. Printemps 2005.

[20] I am indebted to the industriousness of research assistants Gillian Jackson and Matt Doyle, and the research acumen of research assistant and library science student Jennifer Garland who directed them on this task.

[21] Truncations indicate a search using "wildcards."

TOWARDS A CANADIAN FOOD POLICY
POUR UNE POLITIQUE ALIMENTAIRE CANADIENNE



Conférence annuelle de l'Institut d'études canadiennes de McGill

Annual Conference of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada

DU 15 AU 17 FÉVRIER 2006 / FEBRUARY 15, 16 AND 17, 2006

Media coverage / Couverture médiatique :

01. The Gazette	November 16, 2005 – "Myth of family dinner overdone" *Julian Armstrong, Food Editor*
02. Culinary Chronicles	November 2-4, 2005 – "What's for Dinner? The Daily Meal through History" *Fiona Lucas, Editor*
03. McCord Museum	December 2, 2005 – "Qu'est-ce qu'on mange? Le repas quotidien à travers l'histoire" *Amanda Kelly, Agente Communications*
04. The Gazette	January 4, 2006 – "Chewing the fat on Canadian food" *Julian Armstrong, Food Editor*
05. The Gazette	January 4, 2006 – "Eating: New whole-grain choices take a slice off white-bread sales" *Julian Armstrong, Food Editor*
06. The Gazette	January 4, 2006 – "Educated Eating. The Food Mood Is Changing: Society, Government And Industry Are Working Toward Diet Reform" *Julian Armstrong, Food Editor*

07. McGill University	January 19, 2006 – "What Are We Eating McGill hosts conference on Canadian food policy Qu'est-ce qu'on mange? McGill organize une conference sur la politique alimentaire canadienne" *Cynthia Lee, Communications Officer*
08. The Gazette	February 8, 2006 – "Tracing the Canadian menu evolution" *Julian Armstrong, Food Editor*
09. Montreal Mirror	February 9, 2006 – "Generation food: Teacher-chef Paul Finkelstein hopes his students get hooked on freshness" *Patrick Lejtenyi, Columnist*
10. La Presse	February 15, 2006 – « Pas de solution magique » *Diane Finegood, l'auteure est directrice scientifique de l'Institute de la nutrition*
11. The Gazette	February 16, 2006 – "A taste of meals to come: At a conference in Montreal, food professionals are exploring what Canadians are eating, what we should eat for better health and a range of other mouth-watering issues" *Julian Armstrong, Food Editor*
12. The Gazette	February 17, 2006 – "Kitchen skills may be vanishing art, nutrition experts warn: Widespread use of ready-to-serve foods raise fears about healthy family meal" *Susan Schwartz, Reporter*
13. The Gazette	February 17, 2006 – "Nation's profile: fatter, flabbier: Food industry wrestling with how to fix problem" *Julian Armstrong, Food Editor*
14. The Gazette	February 18, 2006 – "Our daily pickle" *Susan Schwartz, Reporter, & Julian Armstrong, Food Editor*
15. Toronto Star	February 18, 2006 – "Cheap-food addiction fuels fat of the land; Canadian obesity traced to desire for inexpensive processed foods. Snacking is now the 'fourth meal' of the day, conference is told" *Susan Sampson, Reporter*
16. Le Devoir	February 19, 2006 – "Le Canada pressé d'adopter une politique" *Fabien Deglise*
17. The Medical Post	February 21, 2006 – "Serving notice: Conference offers up reality check on excessive food consumption with revamped Canada Food Guide on the horizon" *Mark Cardwell*

18. The Gazette	February 22, 2006 – "Keep on cooking, Canada: Helping the hurried cook is a Canadian Living tradition, food editor tells conference" *Julian Armstrong, Food Editor*
19. The Gazette	February 22, 2006 – "Obesity: A tax on low-nutrition foods is one suggestion" *Julian Armstrong, Food Editor*
20. The Gazette	February 22, 2006 – "Our fat fight: We can ban smoking, but we can't ban overeating. Canada needs a concerted campaign against obesity" *Julian Armstrong, Food Editor*
21. Toronto Sun	February 22, 2006 – "Batter up for Fat Tuesday" *Elizabeth Baird*
22. Toronto Star	February 22, 2006 – "The fat of the land" *Susan Sampson, Reporter*
23. Passeport Santé	February 23, 2006 – "Manger santé, un concept dépassé?" *Martin LaSalle*
24. Toronto Sun	February 23, 2006 – "Tax the fat: Sociologist" – *CP*
25. McGill Reporter	February 24, 2005 – "Sweet Scholarship : Conference satiates food lovers' appetite" *Maeve Haldane, Editor*
26. Passeport Santé	February 24, 2006 – "Des consequences à nos choix alimentaires?" *Martin LaSalle*
27. Passeport Santé	February 24, 2006 – "Le savoir culinaire : en voie de disparition?" *Martin LaSalle*
28. Radio-Canada	February 25, 2006 – "Une Politique alimentaire, pour qui, pourquoi?" *Helene Raymond, Host*
29. McGill Reporter	March 2, 2006 – "Food for thought " *Maeve Haldane, Editor*
30. The Gazette	March 4, 2006 – "This chef's got a cause – whipping school lunches into shape" *Sarah Musgrave, Author*
31. Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research	Summer 2006, Taking Food Seriously, In and Out of School, p. A4 *Kathryn Graves and A. Murphey, authors*