

Forget take-out: Families still big on home cooking

We're not losing our collective ability to cook - It's just that the skill set has changed

Montreal, Quebec – May 28, 2010 –The home-cooked meal is alive and well, says a University of British Columbia researcher. It just doesn't look, taste or feel like a Leave-it-to-Beaver meal from the 1950s.

Dean Simmons is a recent graduate of UBC's Integrated Studies in Land and Food Systems program, where his research focused on the practice and significance of domestic cooking to families in British Columbia. He presents the results of that research at the 2010 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences taking place at Montreal's Concordia University.

Simmons says that when he surveyed B.C. families about their cooking habits, he was surprised to find that the vast majority of families were cooking at home on a regular basis.

"I expected them to be more about take-out and eating out," he says. When he asked why they were cooking at home, Simmons says three themes emerged. Adults, he says, like home cooking because it allows them to exercise control over what the family is eating.

"It allowed them to exclude certain foods they didn't want – people talked about not having preservatives and junk foods," Simmons says. Control also extended to money, since by eating in, the families were able to stretch their food dollars.

A second theme was connectedness. Simmons says people told him that cooking makes home a place where people want to gather. Without the family meal, family life would be disjointed.

Simmons says people also use home cooking as a way to connect to their heritage, with immigrants in particular wanting to enjoy the foods of their homeland. Others just want to eat food like Mom used to make – although Simmons says some respondents were adamant that Mom was a bad cook and told him they liked home cooking because it was better than Mom's.

The final theme relates to life skills, says Simmons: "Nearly every teen I spoke to said learning to cook was important for when they moved out of the house. And this included teens who didn't like cooking."

People, of course, do eat out. Simmons recalls the case of a family who told him they 'rarely' ate meals out. But when pressed for detail, they admitted that they ate out almost all the time for lunch, but rarely for dinner. So meals, says Simmons, are hierarchical.

And when people talk about home cooking, he adds, they generally refer to the evening meal. But if families are cooking together, Simmons says plenty about cooking has changed.

Though women still do the lion's share of cooking, it's increasingly becoming a shared task, and teens are less likely to see cooking as a gender-specific activity.

Simmons also disputes the notion that we are collectively losing our cooking skills. All that's happened, he says, is that the actual skills needed for home cooking have changed. Fifty years ago, cooks may have needed to be able to tell when home-baked bread was done, but they didn't know how to microwave; today, they do.

And whereas 50 years ago, the ability to cook might have been held by a single person in the household – Mom – today, men are increasingly adept at the new skills needed to cook. Simmons says that if we continue to cook – and to value cooking – it’s because the whole thing is about more than just eating.

If cooking was just a simple case of heating and preparing food, “you would expect the kitchen would disappear over time” as technology and industrial techniques improved. But that’s not happening.

“Cooking has meaning beyond feeding ourselves. It’s more than just a laboratory process. It has to do with control over food, with independence, and with connecting with each other.”

And he says that for those reasons, even people who don’t need to cook continue to do so.

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