



## RETAILSCENE

Deanna Rosolen

# We are How We Eat

*An anthropologist discusses our very Canadian eating habits*

When eating a chocolate bar, do you examine it or rip open the package right away? Do you eat it layer by layer or enjoy all the layers at once? A Toronto food anthropologist says how we eat offers clues into our personalities: are we methodical or impulsive? How much do we value the nature of the experience?

These anthropological insights were included in a press release announcing Effem Inc.'s new ad campaign for its Mars bars called Mars Mania. In addition to prizes and ads, the company included commentary from Krystyna Siecichowicz, associate professor of anthropology at the University of Toronto.

Speaking with *Food in Canada*, Siecichowicz had some ideas of things to think about – from an anthropological perspective – when formulating new products.

One point to consider is that when immigrants come to Canada, “they go a class up in terms of cooking.” Europeans tend to leave a lot of their peasant cooking behind because they find food is less expensive in Canada. So Italians might add seafood or other elements to their pasta dishes because now they can. But if you go back to their villages, what Canadians think of as Italian food is different at the village level: it's simpler.

Canadians also have a strong sense of multiculturalism. “I think what happens in Canada is that we appreciate the different cultural cuisines and we are prone to tasting them and enjoying them,” she says.

As a result, Canadians tend to mix their foods more: they might have a romaine salad with Japanese flavourings, for instance. This thinking can translate into retail displays: building displays around a whole meal and introducing different and upscale ingredients that might be Thai, French and Indonesian.

Canadians, particularly in urban centres, tend also to be adventuresome and particularly open to variety. Siecichowicz has noticed, for instance, that Americans eat more potatoes whereas Canadians tend to think of different kinds of carbs as possibilities: anything from buckwheat, couscous, wild



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rice, brown rice or pasta. Even in our average retail store, Canadian consumers will find more varieties of rice, noodles and mushrooms, for example, but in the U.S. consumers likely have to venture into a more upscale venue to find the same variety.

One other point Siecichowicz says to consider is class. For the most part, people eat what they think the upper classes are eating. So linking a food with class is one way to promote it. She also points out that while “eating up” is common, people in lower socioeconomic classes tend to eat more comfort food, which also tends to be more fattening. What food manufacturers can do is link class with more nutritional foods and find ways to make those foods more affordable.

“People want the BMWs, the Mercedes and Audis,” she says. “Other car manufacturers are always copying the features of those high-end cars in the low-end cars. I think that in food production one could do the same. You could have a pasta dish, but perhaps with certain ingredients that don't make it as fattening. Or you could have a frozen dish that is a favourite of some well-known society.”

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