

## Grocery 'games' continue to baffle public

by MARK PAVILONS

George Bernard Shaw once said 'there is no love sincerer than the love of food.'

While George was spot-on regarding our taste buds, he never faced paying \$7 for a pound of butter.

'Give us this day our daily bread ...' the prayer goes.

But God never ventured into a grocery store.

We stand in line for things that we think are important and I believe the check-out lines at grocery stores contain more sad faces these days.

The latest bad news comes from the Loblaw conglomerate, who installed receipt scanners in four stores, the closest in nearby Georgetown.

It's a trial but the company contends that 'retail crime across the entire industry is a very serious issue, and has only gotten worse. To protect customers and colleagues, we're always looking at different ways to stop this theft.'

Customers are asked to scan their receipts to exit the store.

I wonder if the company brass looked at the root cause of the increase in food theft.

It's obvious 'ever-increasing prices, which outpace inflation and swell the cost of living.

Canada's 2024 Food Price Report predicts an increase of 2.5 to 4.5 per cent in overall food costs this year, with a rise across the board. Meat, veggies and bread products are all expected to rise from 5% to 7% this year. Ontario wasn't the worst in 2023, but we still experienced a roughly 5.5% hike in our grocery bills.

It's estimated the typical family of four will spend between \$15,000 and \$16,000 on groceries per year. This is, of course, after tax income, and some of our groceries are, alas, taxed.

The report states: 'There were widespread concerns about corporate behaviour, with allegations of profiteering by Canada's major grocery chains frequently reported in the media and the subject of government attention.'

'A significant 30.3 per cent of Canadians believed that price gouging was the primary reason for the escalating food prices.'

I think most people will agree that times are tough and money is tight. We Ontarians have been asset rich but cash poor for some time now. Are we now becoming 'food poor,' too?

According to Food Banks Canada, more than half of Canadians are less than a pay cheque away from 'dire financial circumstances.'

Food banks across Canada saw almost 2 million visits last March. We can only assume these numbers have risen. A third, or 33%, of food bank users are children, but they only make up 20% of the population. Seniors make up roughly 8% of users and 1 out of 6 food bank users are employed.

I'm sure helping organizations are overwhelmed and have trouble keeping up with the current demand. Donations have to rise even

more to meet the rise in food costs.

While the community supports the King Township Food Bank, they're are busier than ever. Their mandate is to provide a week of non-perishable foods, fresh produce, pet kibble and paper products to residents of King Township who seek assistance through registration with them.

Hard to believe in such an affluent community. And yet, the Food Bank serves roughly 120 families or 525 individuals per month. The King Township Food Bank, operating entirely on volunteer efforts for almost two decades, has seen a rise in demand by over 50% this year.

King is fortunate in that the Food Bank's fundraisers are generously supported, helping the organization meet the need.

Consumers are a pretty savvy lot and we tend to adapt to changing circumstances. More are cooking at home and eating out less. This is a double-edged sword of course. Bad for the restaurant and fast-food industry, better for average citizens. But it's only better for the average family of four if they're eating healthy. We all know that good food is pricey food. Junk food, and prepackaged food, are substantially cheaper. Given the current food price climate, I fear that many families are eating unhealthy foods.

The domino effect is prevalent. We spend less on crappy food. Restaurant and food businesses suffer, slowing the economy. Maybe this results in some job losses or reduced hours, which further reduces food insecurity, a nifty term we've created to lessen the severity of the situation.

What a tangled web we've woven for ourselves.

Growing up, I was fortunate to have a German mom whose expertise in the kitchen was legendary. I recall when I had friends and co-workers over for dinner, they asked "do you always eat this well?"

Yes, yes we did.

On our four-acre parcel in Caledon, my mom had an expansive garden and we benefited from fresh veggies of all kinds. Groceries didn't seem burdensome at all. Even steak was affordable for the BBQ in the summer.

We try to make healthy meals that last at least a few days in our house. If certain souls weren't so picky, we'd be fine. I hate throwing away leftovers. I'm not sure if it was from my frugal parents, or seeing poverty first-hand on a volunteer trip, but I can't help but think of those who have nothing to eat.

Our food industry is likely no better. I can only imagine the amount of food wasted each and every day in this province.

Why can't we implement rules like some European cities where at the end of each day, the "old" food is donated to shelters, the homeless, etc.?

I don't know if waste factors into grocery costs but perhaps the great minds should find solutions all around.

The government has tried to encourage "big grocery" to create a code of conduct, but it's a slow process.

No one should go hungry in a country like ours.

No one should have to steal food for their table.

Maybe we should be thinking about communal farms, fresh to table goodies. Despite the connotation, let's bring back the idea of "from each according to their ability (to pay); to each according to their need."