

Salvation lies in traditional home-cooked food

by Mark Pavilons

Food, in the end, in our own tradition, is something holy. It's not about nutrients and calories. It's about sharing. It's about honesty. It's about identity. ? ?ouise Fresco

Humans are obsessed with food. And why shouldn't we be?

When is the last time you cleaned your plate because the meal was made with magical ingredients ? love and tradition?

Ever since we discovered fire and learned to cook, we created the most diverse meals from natural ingredients, those provided by ?the gods.?

Some of the food we eat today dates back hundreds, if not thousands of years. From traditional Mexican tacos and Argentinian stuffed pizza, to homemade Italian lasagna and German sauerbraten, flavours are as distinct as dialects.

In many countries around the world, you will find generations of home cooks making magic in make-shift kitchens, using recipes passed down from their ancestors. Combining ingredients native to their region, they create masterpieces, cooking in cauldrons and fire pits. Many are involved in the entire process, from growing and raising, to cooking and serving.

You may find some of the best authentic dishes for a buck or two on any street in any small town throughout Mexico, South America and Asia. From food carts and back doors, to stalls and bicycle baskets, you will discover the heart and soul of our fellow human beings.

Behind the stall, behind each dish, there is a story, dozens of human tales. And that's very special.

While we maintain many cultural and ethnic traditions in North America, we did ourselves a terrible disservice when fast food took over our lives. We let convenience reign, just to make our lives a bit easier, more convenient. And in this search for expediency, we gave up something much more important than taste: our past.

Walk through any North American suburb and you'd be hard-pressed to find a unique identity, a culture so to speak. Our strip malls and food courts contain token international cuisine, strange concoctions that we've become accustomed to and demand.

Doesn't anyone want sushi made with fresh caught fish? Where can you get tacos made with meat that came out of the pit just an hour ago? How about scratch-made tortillas, biscuits, picarones and a spicy salsa handed down from the Mayans themselves?

Yes, my column does have a common theme. Blame it on Netflix and a couple of documentaries I watched on street food in Latin America.

Watching these self-taught culinary experts, you will find it's much more than taste. It's almost limitless TLC, passion, tradition and pride. They love making people happy with food. They want their customers to leave smiling and full, and coming back for more.

These concepts are foreign to us these days.

When is the last time you witnessed such passion? Has a cook ever come to your table asking about your meal? How many have thanked you for choosing them and said ?God bless?? on your way out?

Sure, there are such places, including right here, but they're few and far between.

It's those places whose entrepreneurs that you should hold close, cherish and support. Here's a personal hats-off to Alvaro at Port Soirée.

Throughout these eye-opening documentaries and personal stories, a few themes emerge. All are proud in their region's history, its abundance and its food. It's who they are. To them, a meal means family; paying homage to friends and family; having respect for one another. In many of these places, street sales are the only occupation available. But the population base and cheap food prices make it lucrative. From standing-room-only taco stands, to food market booths, incredible dishes come hot, fresh and overflowing.

These days we tend to be a bit reluctant of street food and various food related illnesses. But these people have been serving street food for decades. I can't wait for a return to street festivals across the GTA this summer.

In some countries around the world, you will find 70- and 80-year-olds, extending their wrinkled hands, offering you their age-old recipes. It's like a gift from above. It really IS the way grandma made it!

We use what God gave us. We share what He provides. We also share our history, our stories. Why not share it over a bite?

Have you noticed that when you're gathering for a meal, and you have food in your mouth, nothing else matters at that moment in time? All is good in the world, and all your worries can wait, at least until after dessert.

Think of eating your most favourite dish, tasting each bite. You close your eyes, let the flavours dance on your taste buds and you feel good. Endorphins are released and your brain gives you a sense of euphoria. Researchers discovered that pizza makes us particularly happy!

Thank you, brain!

Jean Brillat-Savarin once said: "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are."

Think about that for a minute. What meal or type of food describes you, your ancestry, your lineage?

If you come up short, there's still time for your salvation.

You don't have to dine out. Buy good food. Call your mom and ask for her favourite recipes. Dig out grandma's dusty recipe cards. Call your aunt and ask about special family dishes.

Most Boomers know the importance of the family table, the food, the wine, the bread, the laughs, the love. These are hard to find today.

Eat with your hands, let the sauce drip from your mouth, and live!