
THE BOOK NOOK

BY LEA ZELTSERMAN

ANITA STEWART'S CANADA

Celebrating Our Gastronomic Mosaic

When I ask Anita Stewart what “her” Canada is (never mind the 322 pages devoted to answering exactly that in her newly released *Anita Stewart's Canada*), her response is swift: “Possibilities.” In a country coming into culinary selfhood under the echoing rally of an increasingly urgent “eat local” mantra, it is a particularly apt moment to be exploring possibilities.

Anita Stewart's Canada is much more than a collection of recipes. The subtitle reads *The Food, the Recipes, the Stories*, and Stewart doesn't disappoint. Narratives that introduce each chapter cover the history of our foods, outlining the hows and whys of their journey through our culinary history. From the detailed sidebars, I learn that Canada's first Icelandic immigrant, in 1872, was Sigtryggur Jonasson, and that he edited our first Icelandic newspaper and later

become governor of a region in Manitoba called New Iceland; that there is a potato research centre in Fredericton, New Brunswick, a province where students still get a school break during harvest season; and that Windsor, Nova Scotia, hosts a pumpkin race every October (yes, inside a pumpkin boat). And then there are the photographs of people Stewart has met on her “research” trips, real people – including Stewart's own mother, Anne MacDonald – who care about Canadian food, and whom you might just bump into at your local market.

Stewart is a self-proclaimed gastronome and culinary activist who has been championing Canadian food for over two decades. The founder of Cuisine Canada and advisor to His Excellency, Jean-Daniel Lafond, C.C., who wrote the foreword to *Anita Stewart's Canada*, her fourteenth book, she is also a print journalist and the culinary columnist for *Fresh Air*, the CBC Radio One show. Fittingly, she earned a Master of Arts in Gastronomy in 2003 from the University of Adelaide (jointly with Le Cordon Bleu) in Australia, the first Canadian to do so. Last spring, she became the messenger for OMAFRA's Pick Ontario Freshness campaign.

It is clear that Stewart has spent a lot of time thinking about the politics and meaning behind our gastronomic history. That, and driving. “How can you understand Canada if you don't drive it?” she asks me. Her Canada is deeply rooted in the land, not surprising for someone who grew up in Wellington County, Ontario, on two acres of land that included a quarter-acre market garden on which her mother grew produce to sell along the roadside. “I understand what fresh-tasting leaf lettuce is,” she says. To understand the food, we must first understand the land. To that end, Stewart has spent years criss-crossing the country, exploring the natural history and edible resources of each region. The opening chapter, “The Original Palate,” begins with Stewart's expedition with Vancouver Island chef, mycologist, geologist and expert forager Bill Jones across his local mushroom terrain in the Cowichan River Valley which, incredibly, contains three distinct climactic zones. The expedition leads readers into a history lesson that has certainly never come up in any Canadian classroom.

It may seem like an oxymoron to include baklava and Portuguese sweet bread in a book on Canadian food. Whither smoked salmon? It's there, but so too are Salmon Spring Rolls with Sweet Plum Dipping Sauce. This is, after all, a country where neighbours often have wildly different cultural and, therefore, culinary, backgrounds. For Stewart, those differences inform her understanding of our national cuisine: “Food is on the move all the time, and the people who are eating it are also on the move. The flavours of my Canada here in Wellington have changed dramatically,” she says. “We're remembering our stories through our food. Comfort food takes on a new meaning



here. Modern Ukrainians might not recognize what Ukrainian immigrants who came a while ago are eating here.” It’s in that moment that a foreign cuisine suddenly becomes Canadian.

It is between these two – the land and the people – that Stewart’s Canada of possibilities exists. Each chapter of the book takes an indigenous food item – from the land – and explores the many ways Canadians – the people – have transformed it and adapted it to their particular palates. In the introduction to “Corn, Beans & Squash,” Stewart writes, “These ‘three sisters’ were the foundation plants of First Nations agriculture. Canadians have embraced them all...” And to prove her point, she provides the recipe for her mom’s traditional pumpkin pie alongside Brazilian Black Bean and Chickpea Salad. Under “Meat & Poultry,” we find Jamaican Jerk Pork along with a sidebar about the history of Jamaican immigration to Canada, and Moroccan Lamb and Prune Tagine together with brief overviews of the arrival of people from the Arabic-speaking lands and from Persia (now Iran).

Regarding who we are as a gastronomic entity, Stewart points out that, in retrospect, “we haven’t been very good at communicating. At one point, we had Canadian Living Food [magazine]. Had it flourished, we’d be a decade ahead of ourselves in terms of understanding Canadian cuisine.” But we’re not, and this is where Stewart’s book, and her ability to pull together such a large, geographically diverse country, fits in. She is creating a Canadian cuisine at the same time that she’s discovering it herself.

So what next? “The future has to do with keeping our wild spaces. I’m deeply concerned that we don’t understand what we have. The pressure to cultivate our wild spaces is intense,” Stewart says. “And keeping our farms and farmers. They’re very wise people. Right now, they’re using a lot of new, sustainable techniques that certainly weren’t around when I was a kid.”

For now, it seems, we’re still exploring possibilities. For Stewart, it’s a curiosity about what’s around the corner that keeps her doing this work. For the rest of us, it might be a love for the land or an interest in an unexplored part of our history. Or it might just be an appetite for food. All of it can be found in *Anita Stewart’s Canada*.

“This is a great time to be alive for food. The book, it’s a celebration as much as anything, and maybe a wake-up call to Canada that we have great food. Let’s party on, but let’s not sell ourselves short.” Indeed.

Anita Stewart’s Canada: The Food, The Recipes, The Stories, by Anita Stewart. HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., © 2008

Be sure to visit Anita Stewart’s website at www.anitastewart.ca.

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Long Brown Rice
Parboiled Long White Rice
Parboiled Brown Rice
Pecan Rice
Arborio Rice
Lundberg Long Brown Rice
Lundberg Short Brown Rice
Calrose Sticky Rice
Japonica Rice
Sweet Long White Rice
Sweet Short White Rice
Purple Rice
Forbidden Rice
Wehani Rice
Gala Blend
Organic Long Brown Rice
Scented Rice
Aged Basmati Rice
Canadian Wild Rice
Bhutanese Rice
Valencia Rice
Organic Short Brown Rice
Kalijira Rice (Bangladesh)
Regular Basmati
Organic Sweet Brown Rice
Red Rice (Thailand)
Fiesta Blend
Sticky Brown Rice
Wild Rice Pieces
Aged Brown Basmati Rice
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