

September Speaker

Dr Laura Carlson: An Edible History of Toronto

The delightful Dr Carlson, historian, writer, and host of CBC Sunday Morning's, "The Feast" podcast uses the lens of food to understand the history of Toronto. How has Toronto become a culinary food capital? To discover how food built Toronto and how Toronto built food as a marketable commodity, we must follow the growth of the city.

Tkaronto, Toronto's Indigenous name, is associated with food. The Mohawk word means 'where trees are standing in water' or a fishing weir. Native foods eaten around the area included fish - salmon, whitefish, herring, pickerel; game - duck and moose; and plants and crops - wild rice, blueberries, mushrooms, fiddleheads, honey & maple syrup and the three sisters - corn, beans and squash.

The first settlers arrived in the 1790's bringing their own foodstuffs. In "The Canadian Settler's Guide" (1854) by Mrs. C.P. Trail of Rice Lake, Catherine Traill describes the first cultural food exchanges between the First Nations and settlers: use of cranberries, pumpkin, maple syrup and wild rice, and how to cook bannock. The Toronto lifestyle was still essentially rural at this time.

Soon a wheat economy of farms, mills, breweries developed. Wheat was shipped to Montreal. Toronto's rivers provided the running water for the many mills now remembered as Don Mills, etc. In 1837, with a population of 10,000 Toronto had 76 taverns.

Toronto became a market town in 1803 when 5.5 acres was set aside on the shores of Lake Ontario. Occupying the site north of Jarvis Street, in 1899, what is today's St Lawrence market moved into the former city hall site, nicknamed Siddall's Shed, after the architect who designed it. Every ward had its own market. St Andrew's, built 1850 became in 2016, the Waterworks redevelopment.

Toronto's food and drink industry reached the global stage with the 19th century development of companies like Gooderham & Worts, Neilson's Cocoa, Weston's Biscuits, and Canada (McLaughlin) Dry. Toronto received its name "Hogtown" from the William Davies Company, now Maple Leaf foods, seller of pork pies.

St John's Ward, a newcomer neighbourhood from the 1830's to 1950's for Italians, Jewish, Africans, Chinese and others saw the opening of the Phoenix, owned by Beverley Shaw a free black American immigrant in 1848 and one hundred years later the Lichee Gardens, the first big Chinese restaurant in 1958.

Toronto's restaurants received their first Michelin stars in September 2022. The growth of Toronto since the 20th century through immigration and the diversity of its population and the foods they eat made this possible. Toronto is a first-class food destination. "Diversity is our strength" says Dr Carlson.

Marian Archbold