

# NEW TERROIR DE TERRE-NEUVE

## Contemplating this Province's Food Culture

BY EMILY DOYLE AND DR ATANU SARKAR

*"Tis only by courage and patience and wit and eating plain food that we keep ourselves fit."*

– from *Tickle Cove Pond*, written by Mark Walker

The food habits of people in Newfoundland and Labrador are changing in response to the industrialization and globalization of the food system. This gives us a good opportunity to reflect upon the food culture of this province. Specifically, does food produced from this particular part of the world have intrinsic value that helps define who we are?

*Terroir* is the word for food imbued with distinct geographical or climatic characteristics. It is a concept that helps food-producing regions around the world capitalize on the idea that food is enriched by the environment in which it is grown. This article examines how traditional NL foods, while valued from a tourism standpoint, are less palatable from an economic, natural resources, and health standpoint.<sup>1</sup>

### Ship's rations, root vegetables

When a tourist asks, "What kind of food is Newfoundland and Labrador food?", the three most obvious answers are fish, Jiggs' dinner, and berries. As far as fish goes, it is hard to know how much local fish is in a typical Newfoundlander's (or Labradorian's) diet because this information is not often collected. The fact that there is such a gap in research about local food consumption speaks to the level of priority given to understanding the local diet. Two exceptions are a recent

study from the Bonne Bay area, which demonstrated that there has been a decline in consumption of most major fish and shellfish species over the past five years, and a previous study conducted in 1978 that found people in this province ate an average of six fish meals per month.<sup>2</sup> It appears that meat, rather than fish, is a far more important part of the typical diet today: in 2013, residents of the province consumed \$251 million worth of meat but only \$34 million worth of fish.<sup>3</sup>

As for Jiggs' dinner, that this is a staple meal for NL speaks to the reality of food insecurity in this climate. Jiggs' dinner is composed of mariner's rations (salt beef or pork and dried peas) which are most notable for their long shelf life. Writing about the provisioning of the diet of early Newfoundlanders, historian John Mannion has said that our diet more resembled a ship's rations than any other country's traditional cuisine.<sup>4</sup> And, as we'll see below, the traditional root vegetables that complete the Jiggs' dinner are today most likely not the product of local farms.

The third example of local food, the berry, is a perennial crop that we can depend on our environment to produce. Berries are more than food: they are a "super" food and are emblematic of what it means to be a resident of this place: you grow in harsh circumstances, but you are endowed with special

(cultural) properties because of it—a philosophy echoed in the line from *Tickle Cove Pond*, above.

Due to societal changes, we spend much less time being shaped by our specific environmental conditions than would have been the case for our ancestors, and much of the food culture in this province is more real in history and lore than in current foodways and doings. The message we find in the current policies of the Department of Natural Resources—the provincial department with the mandate for both renewable and non-renewable resources—is that oil comes first, and food follows as a distant afterthought.

The real picture of food culture in NL is that the best of what we have (seafood and berries) is destined for an export market. The rising star of NL's agricultural industry is a subsidized commodity—dairy. Following the milk industry in profitability comes the egg industry and then the fur industry.<sup>5</sup> The emphasis on food as business production over food as culture helps shape the real food customs of the province today. Current food-related policies reinforce a distinction between food for profit and food for culture or food for health. Here, as in the rest of North America, the latter is dictated by the global food industry that offers up choice and abundance in exchange for the scarcity that has historically limited, and thereby defined, a unique NL menu.

The question becomes: how much of our traditional food culture should we keep? If tourists place value on some of these aspects of the food that the people of this province eat, or the ways people have grown, harvested, or preserved this food, then why don't we place the same value on it?<sup>6</sup> And it is not just our heritage that suffers but also our well-being. Not to romanticize the hard old times—because starvation was always a real threat until relatively recently—but there is something to the plain (or that was how it was perceived) hard-earned fish, potatoes, cabbage, and turnip that did keep us fit and that also fit our natural environment.

This point is beginning to resonate with a number of countries around the world. For example, Brazil just released new food guidelines that advise consumers to be aware of preserving food traditions and diets, and of the connection between eating local food and supporting the local economy. And Italy, as part of its universal school lunch program, educates school children about the seasonality of Italian produce and teaches them the cultural history of different food products and how they relate to place.

### **Fresh vegetables, global foodstuffs**

A recent environmental study funded by the Harris Centre took a snapshot of current trends in the production and marketing of fresh vegetables in this province.<sup>7</sup> As the figure (p41) shows, there is a shift towards decreasing vegetable production.

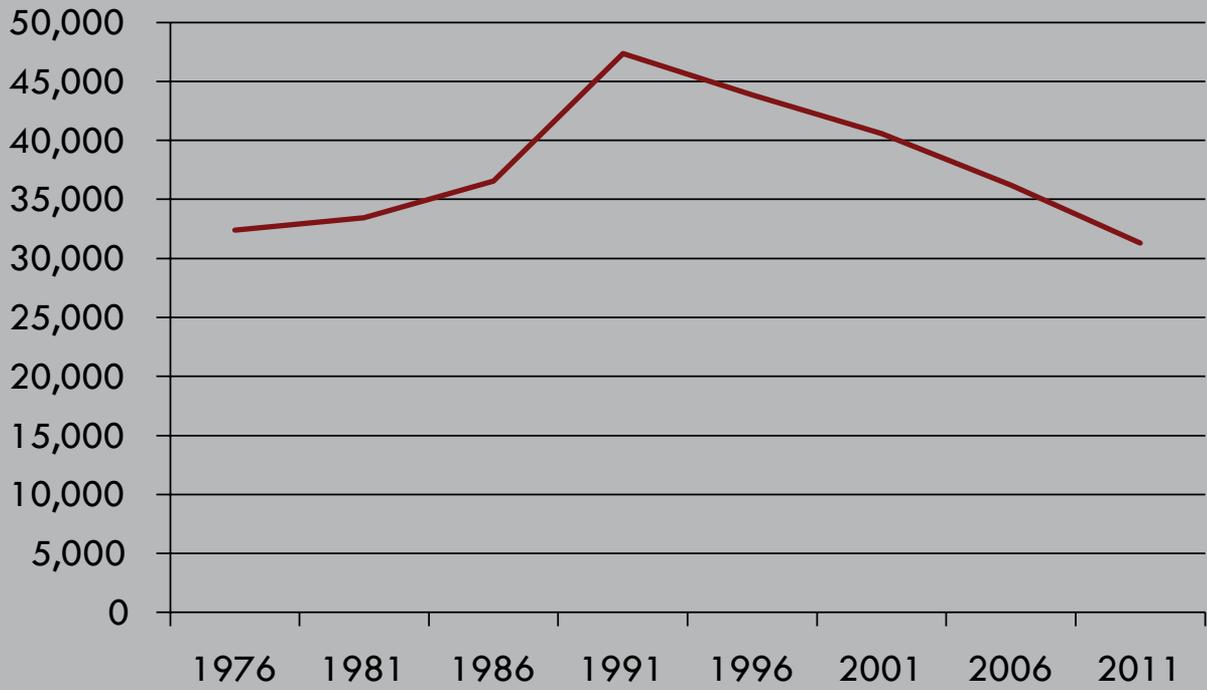
Fortunately, these statistics do not tell the full story. A small sample of interviews held with niche producers and marketers in the St John's region found that consumers are looking to form relationships with local farmers and they are seeking out diversity in the vegetables they purchase. Local marketers and farmers are responding to this heightened demand by expanding production. Still, statistically, this spike in demand for diversified domestically grown produce is invisible on a provincial scale and it is hard to know if this interest in the preservation of local food production is similarly experienced across the province.

What we do know is that NL has roughly 500,000 eaters who spend around \$1.6 billion on food a year. Of that, \$134 million is spent on vegetables and vegetable preparations.<sup>9</sup> Farmers in this province earned only 4 per cent of this amount through sales of potatoes, turnips, carrots, cabbage, and beets.

Another number to consider here is the \$3 billion dollars that NL spends on health care per year. The relation of food expenditures to health care expenditures cannot be overestimated. Strategic financial outlay on food could be used as a preventative health measure that leads to a decrease in overall health costs. As reported by the Department of Health and Community Services, chronic disease is the biggest threat to the wellbeing of the population and the sustainability of the health care system.<sup>10</sup> The chronic diseases from which we suffer are linked directly to both dietary behavior and level of activity, which are both connected to the production and harvesting of food, at least in the traditional sense.

So while we can be forgiven for turning away from a past that was full of famine and malnutrition by embracing a new diet, we are now at a critical juncture for defining what Newfoundland and Labrador food culture is. How have current food policies changed our identity and our health as a province? What consequences are there for future generations when we slowly obliterate farmland and our unique traditions of preserving and cooking? It seems a good time to revisit preconceived notions of what food policy should look like. While the industrial mode of agriculture and

## Total Farm Area (Hectares) in NL (1976 - 2011)



Statistics Canada. "Census of Agriculture. Section 2—Agricultural perspectives from seven censuses, Canada and provinces: census years 1976 to 2006," <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/95-632-x/2007000/t/4185579-eng.htm>; Picture of Kelly's farm in Middle Cove, NL

fisheries matches an industrialized view of food, there may be other options that better cater to the nutritional and cultural needs of this province.

The local food producers who were interviewed as part of the environmental survey spoke to some of these alternatives. Farmers (and market gardeners) are encountering great success with greenhouses as a way to extend the NL growing season. (Currently, 99 per cent of greenhouse space is devoted to ornamental plants.) Farmers are also experimenting with new forms of energy, such as geothermal and wind; incentives to innovate and adapt technologies that take advantage of these energy resources will be necessary if we are to adjust course and become invested in the idea of eating more wholesome locally grown and harvested food.

We need two changes for this to happen. First, we need people to grow and harvest the food. Second, we need people to eat the food.

At present, there are few incentives for young people to enter either the agriculture or the fishing industry. As the average age of the population climbs, it becomes more likely that we will lose the place-specific knowledge of food production, harvesting, and preservation that has been built up over centuries.

Also, as consumption of 'global' food products such as pineapples, avocados, and bananas increases, there may be a decline in people's taste for local food. Over the past 50 years, palettes have changed, and things that were everyday cuisine like boiled greens or salt fish may now seem exotic. One way to cultivate a taste for the new *terroir de Terre Neuve* is to ensure that not only the tourists but the people of this province are encouraged to find innovative and adapted versions of traditional meals on the menu. **NQ**

**Emily Doyle** is a PhD student in the Division of Community Health and Humanities. She is investigating the role of food environment interventions in promoting health within the NL school system.

**Dr Atanu Sarkar**, MBBS, PhD, MES, is Assistant Professor (environmental and occupational health) of the Division of Community Health and Humanities, Faculty of Medicine, Memorial University of Newfoundland. His research interests include food and water security and environmental health.

1 This idea was inspired by Holly Everett's exploration of the distinction between the imagining of the NL berry for the tourism industry versus the actual consumption of berries in the NL diet, in "A welcoming wilderness: The role of wild berries in the construction of Newfoundland and Labrador as a tourist destination," *Ethnologies* 29, no 1 (2007): 48-80.

2 Kristen Lowitt, "Examining the foundation for stronger fisheries-tourism synergies and increased local seafood consumption in the Bonne Bay region of Newfoundland," *Office of Public Engagement*, Government of NL. 2011, [http://www.ope.gov.nl.ca/rural/whatweredoing/cbr\\_reports/14.1.CURRA\\_Fisheries-Tourism\\_rpt\\_Nov2011.pdf](http://www.ope.gov.nl.ca/rural/whatweredoing/cbr_reports/14.1.CURRA_Fisheries-Tourism_rpt_Nov2011.pdf); Omnifacts Research Limited. *Report on the consumption of fish products in Newfoundland and Labrador*, prepared for Fishing Industry Advisory Board, 1978.

3 Statistics Canada, *Table 203-0028—Survey of household spending (SHS), detailed food expenditures, Canada, regions and provinces, annual (dollars)*.

4 John Mannion, "Victualling a fishery: Newfoundland diet & the origins of the Irish provisions trade, 1675-1700," *International Journal of Maritime History*, 12, no 1 (2000): 1-60.

5 Department of Natural Resources, Agrifoods, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. *Farm Cash Receipts*. <http://www.nr.gov.nl.ca/nr/agrifoods/marketing/statistics/farmcashreceipts.pdf>

6 There are pockets of preservation and consumption of this food culture, such as in the *Wall Street Journal's* report on Howard Morry's century's old tradition of pasturing sheep on nearby islands (Rita Trichur & W Connors, "Last licks: Sheep travel to island for tastier pastures," *Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 2014. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/last-licks-sheep-travel-to-island-for-tastier-pastures-1405737003>), or see the *Globe and Mail's* description of chef Jeremy Charles' "terroir-driven food" (A Gollner, "Jeremy Charles: Canada's real top chef," *Globe and Mail*, September 9, 2014. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/jeremy-charles-canadas-real-top-chef/article20495580/>)

7 Emily Doyle, "An environmental scan of factors relevant for sustainable food production in NL," Student Research Fund Report, The Harris Centre, Memorial University of NL, 2014, <http://www.mun.ca/harriscentre/reports/arf/2013/13-14-TSP-Final-Doyle.pdf>

8 Statistics Canada, "Census of Agriculture. Section 2 - Agricultural perspectives from seven censuses, Canada and provinces: census years 1976 to 2006", <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/95-632-x/2007000/t/4185579-eng.htm>; Background picture from [http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/ref/collection/arch\\_geog/id/3362](http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/ref/collection/arch_geog/id/3362)

9 Statistics Canada, *Table 203-0028 - Survey of household spending (SHS), detailed food expenditures, Canada, regions and provinces, annual (dollars)*, CANSIM

10 NL Department of Health and Community Services, "Improving Health Together: A policy framework for chronic disease prevention and management in NL," p 2, [http://www.health.gov.nl.ca/health/chronicdisease/improving\\_health\\_together.pdf](http://www.health.gov.nl.ca/health/chronicdisease/improving_health_together.pdf)