



# Celebrating Canadian Agriculture and Food Innovation

**A**nita Stewart's *Canada: The Food/The Recipes/The Stories*, is the latest book from the Wonder Woman of Canadian cuisine. While it contains a generous selection of uniquely Canadian recipes, this is much more than a cookbook. It is packed with dozens of fascinating personal stories that provide context for the recipes and a lovely sampling of the still largely untold story of Canadian culinary history.

Not surprisingly, there is a recipe for one of Canada's greatest gifts to the culinary world – the butter tart. Stewart also describes the history of this uniquely Canadian invention and the national debates on whether, for example, the pastry should be made with butter or lard, or whether vinegar should be added (my mother would say “of course”).

Stewart tells the story of the world's finest oil, Canada's oil – canola – invented by two Canadian professors and now contributing over \$6 billion annually to the Canadian economy. As well, she tells the story of Ernest D'Israeli Smith, born in 1853 into a Loyalist family and who, because of poor eyesight, could not continue his education and so stayed on the family farm to run their orchard business. Falling prices forced Smith to make jam out of his unsold fruit, and by 1905 Canada's first jam factory, producing E.D. Smith Pure Fruit Jam, had become an icon of Canadian food manufacturing. Thanks to Canadian expertise in food technology and the entrepreneurial genius of the McCain brothers in Florenceville, N.B., McCain Foods is the largest and most successful french fry processor, now producing a third of the world's supply. And thanks to the scientific

genius of Ontario Agricultural College (OAC) researcher Charles Zavitz, OAC variety 211 released in 1922 started the soybean revolution in Canada so that it is now the number-1 cash crop in Ontario.

Stewart provides a wealth of lesser-known stories and facts. For example, Saskatchewan now accounts for more than half of the world's supply of mustard: the odds are that the main ingredient in your fancy French Dijon comes from rural Saskatchewan. Canada manufactures 84 per cent of the world's maple syrup. And, in case you didn't know, hens with white earlobes always produce white eggs and red earlobes mean brown eggs (for more information on our culinary history, see [www.culinaryhistorians.ca](http://www.culinaryhistorians.ca)).

Of course, due diligence required my family to test some of the recipes. My Honey-Nut Blueberry Muffins turned out pretty well and my daughter really liked my personalized version of the Beef Barley soup. My mother-in-law liked the Buttermilk Maple Cornbread with Flax, but was surprised that it was actually bread not the usual cake-like cornbread made in her native Newfoundland. She really liked the Cape Breton Gingerbread and will definitely make it again, but was disappointed that a book on Canadian cuisine had no recipe from The Rock.

Stewart's book also includes several essays that are essentially a loving meditation on the importance of food in our lives and how central food is to defining us as a people. Although, I must say, to me the book tends to support the notion that we do not have a single Canadian cuisine as much as we have a vast array of regional

cuisines, common only in the sense that they share Canadian ingredients and spices, flavourings and techniques from around the world.

Unlike a lot of recent books on food that are written by urban sophisticates who use every opportunity to bash the food industry (see my earlier reviews of Michael Pollan's two books) and to promote the latest fad in food politics, Stewart's book is refreshingly free of political rants and sermonizing; no admonitions about eating “local” or “organic,” or guilt trips about eating unnatural foods such as butter and eggs.

The book is a gentle celebration of the unheralded success of Canadian agriculture and food innovation over the years. It is also a useful and timely reminder of the importance of publicly funded science in our past. Over and over again in the book we see the many benefits of applied university research or the contribution of Agriculture Canada's scientists at the Central Experimental Farm and other Research Stations. We cannot lose this, and must do a better job of explaining to decision makers the economic benefits that flow from this “government” research.

I am proud to say, and full disclosure requires me to admit, that Anita Stewart is my friend, and I recommend her latest book without reservation. Enjoy. Bon appétit.

*Anita Stewart's Canada: The Food/The Recipes/The Stories, Anita Stewart, Harper Collins, 2008, 322 pages. ■*

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