



CENTRE FOR  
Urban Health  
INITIATIVES

# Taste Buds

*The CUHI Food Research Interest Group*



## Welcome to the Centre for Urban Health Initiatives

The Food Research Interest Group (RIG) focuses primarily on how food policy and programs shape the health of urban residents. Topics of interest to RIG members include: urban food security, community gardening, environmental contamination, pesticide use, social mobilization around food, and the relationships between food systems and urban sustainability.



## *News from the Food RIG*

Hello, and welcome to Taste Buds, a student-led newsletter from the Food RIG at the Centre for Urban Health Initiatives (CUHI). Prepare your palate for a variety of news, reviews and interviews from various community and academic sources – all of whom are invested in the food movement. We hope that this provides a way for students, community and academics to connect. We hope you see Taste Buds as an invitation to discuss pressing issues, so feel free to respond and suggest ways we can serve you better. Dig in, and enjoy!

The Food RIG has had a very productive year and recently met to plan for next semester. The popular Food for Talk seminar series will carry on in the fall. We wish to offer more time for discussion (continued on next page)

after the lecture and to create seminar space for students to share their work. Due to numerous requests from across the globe we also hope to Pod-cast our Food for Talk seminars in the fall. The “Foodnews” email network will continue with more international editors commenting on policy articles and tighter co-ordination with current events.

Student involvement has always been a priority for the RIG. Organizing mentoring, an online graduate student database, and pre-conference presentation sessions are a few ways we hope to better serve students. Finally, we welcomed Fiona Yeudall, an assistant professor in Ryerson’s School of Nutrition and a faculty associate in the Centre for Studies in Food Security, as the new director of the Food RIG. She will be officially taking over for our current director, Sarah Wakefield in September.



### *A Note from Sarah Wakefield*

Hi! I would like to welcome all RIG members and friends to the inaugural issue of the “Taste Buds” newsletter. I see this newsletter as an opportunity for our members to talk to each other, to see the great things being done by Toronto food researchers and activists, and to get informed about the ‘Food and Health’ Research Interest Group (RIG) of the Centre for Urban Health Initiatives and its activities.

Overall, this has been a very productive year for the RIG. The Food for Talk seminar series and discussion forum has been a resounding success, and as a result of this and other communication efforts the Centre for Urban Health Initiatives (CUHI) has developed a ‘presence’ in food research in the City of Toronto and well beyond.

The RIG has supported a number of important multi-sectoral collaborative research projects, including the UGROW study of community gardens in Southeast Toronto, a study of local food policy (“Mobilizing for food security and health research in Toronto”), an evaluation of urban pesticide reduction strategies, and a project researching local possibilities for Farm-to-School initiatives. All of these projects involve partners from local civil society organizations and/or local government, thus supporting CUHI’s mandate to build capacity for inter-sectoral research.

The RIG has also been successful in attracting a wide range of members, particularly student members. This newsletter is the result of student efforts to provide an accessible forum for food-related discussion; we also hope that it will serve as a way of connecting interested students with interesting projects, and vice versa.

One area that has been lagging behind is the development of manuscripts and subsequent grant applications from seed projects. Manuscript writing is a priority for this coming summer; however, new grant development will rely on building linkages with researchers who are not already over-extended.

As a related point, I am finding myself somewhat overextended, particularly as I prepare for my tenure review. I am therefore planning to step down as RIG director in September 2006. Fiona Yeudall (Department of Nutrition, Ryerson University) has graciously agreed to take over as RIG Director at that time. Fiona has been centrally involved in many RIG projects, and currently holds the Centre’s junior faculty award – I am sure that she will be truly excellent as leader of the Food RIG!

# Community Food Action

## “Tell Us What Grows in Your Garden”

Carolyn Taron

### The Story of UGROW (Urban Gardening Research Opportunities Working-Group): A pilot study of community gardening in Southeast Toronto

From garden plots the size of an average dining room table, community gardeners in Southeast Toronto are growing a feast of culturally diverse foods such as the ‘lau’ squash (up to three feet long), wing beans (deep purple), okra, Bengali peppers, Vietnamese coriander, arun, heirloom tomatoes, many varieties of spinach and other vegetables from the four corners of the world. Pride, community, social support, skills, sharing, healthy living, environmental stewardship, and attachment to place are some of the other benefits grown out of these community gardens. These results are some of the findings that emerged out of the UGROW (Urban Gardening Research Opportunities Working-Group) pilot study, a community based research project funded by Wellesley Central Health Corporation and supported by the Centre For Urban Health Initiatives (Food Research Interest Group).

As part of an alternative community based research approach to engage participants we asked community gardeners to “tell us what grows in your garden” (see side-bar). Through song, learning exchange, participant observation, focus groups and interviews, we engaged with participants in order to find out from the perspective of community gardeners themselves, what the key benefits, needs and drawbacks of community gardening were. We also wanted to find out what questions about gardening, food and health participants wanted to have answered and how strong, ongoing linkages between gardeners, gardening and food security organizations and researchers could be developed.

The pilot study involved 15 food growing community gardens in southeast Toronto. Seven of these gardens are located in Regent Park which is presently being redeveloped and as a result many of these gardens are at a greater risk of insecure tenure. For many participants the community garden “is a microcosm of the city it is located in”. Another participant noted that, “we share ideas, we share tools, vegetables we share, the foods, we share knowledge, cultures through gardening”.

A report of the findings is presently being completed and will be available online. For more information visit [www.cuhi.utoronto.ca](http://www.cuhi.utoronto.ca). The UGROW research team includes: Jennifer Reynolds (Foodshare), Ana Skinner (York University), Carolyn Taron (Centre For Urban Health Initiatives), Sarah Wakefield (University of Toronto), and Fiona Yeudall (Ryerson University).

*Tell us what grows in your garden  
Tell us the story you know  
Tell us about the seeds you have  
planted*

*Show us the food you have grown  
What recipes do you follow?  
How has the garden changed what  
you know?*

*Who do you meet here in the morning?  
Who do you greet at dusk?  
What knowledge is shared while  
gathering swiss chard, tomatoes or  
peppers or dill ?*

# Food for Thought

*Chew the fat with researchers in the CUHI Food RIG*

## “Selling Subtly to Kids: A Supermarket Study”

**Brent Berry & Tara McMullen**

The contextual hypothesis is fundamental in medical sociology. Some contexts are believed to be health protective while others are health exploitive. The food industry has been the subject of recent debate about rising obesity and other health problems linked to food quality and consumption, but the health protective and exploitive aspects of everyday consumer contexts where food choices are made (e.g. supermarkets) have not been systematically measured and studied by medical sociologists or public health scientists.



Our research examines the visual economy of grocery store cereal aisles as an important, but understudied context where individuals make choices from a range of options available and visible in that setting. Ready-to-eat (RTE) breakfast cereals are an increasingly popular choice for North American children and adults, with consumption rising substantially over the past decade in North America. The nutritional quality of these products varies considerably, and some evidence suggests that cereals most heavily marketed to children in television advertising are less nutritious on average than those marketed to adults.

Visual information can be structured in consumer environments to either protect or exploit the developmental limitations of children with regards to product nutrition. Exploitive communication may be driven by higher profit margins from less nutritious products, knowledge of children's taste preferences, and desire to establish brand loyalty. Protective communication may be driven by population health concerns and regulations on the part of manufacturers, retailers, and governments. We test for a link between child-targeted visual marketing cues on breakfast cereal products and their nutritional content. Cereal aisles are realistic contexts for evaluating these links because virtually all popular choices are juxtaposed within a measurable visual field—from one end of the aisle to the other. The supermarket is one of the most important spaces for food choice intervention, as it is often the first point of physical contact between products and a potential consumer.

We have found that certain visual cues—namely child incentives on cereal boxes, spokescharacters, and themed cereal shapes/colors—are consistently associated with higher levels of sugar, refined grains, and trans-fats in RTE breakfast cereals (with the exception of an insignificant association between spokescharacters and trans-fats). In these ways, our observations are consistent with the health exploitive pattern of marketing to children. Other important visual aspects such as appealing box colours and low shelf location (continued on next page)

are generally not associated with less healthy cereal choices. In fact, we find that the cereals shelved within reach of the average 8-year old child have less sugar per serving and are less likely to contain trans-fats. In these ways, our observations are more consistent with the health protective pattern of marketing to children.

Canadian laws restrict the use of puppets and subliminal messages in marketing to children, but enforcement has been directed at television, the internet, and in schools rather than supermarkets. It is important to note that the “locally exploitative” elements like colour and shelf-location are not associated with poorer health content, while spokescharacters and branding, which are more pervasive, are associated with poorer health content. Our study suggests that visual communication in the supermarket context through spokescharacters and child incentives may be construed as “manipulation” of children’s developmental stages, but have thus far not been interpreted and enforced in this way.

## Student Initiatives



**Roberta Stimac**  
Taking on Food Culture -- One Meal at a Time

There are those who grow food, those who prepare it, and those who eat it. And there are those of us who make it their business to pick at food both literally and figuratively.

I have recently graduated with a masters degree from the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University, with a specialization in food localism and crop biodiversity, as seen from an eco-social, rather than a botanical perspective. For my final project toward my degree, I created a documentary video that follows the journey of an heirloom tomato “From Seed to Seed”, highlighting the environmental and social links in both the industrial and the ecological food chains.

My relationship with food is built on cross-cultural experiences that have been formed through geography and through urban and rural links. Although a descendant from a long line of agrarians, I have spent most of my life as an urbanite with one thumb stuck in the mud, confirming the saying: you can take a girl out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the girl.

To satisfy the country girl within, I am tending the earth at Toronto’s Leslie Street allotment garden. To help realize my vision of sustainable local food communities I am spearheading projects that foster inter-organizational partnerships, including the piloting of a Toronto east end farmers market, the creation of the Urban Seed Savers Network through Seeds of Diversity Canada, and various other collaborations that promote local food initiatives.



## Contact Us!

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## Coming Events

June 1 - 2, 2006: Canadian Association for Food Studies (CAFS) inaugural conference. "Food Systems and Food Security in the 21st Century" - the First Annual General Meeting of the Canadian Association for Food Studies, York University, Toronto ON. \*\* More about the conference in the next issue -- please contact the editors with your thoughts and experiences from the CAFS meeting. \*\*

October 7-11, 2006: Tenth Annual Conference of the Community Food Security Coalition in conjunction with Food Secure Canada "Bridging Borders Toward Food Security", Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Food For Talk: The Food for Talk seminar series is officially on summer break, but talks may be arranged to take advantage of people's presence in Toronto over the summer. In the event of a summer seminar, notices would be circulated via email. If you have suggestions regarding topics or individuals for talks, to please contact us at [cuhi.admin@utoronto.ca](mailto:cuhi.admin@utoronto.ca) or [sarah.wakefield@utoronto.ca](mailto:sarah.wakefield@utoronto.ca)

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