# Holiday feasting: U of T experts reflect on food, family gatherings

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Credit: Richard Wood via Flickr

Holidays are a time for feasting: gathering around tables trembling under the heft of roasts and stews, foods from the year's harvest, the laboured-over results of family recipes, platters of trendy new taste experiments – or sometimes just simple, store-bought goodies.

What matters isn't the menu, but rather the celebration with loved ones

and warm feelings and a healthy appetite. For those hungry for something more from their year-end banquet, several researchers from across the University of Toronto shared their thoughts with U of T News on how to add some extra meaning to this season's festive meals.

"I find that often around holidays we have lists of things where we look back in time and figure out what we liked best," said Irina Mihalache, an assistant professor at U of T's iSchool who studies consumer culture with a focus on food.

"There are always 'top 10 restaurants in the city' or 'top 10 cupcakeries' lists coming out at the end of the year, but the idea extends to cooking and menus at the holidays, too. It's a cultural understanding that around feasting time, the holiday meal is not only an accumulation of traditions but also an accumulation of things that you've learned throughout the year."

Mihalache has been studying menus at museum restaurants and how they reflect and interpret foodie trends. She then follows how these ingredient or recipe trends transmit from culinary culture to home kitchens and tables through publications like the LCBO Food & Drink magazine.

"You see transitions towards what you're going to be feasting on next year, which I also see on the menu at the AGO – these different kinds of dishes that are supposed to make your holiday feast the best that it could be."

Mihalache says this year's trends for foods to help one cook for the "perfect" New Year's and Christmas celebrations included Spanish foods, Brussels sprouts and a celebration of the plethora of holiday cookies, such as U of T President Meric Gertler's recipe for "scholarly squares" as published in the Toronto Star cookie calendar. (Read about the president's scholarly squares.)

Her advice for making the most of holiday meals is to reflect on how and why the dishes were cooked and chosen, to think about holiday feasting as a process and be aware of the things one brings together.

"I'm not suggesting people to do critical studies of themselves for the holidays," she said, laughing, "but just to think about why you cook what you cook. If you have a traditional recipe that has been passed from a previous generation, are you cooking it as it was passed to you? Was it reinterpreted by you? Did you add any ingredients; if you did add the ingredients, how did you decide?"

Dylan Gordon is an anthropology PhD candidate who studies Canada's wild food trade in items such as wild mushrooms and blueberries that have lately become 'trendy,' and are increasingly being marketed as uniquely Canadian holiday feast ingredients.

"They're sort of exotic and novel and expensive and all that comes together to make them 'special foods'," he said. "We think of Canada as not really having any unique Canadian food, but these things are the original Canadian foods – wild rice, maple syrup, mushrooms. These sorts of foraged foods are the kind of natural, traditional foods of Canada that are now trendy. People talk a lot about wild game meats and foods from the bush. It draws on this idea of Canada as a wilderness, as connected with aboriginality."

But Gordon suggests that while diners enjoy their Canadian-wild-filled holiday foods, they recognize that "when we imagine the wilderness or aboriginality through these foods, the real wilderness and real First Nations kind of fall out of the picture and are replaced with romantic imaginations of tradition."

"The fact is, it's not really aboriginals for the most part who make money off the marketing of these foods," he said. "The people who pick them

are marginalized rural resource workers who are 'in touch with nature' but they're also harvesting it and extracting its goods – there is a big tension of values between the people who produce wild foods and the people who consume them."

And, as another U of T expert suggests, keeping others warmly in mind in this way is one of the prerequisites for a happy holiday feast according to one of the most beloved scribes of Christmas tales.

"At the beginning of Dickens's career, he wrote that every day of the year ought to be Christmas, a time of universal charity and good will to all people," said Professor John Baird, who specializes in Restoration and 18th Century literature – and has a keen interest in Charles Dickens. "Dickens's Christmas is not particularly spiritual; he acknowledges the Christian origins of the feast, but it is as a social event that it is important in his fiction.

"Family is important as the radiant circle into which others may be drawn," he said. "Scrooge is welcomed on Christmas Day into the home of the nephew whom he had so brutally dismissed the day before. It is also a time when social distinctions and restrictions are forgotten, symbolized in dancing, as when Fezziwig releases the energy of his apprentices and seems in his own participation to have been made young again."

As for Baird's thoughts on what Dickens might suggest for getting the most out of one's holiday feast: "Recall what happens at the end of A Christmas Carol. Scrooge awakens, realizes it is Christmas morning, and the first thing he does is lean out of the window and enlists the help of a little boy in buying a large turkey which he sends anonymously to the Cratchit family. Then he goes to join his nephew's celebration of the day.

"Dickens is suggesting that we will all enjoy our own feast the more if we have first done something to provide Christmas cheer for those less fortunate than ourselves."

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