

Reserarcher explores how gender infoms our food choices and discourses

November 19 2015, by Paige Black



Lost in the supermarket. Credit: Masahiro Ihara photo, used under Creative Commons license

Everyone eats—but how much do we think about what we eat or why we eat it?

Brenda Beagan, a professor in Dalhousie's School of Occupational

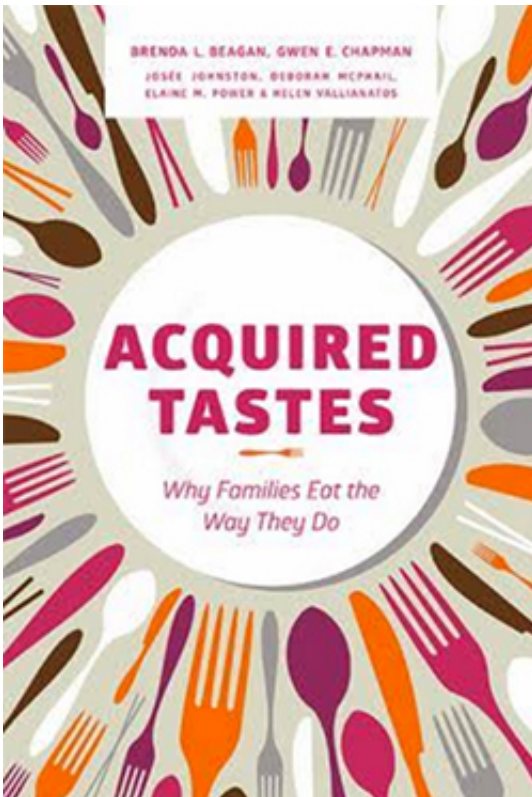
Therapy, has asked this question many times in her [personal life](#) and in her [academic career](#). Most recently, she collaborated with five other women to write the book *Acquired Tastes*, published in May and launching with an on-campus event this Thursday.

Dr. Beagan understands that our personal experiences affect how we relate to and talk about food, and her own experiences are no different. She grew up in rural Prince Edward Island on an organic farm "before [organic food](#) was a trend," as she puts it. She remembers how her mother's habit of saying "oh I mustn't, I really shouldn't" as she ate a cookie reinforced the idea that women have a greater responsibility to eat healthy than men do.

As she grew older, Dr. Beagan openly resisted that gender stereotype. She says when she went out with women who insisted on eating 'light', or who chose foods in a way that could be interpreted as "pretentious," she would feel defiant and order something like a burger and a beer—foods typically identified as male and unhealthy. Yet what does it say about society, and masculinity in particular, when we associate [unhealthy foods](#) as being male and childlike?

Finding connections

As an instructor at Dal, Dr. Beagan taught a class on health and gender. She says the two weeks spent talking about health and dieting "was so interesting to the students and everybody had intensity about it." So, while completing her PhD at UBC, she started teaching courses on the sociology of food and began to collaborate with Gwen Chapman (a prof at UBC), a co-author on *Acquired Tastes*.



Dr. Beagan speaks enthusiastically about her students' reactions to her teachings and how they influenced her research. "Students are resistant to seeing how their actions are influenced by social discourse," she says. "We all want to believe that we are all individuals making individual choices. Many people are threatened by the thought that there are social influences on such basic actions that we do every day."

Some students doubted the U.S. data presented to them in Dr. Beagan's courses, so she decided to conduct comparable research here in Canada. Her findings on gender and food—as part of research that also explored connections with race, class, ethnicity and place—found women still catering to the tastes of men and children to a large extent. In most cases, mothers continue to take responsibility for what family households

consume, across ethnicities and classes. However, many upper class men now find it easier to enter the sphere of food in the household, enjoying food preparation as a leisure activity. One man in this study had even built a brick oven in his back yard just like he had seen in Greece, where he baked bread weekly.

While becoming what many call a "foodie" has presented opportunities for men to engage more in the discourses of food, it has not resulted in the same connection being made between their ability to prepare healthy [food](#) and their parenting abilities. If women do not feed their children [healthy food](#), they are seen to have failed as mothers; if men do not, they do not fail as fathers.

Intersections

Acquired Tastes analyzes these intersections among three main discourses: [healthy eating](#), ethical eating and cosmopolitan eating, the latter two being exceptionally affected by class. Indeed, it's clear that ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status are constantly intersecting with what we eat and how we talk about it.

Provided by Dalhousie University

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