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# 'There's so much junk food in Canada'

## What the rest of the world thinks of our eating habits

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**Think of France, and you'll think of wine, cheese, bread and pastries. But France also conjures images of a handsome man and a gorgeous petite woman taking a stroll in the City of Lights. Many wonder how the French can indulge in calorie-laden foods, yet still look so good and be healthier than their North American counterparts.**

**It's called the French paradox:** a high consumption of animal fats coupled with lower rates of obesity and heart disease.

Some have attributed the paradox to the amount of red wine the French drink, much to the delight of local sommeliers. Others credit the amount of onions and garlic used in cooking. Still others believe that remaining thin while savouring all that fat is simply a matter of eating less – the French don't "supersize" their meals.

It's an ongoing debate that's been amusing Parisians and annoying North Americans for decades. Whatever the reason, France is not the only country whose food culture differs from Canada's.

The United States has dietary habits closest to Canada's. And with almost 14,200 McDonald's restaurants in North America, maybe we should be worried.

The Dietitians of Canada say fat is not necessarily a bad thing.

"Contrary to popular belief, fat is important for good health. However, most of us eat more fat than we need. Aim for less than 30 per cent of total calories from fat. This amount is 60 g of fat (per day) for the average woman and 90 g for the average man," their

**How to stop snacking**

Patricia Chuey, a registered dietitian and nutritionist from Vancouver, says Canadians eat large portions and still snack between meals. She says people should run through a "five-point plan" before reaching for the snacks.

**"Step One:** Analyze why you are hungry. Are you truly hungry for food? Maybe the issue is boredom or stress-related and a hug or a heart-to-heart talk with someone would be more 'filling.'

**"Two:** If truly hungry, analyze what you're hungry for before you eat. If you want crunchy, try an apple; if you crave salty food, fruit will not satisfy you.

**"Three:** Eat exactly what you're hungry for. By listening to your body, it is easier to have food portion control.

**"Four:** Drink water with a snack. Sometimes the munchies are just the thirsties.

**"And five:** Don't feel guilty for eating what you wanted."

literature says.

"Fat can be hidden in foods (like cheese and baked goods), it can be visible on foods (such as chicken skin and the fat surrounding meat), or it can be added to foods (in the form of margarine, butter and salad dressing). All of these contribute to the daily fat intake."

We talked to people from around the world about their impressions of Canadian food.

### Sebastien Mercier France

"In Canada, the portions are huge, people eat at any time of the day, and have a wrong perception of what is healthy. They're scared of cheese and bread, but don't eat enough vegetables and drink pop instead of water.

In France, "we ate like the French paradox suggests: a lot of **butter** and **sauce**, **bread** with **wine**. But the French are still healthier than most Occidental countries and diversity is a strength: **seafood**, many meats like **beef**, **lamb**, **rabbit**, **horse**, et cetera.

"There wasn't a lot of fast food there when I was growing up, but there is more now. Canadians eat a lot more than the French do, and statistics show the French are healthier."



### Shaima Zakhilwal Afghanistan

"I was very surprised to look at the food here. Fresh, big, but unfortunately no taste. I couldn't eat for almost two weeks until I became used to it.

"The usual meal we had at home was meat. We use **spicy masalas** in our meat because we eat hot and spicy food.

In Canada, "I usually like fresh vegetables, but we always eat **kabob** and eat dishes that have meat. It's too expensive to buy fresh things all the time. At home, we could barter in the markets. Here, the supermarkets have a fixed price even for frozen food.

"Of course I think Afghans are healthier than Canadians. First, they don't eat junk food, and second, they are eating nutritious food and fresh vegetables grown in their own fields or houses."



### Yoland'e Oyewo Nigeria

"Our standard meal usually is **rice**. We also have the local meal called **eba** – it's ground **cassava** mixed with hot water and made into a paste, served with sauce and vegetable soup. Not the kind of vegetable soup you have over here. Vegetable soup in Nigeria is **leaves** and **meat**, not peas and carrots. That's basically the standard meal. There's a lot of red meat, but not a lot of chicken.

"It took me a long time to get used to Canadian food. The first time I got here, I would not eat mashed potatoes because I was used to eating **yam**, and yam is like a non-sweet version of potatoes, so they tasted completely different.

### What we should be eating

Health Canada's Food Guide offers guidelines on how much food we should be eating every day.

The guide is broken into the four major food groups (grain products, fruits and vegetables, dairy, and meat or meat alternatives) and offers advice for eating habits, but stresses that habits will vary depending on age, sex and activity level.

#### The Guide:

**Meat and meat alternatives**  
2-3 servings per day

**Dairy products**  
2-4 servings per day

**Grain products**  
5-12 servings per day

**Fruits and vegetables**  
5-10 servings per day

(For serving sizes, check the Food Guide.)

"I think it's a little weird that there's so much junk food in Canada. Back home, you have a market where there's a hut for fresh vegetables, a hut for meat, a hut for everything. It's not like grocery stores here where the prices are fixed, because at home you can bargain and the food is fresh. There are no frozen foods.

"I think Nigerians are healthier than Canadians, just based on the foods they eat, because Nigerians don't eat a lot of junk food and they eat a lot of fresh food. Corn is junk food there – that's what we call junk food. **Roasted corn**, cooked corn, oranges, fruits and vegetables.

"I had never seen potato chips until I came to Canada! We might peel **yam** or **plantain** and fry that, but not like chips. I eat like a Western person now, because, first of all, you can't find the ingredients to make Nigerian stuff, and if you do, it's very expensive so you don't have much of a choice."



**Habiba Ali**  
**Somalia**

"Canadian food is so bland and tasteless, yet everyone eats so much of it! You can't find decent spaghetti here. It's so bad. In Somalia (a former Italian colony), we ate **spaghetti** with a lot of meat sauce with a **banana**. You'd either take a bite of spaghetti and then a bite of banana, or you'd slice up banana and put it on your spaghetti. So good!

"My family still eats a lot of cultural food even though we are in Canada, but it's expensive and hard to find. I think Canadians are big into health and stuff. We eat what we want to eat 'til we can't stomach it anymore. But Somalia doesn't have much junk food or fast food, like here."

**Katarina Johanna Ducrozet**  
**Sweden**

"I've been in Canada for 12 years, and I am still unhappy with how Canadians eat. It's all unhealthy, fairly expensive and not a lot of variety. Also, most people don't seem to eat fresh products but rather from a can or pre-made, with preservatives and chemicals.

"Swedish cuisine is simple and healthy, but we thrive on variety. Fats, oils and sweets are used sparingly. Our traditional dishes are fairly simple but with a lot of variety, depending on the season. We like to eat a lot of food and dinners could take hours to eat – you sit down and enjoy the many dishes. **Shrimp eggs** are very popular. We like to make open-faced sandwiches with **gravalax** (cured salmon) and shrimp eggs and **fresh shrimp**.

"We love to bake and we do make a lot of **cakes, cinnamon buns, danishes**, et cetera, but they are not overly sweet and usually always made fresh with more wholesome ingredients. We are not large consumers of chips and candies.

"I am appalled at how much junk food there is in Canada and how Canadians eat it on an everyday basis and in such large amounts. There is no wonder why North American society has a problem with obesity and health."



**Karene Josephs**  
**Jamaica**

"On first impression, Canadian food seemed so bland and not a lot of variation! A lot of fatty and oily stuff that we never really saw in Jamaica. We eat rice and chicken with vegetables, sometimes **mutton, beef** – in general meat, rice and vegetables. We also eat lots of ground produce like **yams**, and we have this thing called **bammy**, made with **cassava** that we'd eat with fish. **Steamed fish** and bammy, yum!

"I eat basically the same things in Canada as I did in Jamaica, but it's way more expensive and many of the meats and stuff are frozen, not as fresh as when we buy it there, like **oxtail**.

"Sometimes it seems Jamaica's becoming more and more Westernized by the second. But the thing about junk food and fast food is that it's expensive and so it's more of a treat as opposed to an everyday thing, like in Canada.

"I believe on a whole we eat more healthily in Jamaica, but we are not necessarily healthier than Canadians. There are a lot of factors involved, not just diet."



**Marcus Quarshie**  
Ghana

"Canadian food was a bit tasteless at first. It felt like nothing, felt like plastic in my mouth. In Ghana, all our food is spicy. We eat a lot of meat there, and it's all hot food. Nothing is cold. Prepackaged and frozen food is heard of in Ghana, but it's not common. We'd rather have it fresh.

"For breakfast we'd have a porridge made out of **maize**. You eat it with bread, milk and sugar, not like bacon and eggs and grease. It's good. There's not much junk food in Ghana. For dessert, we have a form of cake back home made out of **tiger nuts**. It looks like jelly.

"I think people in Ghana eat healthier than Canadians because most of the stuff is well prepared and people take their time to eat their food because they enjoy it. Even if it takes two or three hours, they take that time rather than just find something fast and easy.

"The people who have a traditional lifestyle will not go out to eat. Instead, an entire family will come over to eat. An entire family of six will sit and eat out of one large bowl. That's for special occasions."

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