



AMPLIFYING OUR DIVERSE VOICES:

Creating A More Inclusive Culinary Community

BY CARMEN CHENG

OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS, there has been a global awakening for racial injustice sparked by the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. The Black Lives Matter movement has caused many of us to reflect on the practices within our own organizations and circles.

Heather Campbell, co-chair of Alberta's Anti-Racism Advisory Council who provide advice to the to the Alberta government on combatting racism, says this of the movement, "At this extraordinary time, as we experience a historic social justice movement, there is vital work to be done by Alberta's Anti-Racism Advisory Council. As a

co-chair, I call on people across Alberta to listen and to act. Racism has always existed in Alberta, and sadly it continues to exist today. The issue of racism belongs to every Albertan and we must all work to address it. Albertans need to call out and name racism each and every time it occurs, making it their active business, everyday. Only then will our province thrive and experience real, resilient, and lasting prosperity."

The culinary world is also experiencing a reckoning, as stories about racism, mistreatment, and harassment from employees and consumers are more widely shared online. Accusations from staff have resulted in the resignation of two

well-known food media editors – Adam Rapoport, Editor in Chief of Bon Appetit, and Peter Meehan, Food Editor of LA Times. The recently published Canada's 100 Best Restaurants list has also been criticized for its lack of diversity in winning restaurants and on the judging panel.

Bringing this closer to home, how does racism show up in Alberta's culinary scene and what can we collectively do to create an inclusive environment for all who are a part of the industry? With the enormity of this question, we enlisted some help by bringing together a group of chefs, restaurateurs, managers, and culinary educators for an enlightening virtual discussion.

The robust discussion spanned a multitude of topics, including the lack of representation in the industry, stereotypes of cuisine from different cultures, and culinary ownership of dishes and ingredients. We heard personal experiences from people who had faced derogatory or racist comments from coworkers and customers. We also discussed the role we each hold in shaping the future of this industry.

The hospitality and culinary world is fuelled by people who are passionate about creating amazing experiences for others. However, when biases or issues are passed down from one generation of employees to the next, problematic behaviour can often become the culture, and there are significant practices within the industry that require improvement.

A cook or server who witnesses harassment or a racial slur thrown out carelessly, and sees their coworkers and managers laugh it off and tolerate these acts, learns that the behaviour is acceptable and normalized.

Chef Mike Provo is a Halifax-born Canadian with Jamaican and African heritage. Chef Provo has been cooking for over 20 years.

“After putting in my time and rising up through the ranks to become a chef, I was told to ‘go back to Africa’ because the person didn’t want to converse with me. I didn’t freak out, I sent an email to the appropriate people, but not a thing was done about it,” he says.

Complacency in response is one reason why employees may not bring their concerns forward, as well as a fear of not fitting in. When there’s already a lack of diversity in industry workers, the issue of being accepted is even more prominent. Although Alberta’s range of restaurants and cuisine is vast and spanning different cultures, the folks we talked with agreed that lack of representation is still an issue in most mainstream restaurants, particularly in upper levels of management. Being part of the in-group can present more opportunities in the form of recognition, progression, invitations to participate in events, and recently, even television opportunities. Homogeneity results in a

lack of diversity in thought and opinion.

Similarly, stereotypes made by customers can have a domino effect on how businesses are run and the opportunities afforded to black, indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) chefs and business owners. Chef Billy Alexander, Executive Chef and Culinary Advisor for Caldwell First Nation is well known as a leader and consultant in indigenous cuisine.

“When I first came to Calgary, there was nobody doing indigenous cuisine. When I started cooking indigenous food there was a misconception that it was just for indigenous people. When you start to specialize in your own culture and your own food, people think you’re only cooking it for your own people. Unfortunately, that makes it difficult to stay in business, you need everybody to want to be interested in your cuisine,” says Alexander.

In our discussion, we heard about stereotypes that restaurateurs and chefs often face, from BIPOC female restaurant owners having to address suppliers or customers who expected to see a white male in her position, or BIPOC chefs who are expected to cook solely food from within their own heritage.

“There’s a stereotype that if customers walk into a fried chicken place, it makes sense that I’m cooking, but if I were a chef at a high-end French restaurant it would be a bit confusing for some people. However, many of us go through training and have developed skills in different cuisines,” says Chef Provo.

A perception has developed over time where cuisines from many ethnic cultures are deemed less valuable than European-centric restaurants. The perception of value often results in BIPOC owned businesses settling in areas and neighbourhoods where it is less costly to operate, resulting in a segregation of culinary cultures. For example, there’s an accepted belief that dining out at restaurants that focus on Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, Mexican, or Caribbean food should be less expensive than eating at French or Italian restaurants.



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Customer expectations can be limiting for businesses, affecting decisions on pricing, menu choices, locations, and whether a business invests in the design or décor of their space. Judith Kwong is the General Manager at Sukiyaki House, a Japanese restaurant owned by her family. “Many people often expect Asian food to be cheap, but high-quality sushi is not cheap to source,” explains Kwong. “Yet we have a difficult time sourcing premium quality fish without getting complaints from customers that they feel the price is too high.”

The value placed on a dining experience also spans to criteria for awards and accolades. In North America, a certain type of ambiance, service, and even beverage list is expected from “best” restaurants. By contrast, in Asian countries, value is perceived differently and Michelin stars are given to a variety of dining experiences, including street food vendors.

Amidst all of this, the awakening to racism and employment practices has generated awareness for the issues that can lead to a conscious effort to make changes. Customers, food media, suppliers, restaurant owners, and employees can change the culture and issues in this industry.

To start, we can collectively work to bolster lesser known businesses and BIPOC talent. Food media and event organizers can highlight more restaurants and chefs across different parts of our cities that are not as well known in mainstream media. Often culinary events promote well-known chefs from out-of-town, and while this can bring excitement to the culinary scene and meet customer demand in today’s celebrity-focused world, it would also be a great opportunity to highlight local, underrated chefs, so diners gain more awareness for the diverse talent in our communities.

Blair Lebsack and Caitlin Fulton, partners of Edmonton’s RGE RD and the soon to be open, The Butchery, responded to the anti-racism

movement by declaring that they would assess event requests to ensure that there is diversity and gender equality in representation of talent and compensation before committing their attendance.

Fulton explains their driver, “A huge part of our success has been due to our inclusion in certain media ‘best of’ lists, and events we’ve been invited to participate in. By continuing to blindly say “yes” to systems that actively exclude or marginalize diverse voices, tastes and flavours, means we’d continue to be complicit. We have a very diverse team and we’ve always had women in leadership roles, but that doesn’t exempt us from the very painful processes of grappling with patriarchy and white supremacy. When we collaborate with chefs that come from non-familiar (to us) culinary traditions, we learn more, have more engagement from the team, and the results are simply more delicious.”

Chefs and restaurateurs with local or international popularity would be able to amplify diverse voices by promoting or lending their platform to chefs who may be unfamiliar to diners through guest chef-ing or collaboration opportunities.

Each of us can take steps to demand a more inclusive food community. As diners we need to reflect on our own biases and harmful stereotypes that we may hold, try a cuisine from a culture that is unfamiliar to us, and consciously support businesses that are diverse and embody inclusive practices. Educators of up and coming talent in the hospitality industry could evaluate and diversify the techniques and cuisine taught in learning programs.

Phoebe Fung, proprietor of Vin Room and VR Wine sums this up well, “We all have a role in changing the culture within our own sphere of influence. We have a role in how we train and educate people who are coming into our industry. There are opportunities for us to change the path that we are on.” 