Worth the effort

Rowland Robinson reclaiming Indigenous ingredients, techniques right here in Waterloo

Rowland Robinson poses in the University of Waterloo's Indigenous Student Centre.

PHOTO BY PETER LEE

Jasmine Mangalaseril

Rowland Robinson grew up in a British West Indies home steeped in food culture, so it's not surprising his culinary passion took root early.

His parents were food and wine professionals — his Anglo-Bermudian father was in the wine industry and his Menominee mother had a long restaurant career. He and his brother grew up on the western, Chinese and Japanese dishes that highlighted his mother's broad palate. On special occasions she prepared the Indigenous foods she grew up with.

When Robinson was old enough to be trusted to be near a gas flame and handle sharp knives, his mother taught him to cook, initially passing on recipes from an Italian granduncle.

Today, the 32-year-old PhD candidate in sociology at University of Waterloo focuses his culinary interests on investigating Indigenous food and cooking techniques from his home kitchen in Waterloo.

The Wild Rice People

Robinson's mother and maternal grandmother are members of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin. The nation's community is now on about 95,000 hectares (235,000 acres), about 275 kilometres north of Milwaukee, a fraction of their once four-million-hectare territory in what's now Wisconsin and Upper Michigan. They are culturally and linguistically related to Algonquian-speaking peoples, and have traditions similar to the Anishinaabe.

"Our name actually means 'wild rice people,' that's what the Ojibwa called us," says Robinson, whose Indigenous name is Enaemaehkiw Kesiqnaeh. "We didn't farm a lot per se, but an important staple was wild rice. It wasn't grown in a field (like in East Asia) or farmed like corn, but the way it was seeded had a human relationship."

Childhood summers were spent with family who lived near the Menominee community, where he learned and participated in traditional activities. "There was a particular place we could go and catch trout, and there was an old Menominee man who would fillet them up for us," he remembers. "My grandfather would fry them up, often with salt pork."

Reclaiming his roots

Decolonization — questioning and reframing narratives associated with colonial expansion and cultural assimilation — is important to him and is connected to his academic work. His dissertation is about Indigenous identity and issues regarding blood quantum (the measurement of ancestral pedigree through bloodline).

These narratives also inform Robinson's cooking, specifically in finding healthier ways of eating and in delinking from Eurocentric and western diets and food systems. About six years ago, a Facebook group's discussion about decolonizing traditional Mexican diets became his entry point into Indigenous cooking. His interest in Mexican food expanded to Mesoamerican foods and, along with traditions from the Caribbean and other Indigenous diets, became his culinary specialities.

"Where I can, I find traditional ways of doing things, within the limitations of being a PhD student, living in an apartment, in a city."

Asking Robinson to define "traditional Indigenous food" highlights issues in interpretation.

"I am an anthropologist by training. Certainly, I see some soups or the ways of cooking beans or corn as pre-contact, but so much gets mixed. In the northeast, you'll find a lot of dishes that are cooked with bacon. In the southwest, lamb has become a huge part of Navajo culinary culture. Pork and lamb are not traditional foods, but they've become such a big part now that they're traditional."

He studies techniques and ingredients, using his skills to modify and readjust recipes. Original foods are returned to dishes (using turkey instead of chicken), while other cuisines' foods are adapted (using culantro instead of coriander leaf). These techniques are also used by Indigenous chefs, who practise fusion cooking by using European techniques to prepare traditional ingredients.

Student life

Throughout the year, Shatitsirótha, the Waterloo Indigenous Student Centre, helps to connect University of Waterloo's Indigenous student population. Food often plays an essential role, such as at the autumnal welcome dinner, an event marking the start of the academic year.

For the 2018 feast, Robinson prepared a popular dish known as Indian Tacos. Rather than the usual Tex-Mex chili topped with tomatoes, cheese and lettuce on frybread (pan-fried wheat bread), he created a buffalo and elk ragout flavoured with allspice, epazote, Mexican oregano, sumac, and other spices. The accompanying southwest-style beans were flavoured with garlic, onions, epazote and cinnamon.

Robinson occasionally prepares the student centre's soup and frybread lunches, weekly events attracting about 100 diners. He keeps true to traditional techniques — cooking beans from scratch rather than reaching for a can — and freely explores different Indigenous traditions.

"I'll give them various types of squash or bean soups or chowders, including fish chowders," he says. "When I make corn soup, it's different from the Haudenosaunee-style that people make here. That one's thinner, has some beans in it, hominy and ham. Mine is like a thick and creamy corn chowder."

For some students, delinking their diet means removing wheat or dairy, and for others it might mean following a vegetarian diet until they can get traditional, hunted meats. Robinson's approach reduces or eliminates introduced elements (such as salt, granulated sugar and fat) and reintroduces foods used by previous generations.

"There's a spectrum, but I think it very much varies from individual to individual. I have my way, which focuses more on ingredients."

While some students want a more traditional diet, the reality is many don't know how to cook from scratch. Robinson wants to change this.

"I'm interested in trying to help other people learn how to do it. I see it as two-pronged: getting people to cook for themselves more and getting people to focus on traditional ingredients, dishes, or ways of doing things. I always try to impress upon people that maybe it's a little time consuming, but it's something you can do for yourself."

TRY IT YOURSELF

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NORTHEAST PUMPKIN SOUP

Adapted from "Spirit of the Harvest: North American Indian Cooking," by Beverly Cox and Martin Jacobs, published by Stewart, Tabori and Chang.

Makes approximately 1.5 to 2 litres (6 to 8 cups)

1 can (796 ml) pumpkin purée (NOT pumpkin pie filling. Also, see directions for 'Using Fresh Pumpkin')
1.25 to 2.5 ml (¼ to ½ teaspoon) ground spicebush berries (also known as Appalachian allspice) OR allspice, to taste
15 to 45 ml (1 to 3 tablespoons) maple syrup OR 11.25 to 35 ml (2¼ to 7 teaspoons) honey, to taste
750 ml to 1 L chicken broth OR beef broth OR vegetable broth, as needed

Garnish (optional) – choose one of the following:

2 to 4 green onions, finely sliced (green parts only)
125 ml (½ cup) toasted chopped hazelnuts
125 ml (½ cup) toasted pumpkin seeds

To make the soup:

1. Place the pumpkin purée*, allspice and maple syrup or honey in a heavy-bottomed pot. Over medium-high heat, stir in enough broth to achieve the desired consistency.

2. Bring to a boil and let bubble for about five minutes. Lower the heat and let simmer for another five minutes, stirring occasionally. Balance flavours to taste.

3. Ladle into bowls and garnish as desired. Serve while hot.

*To help get rid of the tinny taste, pour the purée into a heavy-bottomed pot and stir constantly over medium-low heat until it steams and becomes fragrant, about five minutes.

Using Fresh Pumpkin

You can replace the pumpkin purée with one roasted pumpkin (30 centimetres/12 inches; approximately 1.5 kg/3 lbs.)

To roast the pumpkin:

1. Preheat oven to 350 F (180 C) and line a baking tray with tin foil.

2. Place the pumpkin on the prepared tray and roast until the tip of a sharp knife easily pierces the flesh, about one hour.

3. Remove from the oven and cut a few slits to allow the steam to escape. Let cool, about 20 minutes.

4. Halve the pumpkin and set the pieces on the pan skin-side down until cool enough to handle, about 20 to 30 minutes.

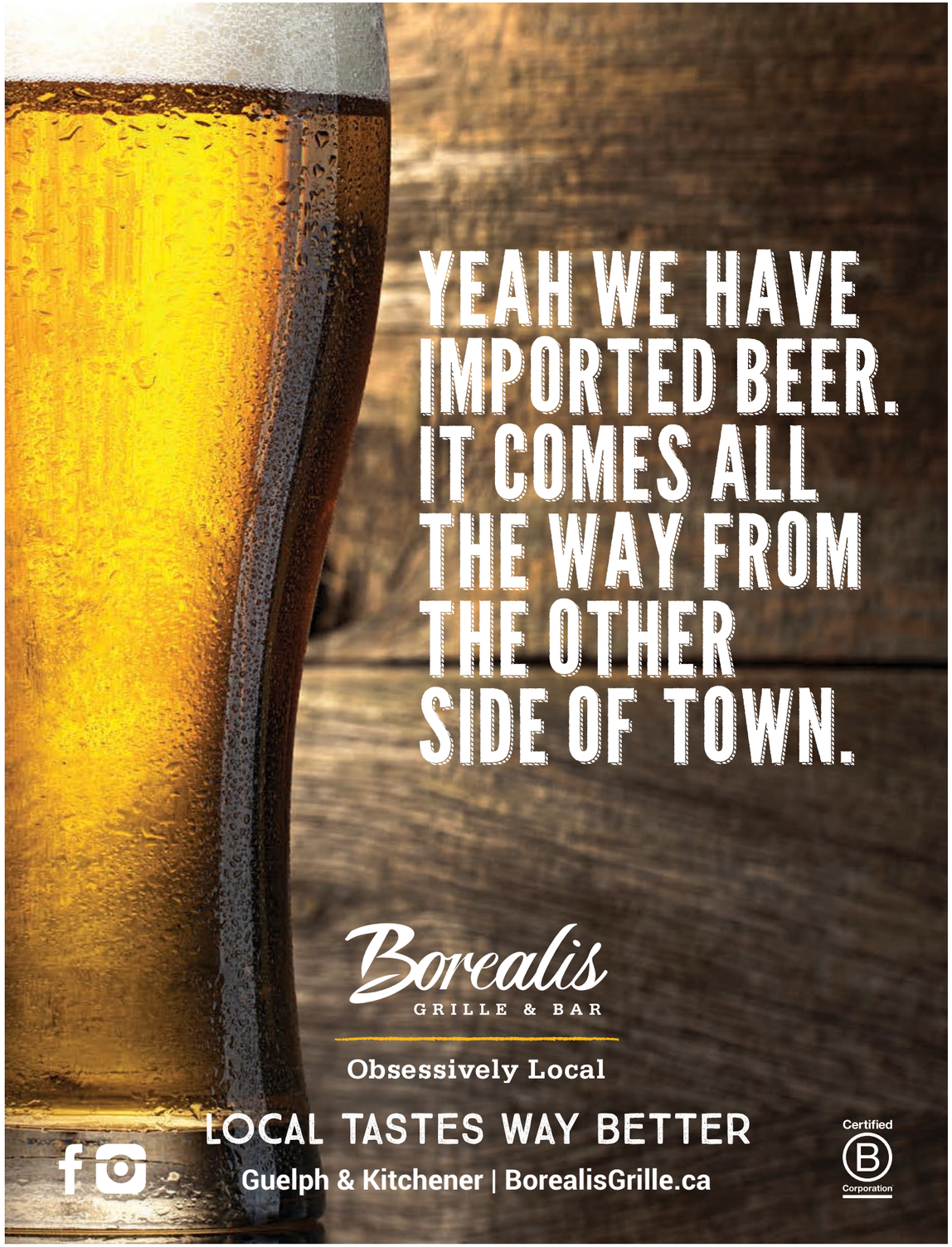
5. Remove the seeds and strings and set aside for roasting, see below. Cut the halves into wedges and peel off the papery skin. Mash or purée the flesh to the desired consistency. Measure 800 ml (approximately 3¼ cups) or 825 g of purée.

To roast the pumpkin seeds for the garnish

1. Return the oven to 350 F (180 C). Remove and discard the strings and wash the seeds. Toss them in 30 to 45 ml (2 to 3 tablespoons) sunflower oil or other flavourless oil. Season with salt and pepper.

2. Spread them in a single layer on a baking tray and toast until golden, about 15 to 20 minutes.

NOTES

• Not all fresh pumpkins (gourds or squashes) are best for soup. Use a sugar pumpkin (also known as a pie pumpkin). Otherwise, you can try one of the following squashes: buttercup, butternut, carnival, red kuri or sweet dumpling. If you use a squash, the roasting time may vary and you may need to adjust the spicing or sweetness.

• Kitchener stores selling Latin ingredients include America Latina (1120 Victoria St. N.) and Mi Tienda Latina (103 Ontario St. S.)