

A Conversation Potluck: A GTA regional chapter of CAFS event

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Our new Greater Toronto Area local chapter of the Canadian Association for Food Studies (CAFS) held its first in-person gathering in Newmarket on January 17th, 2026. Co-hosted by Diana Chu and myself, the event brought together members to share food stories, to reflect on the politics of eating, and to begin shaping what we hope will be a vibrant, community-rooted local chapter. Our intention is to create space beyond the annual conference where people can connect over food, exchange ideas, and explore how their research, practices, and lived experiences intersect.

In our conversation, we discussed sweetness in traditional food cultures. Participants reflected on how sweetness appears in many culinary traditions not as excess but as balance and nourishment, such as coconut milk in curries, honey or maple syrup in desserts, and figs and dates as healthy snacks. This stood in contrast to contemporary forms of sweetness in the industrial food system and how sugar has shifted from a valued ingredient embedded in a cultural context to a highly addictive substance that permeates modern diets.

Alongside this, we shared personal food stories through the dishes brought to the gathering. Apple crumble sparked reflections on comfort, care, and intergenerational memory; chestnuts evoked seasonal and slow-food practices; dumplings carried stories of how the family kitchen evolves across generations and geographical spaces; and onion jam told a story about building more intimate relationships with food producers (the onions were a gift from a local farmer). These shared foods grounded the conversation and reminded us that food knowledge is often carried through storytelling.

From these discussions, the conversation widened to a critique of industrial food systems. We talked about sugar addiction, white flour, pop, and fried foods, and how ultra-processed diets are historically tied to industrial capitalism. Food has long been engineered to keep people working long hours in factories and repetitive jobs. Cheap, nutrient-scarce foods dull our senses, producing lethargic, uninspired populations. The Irish potato famine emerged as a powerful example of how food systems have been used as tools of control, including the enforced narrowing of diets under colonial rule.

This structural lens shaped later discussions about food in northern communities and the ethics of imposing dietary norms. Participants reflected that Inuit food systems do not centre vegetables, and that efforts to introduce foods like kale into northern diets often reproduce colonial assumptions about health rather than supporting food sovereignty. We also discussed the dominance of retailers such as Giant Tiger in the North, where shelves are frequently stocked with candy and pop, and how corporate control narrows choice. One participant shared that during research in the North, she was not permitted to take photographs inside stores, underscoring the political dimensions of these food landscapes. These conversations led to a shared recognition of the need to build networks that promote alternatives rooted in ethical relationships, cultural specificity, and community-led solutions.

This first gathering confirmed the importance of a local CAFS chapter. Our goal is to regularly bring people together through in-person events that centre food as story, politics, and relationships while also opening CAFS to farmers, chefs, and community organizers across the GTA. We hope you will join us at our next gathering!