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Professor challenges us to look beyond singular food truths

Edmonton – Canada’s Food Guide offers nutritional information aimed to help Canadians make healthy dietary choices. But, no matter how tempting it is to cling to singular food truths – kale is a superfood, organic is best – the biggest truth, it turns out, is that there isn’t one.

Dr. Alissa Overend, assistant professor, Department of Sociology, researches shifting definitions of healthy eating, to talk about food truths. “As much as we talk about dietary truths, even in the scientific literature, there’s a lot of grey area,” she says. “There’s a divide between stating that as a general rule, foods have certain vitamins and minerals, and ignoring the fact that no everyone can digest certain foods, like meat and dairy.”

Overend’s upcoming book *Food Facts in a Post-truth Culture*, examines the cultural influences around food – topics she’s also exploring with students in her fourth-year seminar on the sociology of food and nutrition. Using case studies on foods like meat, wheat, soy and dairy, and a chapter on the history of Canada’s Food Guide, she challenges the way we’ve been taught to think about what we eat.

“We’ve been trained to look at food through a scientific lens, but it’s often difficult to find the truth of food studies,” says Overend. “There are many factors. Foods are metabolized in combination – a bagel eaten on its own, isn’t processed or metabolized the same way as it is if you eat it with peanut butter or an egg. A carrot that was pulled from your garden will have different nutritional qualities than the one shipped from South America. And, the way you prepare food also changes its nutritional value. So, it’s really complicated to pinpoint a singular dietetic truth.”

Overend says we need to look beyond calories and carbs, and consider the bigger picture, including issues like affordability. “It’s easy to say everyone should eat more produce, but for many people, produce isn’t affordable – or even accessible.”

“Prepared foods are often demonized, but depending on the context, eating prepared foods could mean an extra hour of sleep, or spending more time with your family,” says Overend. “When we look at the foods only in one way or focus on a very strict, healthy eating regimen, we ignore how food is tied to our families, histories and culture.”

Overend suggests thinking about what works for you – your schedule, your culture – and what makes you happy. “Think about what you like to eat and why it makes you feel good, because food should also bring you pleasure.”

Overend is available for media interviews.

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