

Taking your foot off the gas

By Tony Pearson

This weekend my wife and I visited The Old Hastings Mercantile and Gallery in Ormsby, which as most of you know is one of the most charming places to shop anywhere in Eastern Ontario (including Ottawa). There, you are invited to 'step back in time.' As someone who loves history, I don't need a second invitation for that.

I found one book that got me pondering. It's called *Children at the Hearth*, featuring 19th century cooking and family life vignettes. It deals with items concerning the children of 150 or so years ago, such as manners, chores, safety and hygiene. And it contains several score recipes for various types of meals.

Now I am not one to praise 'the good old days.' This book makes clear that life may have been less complicated then, but it was also darker. It was a time of child labour, of massive poverty, of rampant disease, and precious little opportunity to change your life. Infant and child mortality was very high, due to conditions which gave rise to typhus, cholera, tuberculosis, polio and scarlet fever. Not surprisingly, hygiene was in scarce supply. For example, as the book points out, one stick of chewing gum was passed around from child to child for days. In towns and neighbourhoods, there'd be a common well with a shared dipper for scores of people to use and pass along their germs.

Children went to school very sporadically - perhaps four months in a year for three or four years. Country children were needed for chores: hauling water, tending livestock, churning butter, harvesting vegetables, sewing and mending, and so on, from sun-up to sun-down. City children worked in factories. In short, it was not a great time to grow up.

But when I looked at the recipes, I saw a brighter-than-usual side to this time. The recipes are simple but tasty and nutritious - at least if you lived in a rural area (city folk had to take their chances with spoiled milk, tainted meat, and rotten produce). Consider the familiar titles: Mulligan stew, tomato bisque, chicken noodle soup, corn bread, soft pretzels, hash, chicken and dumplings, apple cobbler. Then there are the wonderful names: hopping john, cat-head biscuits, corn oysters, fudge snow taffy.

Most of these recipes have only a few ingredients. Corn oysters contain milk, flour, an egg, butter, salt-and-pepper, and some ears of corn. Pioneer sausage is sausage, brown sugar and apples. Yet the author insists that today's kids will find them tasty.

Now compare that to some of today's recipes. Certainly there are enough of them. The New York Times has a special best-sellers list for books on food and diets. Harvard's library contains more than 20,000 cookbooks. Then there are the cooking shows - the ones that have made international superstars out of chefs such as Gordon Ramsay and Bobby Flay. The competitive shows such as *Chopped* and *Top Chef* have cooks using dozens of ingredients in a single meal - sometimes more than a dozen in a single dish.

I went online to check out some of these concoctions. Bobby Flay's recipe for turkey burgers has Meyer lemon (not to be confused with ordinary lemon), goat cheese, clover honey, and Dijon mustard. His meatloaf recipe has 15 ingredients (including balsamic vinegar). The 19th century meatloaf recipe called for meat, potatoes, onion, and butter.

It isn't just chefs who are expected to pull off miracles of cuisine these days. In the U.S. and Canada, there's a competition called *Masterchef*, which is supposed to be for home cooks. Sure it is. I know all you home cooks reading this can whip up a Mahi Mahi Fish Taco with Chipotle Slaw and Roasted Pineapple Sauce in a jiffy. For cottage barbecue masters, there's the Goat Cheese, Arugula, Prosciutto and Truffle Aioli-Topped Burger: just by itself, the made-from-scratch aioli - mayonnaise to us common folks - has seven components.

Then there are the kids' cooking shows, such as *Chopped Junior*. These 'kids' have apparently all been to cooking summer camp and then to culinary finishing school. They toss around terms like 'sous-vide' and ceviche.

Don't get me wrong. I don't want to forsake Chinese or Indian or Italian or Mexican cuisine. I love sushi and pad thai from time to time. But it seems to me that there must be a happy medium between the plain-as-dirt cooking of our pioneer families, and the food snobbery of today. Simple surely has its place, even when it's garnished with chili.

You could argue the same about lifestyle. No one wants to return to the days when you were unlikely to travel more than 50 miles from your home in your entire life. But we don't necessarily need the biggest, fanciest truck or SUV to stay mobile.

Lifestyle change is central to combatting the threats posed by global warming. We could take one clue from our ancestors: we don't need more and more of everything to enjoy life. Or as a wise person once said, 'More isn't better; it's just more.'