A quest to reinvent the lethal Scottish diet

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Maragaret Webb

How do you begin to improve a national diet of deep-fried Mars bars, fat-laden meat pies, haggis and binge drinking?

When I first met the petite woman tasked with shaping up Scotland's food system, I thought Annie Anderson might get crushed in a lineup for the lady's loo, never mind a football match. But the professor of public health at the University of Dundee Medical School clearly relished the battle of improving the worst health of any Western European nation.

Much like Canada, Scotland has a dysfunctional food system that frustrates farmers, nourishes citizens inadequately, leaves many hungry, infuriates environmentalists, and drains health-care budgets of £171 million ($285 million) per year for obesity alone – and Scotland has just 5 million people.

So food activists here were eager to see how Scotland would tackle the problems with its first official National Food and Drink Policy, released in June.

The visionary process to develop it engaged experts rather than government bureaucrats to lead work groups on areas ranging from health to food security and economic growth. They, in turn, pulled together diverse teams of farmers, health specialists, environmental activists, industry reps and anti-poverty advocates, creating a veritable food fight in every stream to hash out solutions.

The process held much promise, as Anderson believed, to actually create a food policy grounded in nutrition and health, to elevate food from a commercial enterprise to a public good.

But it may have been derailed from the start, by a government focused on keeping everyone happy, but most especially by the food and whisky industries, as the governing Scottish National Party gathers support for an independence vote.

Well, food is never just about food.

I learned that again as I sat across the kitchen table from Kate Ingram, who has scratched out a living on the farm where my maternal grandmother grew up, an eye-shockingly beautiful knoll in Banffshire.

My grandmother would never talk about life here except to say it was "cold." Actually, she'd say it twice, and shiver in between. She left for Canada at 19 and that was that.

Kate is 94, yet her eyes flared like lit matches as she told me stories about my great-grandfather. And she only knows him from tales that live on in this community.

Neish the Post, mail carrier and croft farmer, was widowed at my grandmother's birth. Then he watched his eight children leave, one by one, for Canada, and, quite understandably, went off his rocker.

Many farmers were squeezed out of business after the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 removed tariff protection and let in a flood of cheap food from the colonies, including Canada. The choice was to leave Scotland or move to cities, into two-room flats without kitchens, to endure meals of bread, jam and cheese. That cheap lodging and fuel for workers enabled industry to pay lower wages, Scotland's cruel advantage in the industrial revolution.

Business drove that unofficial food policy. The legacy? Today, a middle-aged Scot is more likely to drop dead than in any other country in Western Europe. When I told Kate I was here to write about the food policy, her eyes flashed again.

"Herring!" she nearly shouted. A poor man's fish. "Aye," she said, "but I have a wonderful recipe for it."

I thought about Kate's herring as I drove to Scotland's east coast, just 15 kilometres away. The waters teem with lobster, scallops, salmon and other seafood. The verdant landscape produces incredible grass-fed meat. Most is exported.

It's the puzzling paradox: Farmers struggle to survive yet have been stocking the U.K.'s and Europe's larders for decades, while people at home get the lard, a diet heavy on meat, fats, salt, sugar and processed food. Nurtured on this, Scots have developed a near allergy to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Chefs like Martin Wishart, along with small-scale farmers and locavores, have been trying to repatriate those ingredients. The Edinburgh Farmers Market is thriving, and on-farm stores are cropping up around the country.

But the food remains out of economic reach for most, and touring Scotland is an exercise in survival eating. That became clear enough when I drove into Keith, the market town my grandmother once shopped in. When I was here 18 years ago, the main street was a bustling hive of small food shops. Now, a bakery selling those ubiquitous meat pies was all that was left.

Leaving town, I saw why: A giant supermarket hunkered on the edge. Keith had become the town of Tesco, like so many superstore towns in Canada. The four big grocers in the U.K. now control about 75 per cent of retail food sales. Their produce section is even smaller, with only four or five homegrown items at the height of growing season. Scotland imports 88 per cent of its produce and is even a net importer of meat.

So Scottish farmers are suffering much like ours, hammered by cheap imports. As in Canada, young producers have fled the sector.

Scotland's big food rethink started with the best of intentions.

Former agriculture professor David Atkinson was tapped to lead the food security group. They considered it from a national and dinner-table perspective. Does Scotland produce enough food and the right kind to secure its internal supply? And can all citizens, especially the quarter of Scotland's children living in poverty, access nutritious food?

Atkinson's report advocated local producers providing at least two-thirds of the national food supply, to achieve greater food security. It also advised delivering more food through non-profit agencies and food co-ops. "To put control food, one of the few things vital to life, in the hands of a small number of corporations is foolish."

But the supermarkets, said Atkinson, would not sign on to food sovereignty. The final policy includes no mention of it and only a whack of platitudes about non-profits.

The policy, said Atkinson diplomatically, is "still a work in progress."

"An embarrassment" is what Anderson called it. Her health and sustainability group set out to clean up Scotland's food supply from field to plate. "You have to go right back to land use," she said, advocating reducing the supply of unhealthy foods and producing more fruit, vegetables and cereals. Finland, Norway and Sweden have all pursued such integrated health and agricultural policies, enjoying impressive health improvements. But the government took "the field" off the agenda.

Other bold ideas included scaling back portion sizes to the norm 10 years ago, before North American fast food invaded and obesity skyrocketed; developing a "name and shame" policy to call out poor corporate performance on nutrition; engineering a massive increase of fruit and vegetable sales; and a ban on marketing junk food to children.

Again, the industry representatives balked, and the final policy stresses education and labelling to improve food choices. "If education is the main thrust," said Anderson, "we're going nowhere. We've had excellent health education, but it hasn't changed the Scottish diet."

It became clear that health was a "minor player," she said, and that the food and drinks industry was driving the policy. "What's the point of increasing economic turnover if it's draining health care?"

I took that question to Paul McLaughlin, CEO of Scotland Food and Drink, the industry group that led the economic stream. It achieved the policy's most prominent goal – growing the industry – and got the budget to support it.

"That the policy highlights growth first is a positive element," said McLaughlin. "It will allow us to change the conversation on the environment to expand salmon aquaculture."

Along with protecting the whisky trade, the policy, he said, would help food businesses scale up for export. He cited Makays Ltd. jams as potential and Walkers Shortbread as the shining example. So it's jams and shortbreads over health and the environment, I venture. "Industry can be more engaged with tackling issues of health or the environment," said McLaughlin, "if it's on a positive trajectory for growth."

I must admit, I left that office feeling a little of the "cold" in my grandmother's shudder when she thought of Scotland.

Anderson said that at least food is now on the political agenda, and the policy is an ongoing process. Leaders will meet again in November

to consider next steps. And facing the anger of leaders such as Anderson may force the government to make harder choices.