

# Food literacy suffers setback but not a knock-out

Ontario Farmer - Nov. 5, 2013 by Frances Anderson

You've heard of English literacy, and math literacy...and now the Ontario Home Economics Association wants Ontarians, or more precisely Ontario students, to learn "food literacy".

The home economists are promoting the idea of making food studies mandatory for elementary and high school students.

Okay, so it's a little self-serving, but that shouldn't overshadow the fact that it's a great idea. And who should be a better advocate of teaching the next generation what to eat and how to cook, than home economists?

Recall that the reason for establishing public education in the first place was to create a population literate enough to become good citizens.

The idea here was that folks who could read, would read, and make informed decisions on their leaders when they cast their votes.

Today, anyone with teenagers knows there's a mandatory half credit high school course in Civics. It shares the time slot with 'Careers' which is also deemed important enough to have its own spot in the curriculum. Surely food preparation and nutrition education deserve equal or greater standing.

A single phys ed class that mentions Canada has a food guide is unlikely to instill a lifetime of healthy eating. And, any course in healthy eating should come with "a side" course of critical thinking, since teens seem to believe whatever's on the label, even if the label is so complicated you could spend an entire class figuring out whether a product that is "fat free," "gluten free" and "preservative free" for example, actually contains anything nutritious.

Then, there's the issue of how to cook. And I'm not thinking of Iron Chef. I'm talking about basic food safety so as not to poison yourself when you head off to university.

Are the chicken fingers in the box uncooked...or precooked? Will two minutes in the microwave cook the meat or just make the salmonella happy? Don't use the knife that cut the raw chicken to slice carrots for the salad! And make sure the hamburger is barbecued to a safe internal temperature. This is all information worth knowing...life-saving even.

The home economists go so far as to insist that food literacy would also help reduce many nutrition-related health issues such as diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity and heart disease!

And so, this spring, London area home economists Mary Ann Binnie, an expert in meat science, Lucy Mahood, of Brescia College, and Diane O'Shea, who teaches high school home ec, began lobbying to make mandatory food education part of the proposed provincial Local Food Act. It didn't happen.

The Liberals blocked the amendment last week as the act headed into third reading.

However, this doesn't mean the idea of mandatory training in food literacy is dead. In fact, given the history of the women promoting it, and the inherent value of the idea, I'm sure, like any yeasty bread, you can punch it down, but it will rise again.