

**Show Transcript**  
**Deconstructing Dinner**  
**Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY**  
**Nelson, B.C. Canada**

**July 5, 2007**

**Title: CONSCIENTIOUS COOKS III**

**Producer/Host: Jon Steinman**  
**Transcript: Pat Yama**

**JON STEINMAN:** Thanks for joining today's broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner, a weekly one-hour program produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson, British Columbia. I'm Jon Steinman.

In April 2006 we launched the CONSCIENTIOUS COOKS series here on the program, with part 2 airing back in September of 2006. The series was created to expose chefs and restaurants that are moving beyond the standard eating out experience and introducing new approaches that in the end are more socially and environmentally responsible.

Well today marks part 3 of this CONSCIENTIOUS COOKS series and it's a special broadcast as the full one-hour will focus on one person, Maria Solakofski, a conscientious cook who I spent quite a bit of time with while recently visiting Toronto. I had initially thought a quick visit with Maria would suffice, but upon chatting over the phone and hearing the real passion that goes in to her approach to food, I ended up gathering hours of inspiring recordings that will, on today's show, hopefully capture this passion.

Maria doesn't quite operate a restaurant per se, and instead operates what she has called Guerrilla Gourmet, that is Guerrilla spelt G-U-E-R or otherwise used in reference to independent groups who are fighting. Maria's Guerrilla Gourmet consists of upwards to 10 complete strangers coming together within her home, where she prepares 3-course meals and provides an educational experience that could certainly not be received at any other restaurant.

*increase music and fadeout; fade in restaurant wave*

What makes today's broadcast so interesting is that instead of deconstructing food as is often done here on the program, Maria Solakofski's Guerrilla Gourmet encourages a deconstructing of restaurants themselves, or more simply, the commonly accepted forms of *eating out*. Whether it be cafes, diners, or five star restaurants, all are based on a very similar model that is rarely, if ever, examined critically. All over the world, this concept has acted itself out for centuries. At its core, restaurants consist of people gathering at random times in locations outside of our homes. We develop very brief and sometimes meaningless relationships with a host and or restaurant server. We order our food from a menu of options with no background on where the food came from and made with ingredients that rarely the cooks could even provide a history of. Upon ordering our appetizers, main courses or desserts, this food is then expected to be received within what essentially has become a time limit, where waiting more than 15 minutes for the food is unacceptable. Behind a wall is often a brigade of white clothed humans preparing our meals, remaining completely shut off from those of us eating the food. Now surrounding each group of eaters, are even more eaters, but with whom there is never any interactions, no conversation, and

maybe just a brief acknowledgement of a coat that may have slipped off the chair of the person sitting next to you. This, in a nutshell, is the restaurant experience, which when breaking it down in such a way, really emphasizes how the restaurant experience itself, is very much a reflection of our collective relationship with food.

It is often suggested here on Deconstructing Dinner that the ease through which farming and food production has become as centralized and factory-like as it has, is a result of our passive consumption of this essential part of our everyday. There is certainly no arguing that more than any other time in the history of human civilization, have such large populations of people become able to maintain such a distant relationship to food as most of us now do. No farming involved, no canning or preservation of food is necessary, no cooking or even chopping of vegetables is a requirement of a meal anymore, it's all done for us. This passive consumption of food extends far beyond this daily requirement of eating, and much of the North American lifestyle from our jobs to our leisure is all designed so that passive consumption is in fact desired, where relationships with the other humans involved in the process are hardly required in any shape or form. Now coming back to this restaurant experience, this is, in and of itself, another form of this passive consumption that has become so integral to our daily food choices.

Now in this sense, Maria Solakofski's Guerrilla Gourmet – the focus of today's broadcast, is, to be blunt, quite revolutionary, in that it is challenging this very passive consumption that has, as previous broadcasts of Deconstructing Dinner have illustrated, led to the socially and environmentally destructive practices that are the backbone of the vast majority of the foods we find on grocery store shelves, or, on restaurant menus. Guerrilla Gourmet puts into question our relationships to food and our relationships with friends, partners, family and even strangers.

On the surface, Toronto's Guerrilla Gourmet is quite simple. Through word-of-mouth and a growing list of e-mail addresses, Maria Solakofski sets a date for a dinner – sometimes once a week, maybe twice a week, or maybe even once a month. Up to ten random guests then arrive at Maria's house, and are unaware of the menu for the evening. Guests then mingle with each other and with the chef, right in the kitchen itself. And when the three-course meal is served among Solakofski's backyard garden, a detailed history of where all the food comes from is provided, with names of every farmer and producer involved in the process. Now all of this, the interactions with the chef, with other eaters, the time spent in the kitchen, in the garden and the educational experience itself, is a far cry from the passive consumption that the common restaurant experience or the common restaurant model allows for. And so on today's broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner we are going to spend the remainder of this hour shopping with Maria, preparing food with Maria, eating with Maria and then sitting down and talking about this unique and important concept that she operates in downtown Toronto.

#### *soundbite*

If you do miss any of today's broadcast, it will be archived along with all broadcasts of Deconstructing Dinner on our website at [cjly.net/deconstructingdinner](http://cjly.net/deconstructingdinner). More information on today's topic will also be posted, and you can also subscribe to our weekly podcast there as well.

My visit while in Toronto with Guerrilla Gourmet's Maria Solakofski was rewarding for a number of reasons. For one, I was able to receive an exclusive tour of one of the city's most interesting farmers' markets. This is where Maria purchases most of the ingredients she uses for her meals, with this step in the process being unique in itself as very few restaurants source their ingredients from farmers markets as was done ages ago. The market is located in Dufferin Grove Park and has operated for close to five years. It is an organic only market where all vendors are

required to be selling products that they either grew or produced themselves. Now the reason for this will become evident in just a moment, as for the first half of today's broadcast, we will go on a tour of this unique Toronto farmers' market. I joined Maria the day before one of her dinners, which, I would later be attending, so not only was this a tour of the market, it was also a glimpse into the mind of this conscientious cook as she sources her ingredients for the following day's dinner. The most surprising outcome upon visiting the Dufferin Grove market, was a very glaring sense of community, created within Canada's largest and perhaps busiest city.

Following this market tour we will then take a listen to recordings from the dinner itself where you will hopefully receive a taste of what it's like to arrive at a stranger's house for a meal and then sit down and eat among other strangers with absolutely no idea of what food is going to be served. A few days following the dinner I then sat down with Maria yet again to learn more about her passion for doing what she does, and that interview will conclude today's broadcast.

And so to launch this first segment featuring my trip to the Dufferin Grove Farmers' Market, we first hear from Maria Solakofski, and why she chose to name her dinners Guerrilla Gourmet. In the background are the sounds of the Toronto subway, my preferred source of transportation while visiting the city.

And this is Deconstructing Dinner.

#### *On subway to Dufferin Grove Market*

**MARIA SOLAKOFSKI:** When I was trying to sort out how I was going to name what it was that I was doing and I looked up the definition of guerrilla. And one definition that I liked here was appropriate was "person taking part in a regular fighting by small groups acting independently" from the Spanish diminutive form of war. And I liked that because I was like – okay, what am I fighting? Like what's the irregular fighting and I went – well I guess I'm fighting ignorance and it was like apathy and just like a passive consumption, you know. And yeah, just pushing for awareness and that spontaneously popping up and not having a consistency about how it is that I do things makes people have to pay attention. And that's the guerrilla aspect of it for me.

This market has been around for at least five years and Dufferin Grove is the most developed farmers market in Toronto as far as I'm concerned especially organic farmers market. And it's the most community-developed place because they have so many activities and they have a fantastic park. And so there's so much going on here. There's these wood ovens that you can come to and have pizza baking days or like I've used them to bake pies to sell at a table at the park. You can do all kinds of things with these ovens if you co-operate with their schedule. And then they have a bakery market day here. And then there's all these local organic farmers. Like just what's happening here on Thursday is just like a little tip of what happens in this park.

What I really like about this market is that it's year-round. The only outdoor year-round market, organic market. Because there's St. Lawrence Market but it's not organic and it's not necessarily all locals and there's a lot of stores set up there. So when it starts to get wet, like this market is really organic in that it responds to the seasons and the changing and so everyone changes and moves with it. And that just reflects what it is that people can learn about when they come to this outdoor setting, is that when it gets too muddy and wet here then everybody moves up into the rink. And so like in November it's in the skating rink and then when it gets really cold in December, people move in the Zamboni garage inside to the rink house where the change rooms are. And then there's like this really cozy little marketplace. And some of the farmers drop out because most of the farmers are only selling the produce that they have but there's also a huge range of things here, like from animal products to vegetables and fruit. And then there's lots of

good food to eat while you're here which is not very developed in a lot of other markets. So you can come to this market hungry and that's always really satisfying.

I had a table here selling all kinds of things like baked goods and herbs from my garden and the menu item of the moment and just telling people about my dinners. So that it was a changing item every week based on whatever I was pulling out of my garden. And then it would just be a sample to say – yeah, okay this is an improvised thing and if you come to dinner then you'll kind of have an idea.

**JON:** When I first got to Toronto about a week ago I was asking the people about the various farmers markets, did a little bit of research on the internet as to how many farmers markets there are and there doesn't seem to be a lot of farmers markets in town. One thing I did hear though was that with some of the farmers markets, one of the issues is people just going down to the Ontario Food Terminal picking up food and then pretending their farmers at some of these farmers markets. What's the story behind this, do you know?

**MARIA:** At this particular market you can only sell stuff that you are creating or it's like this percentage. So Plan B in Greenfields like throughout the year because it's a year round market, they have their own stuff but then they also bring in oranges and other things that people want to supplement there so that they can do a one stop shopping still at the market in January. Though you can still get local apples in January and I mean you can eat still all local and Ontario in January and February but you have to have a certain percentage of your own stuff. So at this market that's not allowed.

But on Wednesday there is this farmers market which like ten years ago was the first farmers market that I discovered because it was right downtown, that is in front of Nathan Phillips Square. And this is a class example of, you have to scope out who are the real farmers and who are just going to Ontario Food Terminal and just being a grocery store on Wednesday for you know everyone that's ... it's super busy during lunch time. It's like a morning through lunch market. And they have some really good ideas and they're catering to a different crowd because they have a lot of people who are working in offices and then they get to have this outside experience and I still think it's really valuable. So instead of shopping in a supermarket, at least they get to buy these things outside. They're going to the Ontario Food Terminal. They're still getting their stuff from the same Ontario Food Terminal place. And there are Ontario farmers that go to Ontario Food Terminal just, you can't have that intimate relationship with them but it's really easy at the Nathan Phillips Square market to see who's a farmer and who's not. You just go – oh look, there's a man and all of his blonde daughters. That's obviously a family and look at how suntanned they are. It's like they're working on the farm. And then you see like four random people at a booth working together who are just, you know, like (*laughs*) inside people right? So you can tell who the farmers are. It's specifically like they sell a minimal range of things. So there's like the cantaloupe people at the Nathan Phillips Square market and I still go out of my way to go and get cantaloupes because that's all they grow. So in August you just go down and they just have like the back of their truck, they don't pack them or anything, they just fill the back of their truck with cantaloupes, it's hilarious.

**JON:** If you're tuning in, this is Deconstructing Dinner where we are listening to a recording from a recent trip to Toronto's Dufferin Grove farmers market with Maria Solakofski, aka the Guerrilla Gourmet. Maria is the focus of today's broadcast as she operates a unique concept whereby she invites groups of strangers into her own home and prepares dinner for them. I met up with Maria at the market where she was sourcing for the following day's ingredients. And in this next segment she introduces her role in conducting farmers market tours for children. Yet another

quality that this conscientious cook possesses as part of her collection of food awareness projects. And should you miss any of today's broadcast, it will be archived on our website at [cjly.net/deconstructingdinner](http://cjly.net/deconstructingdinner) where more information on today's show will also be posted.

**MARIA:** I just started this program with a group called Real Food for Real Kids that caters lunches and snacks to about 2,000 kids in Toronto right now. So that's 50 daycares and schools in Toronto. And they are just so open-minded and brilliantly collaborative with me that I've just created this program to take their kids on field trips to the farmers markets throughout Toronto. So I've picked six markets in Toronto and have this one hour program for kids to be able to come to the farmers market and just experience like, it's just a sense awareness exercise. And so that's very exciting and that's just about to start happening

**JON:** And you're going to do that right here? This will be one of the markets?

**MARIA:** This will be one of the markets that it happens at. And every market is so different because at Riverdale on Tuesdays there's a farm and there's all kinds of animals there, or like a little zoo I guess you'd call it. And then there's also people coming to the Nathan Phillips Square market, like the downtown schools and that's like all concrete and like we say, with also vendors from the Ontario Food Terminal. So, it's just, yeah, it's going to be a totally different experience everywhere that we go and that's the whole basis behind everything that I do. It doesn't matter if I'm in Costa Rica or if I'm in Toronto what I try to teach people about is pay attention to your surroundings and see what can you do with what's being offered to you right here. Like look at what's around you. Okay now what are we going to do with that? And so that attitude comes into my dinner. So, without planning a menu, I get to go around and see what's available. I can plan a menu, even a menu in season and then I come here and guess what, they don't have Japanese baby turnip. So well I have to get Kohlrabi instead (*laughs*), you know.

**JON:** I don't even know what a Japanese baby turnip looks like.

**MARIA:** Well, you can't see it today because they don't have any. But you can see a Kohlrabi which looks like an underwater sea creature.

**JON:** So we're here because you're going to be purchasing some food for tomorrow's dinner.

**MARIA:** Yeah.

**JON:** Do you have anything planned?

**MARIA:** Not at all (*laughs*). I had planned to see what is inspiring and then I'll get that and then tomorrow I will see what happens for dinner. And the other thing is that how many people I know are coming right now may change by tomorrow evening. So like I just found out that while I've been here that someone is travelling from Maine, driving from Maine. He left his morning and he's going to come for dinner tomorrow night. He's on his way out West and I met him in Costa Rica two months ago.

**JON:** And you're tuned in to part 3 of the CONSCIENTIOUS COOKS series on Deconstructing Dinner, a weekly one hour program produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson, British Columbia. I'm your host Jon Steinman. This current segment features a recording from a tour in Toronto's Dufferin Grove Farmers' Market where conscientious cook Maria Solakofski frequents to source her ingredients for the dinners she hosts in her own home. Maria refers to herself as the Guerrilla Gourmet. That is G-U-E-R-R-I-L-L-A and not in any reference to any animal of sorts. I

met up with Maria in Toronto during a recent visit. I did attend one of Maria's dinners where she invites groups of strangers into her own home. And you can stay tuned for that segment shortly after this farmers market tour.

**MARIA:** I will come back and get a little bit of them from you in a moment. Thanks my dear.

**JON:** What kind of mushrooms were in that box?

**MARIA:** Oh, do you want to look at them?

**JON:** Yup.

**MARIA:** They're hilarious mushrooms.

**JON:** I don't know that variety.

**MARIA:** There are so many different names. Okay, they're called Hon-Shimeji. Like H-O-N-shimeji. And what Bruno told me, who runs this business Fun Guy Farms is that the people who are working here just call Hon-Shimeji mushrooms, they just call them honey mushrooms, for short. They just abbreviate it so they call these Hon-Shimeji mushrooms – honey mushrooms.

**JON:** Hon-Shimeji.

**MARIA:** Hon-Shimeji.

**JON:** Hon-Shimeji.

**MARIA:** What I love about these is that they're like straw so you can just rip them apart. So we got these because we're making crepes on Sunday for the picnic (*tasting mushrooms*). And they can be eaten raw but and they're just so gorgeous.

**JON:** Wow.

**MARIA:** Like look at that. (*Jon agrees*) What a sculpture. And they just grow in this little pod.

**JON:** When I first saw them I thought they were oyster mushrooms ...

**MARIA:** They're kind of smoky.

**JON:** ...but they're not.

**MARIA:** Yeah and they're very, very earthy. (*Jon agrees*). So I'm hoping this is going to be enough for 24 people to have them.

**JON:** It's almost a shame to cook them.

**MARIA:** Yeah, we're just going to...well the solar cooker goes at like a really low temperature so it's just going to be...we may not cook them and the other nice thing is that you can marinate those mushrooms and they're really great. We're going to go talk to Biata who has imported stuff. She is a wonderful woman and she makes fantastic tea and I have a few of her cups I want to return.

Biata and I had our table next to each other inside in the winter when I sell baked goods here which I can talk about later. And this year I didn't have a table at the market because I just got really busy trying to develop these kids programs but she just let me take a big space of her table. But she sells like incredible things – these tea mixtures. And everything is like wildly collected and fairly traded so she's got like vanilla beans and sometimes she has raw cashews but they're not organic cashews which are still farmed. They're wild cashews which means cashew trees just grow among other trees and that's the way Kakaw is which when you talk to the Kakaw people you'll learn that. That it's different to have a Kakaw farm even if they have a canopy or a coffee plantations or whatever but like in all of the southern countries that grow Kakaw, there'll be a Kakaw tree among all these other trees and then you take these flowers and herbs and seeds and all these other things and you mix them together and you make your special Kakaw drink that's like unique to your family. So they go around collecting all these recipes. So the taste that the cashew, that a wild cashew will have compared to even an organically crafted cashew because it has the essence of all those other trees and plants around it that a cashew farm cannot have.

**MARIA** (*talking to others*): I'm going to come back and say hi to you, okay? No I'm going to say hi to you. Hi beautiful, what's on your shirt? Thank you. Like little suns.

**FEMALE**: Yes like little slices of lemons.

**MARIA**: That's what I need like – is it tiger tails?

**FEMALE**: No today's sample is a Whirl Pearl Drop which has – oh gunpowder green tea, jasmine, and peppermint in it.

**MARIA**: Look at these jasmine flowers, isn't that gorgeous? Okay. Whirl, Pearl, Drops.

**FEMALE**: That's right.

**MARIA**: So jasmine, green tea and gunpowder - gunpowder green tea and peppermint. Okay, what's gunpowder green tea?

**FEMALE**: Gunpowder, basically it's a type of a rolling of the leaf, so every leaf is rolled into a little bowl.

**MARIA**: By hand, yeah.

**FEMALE**: by hand. And that's why it resembles gunpowder. You assume that's what a gunpowder would look like, little pellets.

**JON**: As the tour of Toronto's Dufferin Grove Farmers' Market continued with Guerrilla Gourmet's Maria Solakofski, among our many conversations she shared with me her thoughts on organic farming. A very broad term that while used in both in a large grocery store setting is also the foundation for the small-scale Dufferin Grove Farmers Market where I met Maria. After sharing her thoughts on this controversial topic, our tour continues. And it was during this time that a real sense of community created at the market became evident. A sense of community that within a large urban metropolis like Toronto provides a vision of hope for not only conscientious cooks like Maria Solakofski but any urban dweller looking to connect with both farmers and members of the community alike. And again should you miss any of today's broadcast of

Deconstructing Dinner, you can download an archived version of the broadcast or sign up for our podcast through our website at [cjly.net/deconstructingdinner](http://cjly.net/deconstructingdinner).

**MARIA:** So, I think like organic, I mean I prefer for things to be organic but, I think a lot of this is controversial, I think a lot of organic farming is a response to industrial farming. It's not necessarily the natural way to do things and because organic farming has also expanded into a corporate monoculture farming, right? So, I don't care if there's wheat that's organic. I'm not going to get it because there's just planting it over and over. Maybe they're planting corn or soybeans or something but they're all like monocultures and organic farms would grow everything that they needed to sustain themselves plus a few other families because the other family was a blacksmith and this guy was, you know, like the veterinarian. And so you'll see that with the range of things that people at this market grow, what's on their table that they're not just growing one thing. They're, I mean they may have their specialty thing but I think that's more out of co-operation for each other. Like okay, everyone knows that you get Sosnickis' potatoes because Ted grows turnips but no one else grows turnips, right? And then everyone grows greens and some people grow more lettuces and someone else grows more Arugula and you know, people get to be known for particular things.

**JON:** So it's a self-regulating market in a sense (*Maria agrees*). You know, it's like the grocery store that's planning what we're going to have but they're doing it on their own here.

**MARIA:** Yeah and the way that they're doing it on their own is that they communicate because it's a community here, right. And so there's just like this understanding with each other instead of anyone trying to outsell anyone else. Like for the longest time Ted Thorpe has been known to be the strawberry man here at the market. And Greenfields often has strawberries and this year Plan B has strawberries. But guess what there is never enough strawberries so there's no such thing as like – oh no, like Ted sells out of his strawberries in two hours and it's a four hour market.

**JON:** So where next on our stop, or, it's all up in the air?

**MARIA:** Where next. It's all up in the air. I'm just going to walk until I see an empty space or an open space, you know. Now, you can see where Biata is, here is Ted Thorpe and his brother on the left. His brother also has a farm right next door to him and what's really interesting is that his brother is not an organic farmer and Ted's farmland is very close and he is an organic farmer. And yeah, it's cool to see his brother at the organic farmers market. But Ted is the man with strawberries and his table is always crowded and he's one of my favourite farmers. He's just a fantastic generous man and I've worked at his farm before. And he's got some brilliant kids that I really like to hang out with.

*market noises, music, conversations in background*

**MARIA:** And this is my friend Jon from Nelson. (*Jon and Alvaro greet each other*). Alvaro is the owner of Plan B Organic farm which is where all these greens and strawberries that you see here.

**JON:** Excellent. Yeah.

**MARIA:** Jon hosts a radio program in Nelson called Deconstructing Dinner. And so, I am wondering about these Hen of the Woods. (*conversations with vendor and others*) I kind of like the name of the Hen of the Woods. Yes, yes. How much are Maitaki mushrooms? Fourteen a pound, thank you. Okay, they're very woody, dirty (*Jon agrees*) but I love the sculpture of them.

This is Colette who I also wanted you to meet. And when she has some time because she's on her own today but it looks like Chris McCluffy is maybe helping her. But she grows indigenous plants and heirloom seeds and vegetables. So all native species, or Ontario growing and sell seeds and so whatever seeds I don't collect from my own garden, I like, recollect them. But she has started my garden and I bought all my plants and seeds from Colette. She has an amazing range of things here, like she's got six different kinds of thyme and all kinds of lavender. And I really, you'll see when you come to my garden, just like herbs. I love herbs. What the hell is this? Looks like Butterfly Weed but, what is that? Mountain mint? It looks like, this looks like tarragon, but it's ... oh, you know what this smells like? Think Laurentian pencil crayons from when you were a kid (*Jon laughs*). That doesn't smell very edible but you can eat these flowers of sage, you're going to see this. I have lots of sage bushes.

Is there more peas or is that's all that's there? Okay. Okay, I'll be back in a moment then. I'm going to go get ricotta. Because I don't know what vegetables I'm going to get and I like to just spread out the balance so that all the farmers get to have my business. You know because they all grow stuff (*greets another person and has a short conversation with others there*).

This Utah Mason who is like the queen pin of the Dufferin Market.

**JON:** Okay.

**MARIA:** This is Angelo where I'm going to get ricotta cheese made with sheep's milk. So yeah, he brings a little bit of Greece here. He has olive groves there and so he brings olives which are cured – green ones and black ones which are like my favourite olives, and olive oil. And my mom is from Greece so I like – there's some things that don't have to be local for me that are mandatory to not be local. Like I have olive oil going through my blood and I also need to have salt from France (*laughs*).

So I just got a humongous chunk like this, \$33 of feta cheese for the sheep's feta cheese for the crepes that we're making for Sunday's picnic.

**JON:** So is it a tough decision for you to buy a few things that aren't local? Is there a select number of ingredients that you will always use and those that you won't?

**MARIA:** That's a good question. I'm not fanatical about anything because that just makes you an angry person. And it makes you very not accepting of what the world offers you and I always say this to people – like yeah, I use to be an angry vegan until I realized – wait a second, why the hell am I getting avocados when there's like butter that, I know this farmer that has cows and that I should be eating butter. And wait a second, I don't live in a climate that I should be eating avocados everyday. That doesn't mean I don't eat avocados. It just means, like I love avocados but it means that I just started opening my eyes about ten years ago to really what I said earlier is like what is around you and to pay attention to that. And I think that that's a much more effective way to live, to accept everything that is.

When I lived out West, I became a vegan because everyone that I was with was a vegan and for me primarily it started because I was travelling across the country and I just felt like 85% of U.S. farmlands, right and Canada but I was driving through the U.S. was used to grow...it was for cows, and to grow corn to feed cows and to have pasture. It's like 85% of the farmland is used for cows? It just didn't make any sense. Even still when I first got there, we're having bacon and egg diner breakfast and everyone was like – that's not cool. So then we started this way of like

everyone having a few ingredients and sitting in a park and everyone sharing food and you know a bunch of barefoot folks sharing lunch, making sandwiches together.

**JON:** Is that where maybe your Guerrilla Gourmet evolved from?

**MARIA:** I think so because I had a kitchen out there. I was living in Vancouver in East Van on Commercial Drive and I was the only person of like all these folks that I was hanging out with that actually had a kitchen that we could use. And so all these other people engineered having enormous pots and food donations from this place called Circling Dawn at that time. And then we started like this food kitchen for like a lot of homeless people, a lot of Canadian natives out west. And so we just started making really simple things like rice for 150 people and you know vegetables and just like from donations and things. So, I mean that was a little guerrilla but now I just keep refining it and refining it. And it's just like – okay here's a situation, what can I do here? And that paying attention to your surroundings means that everybody, every place you're at has a different situation, so has a different solution. And that, you know, excluding ingredients for things like when we meet the Kakaw people you'll see the same thing. Like what they're doing is beautiful for how it is that they're doing it and how they introduce it here. And Angelo is from Greece but he's moved to Canada. So he's got sheep and cows here and he's got a farm here and he grows tomato plants and rosemary and sells these at the market but then he also has his heritage and this link to Greece and that multicultural part is what enriches our lives and especially living in Canada. And particularly living in Toronto is one of the most beautiful things. This is like the most multicultural city in...it is like that. And that's one of the beautiful things about Toronto is that every culture is able to express itself and able to integrate itself. And what I really like about this is that it's not just like – okay here I am and I'm going to make Greece but here. It's like – okay, I'm bring my heritage and I'm doing it here too so there's something that's a link there and then there's something that's also a link here. And so both of those things are coming together and then I get to have that picture into the world and I don't think that travelling or long distances is wrong. I just think from an ongoing perspective it's like look what's around you. I would prefer to have a relationship with the person that is bringing that from Greece and bringing me these olives.

**JON:** On today's broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner we are featuring recordings of my visit with Toronto's Maria Solakofski. Maria operates the Guerrilla Gourmet, an ongoing series of dinners she hosts at her own home where she invites groups of strangers to come together to enjoy a very unique and intimate form of eating out. Maria sources most of her ingredients from Toronto farmers markets as it's these personal connections with farmers and producers that provide the foundation for the educational experience that Maria provides her guests. I did join Maria at her home for one of these dinners. And following the remainder of these recordings from our trip from the Dufferin Grove Farmers' Market, we will listen to more recordings from one of the very dinners that all of this preparation is for. And you can stay tuned for that.

**MARIA:** Yeah it's just for me what I'm really trying to help people acknowledge is that connection between your food and where it comes from. And like to have a relationship. If you have a relationship with the people who grow the food and make the food you have this different respect and this different understanding and then you can have a relationship with yourself and how the food is going into your body and how it's affecting you and a lot of people are just very removed from that. And this is a very organic experience. Like we're talking to people. There's a community here, you bump into people, skins touching skin. It's not just like shopping carts and concrete and fluorescent lights and closed walls you know, like UPC blip, blip, blip. You know, conveyor belt thing. It's like where everything's very automated. Everything is very organic and these farmers work their asses off, and you can tell.

**JON:** Well you've spent more time socializing than buying food.

**MARIA:** No kidding. That's why I got here early to do the big shopping. So – oh no, did someone just take the ricotta? Okay. Phew! It was just like right under my eyes...

**JON:** It's dangerous to socialize.

**MARIA:** Angelo, this is my friend Jon. I would like some ricotta cheese, please. Just maybe half of that piece.

**ANGELO:** Here?

**MARIA:** Yeah, that's good. I wonder if that's enough? Maybe I should...

**ANGELO:** So there. That would be bigger.

**MARIA:** I think I'll get the bigger one, yeah. You know there's only going to be five people, so far but you never know who's going to show up for dinner tomorrow.

**ANGELO:** That's it. You never know.

**MARIA:** (*laughs*) Not at my house. One moment you have like a quiet time and then all of a sudden there's 12 people walking through the house.

**ANGELO:** A whole family walks in.

**MARIA:** Yeah.

**ANGELO:** Seven dollars, please.

**MARIA:** Seven dollars. Eleven dollars. So yeah and then there's some farmers who get like a lot of my business consistently and then other farmers where I just buy, like big things sporadically, right. Like you buy a lot of honey or you buy a lot of olives. I don't know if we're going to have a soup tomorrow or if we're going to have a grain or what. So, like I could have a...I'm just going to get the rolls because they're lovely. And I put a ridiculous amount of money in my wallet today because that was like – I just feel like buying food today.

**JON:** (*laughs*) Is this the market that you'll typically spend more money at?

**MARIA:** No, I go to the market that is closest to the date of my dinner. So next week dinner I'm having a dinner on Wednesday so I'll go to Riverdale Market but Alli will be there and I should actually probably get her rolls then. I don't think I'm going to get rolls today. I'm just going to admire Alli. So, let's ummm...what was I going to get? I have to get ...

**JON:** Peas, shelling peas.

**MARIA:** Peas. Peas and what was I going to get from Greenville – its Kohlrabi, perhaps.

**JON:** You were thinking of mushrooms.

**MARIA:** Oh the mushrooms. Right, I don't know about the Hon-Shemeji mushrooms. Not the Hon-Sehmeji, there's this other, so I don't know...oh I hope they haven't run out of Kohlrabi. Oh dear. Is Kohlrabi finished? Darn, there's no Kohlrabi for dinner tomorrow. (*puts on an accent*) Is no problem. We get mushrooms and then I get the peas.

There are the ChocoSol people. Hi Michael. This is my friend Jon from Nelson.

**JON:** Hi.

**MICHAEL:** Hi, Jon from Nelson. I just sent a big order of Kakaw to Nelson.

**JON:** Oh yeah.

**MICHAEL:** To Johnny and a girl named Hoseah?

**MARIA:** (*tasting something*) It's so smooth.

**MICHAEL:** Yeah, this is a new crop that's coming in based on the work that Graham just spent the last seven months doing in Mexico.

**MARIA:** He was just telling me about that.

**JON:** And you're tuned in to Deconstructing Dinner, a weekly one-hour program produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson, British Columbia. Today marks part 3 of the ongoing CONSCIENTIOUS COOKS series here on the program. And you can take a listen to previous broadcasts of this series by checking out our website at [cjly.net/deconstructingdinner](http://cjly.net/deconstructingdinner).

Today's conscientious cook is Maria Solakofski, aka the Guerrilla Gourmet who in those last segments was featured taking me on a tour of Toronto's Dufferin Grove Farmers' Market. Maria sources most of her ingredients from the market, a place where as you could tell, she is very well connected. But she needs to be, as the dinners she provides at her home are experiences that are more than just eating. Maria invites up to ten strangers into her home where she hosts meals that are essentially challenging the common concept of eating out. Instead of a menu is a meal that is prepared last minute. Instead of a wall separating the dining room from the kitchen, guests instead mingle *in* the kitchen with the chef herself. Instead of never speaking to those strangers sitting at the table next to you, guests instead converse and meet those strangers, at the same table. And instead of never knowing the history of the food, Maria Solakofski provides detailed background on who grew the food, who processed it, where it came from, and why it is important. Now this in a nutshell, is Guerrilla Gourmet. And the day following my tour of the Dufferin Grove Farmers' Market, I arrived at Maria Solakofski's home, and joined her and five other strangers for dinner. I arrived a little early to witness the preparation of the meal, and here are some recordings from that evening.

*sounds of bowls while Maria is making a pie*

**MARIA:** I'm making a rhubarb pie here and I put one of the vanilla beans that I got. So there's a whole vanilla bean in with this rhubarb. I just saw that there's not enough sage flowers to really put in the salad so it's going to be a little garnish so. The first course is very green. The second course is like very warm and roasty like wild rice, zucchinis and mushrooms and all like earthy tones. And so I just needed to have something of a little bit of colour and what I have in the garden right now, I have roses. Well I have a tiny little miniature rose and it's red and I have a lot of strawberries. Rather than putting the strawberries in the strawberry rhubarb pie which is such a

shame to cook strawberries I thought that I would do something with them either in the salad or in the main course to brighten that plate or the monocolour of green. So I was thinking of putting rose petals in the salad.

I got some sage and marjoram and rosemary and garlic greens and I've made a pesto with it with hemp seeds and some sunflower oil. And that's going to be in the main course.

**JON:** I was the first guest to arrive at Maria Solakofski's house and as I learned was customary, when the second guest arrives, it is the first guest who then opens the door and greets them. This of course became my role. And I greeted Spencer, a boat builder from Maine, who passing through Toronto chose to stop at the Guerrilla Gourmet and receive a much more personal and welcoming dinner than can often be found at the traditional restaurant. The remainder of the evening's guests arrived as we spent time observing the final preparations of the evening's meal. I was put to the task of sourcing a collection of fresh herbs from the backyard garden to then be placed in a pitcher of boiling water which would then become the tea that we all shared prior to sitting down at a table surrounded by a well laid-out collection of cushions. The table sat within Maria's garden, the source of many of the ingredients in her first course with which great detail, she introduced to all of us.

**MARIA:** A lot of these greens I just picked from the garden. It's intense flavours like...there's a lot of...you could pick a leaf and then I'll tell you what it is but I won't tell you what everything is, now. But if you look behind you, that dinosaur kale, the big tall stuff right behind you, there's all kinds of like a spicy salad mix growing in the middle of that, I picked from there. There's this right by the zucchinis and this orange thyme. There's this soft, green, buttery lettuce there. And in front of that big bush which is a marjoram bush there's all kinds of other – it's a mild green mix and then there's parsley growing under the lilac. So just like some intense herbs. And some rose petals. And the dressing is very simple. There's miso in it which is made locally, like locally in Ontario by a company called Tradition in Claremont and then there's ginger in it.

**FEMALE:** I like that there are so many different things.....

**JON:** After about 40 minutes of conversation and story telling by the chef herself, Maria introduced the main course which as you will hear, didn't quite turn out as planned.

**FEMALE:** She choked on the food (*laughter*)

**MARIA:** (*laughs*) Because you got to have the pleasure of my company telling you ridiculously long stories. We are having some very overcooked food. These mushrooms were significantly larger. They were in a perfect state when we were serving salad but we did linger and that's fantastic because this is slow food right? So, what we have is a warm oven that continued to cook these king, baby king oyster mushrooms which you would think could be called prince mushrooms but, you know, not every baby king is a prince. You could be born a king. So we have baby king mushrooms. The baby king mushrooms I think I put pomegranate syrup on them (*someone agrees and makes hmmm sounds*) because why not.

**FEMALE:** How do you grow mushrooms?

**MARIA:** I don't but Bruno from Fungi Farm does. He is neighbours with the people that make tradition miso in Claremont. Okay, and then we have zucchinis with garlic greens from my garden and some wild bergamot which is a prairie flower. It's the only thing in Canada that has a native heritage that has a peppery taste to it. And these are the Mennonites, thank you, from

Hope, Ontario, growing zucchini so early in the season. Underneath we have wild rice cooked with sweet chestnuts which had been laboriously collected by Jonathan Forbes, the Wild Foods man at Dufferin Market and many other markets. And then the chestnuts are cleaned and they're dried and so I cook them with the wild rice. And then the tempeh was not so crispy as this but let's pretend that we meant for it to be so crispy as this. Henry made the tempeh and he is from Waterloo, Ontario. And what we have with it is a very luscious pesto made with the three strongest herbs from the garden that you would not eat normally such an abundance of – sage, rosemary, and marjoram. And like lots of them. So like it's an intense flavour, like you can't just eat, you know, a handful of sage leaves. And I had some walnuts and I just forgot that I was suppose to get more hemp seeds and I didn't so I put the walnuts in too.

And it's funny, once Henry heard me on the CBC radio when someone was talking about the menu and that I had served tempeh because I love tempeh, I think it's the wonder food from outer space and Henry sent me an e-mail, like two minutes after he heard what the menu was and said – hi, my name's Henry and I make tempeh and thanks for using tempeh. And I wrote back to him like – thanks Henry, I always use your tempeh.

As you can see, I don't necessarily believe in forks and you can use your fingers. This is part of it right? See if I ran a restaurant this would not be possible and the other thing that wouldn't be possible is that we wouldn't be sitting her chatting. And then everyone would be very concerned but there would be other people in white coats that were making the food exactly at that time and so this is just a little more natural about what happens. And this is how things are discovered.

Oh wow these mushrooms are fantastic left in a slow oven! They're chewy and they're like little caramelized candies with pomegranate syrup all over them (*others laugh*).

**JON:** As guests polished off the main course, some helped clear the table and retreated to the kitchen while others remained outdoors. The pace of the evening was far different than any other restaurant experience. And there were no expectations of when the dessert would arrive and it was during this time that the real pleasure of this unique experience rang true. This wasn't any restaurant experience whereby the dinner was just part of the evening. This particular dinner was the evening, with food being the catalyst for newly formed friendships and interesting conversation. And then, dessert arrived.

**FEMALE:** Maria tell us about this delicious pie.

**MARIA:** Oh, it's rhubarb.

**FEMALE:** And the crust?

**MARIA:** It's rhubarb and it has vanilla beans in it. The rhubarb came from my friend Dave's garden and I rode my bike up there today at Dupont and Bathurst and I picked it out of his backyard and he wasn't home (*some laughter*).

**FEMALE:** The crust is amazing.

**MARIA:** Okay, we will talk about the crust. Oh, I need a spoon (*laughs*). This is Spelt flour. Yeah, so do you know what Spelt is? Spelt is an older form of wheat. It hasn't been so cultivated and directed and created by us for our weather conditions and all of these things. So it just has more B vitamins in it and has less gluten in it.

**JON:** You're tuned in to part 3 of the CONSCIENTIOUS COOKS series on Deconstructing Dinner, with those last segments providing a collage of recordings from my visit to a dinner hosted by Maria Solakofski, also known as the Guerrilla Gourmet, and who is the feature for today's one-hour broadcast. When all was said and done and the evening came to a close, it wasn't until over five hours later that guests began to leave – truly an experience far different from the average visit to a local restaurant. Having spent quite a bit of time in Toronto during this visit, I sat down with Maria yet again a few days following this dinner to learn more about what drives her to operate such a unique concept that challenges the more traditional approaches to eating out. In this next segment featuring some of this conversation, Maria begins by quoting one of her previous guests observations – a guest who later wrote an article about his experience at the Guerrilla Gourmet.

**MARIA:** Kevin Bottero wrote this article about slow food in his new magazine called The Mindful Word - Creating a Culture of Engaged Living. And this is the first issue and he came to a dinner in January. And I really appreciate being able to read and hear how other people interpret their experiences with me because people ask me often can you explain what you do. And if I'm with someone that's experienced it I say – let them explain it to you because, you know it's like an artist – if I try and tell you what you're suppose to interpret from the painting, that's not what the art's about. I think it has a lot to do with your interpretation. So, I like how he summarized this. He says, “I consider the spontaneity of the event thus far: random scheduling, unplanned menu selection and complete strangers eating together in a stranger's home. These are the tools in Solakofski's guerrilla arsenal. By creating an atypical eating experience, the Guerrilla Gourmet helps disengage minds conditioned by patterns of passive consumption.” And I just thought that's exactly it (*laughs*). That's so cool. The challenge, like I know that, I've thought of that. Just that one of the first interviews that I had someone was asking me like, you know, how is it that you get people to come to these dinners or to accept that you don't know what you're eating, you don't know where you're going, you don't know who's going to be there. And I said – well if you can accept those conditions then you're a great candidate to be open to the whole different experience of it.

But the other thing that I really liked that he wrote was describing the meal. And then he says “After all the plates are in place she proudly proclaims the names of all the vegetables as if they were her children: sunchokes, golden potatoes, parsnips, carrots and shallots, all grown in Ontario and seasoned with five different types of basil from the backyard.” And it was just so funny, like these little vegetables are all my children. I just thought that was really cool because there is a real mothering instinct about how you know, just bringing people together around the table like that.

**JON:** What stood out from Kevin's article when you were reading that was his notion that Guerrilla Gourmet is challenging this passive consumption that in the sense of the more traditional forms of eating out, going to restaurants is really what drives that model of sitting down, having this disconnection with who's behind the kitchen, having this disconnection with all the people who are sitting around you in essence, Guerrilla Gourmet is challenging that. What is it would you say about eating out and going into that traditional setting that people are not receiving or being a part of, that they instead are being a part of here, in your home?

**MARIA:** A friend just was talking to me about this who's worked in a kitchen for a long time in a restaurant and he's just quit. And he wants to leave that scene for awhile. He said you know as soon as you walk into a restaurant, there's a contract and (*sound of tapping*) it's that foot tapping. Like as soon as you walk into a restaurant there's an expectation. Food is coming, that's why you're here. You've walked in here because you're here and you're tapping your foot and there's

this clock that's going and you're waiting. And that does not allow a slow food experience. Yeah, you were the one that told me that when you came for dinner it was like – yeah here's a new friend and that it would seem very odd to have that expectation and the dinner that I had last night with so many here and everyone was just hanging about in the garden. And we were talking about that same thing and about the timing of things and they went – no, there's no rush, yeah, whatever, you know, whenever things come out, they come out and there's just that timing of waiting, of urgency. It changes right away because you're visiting someone's home. Right, so do you go over to your friend's house when they're hosting you and go – come on, I'm starving, where's the food? Right, you just don't have that attitude there. It's a different attitude. It's more co-operative where people are like – ah, can we gather the plates or can I help you pick some herbs from the garden or something? And that also offers the involvement. I mean, people do pay me to come and have dinner so I wash the dishes. But there is a sense of involvement and satisfaction that is a novelty for people that they really enjoy that and so they do want to find some way to be involved even if it's just like when they come in to go to the bathroom and then they say – oh can I take these pitchers of tea? Right to bring them out they just want to be involved to do something and it's because that feels natural, right? With food and sharing to be involved in it.

**JON:** What is the common dynamic that exists when people are coming over. You must have very different people showing up every week that you're hosting these. Is there a common energy that exists among people or is there ever discomfort among those that are here because it is a very different environment for people. Or is there a level of comfort because people are coming essentially into someone else's home. How do you observe that?

**MARIA:** I feel that I'm very open and welcoming when people come over and in general just in my life. Most particularly at dinner and I don't want to try too hard because that trying too hard is going to put that feeling of I'm trying too hard to make you comfortable, right? So like the less that I do and just like – yeah, you can be here, you can be out there. There's no rules to how things happen here, that's the basis right. So I just say – you figure out what you want to do and do it. Don't feel like you have to do any one thing because there's no agreement about how this is suppose to happen. Eventually I'm going to serve you dinner tonight and that's the only understanding that we're both in agreement on. And anything else and how the details of that, the hows of it, are really determined by the guests that are here.

**JON:** One thing you will never find in a restaurant is someone walking into a restaurant and feeling a responsibility to help make the food in the kitchen, right or to help wash the dishes. And when I came here I found this desire to want to help. You know, that here I was in the kitchen and I might as well help because I'm here and I might as well be a part of this meal that's going to be prepared and that I also might as well clean up afterwards because I'm also here and you don't find that in a restaurant. Does that happen often when people are coming here? Is there a lot of involvement from your guests?

**MARIA:** Yeah, it is very much so and that's the difference of what I'm doing. Why, I've said this. I don't actually think that people should eat in restaurants as a habit. I certainly love to be served but if you're served all the time, there's a laziness that develops from that - that can develop from that. What happens here is like no you're not coming to a restaurant, you're not here just for me to serve you dinner. You're here for this experience of what it takes to bring food together and grow it and harvest it and prepare it and lay it all out for you with everyone sharing it. So, for people to want to be involved in any way to help, it doesn't feel unnatural to me or like, oh yeah, isn't that a smart idea - people are paying you and you've got them working for you. But it's like, no you work when you go to school or you work if you're going to take a workshop with

someone or seminar, it's like this is experiential and food is just the basis of it. But yeah, it's a lot more than just the foods, so.

**JON:** And this is Deconstructing Dinner. In closing out my conversation with Toronto's Maria Solakofski and in also closing out today's part 3 of our ongoing CONSCIENTIOUS COOKS series, Maria ended with the following comments. And in doing so reintroduces her role as what many would now refer to as a community food animator, whereby she has become involved in a number of projects that encourage a more engaged approach to eating, and one which inevitably fosters a more intimate form of community. A reminder that should you wish to contact the Guerrilla Gourmet, this information will be made available on the Deconstructing Dinner website, or you can go directly to [guerrilla-gourmet.com](http://guerrilla-gourmet.com) and that spelling is G-U-E-R-R-I-L-L-A. And her phone number is 647-831-3377.

**MARIA:** There is this layering of things like I've started working with kids and started to take kids to the farmers markets on field trips as a sense-awareness trip. And I just got an e-mail today from the people that are behind me with connecting me to the schools that I'm doing this with saying I've been offering only like weekday markets because that's when the kids are at school and at daycare and I just got a message saying – would you consider doing a Saturday market? And then after you deal with the kids you can have a chat with the parents? Yah!! (*laughs*) Like that's exactly it, that's exactly, exactly it! If I can have more people aware of that there is another way to do things then you don't have to shop at the supermarket. And shopping at the supermarket doesn't have to be bad but like let's support a local economy. I am a local economy so if people start to recognize that they can live more locally then people will start talking to people and communities will be formed and people will be friendly. And then neighbours won't call the police if there's a little bit of noise or if someone's doing something that they don't think is normal or that they don't recognize. You know they won't be so threatened because that barrier will disassemble itself and that's a lot of what the dinners is about is just making people connect. When people connect with each other then they connect with everything, with nature and you have a connection with nature, you hear this rhythm of what's happening. And a lot of people disconnect from their own rhythm because they're listening to what other people say. That way of like, I'm at work and then I'm at home and having these separate lives really disconnects people and food is an essential part of that. And so I'm just, I guess showing like how there's this one big circle and one big picture by opening my door. Like I'm really not doing anything but living my life and I'm just allowing people to join me if they want to.

*ending theme*

**JON:** *And that was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson, British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman.*

*The theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson-area resident, Adham Shaikh.*

*This radio program is provided free of charge to campus/community radio stations across the country, and relies on the financial support from you the listener. Support for the program can be donated through our website at [cjly.net/deconstructingdinner](http://cjly.net/deconstructingdinner) or by dialing 250-352-9600.*

*Till next week.*