

From Innocent Inquiry to Suggested Industry Changes: The Story of How #Buttergate Went Viral

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Over the last several years, Canadian consumers' desire to reach a higher level of food literacy – knowledge about food – has increased. Rightfully so, consumers are curious and are beginning to examine the origins of their food and the production methods behind it, which can uncover a wealth of underlying information. Consumers are leaning, more than ever, on social media as a platform for their voices to be heard. On February 5, 2021, Julie Van Rosendaal, a Calgarian cookbook author and food writer, brought attention to the changed consistency of room temperature butter and committed to finding out the root cause of such a change using Twitter as a medium to keep her foodie followers up to date. Her inquiring tweet quickly sparked a global digital movement now referred to as “#buttergate” (@FoodProfessor). Have Canadians been left in the dark by an industry they have long trusted? When #buttergate stepped into the spotlight, Canadian dairy consumers looked to the government-regulated industry for answers as to why their butter had changed consistency. Consumers' concerns were heard, eventually forcing the industry to nimbly pivot and respond by implementing swift changes to otherwise acceptable, longstanding production practices. #Buttergate has proven the power consumerism holds to promote consumers' voices and to produce changes in the food industry, which would not have been possible without the useful presence and far-reaching influence of social media.

Van Rosendaal first tweeted that “something is up with our butter supply, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it. Have you noticed it's no longer soft at room temperature? Watery? Rubbery?,” bringing attention to the consistency of her room temperature butter (@dinnerwithjulie). Van Rosendaal theorized that changes in dairy farming practices to modify the fatty acid profile of milk in an attempt to boost yield may be one of the culprits

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(@dinnerwithjulie). Surprisingly, within days her inbox was flooded with messages from fellow Canadian dairy consumers sharing they, too, had noticed a change in the consistency of their butter at room temperature. Even a former employee of the livestock feed industry reached out to Van Rosendaal to offer insight into the firmer texture and suggested that recent supply-chain disruptions could be the culprit (Van Rosendaal). Many consumers have said, *so what if our butter is firmer? Besides, consumers have preferences when it comes to the consistency of their butter.* Some may not all want soft butter – it depends on the end-user of the product. For example, bakeries look to a firmer butter which produces a flakier product, whereas home bakers look to a softer, more spreadable butter (Mosley et al. 987). However, social media chatter is no longer just about consumer preference as it relates to the consistency of butter. With the spotlight now turned to the possibility that domestic livestock may have received diets supplemented with palmitic acid, consumers may wonder if the use of palmitic supplements in dairy feed is safe: for the animal and for humans.

Consumers know that butter should not be destroying their bread, and most of them are under the impression that consuming certain levels of saturated fat is unhealthy; therefore, consumers are raising questions about the safety of adding palm fat supplements to livestock feed (Leyland). Saturated fats are what add *form* to butter, and they are solid at room temperature (“Types of Fats”). Therefore, the more saturated a fat is, the longer it takes for it to become soft at room temperature. Over the years, consumers have been advised to avoid overconsuming saturated fats as they can cause cholesterol build-up in arteries, raising *bad* cholesterol, and further increasing the risk for heart disease. In addition, the World Health Organization has reported that a higher intake of palmitic acid is also associated with the risk of coronary heart disease (Van Rosendaal). Does the addition of highly-saturated palm fats to cattle diets influence human health? According to Mosley et al., adding supplemental fats to dairy cattle feed has been typically used to bolster the cow’s diet and subsequently increase milk yield (987). There has also been research into milk fat with higher concentrations of saturated fatty acids and the possible benefits to the cow that may exist – that “adding high levels of palmitic acid can be an effective method to increase energy intake without the negative effects on ... milk fat” (Mosley et al. 987, 993). Further, when dairy cows’ diets are supplemented with palm fats, it is “known to alter the saturated fatty acid profile of the resulting milk fat – a shift that could show up in butter that’s firmer at room temperature” (Van Rosendaal). However, according to Dr. Sylvain Charlebois, professor and director of the Agri-Food Analytics lab at Dalhousie University, “little research has been conducted on how feeding palmitic acids to dairy cows could compromise the health of both animals and humans” (Charlebois). Considering the lack of scientific research linking cattle diets with possible health effects on consumers, a strong argument can then be made for the industry to support research on this growing concern (Charlebois). Now that consumers are aware that domestic dairy cows may have been supplemented with palmitic

acid, there is a great possibility that some may choose to stop buying butter in its current state. In the past, consumers would have relied on the government to ask the questions of the industry that Van Rosendaal is asking. Social media quickly offered a space for consumers to directly ask industry their questions; whereas, without the social platform, they likely would not have been privy to much of this information. Now, in the spirit of consumerism, consumers can produce change only by refusing to buy butter and forcing the dairy industry to address the concerns about the level of fats in the butter.

The sky-high standards and strict policies that govern Canada's dairy sector are largely influenced by The Dairy Farmers of Canada, a powerful industry lobby group. This group claims to lobby on behalf of Canadian dairy producers to ensure transparency and accountability within the dairy sector. However, because the lobby group is funded and run by farmers and primarily protects industry farmers, the consideration of consumers' best interests can easily take a back seat. How can a group look out for the consumer and producer, especially when actions (or inactions) affect their bottom line? In an effort to be transparent, the lobby group released three consecutive statements in response to consumer concerns. First, on February 11, 2021, it acknowledged awareness of the concerns with firmer-than-usual butter, and due to a lack of data to show for the change in the consistency, it would strike a working group of industry experts to further investigate the consumer claims (Dairy Farmers of Canada 11 Feb. 2021). In its second statement that followed shortly thereafter on February 19, 2021, the group reassured consumers that "the use of palm fat in dairy feed is not new and is a safe ingredient, approved for use by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency" (Dairy Farmers of Canada 19 Feb. 2021). Contrarily, less than one week later, they released a final statement on February 25, 2021, asking dairy farmers to consider using alternatives to palm supplements (Dairy Farmers of Canada 25 Feb. 2021). Given the extent of contradictory and convoluted information, consumers were left scratching their heads. Without the presence of social media, these seemingly transparent statements would not have reached consumers as widely as they did and would not have pushed consumers to hold the industry accountable for its actions – further underlining the importance of transparency. Social media holds significant power – it can reach a large audience in a short amount of time, and it has the ability to maintain the speeds of dynamic digital movements.

The country took notice of the #buttergate hashtag when Charlebois coined the term "buttergate" in a tweet on February 12, 2021, in which he writes "#Buttergate in the making..." (@FoodProfessor). Charlebois recalls his igniting tweet and emphasized that the catalyst for social change is having a concise message: "if you want social change, you need a brand. If your message is too complicated, people just won't get it" (Friedman 00:03:10-00:03:44). With the emergence of the #buttergate hashtag and its implication of a

cover-up, consumers began questioning what information was being withheld. Over the last year, Canada has seen a surprising 26 percent increase in the demand for its butter, and Charlebois suspects that in order to keep up with the spike in demand, farmers have leaned on the dietary supplemental use of palmitic acid – a by-product of palm oil as a cost-effective way to increase energy and boost the yield from their dairy-producing cattle (Friedman 00:09:09–00:10:20). Furthermore, some believe that dairy farmers have *increased* the levels of palm supplements in cattle feed to keep up with “pandemic-fueled [baking demands]” (Bresge “Directive”). Charlebois’ theory has the potential to be proved since the industry has not yet provided any evidence to the contrary. Daniel Scothorn, leader of a Canadian-based nutritional consulting company that is responsible for importing palmitic acid for use in livestock feed supplements, says, “[f]armers were asked by the processors to increase production, but to get more replacement cows [it] would take a while... it makes more sense to feed them a higher-calorie diet to meet immediate demands” (qtd. in Van Rosendaal). Some consumers may be left to wonder if the change in the consistency could be attributed to an adjustment of the supplement levels administered to cattle in their feed. The industry has failed to address the levels at which they are *now* supplementing their cattle’s feed with palmitic acid, which the industry could view as unimportant information to the average consumer. Therefore, one may argue that the dairy industry felt it unnecessary to be transparent due to the pressure to meet the demands that the pandemic was placing on the supply of butter. However, even with the sheer quantity of raw information available on social media, consumers are left with a lack of structured and straightforward guidance; thus, they might feel inclined to *trust the system* – the system that has consumers’ and animals’ best interests in mind, ostensibly the transparent dairy industry. Social media can often be seen in a negative light; however, #buttergate proves that without the helping hand of a simple social media hashtag, Van Rosendaal’s innocuous and insightful inquiry would not have taken viral flight.

In the absence of social media, #buttergate would not have revealed conflicting information, which further encouraged consumers and researchers to strive to uncover additional truths. Due to the contrary industry statements, some might feel as though the protected and privileged dairy industry has breached its moral contract with its domestic consumers – highlighting the gaps that exist within the large industry. Industry policy and regulations largely exist to protect the consumer. The 14.8-billion-dollar dairy industry is tightly controlled by a closed supply-management system, which controls its prices, production, and imposes strict import quotas (Bedford). Under this system, all dairy producers have a production quota guarding against overproduction, allowing producers to earn a stable living (Friedman 00:05:56–00:06:07). “Dairy farmers are paid based on the components of their milk – butterfat, protein, and lactose and other solids – rather than overall volume... butterfat has a higher value than protein and other solids,” and in Canada,

butter must contain no less than 80-per-cent milk fat (Van Rosendaal). Therefore, an argument can be made that there is adequate motivation for producers to use palmitic feed supplements to boost or maintain optimal milk fat levels in the dairy they produce, especially to keep up with a spike in demand. In his over 25 years of observing the industry, Charlebois can't recall another time when consumers had the ear of this large industry as they do now (Friedman 00:06:38-00:07:26). The trust-local message and the signal of high quality that is behind the blue cow logo of Canadian-produced dairy are now threatened because of a lack of transparency that exists between the industry and its local consumers. Charlebois passionately expressed, "transparency is a choice... [the dairy industry] chose not to [be transparent] ...Canadians were caught off guard... shocked when they learned that palmitic supplements were used as an energy supplement on dairy farms" (Friedman 00:04:44-00:05:06). Charlebois voices "when you run a closed system, how can you possibly know what is ethically and morally acceptable anymore?" (Friedman 00:16:12-00:16:21). Canadian consumers should aspire to reach high-quality dairy products, where, unfortunately, room for improvement of quality exists (Friedman 00:16:44-00:17:25). For an industry that upholds high-quality standards, consumers have every right to demand more from their dairy. The opacity of butter and the opacity of the dairy industry is not a similarity that Canadians deserve, and a *buttergate* is not what the industry needs. Consumers deserve to be in full possession of all of the facts as they relate to supplementing livestock feed, even if they need to turn to social media to find what they are looking for.

The controversy behind #buttergate managed to proliferate across a local, national, and global digital platform. Within three weeks, Van Rosendaal's curiosity around the changes of consistency in room temperature butter quickly garnered international attention not only from industry experts but also from celebrities. For example, the Tonight Show host, Jimmy Fallon, joked about Canada's butter woes, and world-renowned chef Nigella Lawson thanked Van Rosendaal for her "sterling work on behalf of butter" on Twitter (Cukier). Some in the industry believe the industry's hands were tied, that they had to respond in this way, and that the media hype had no factual basis and subsequently caused too much of a threat to the industry for them to stand idly by (Bresge "Directive"). It can also be argued that Van Rosendaal did not "specifically and deliberately strategize with inventive considerations conscious of third-party recomposing" when she initially conversed with her Twitter followers on February 5, 2021 (Ridolfo and DeVoss 2009). Regardless of her intentions, Van Rosendaal's original tweet gained its speedy momentum and its significant flight into rhetorical velocity, eventually landing in a global digital discourse – likely not her initially intended audience (her Twitter followers). Acquiring the attention of transparency-seeking dairy consumers south of the border, Van Rosendaal shared an enjoyable moment on Twitter – @AlfordAlice writes, "what I, as an outsider, find most shocking is that the dairy council caved when called out. Americans, can you imagine just

saying to a giant, powerful industry, “Hey, we know you’re doing something we told you not to do. Knock it the fuck off” and then having that industry actually knock it the fuck off? It’s like they have some sort of functioning society just positively glazed with good-ass butter up there” (qtd. in @dinnerwithjulie). #Buttergate continues to spread through being reported by news outlets across the globe – notably holding a spot as a top story on *BBC News* for a period of 24 hours. In less than three short weeks, Van Rosendaal’s harmless tweet went from a conversation among her followers to an international media sensation, eventually steering meaningful changes in a tightly government-controlled industry, where consumers typically hold little to no power (Bresge “Directive”).

Looking at what began as an innocent inquiry and how it quickly morphed into a digital movement – bordering on food activism – represents the power of consumers’ voice when coupled with social media. When given a digital platform, voices can loudly echo across the world and have the potential to force meaningful change. #Buttergate is centred on a widely-loved, widely-used, simple everyday product, but it has also shown us that when consumers push back, they can greatly impact a large industry’s choice to be transparent. The ripple effect of changes felt across the dairy industry also has the potential to be felt across the food industry at large – thanks to the far-reaching and powerful influence of social media on consumerism. The important message at the heart of #buttergate is that consumers deserve transparency. Not all may agree that the anecdotal claims hold scientific merit; however, Van Rosendaal deserves a *pat* on the back for her unconsciously innocent food activism – even if *spreading* the word wasn’t her original intent (Bresge, “Buttergate”). In general, butter consists of, at most, two ingredients: cream and salt. Imagine if we questioned our food with more than two ingredients in this way: what meaningful change in our food’s ecosystem could be on the horizon.

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