

# Alumni Gazette

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## APPETITE FOR CHANGE

Michael McCain, HBA'79,  
LLD'17, reshapes the role  
of food in our world



Western

BY JASON WINDERS, MES'10, PHD'16

# Appetite for *deconstruction*

Michael McCain, HBA'79, LLD'17, rethinking the role of food in our world

Michael McCain has never shied away from the right thing – even when it wasn't the easiest thing. And now, a decade after his most daunting professional challenge, the Maple Leaf Foods President and CEO is building a company set to become unlike any other on the planet.

Born in Florenceville, N.B., McCain started university at 16. After completing two years at Mount Allison University, he was approached by the dean of the school's Commerce Department about the future. Seeing something in the young man that could benefit from broader opportunities, the dean advised McCain to transfer to the Ivey Business School.

"I had a big appetite for challenge and adventure – and that sounded like quite a challenge and adventure," McCain said.

At Western, McCain thrived by embracing the "intensely focused experience" of Ivey.

"I was something of a workaholic at the time. Mine was an academic experience. I didn't have the first two years at the school – I didn't have that broad, social experience," explained McCain, whose five kids all attended Western and had, he points out with a laugh, "more of a social experience than I did."

"But what I had was a deep, enduring experience with my classmates. It is a tight-knit experience."

And what he drew from Ivey, he carried with him into his career.

"When I think to my time there, there are two things that endure not just in business, but in my whole life's ecosystem. One was the mental discipline of decision-making, the architecture of how Ivey teaches. Everything was about embedding the DNA of decision-making – the art and science of the simple notion that you have got to make a call," McCain said.



(PHOTO BY FRANK NEUFELD)

“The second was around communication skills. It was about coming to class with that feeling of preparedness but still knowing there was someone in the class just a little more intelligent, that spent just another hour preparing, who had a completely different point of view and was going to share it. You had to be ready to defend your point of view. That art of communication was foundational.”

McCain has since devoted his career to the food industry, starting at McCain Foods in the late 1970s where he held a variety of roles culminating in his appointment as President and CEO of McCain Foods USA. He joined Maple Leaf Foods in 1995. For most of his life, he has watched an industry evolve.

“The food industry has gone through lots of transition. Our journey, specifically, at Maple Leaf has been one of evolution and transformation. It has had many successes, and many obstacles, along the way,” he said.

No obstacle was bigger than the crisis the Canadian food processing giant faced a decade ago.

In August 2008, listeriosis contamination was confirmed at one of the company’s meat-processing plants near Toronto. In total, 23 deaths and numerous serious illnesses would be linked to the outbreak.

## IT HAS TO BE ABOUT MORE THAN PROFITABLE GROWTH – THERE NEEDS TO BE PURPOSE HERE.

Starting the evening the outbreak was confirmed, and continuing throughout the crisis, McCain and his team took accountability for the issues and opted for transparency, rather than spin, in providing information to the public. The handling of the situation is still studied today as an example of responsible crisis management. That ‘buck-stops-here’ approach is credited with not only saving the company, but restoring confidence in the entire Canadian food industry.

Today, McCain heads a company with a renewed vision, a company that sees itself as a larger part of the solution to problems faced by the planet.

“We came through a difficult period, a decade of struggle in our business. We spent a billion dollars in our supply chain to rebuild that. It was re-engineering – fixing, if you will – our business. When we came to a successful conclusion of that, the whole energy of our team turned from fixing a business to what do we want to be in the future, how do we want to grow, how do we find a prosperous future of growth in our industry,” he explained.

“That led quickly to the question of ‘Why?’ There is a big appetite to answer, ‘Why the hell do we want to do this?’”

For Maple Leaf Foods, that answer was bigger than many expected.

“The idea of shared value in our prosperity is where commercial enterprise needs to change the lens through which we look. Capitalism 2.0 needs to be defined through the construct of shared value – what is good and healthy for the business only on the basis it creates value in the society, as well. That’s how we define our future,” McCain said.

“It has to be about more than profitable growth – there needs to be purpose here. Our path forward is to find that shared value. We can both find prosperous growth as a business and be a different kind of company in our industry.”

Maple Leaf has opted to confront the “challenging place” the industry finds itself in.

“It’s a challenge that connects the needs of feeding nine billion people by 2050 with the recognition that Planet Earth does not have a sustainable capability today to accomplish that. The food security – or, said differently, the food insecurity – attached to that crisis is compelling to anyone in the industry. It’s addressing the needs of billions by finding a balance between affordability, accessibility, nutrition, sustainability and animal welfare – all of which conflict with one another, none of which have the ability to address the fundamental challenge of feeding nine billion people.”

Last June, McCain and Maple Leaf Foods set out a bold, new vision. They plan to become “the most sustainable protein company on Earth,” a goal based on a sweeping set of principles and an expansive agenda that has yielded substantial advancements in nutrition and environmental impact, elevated animal care, and step-changed the company’s investment in social change.

Sustainability requires a broad perspective and Maple Leaf has spent a lot of time researching and thinking about what this entails. The result is an industry-first set of Sustainable Meat Principles that will guide the company’s growth and business practices.

Beyond being “the right thing to do,” the company’s vision aligns with the changing tastes of its consumers, and an oncoming generation “materially more focused on responsible consumption.”

“Their food purchases need to mean something more than just a great food experience,” McCain said. “It has to be delivered in a way that is responsible. They are helping revolutionize the food industry.”

McCain touts his as an organization that embraces changes – “We have been through so much of it.” – but knows the path forward is not necessarily easy.

“When you establish a goal to be the most sustainable protein company on Earth, that is a relatively bold undertaking. There is the continuous appetite to understand how we are going to address the questions of ‘Is that possible?’ ‘How?’ ‘Is that important?’ ‘What does it mean to the commercial success of the business?’

“Today, most of the people in the organization are emotionally aligned with this. It would be hard to argue this idea doesn’t matter; it is too obvious to ignore. The obstacle isn’t that, but it is ‘Wow, that is really important, but that is really big – can we do this?’ My job is to give people the clarity that, yes, we can do this.” **WAG**

BY KRISTA HABERMEHL, MA’05

# Around the world in 40 Days



ne hundred and three airports. Fourteen countries. Thirty-eight thousand kilometres.

All in the span of just over a month.

Father-and-son-team Bob and Steve Dengler, BA’93, covered that distance this summer in a Bell 429 Global Ranger helicopter. The seasoned aviators took off from Ottawa July 1 for what was the first-ever father/son aircraft circumnavigation and the first-ever Canadian helicopter circumnavigation of the globe.

“Basically, it was an idea my father had that, when I got involved, went from being a ‘what if’ to a ‘let’s do it.’ We’ve probably spent more quality time together in the last year, planning the trip, than we did in the previous 10. It’s been an amazing time to reconnect, re-establish the relationship that, because we’ve both been busy, we haven’t had the time to put a lot into,” said Steve.

Throughout the journey, which took the Denglers through the Canadian Arctic and remote locations in Greenland, Iceland and Russia, they photographed and live-streamed what they saw, thanks to a helicopter equipped with broadband Internet. They also brought VIP guests on board for different legs of the journey, including hockey legend Guy Lafleur, astronaut Dave Williams and internationally renowned photojournalist Peter Bregg. **WAG**



(PHOTO BY PAUL MAYNE)