



MADE  
IN

# Montreal

A MELTING POT OF CANADIAN  
INGREDIENTS, FRENCH  
CHEFS AND INTERNATIONAL  
FLAVORS, QUÉBÉCOIS CUISINE  
CONTINUES TO EVOLVE

by  
LIZ GROSSMAN

photos by  
HUGE GALDONES



Manning the massive smoker at Cabane à Sucre  
Au Pied de Cochon

# Montréal

“We started with soufflé of pike *mere jeanne*, and filet of sole *paupiette palais royale*. Never did we taste such a magnificently delicate soufflé, and sauce for the trout was superb. This was serious eating at its best,” wrote the late owner of Chicago’s Blackhawk restaurant, Don Roth, on August 13, 1967, in a review of a \$10 meal he enjoyed inside the French pavilion at Montréal’s Expo 67. The World’s Fair also

provided culinary pavilions for Czech, Swiss, Belgian, Indian and dozens of other chefs who came to cook their native cuisines for more than 50 million visitors over six months, but “of these chefs, the majority were French,” writes David McMillan of Montréal restaurants Joe Beef, Le Vin Papillon and Liverpool House in his book, *The Art of Living According to Joe Beef* (Ten Speed Press, 2011). “They came for the food and stayed for the forests, rivers, lakes and the women (hey, it was the summer of love!). Over the next 30 years, the French reigned in Québec City and Montréal.” These chefs proceeded to open French restaurants all over town (including L’Express, which has been packed since it opened in 1980) and influenced Québec chefs to travel to France to work in their restaurants. “It also delayed the arrival of ready-made foods like margarine, and curbed Montréalers’ appetites for abominations like canned meat and processed cheese, at least for a little while,” writes McMillan.



Poutine, pogo and hot dog at Chez Tousignant

### THE NEW FRENCH

Two Québécois chefs strongly influenced by the French chef diaspora and an appreciation for local ingredients were Christine Lamarche and Normand Laprise of Montréal's 23-year-old fine dining temple, Toqué. "In the '60s and '70s, Montréal chefs were almost all from France and served traditional French fare with imported products," Lamarche says. "Today, 'cuisine Québécoise' is modern and has a young history. It's marked by the seasons and Québec *terroir* and

prepared by Québécois chefs." Toqué opened with only 55 seats and a small à la carte menu. Today, they serve a seasonal, über-local tasting menu.

"It was so fresh, new and cool," writes McMillan of Toqué. "Everyone wanted to work there and a lot of us did...It was like the Bohemian movement in Paris, a powerhouse of great talent," continues McMillan, who met his partner Fred Morin while working at Toqué along with other notable chefs like Martin Picard of Au Pied de Cochon and Cabane à Sucre



Michele Forgione



### TO THE SUGAR CABIN IN THE WOODS

Making our way out of Montréal to escape the pace of the city, we headed to St-Benoît-de-Mirabel, where the golden late-afternoon light bounced off emerald-green hills, sprawling farms and trees donning every baking-spice hue of fall. You'd swear we were in northern Wisconsin or even the French countryside, but instead, we were heading to Cabane à Sucre Au Pied de Cochon, Martin Picard's Québécois sugar shack. Before we entered, there was plenty outside to soak in. The log cabin restaurant glowed against maple trees lush with goldenrod, burgundy and burnt sienna. Smoke curled from a black smoker that looked like a turn-of-the-century locomotive,



Venison carpaccio at Bouillon Bilk

Au Pied de Cochon (see “To the Sugar Cabin in the Woods,” p. 44).

“We’ve always used good-quality local product and always knew who raised the duck, the lamb, who grew the carrots,” Lamarche says. “If you look in France or Italy, they have a very long history. Here, it’s only 400 years or 500 years. We have things our grandmothers were cooking, but it was another lifestyle. They were cooking with fat, root vegetables and pig, and they didn’t have all the products we have now, so this is old Québec cuisine. Now the influences are coming from many countries, a lot of young chefs are trying things and technology has made a big difference in the world’s kitchens.”

One of those Montréal chefs is François Nadon, who started out cooking classic French food at a bistro near Ottawa, but was inspired by other culinary influences for his six-year-old contemporary restaurant, Bouillon Bilk. “We’re influenced by Italy, Asian products, raw fish, Québec-produced venison, game and modern cooking techniques. It’s more like North American contemporary cuisine.”

His style is evident in his sea urchin

while porcine-craving kittens scurried over stacks of scraggly firewood. We walked past a tractor, more wood and up a few rocky stone steps to a porch where pre-dinner guests were sipping maple-syrup gin cocktails made from the maple water the sugar shack collects in the spring as it starts to melt and flow from the trees. Maple-syrup water is also used in the ketchup and in the feed for ducks who are raised for foie gras. During the sugar season, every meal ends with maple taffy.

But it’s fall now, which means a harvest menu at the restaurant for guests who come from all over to experience Picard’s 12-course adventure that elevates Canadian sugar-shack traditions.

“A classic sugar shack is muddy. You sit on a crowded bench; everything is done family-style,” says head chef Vincent Dion-Lavallée. “They

provided food for those working in the woods. The families would come into the shack, they would boil maple syrup, potatoes, salty pork or ham, and they’d make it a party.”

Picard, who also owns the gluttonous, 15-year-old lumberjack food-inspired Au Pied de Cochon in Montréal, opened the Cabane à Sucre in 2009 as an homage to the classic sugar shack. “There are two seasons in our sugar shack: the sugar one and the harvest one,” Picard says. “The sugar one is a bit more influenced by traditional sugar-shack cuisine, as the harvest one is inspired by the summer/autumn season.” The volume of guests throughout both seasons is so high that even with 150 pigs, maple trees, and vegetable and herb gardens, the restaurant still relies on local producers for much of its ingredients. But the family-style feel of a



Vincent Dion-Lavallée



Roasted seasonal mushrooms at Maison Publique

amuse, which is made with urchin sourced from the Gaspé Peninsula on the St. Lawrence River and served with a cold cauliflower soup, chive oil and puffed wild rice seasoned with local nori. Nadon also does a stunning venison carpaccio and a strawberry salad, created as an homage to their strawberry producer, but the chef sometimes features French specials, from

*cassoulet* to tartare and white truffles and foie gras. “We’re not shy about going back to our roots,” he says.

### PROPER POUTINE

And when you look at some of the deepest roots of French-Canadian cuisine, you can’t help but point to poutine. The heart-warming (and possibly stopping)

trifecta of French fries, gravy and cheese curds is found all over Montréal, from the foie gras-enhanced version at Au Pied de Cochon to smoked meat-latke poutines at Eastern European-inspired Déli Sokolów. But according to McMillan, poutine very likely has French roots. “You could dig deep with poutine,” he says. “It’s similar to *pommes boulangère*, which is scalloped potatoes, or baker’s potatoes with onions and veal stock. That flavor is very close to the flavor of poutine. That’s a flavor profile someone of French descent was probably craving.”

The base flavors may be French, but poutine ultimately tells different Québécois stories. “I could bring you to a small town in the countryside with five snack bars, and they make five completely different poutines,” says McMillan. “It’s like pizza in Chicago—one guy’s is thinner, one uses tomato sauce—they can be completely different.”

According to Montréal chef/restaurateur Michele Forgione, some people say poutine is English for “put it in.” “Dozens of restaurants around Québec since the ’50s claim to be the birthplace of poutine.

sugar shack can be felt in the tables packed with groups seated under a stuffed wolf in the ceiling beams caught mid-howl, and a mounted deer head peering out over the crowd. Servers balance black candelabras dotted with cheese- and popcorn-dust-covered ears of corn and roll out carts of rabbit-blood sausage terrines served on rabbit fur (a whimsical version of the French dish *hare à la royale*). It’s food that makes you stop and stare, like the whole salmon, which arrives glistening with a miso-carrot marinade, its sides curled up into a blackened crisp. “We were on a fishing trip and ended up with so much salmon that we saved the loins and barbecued the bones,” says Dion-Lavallée. “The meat near the bone had more fat and was really juicy and had a nice texture,” he says.

What’s not pulled off the barbecue or out of the



Whole salmon at Cabane à Sucre Au Pied de Cochon

There are many different stories, and every region has their own recipe,” says Forgione, who co-owns Pizzeria Gema, Impasto and Chez Tousignant, a corner snack shop, or *casse-croûte*, where the made-from-scratch poutine is comprised of hand-cut fries that stand up to dark gravy and perfectly squeaky cheese curds. “As children, we’d go to our cottage and to the *casse-croûte* for hot dogs, poutine and pogo (a Canadian corn dog),” he says. “It was my dream to open one of those snack bars, but with the mentality of a chef where everything is made from scratch—from our sauces to our hot dogs.”

He recruited his Impasto opening chef Yann Turcotte to combine his love of the *casse-croûte* with his fine-dining French background. “Yann is a stickler,” says Forgione. “Imagine working for those crazy French and English chefs, doing 10 sauces a day, and everything being so precise. That never leaves you. We put mentality into a fast-food joint.”

Chez Tousignant does do fast food, but it’s definitely more 1940s European



The menu at Maison Publique

beachside snack shop than “joint.” Black stools plucked from long-gone Québec diners and mint green and white wall tiles give it an authentic feel, while the menu reads straight from an all-Ameri-

can ’50s diner, until you get to the pogo and the hot chicken sandwich, which is delicious, but nothing like Nashville hot chicken. Here, the heat comes from the warm poutine sauce or gravy ladled over the top along with peas. Of course, Forgione’s version entails a brined, free-range chicken that’s air-dried, run through the rotisserie and pulled. “It’s that chef’s mind, doing it properly,” he says.

**CLEARLY QUÉBEC**

A hearty pile of potatoes, cheese and gravy can be found year-round in Québec, but it’s the local and seasonal cuisine that shines at British pub-inspired spots like Maison Publique. “I think Canadian and Québécois food gets stereotyped,” says its Vancouver Island-

born chef Derek Dammann. “We do have poutine, beaver tails, bacon and all those things,” he says. But his menu focuses on the best-quality products he can source during the too-short growing season. “Québécois food is very regional. We get

smoker is coming from the kitchen that buzzes with 30 trucker-hatted chefs manning a station for each course. The “evaporator’s room” is where the maple water is boiled and evaporated to make syrup during the sugar season (they were deep in ketchup-churning mode when we were there). The scene goes right along with the red- and black-checked lumberjack flannels (the “other” Canadian tuxedo, our Québécois photographer remarked) hanging on one wall. It’s the ideal arsenal to survive a Canadian winter, but the constantly evolving menu isn’t limited to Canadian influences.

“We use French cuisine as a base,” says Dion-Lavallée. “But we also use a mix of English influences. Cuisine in Québec isn’t French. It’s not English. It’s not Italian. There are no boundaries. We get ingredients and produce and do it in our way...for example



our *beurre blanc* is made with maple syrup.”

And it’s maple syrup that sparks some strong memories for Québécois chefs who grew up going to sugar shacks. In the winter, snow banks served as taffy makers, as boiling maple sap was poured in until it hardened onto a stick for a sweet parting gift.

“In the beginning of spring everything is alive and the sap starts flowing,” says Montréal chef/restaurateur Michele Forgione. “It’s a huge party. Martin took it to the next level.” David McMillan, chef/co-owner of Montréal’s Joe Beef, Le Vin Papillon and Liverpool House, agrees. “Historically, a maple guy would supplement his income by serving pancakes on a Saturday,” he says. “It was status quo for 50 years, then Martin came along and said, ‘Screw that!’ He’s a true farmer, a true agriculturist, a true chef; his food is his own food.”



Derek Dammann of Maison Publique

restaurant is more reminiscent of a British pub than a Parisian bistro (although the quaint wall menu looks like it's lifted from one). But McMillan notes that British influences are another important part of the region's past. "In history, a minority of Anglophones have controlled the province of Québec for years," he says. "The French speakers were farmers; the majority of everything was controlled by the Scots. If you look at the true essence of Québécois food, it's kind of like the food of New England—baked beans, toast, eggs, bacon, clam chowder, lots of cod and pork—a lot of original French-Canadian cooking is exactly the same as the cooking of New England. There was no real birth of French cuisine in Québec until 1964 when they knew Expo 67 was coming; the chefs started moving here in the '60s and '70s. Before that, everything was English taverns that served beer and pickled pig's tongue."

Other British-pub influences can be found in Dammann's hyper-local game dishes, be it pot-roasted guinea hen wrapped in pancetta, cold-smoked horse carpaccio or fried smoked rabbit (a "very noble meat," Dammann says), with rabbit red wine *jus*, bitter leaves and foie gras toast. "Everything comes from here, we just treat it in our own way," he says.

Creating the local product in your own way is the essence of Québécois cuisine, as long as you don't forget where it came from: "Each one of us has a story about growing up in different neighborhoods—some up north, out east, out west, far up north. Everybody realizes the French cuisine of Québec is important," says McMillan. "You have to keep history in mind. Who was there before you? Why does it work with the season? Who are the chefs that let us cook the way we do now? For me, the history component is very important for the food we do."

Liz Grossman wishes she could find good pogo in Chicago.

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## TODAY, 'CUISINE QUÉBÉCOISE' IS MODERN AND HAS A YOUNG HISTORY.

IT'S MARKED BY THE SEASONS AND THE QUÉBEC *TERROIR* AND PREPARED BY QUÉBÉCOIS CHEFS."

—CHRISTINE LAMARCHE, TOUÉ



ingredients from June to November, so everything is extremely celebrated. We're under snow for a good portion of the year, so I think Québécois cuisine is expressing ourselves through local ingredients."

For Dammann, that means a side of mushrooms (lobster, cauliflower, Hawk's Wing, chanterelle, porcini and puffball when we were there) stewed and roasted

in the pan with butter, garlic, shallots, thyme, white wine and duck stock and finished with Parmesan. "There's a simple pleasure in a bowl of mushrooms—we don't get them often, and in two to three weeks you will see them disappear."

Despite global mash-ups at Maison Publique (like *kimchi*, blood sausage and eggs for brunch), the cozy neighborhood