

Canada's cuisine: A river of flavors

Many cultures stirred traditions into the nations cooking pot

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By ANITA STEWART / Special Contributor to the Dallas Morning News



A tower of sablefish at Sooke Harbour House on Vancouver Island, B.C., a must for passionate gourmandes.

Canada's cuisine is like a magnificent frozen river. The upper icy layers are hard, immovable, laden with facts and holding order tightly.

But culinary Canada is in transition. Flowing beneath the export and grain tonnage reports is tumult, the real Canadian cuisine, rushing and powerful. In the hidden eddies lie distinct flavors.

Food in all its wild forms is Canada's reality. It is our original palate, a natural wonder, and we are blessed to be one of the few nations where it is still clearly visible in the rivers, fields and lakes.

To understand Canada's food, you must first understand the land.

Canada is vast, covering about 3.8 million square miles. Its coastline, bordering three oceans, stretches roughly 150,000 miles. It would take nine regions the size of Italy to fill the space occupied by the province of Ontario alone.

Canada is one of the last places on Earth that has entire ecosystems still intact. It teems with life, and with food.

What is Canadian cuisine? Who are we?

Ours is a tale of magnificent ingredients and of two founding nations, France and England. But no country has more ethnic traditions. The land was peopled from afar with myriad flavors. From cities to rural communities, Canada can taste the world, and we do it on our own terms and with our own ingredients.

The Irish still love their spuds, their storytelling and their rousing music.

The Scots brought oatcakes, bagpipes and dance.

Loyalists poured northward from the American colonies, bringing with them amazing beans, johnnycake, buttermilk pie — and Thanksgiving.

Russian and German Mennonites brought their Easter cheese, summer sausage and platz (pie by the yard).

Ukrainians brought pierogies and bread-making tradition. These farmers understood wheat!

Waves of Chinese helped to link the confederation by building the railroad. Then they made the Fraser River Delta bloom.

Italians built Toronto's subway and Toronto's food scene. Gray, overdone roast beef gave way to vital red and green.

Azorian Portuguese arrived with their fabulous pepper-rich fish stews and sweet egg breads.

Then came the Czechs and the Polish, the Vietnamese boat people and the Sikhs and the Sri Lankans. The list includes almost every ethnicity — and nearly every food tradition.

So here we are in 2007.

Picture the river, turbulent and ever-broadening into the widest expanse and flowing faster below with the melt waters of spring.

Canadian cuisine is about honoring the reality of our magnificent differences, our roots, our ethnicity, our future.

Fifteen years ago I visited Michigan-born food writer M.F.K. Fisher. She understood the elemental nature of food. "There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine is drunk," she wrote.

She understood that there is a food voice. It was my search for that voice that led me on an odyssey to find the authentic Canadian meal. As I hit the road, and often the railroad, I found the language of food embedded in the country inns of our nation.

These were places made intimate by those men and women who spoke "food" and whose kitchens were personality-inspired. In my quest to hear and understand, I've also learned that these places had huge staying power because their innkeepers cared. Among them:

Charles McDiarmid at the Wickaninnish Inn in Tofino, British Columbia.

Frederique and Sinclair Philip at the renowned Sooke Harbour House on the south shore of Vancouver Island, B.C. André and George Schwarz with their wine list and mountain food at The Post Hotel in Lake Louise, Alberta. The Webber family at remote North Knife Lake near Manitoba's 58th parallel. Caryn Colman and Francis Boyes at Smoothwater Ecolodge in Temagami, Ontario.

Anne Desjardins and Pierre Audette at L'eau à la Bouche, an extraordinary Relais Gourmande in Ste. Adèle in Quebec's Laurentian Mountains. The Pinsonnière's Authier family in La Malbaie on the banks of the St. Lawrence where it widens into the Charlevoix. American Dave Wilmer's Inn at Bay Fortune near Souris, Prince Edward Island, with a great chef's garden and young, creative kitchen.

Canadian food is as exotic and sexy as any on Earth.

It's herring roe dried in foamy masses on balsam fir fronds in Waglisla, British Columbia, and bite-size abalone and sea cucumber and geoduck clams encircling Vancouver Island with an extraordinary wild harvest.

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North Knife Lake Lodge in Thompson, Manitoba, is the place for eating and fishing.

It's legendary Red Fife wheat harvested in Speerville, New Brunswick, and baked into bread on the farm next to the mill before being sold at a farmers market.

It's the sensuous fragrance of ripening apricots as sunset sweeps the sky from behind the Niagara Escarpment.

It's King salmon from the Porcupine River grilled by two Yukon nurses, followed by an utterly world-class dessert of wild cranberry cheesecake with a steaming mug of hand-gathered Labrador tea.

It's blueberries thick and matted on the Canadian Shield and women who sell blueberry jam and blueberry muffins and coffeecake from the back of their van beside a railway whistle-stop in the bush of Northern Ontario.

Could there be anything more delicious than a tasting platter of Quebec's extraordinary cheeses?

Maybe it's a fresh lobster, ready to crack on a Prince Edward Island beach with a fiddler playing tunes that have accompanied the lives of generations of islanders.

This is what the world craves, a sense of connectedness to our land and lives through our food.

And we say: Come! Taste our land. It's absolutely delicious.

A noted authority on Canadian cuisine, Anita Stewart is author of 13 books on the subject, a broadcast journalist and chairwoman of Cuisine Canada, a national group of food professionals. www.anitastewart.ca