



GOURMET GETAWAY BY KAREN TINA HARRISON



Les Cons Servent toasts Quebec's traditions — it's a place where young Montreal discovers old Montreal. Photo by Samuel Archambault

Montreal, it's to dine for

New York may be the greatest city in the world, but sophisticated, international Montreal flaunts dining as dazzling as the Big Apple's.

The bilingual French-Canadian metropolis 330 miles to the north tempts with all sorts of restaurants: celeb chefs' posh domains, funky little BYOBs and heritage-proud kitchens that revel in Quebec's bounty. Even takeout grub is tops in Montreal.

Renowned gourmet chefs reign over the city's top kitchens, offering sumptuous, multicourse tasting menus. The Beaver Club, in the Fairmont Queen Elizabeth Hotel, is where Montrealers go to pop the question or celebrate a windfall on the Toronto Stock Exchange. Dress for a dignified evening, and when you're settled in, go for the house strawberry Champagne. Don't miss chef Martin Paquet's maple-glazed piglet or lobster in Canadian whisky, and save room for the predesert cheese course.

It's no gamble to dine at Nuances, the award-winning restaurant in the Casino de Montreal. Sitting in Nuances' plush, dove-gray room, with a view of the sunset, is like lounging on a cloud. Master chef Jean-Pierre Curtat's tasting menus showcase Quebec as well as his uncommon gift for seafood. The Nuances wine cellar is spectacular, so consider the "wine with each course" option.

Bronte is a supersexy spot where couples cuddle in circular white leather booths and hand-feed each other. But the oohs and aahs you hear are for chef Joe Mercuri's bold and sensual chow, which Montreal foodies love to blog about. This chef's indispensable ingredient? "Passion," says Mercuri.

Open for dinner and Sunday brunch, Les Cons Servent is a trendy yet committed "resto" with an inexpensive modern bistro menu and an equally contemporary look. Chef Stelio Perombelon's innovative recipes include crispy, fresh-caught salmon, and avocado-lavished Quebec venison carpaccio. See how your waiter translates the place's name. It's a French joke — about waiters.

How about a BYOB? Choose a fun bottle of wine in an SAQ, Quebec's classy, government-run liquor stores. Then hit Duluth St., lined with cheap yet terrific BYOBs. Le Couscous Royal cooks way-authentic Moroccan food like you'll never find in New York. Sit on the shady terrace and try owner Hafid Zniber's méchoui, an indescribably delicious roasted lamb dish.

A four-course BYOB feast is only about \$40 at Le Poisson Rouge, a spider plant-filled corner bistro facing the inviting Parc la Fontaine. Servers André and Josianne take good care of patrons, many of whom order the Quebec-raised wapiti (elk) fillet or the Arctic char caught in Atlantic Canada's waters.

Montrealers on the go, especially potatoheads, treasure Frite Alors. Its eight locations serve skinny Belgian fries right out of the fryer with your choice of mayo. Try the one spiked with harissa hot sauce.



Prosciutto-wrapped halibut is on menu at Les Cons Servent. Photo by Samuel Archambault

"The Main" is the Blvd. St. Laurent's nickname, and one of its legends is Schwartz's, a vintage, no-frills Jewish deli. If the line is long, you can buy beef brisket and rye bread to wolf down in your hotel room. Just don't ask if it's pastrami or corned beef — it's Montreal smoked meat.

Montrealers scream for ice cream from Bilboquet, whose two storefronts scoop heavenly cones. The choco-orange and praline flavors are worth the wait.

To really get into Quebec cuisine, though, shop where the chefs do, at Marché Jean-Talon. This glorious farmer's market, right on the subway line, also happens to be Montreal's most inspired photo op. It boasts acres of produce and flower stalls, delis, bakeries, cheese shops and a made-in-Quebec store where you can sample fabulous Fin du Monde beer brewed a few miles away.

Vive Montreal!

if you go...

- Montreal info: (877) BONJOUR, www.tourisme-montreal.org
- The Beaver Club: (514) 861-3511, www.fairmont.com/queenelizabeth
- Nuances: (514) 392-2708, www.casinosduquebec.com/montreal
- Bronte: (514) 934-1801, www.versailleshotels.com/en_bar.htm
- Les Cons Servent: (514) 523-8999, www.lescs.com
- Le Couscous Royal: (514) 528-1307, www.lecouscousroyal.com
- Le Poisson Rouge: (514) 522-4876, www.restaurantlepoissonrouge.ca
- Frites Alors: www.fritealors.com
- Schwartz's: (514) 842-4813, www.schwartzsdeli.com
- Bilboquet: (514) 276-0414, (514) 369-1118
- Marché Jean Talon, (514) 277-1588