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# For a Real Taste of Montreal, Go Beyond Poutine

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Photo: Alamy



As Canada's capital of cuisine, Montreal earned its food-scene fame through French-Canadian food: from the high-end, foie-gras-laden menus to the gravy-laden French fry dish, poutine. But beyond the classics and restaurants run by chefs on the covers of magazines, Montreal's dining scene holds a less-talked about treasure: food from around the globe, served at holes-in-the-wall, lunch counters, and high-end restaurants.

The combination of Montreal's relative affordability, Canada's welcoming immigration policy, and the city's population of eager diners means you can follow your Haitian mini-mart lunch of rice and beans with a dinner of fancy cocktails and a Syrian tasting menu. Here's the beginner's guide to exploring Montreal's veritable world of excellent cuisine, way beyond French fries in gravy (not that there's anything wrong with those).



Rice and Beans at Marché Méli Mélo  
Photo: Courtesy of Naomi Tomky



## Marché Méli Mélo

Just a few steps from the Jarry Metro stop, this Haitian mini-mart stocks all the tropical fruits and Caribbean fish you need to cook up an island feast. It also harbors a no-frills lunch counter in the back with what's widely considered the best Haitian food in a town filled with it. The Haitian community is more than 100,000 strong in Montreal. Patties—pastry-encased meat or fish, in either Jamaican or Haitian style—sing a siren smell from the front window, but the real treasure lies on the menu at the cash register. About twenty meats, soups, stews, and seafoods make it up, but what's most important is that almost all of it comes with the spot's magical rice and beans. Each serving could easily feed a family with its giant mound of kidney beans mixed with rice, brown with spice and flavor, and addictively good enough to make you forget the rest of the meal.



Griot at Agrikol

Photo: Courtesy of Naomi Tomky



## Agrikol

While the food at Marché Méli Mélo serves as its only ambience, this Haitian bar and restaurant, co-owned by artist Roland Jean, restaurateur Jen Agg, and Arcade Fire band members Régine Chassagne and Win Butler, specializes in it. The peach-colored, palm-painted walls and music-themed murals that decorate the house-like space transport diners immediately to the Caribbean, while a window into the kitchen—with the appearance of a beachside shack—leaks the smells to complete the trip. On the table, beguilingly savory fritters called accras are crisp on the outside, tender within, and lightened by the accompanying foil of pikliz, spicy pickled cabbage served both on the side and in a jar on the table. The griot—marinated, stewed, and fried—crackles with flavor before the chunks of pork gently melt. Big, rummy cocktails wash it all down, while upbeat music sparkles around the room. This could be New Orleans, it could be Port-au-Prince, but somehow, that’s what makes it uniquely, definitively Montreal.



Cocktails at Damas  
Photo: Courtesy of Naomi Tomky



## Damas

On lists of Montreal's best restaurants, Quebecois spots nudge shoulders with Western European cuisine, but almost all include at least one outlier: this Syrian spot. Soft lighting and a rich red ceiling reflect the lushness of the food, a gentle stroll through traditional Middle Eastern cuisine with an eye toward the modern diner. Expertly made cocktails incorporate such old-world ingredients as sour cherries and rose petals. The tasting menu inverts the mezze tradition, serving dips like hummus and labne last, so nobody fills up on bread—and giving the steak-tartare-esque kefta nayye a chance to shine before the grilled octopus and lamb chops show up.



Mustard greens at 786 Halal Restaurant

Photo: Courtesy of Naomi Tomky



## 786 Halal Restaurant

This Pakistani restaurant, confusingly located at 768 Rue Jean-Talon (it's named for a significant number, not the wrong address), serves a huge menu of subcontinent specialties. Marché Jean Talon, the bustling fresh market, is often seen as the center of Montreal's culinary world, but just to its west, the neighborhood of Park Ex holds court as one of Canada's most diverse neighborhoods, making it a food mecca of its own. Here at 786, pillows of naan waft their garlicky scent around the upstairs dining room (below is a grocery store with the same owners), while piles of biryani, veal specialties, and grilled meats sit beside salty lassi drinks. But those in the know dig into the sarsoon ka sag, a complex tasting, yet deceptively simple, dish of mustard greens with spices and plenty of ghee.



String hoppers and lamb curry at Restaurant Jolee  
Photo: Courtesy of Neomi Tomky



## Restaurant Jolee

Across town and across the subcontinent, this Sri Lankan spot serves up spicy curries and noodle-y string hoppers in a casual café space with a sweet outdoor seating area. While Indian restaurants commonly pop up around the world, the hot, coconut-fueled cuisine of the tiny island just off India's coast rarely manages to find a home. Here in Montreal, where tens of thousands of Sri Lankans live, there's no shortage, though, and at Jolee, you can sit down to a taste of kottu roti (like fried rice, but made from bread), while Sri Lankan television coos from the corner. Curries—meat, fish, or lentil—form the center of each meal, but diners can choose to eat them with plain rice, string hoppers (a fascinating pancake woven from rice-flour noodles), or pittu (a steamed chunk of rice and grated coconut).