



TRAVEL

Quebec City Is Giving Montreal a Run for Its Money

Six-layer meat pies and hot maple syrup poured onto fresh snow make it a true winter wonderland

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Photos: Todd Coleman

When you check into the hotel [Auberge Saint-Antoine](#), you may have to wait a moment for your room. But this isn't due to inattention or lack of hospitality—it's because someone has to shovel a towering mass of snow off your terrace.

Such is life in Quebec City, and I took it as a sign, rightly so, that I was about to have a complete winter wonderland experience. While waiting, I slouched into a plush high-backed chair in front of an imposing fireplace. The flames licked through and around a massive iron chain in what must be a reference to the city's historical reign as a port powerhouse. Cold outside, toasty inside. It was a classic setup. And sipping on a maple-laced cocktail of bourbon and orange juice—named the Clockwork Orange—certainly didn't discourage the mood.

It was difficult to actually leave the Auberge, which felt more hearth and home than just a place to set up camp for the night. But I decided to head out on a mini tour of the nearby *casse-croûtes*—shorthand French for "little snacks." These petite stalwarts of everyday food reminded me of the *Imbiss* culture of Germany: punchy, homespun street food faves served in a shack. I ended up at **Chez Gaston**, and after receiving a booming "Bonjour!" I put on my Captain Obvious hat and **ordered some poutine**.

You can't visit wintry French Canada without conquering authentic poutine. Here, it comes in *grosse*, *moyenne*, *petite* and *micro* sizes. I nervously ordered the *micro*, fearing it would be the equivalent of tattooing *outsider* across my forehead, but they didn't blink and it didn't disappoint. It was a glorious mess of deeply bronzed *frites* drenched with a bracing sauce and strewn with **squishy cheese curds**.

Back at the Auberge, I met Julien Ouellet, the chef of the cozily named in-house restaurant, **Chez Muffy**. A native Quebecois, he had prepared a dish that was firmly ensconced in the tradition of hearty dishes baked in a crust: *cipaille*. It's a many-layered affair of beef, pork and chicken, along with herbs and spices like savory, mace, clove and cinnamon. Ouellet laminated each layer with circles of dough that absorbed and swelled with a fortified broth as it baked in a copper casserole. A crown of buttery dough sat on top of it all.



"I have a lot of chefs from France in my kitchen," Ouellet said. "The first time I make it for them, they say, 'What is that?!' But once the scent of spices flooded the kitchen, their eyes open wide, as it reminds them each of a dish from home." Just as everyone in this baked-under-dough fellowship knew, this was a dish to share. Breaking into the crust released the universal smell of Sunday dinner. The ravishing layers gave way to a **perfect stew-pie combo**. Ouellet served his traditionally, with cranberry sauce. I was pleasantly surprised, having never seen it outside of a Thanksgiving spread.

This historic dish wasn't out of place in a spot that's just as much a museum as it is a hotel. The halls were lined with displays of the tea cups, plates, cutlery and serving ware that were found when the hotel was being renovated in 2001, some of which date back to the 1600s. The collection was a clash of color and time, a physical representation of what it was like to cook, serve and eat through the ages.

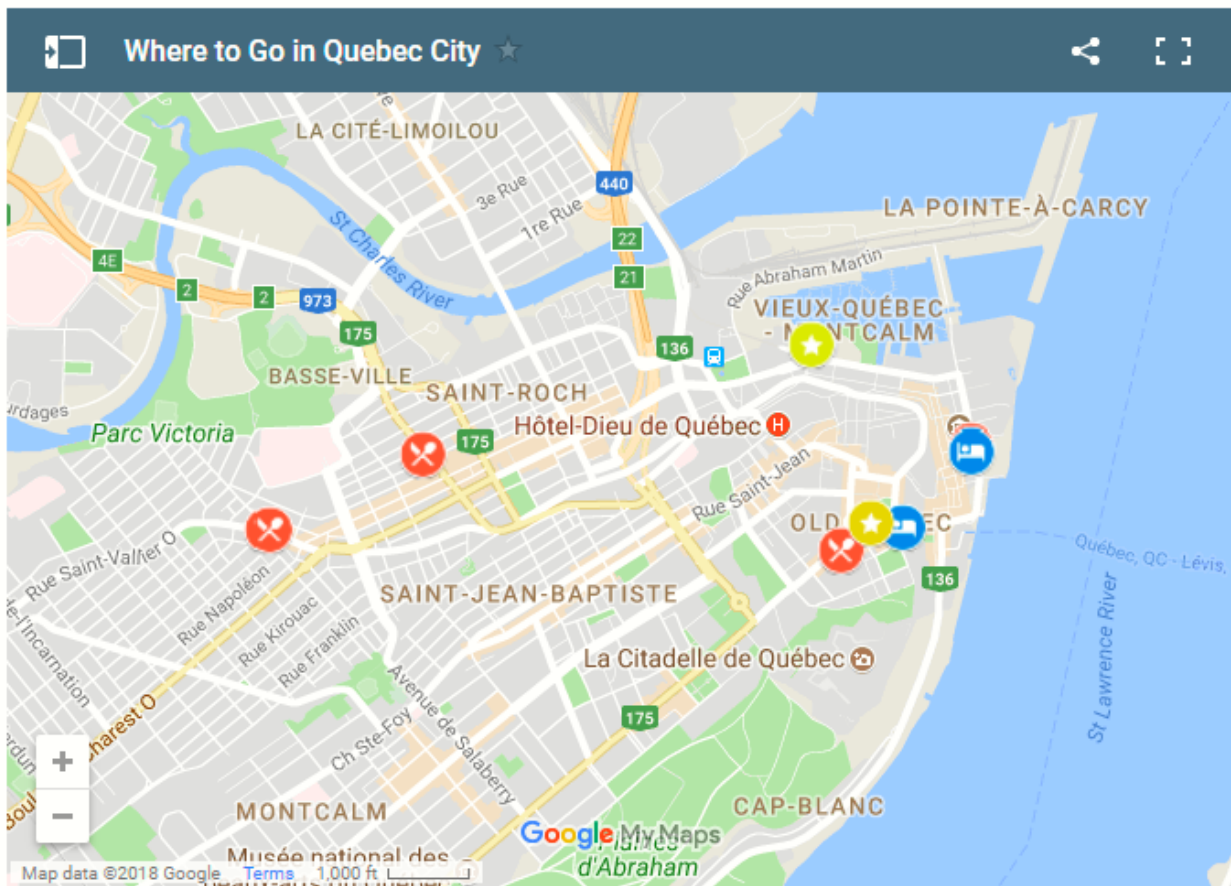
Chef Ouellet sent me on my way to [La Buche](#), a restaurant with an unapologetic sense of French Canadian *hygge*. Wolfskins and plaid abounded, and likeable hokiness seeped through the stone walls. "We put maple syrup everywhere," manager Mychael Blouin said. "On eggs, in cocktails, beer. Everywhere."

I was here to experience *tire sur la neige*, otherwise known as maple taffy. Blouin dumped fresh snow by the shovelful into a giant metal trough, calling it "farming." He then began whipping and twirling boiled maple syrup onto the snow with the flair of a ringmaster. As the ribbons of syrup settled on the surface of the snow, they congealed into tacky strips. This series of strange events ended in his rolling the maple strips onto large tongue depressor-like sticks to form crystallized spheres of soft maple candy. "My family used to do this every spring at our sugar shack," Blouin said with a smile. "But outside—on the ground." Biting into one is a revelation, but you have to act quickly, as it melts and oozes. "Pure sugar!" Blouin exclaimed with a start.



My next stop was [Kraken Cru](#), a restaurant outside of the old city that was suggested to me as a place to experience the new wave of Quebecois cuisine. Right away, I saw that this was the kind of restaurant I always wanted to open: more punk rock, less white tablecloth. A dim *Blade Runner*-esque light flickered overhead. A mysterious open bag of pizza-flavored Goldfish sat on a prep table. The effect on the whole was that of an old Italian social club combined with an ice fishing shack—irony done right.

After I scanned the menu scrawled on the wall and placed my order, out came six South Lake oysters on the half shell perched on a bed of crumpled aluminum foil. Sautéed mushrooms with shallots had been nestled on the oysters under a crispy baked topping of three-year-old cheddar and mozzarella, proving that whoever came up with the no-cheese-with-seafood rule didn't know what they were talking about. Sensing my enjoyment, a server offered me a shot of mushroom gin in a silver chalice. As I was walking out, the Talking Heads came on—somehow, I knew they'd be proud.



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