



5 Things You Didn't Know About Poutine

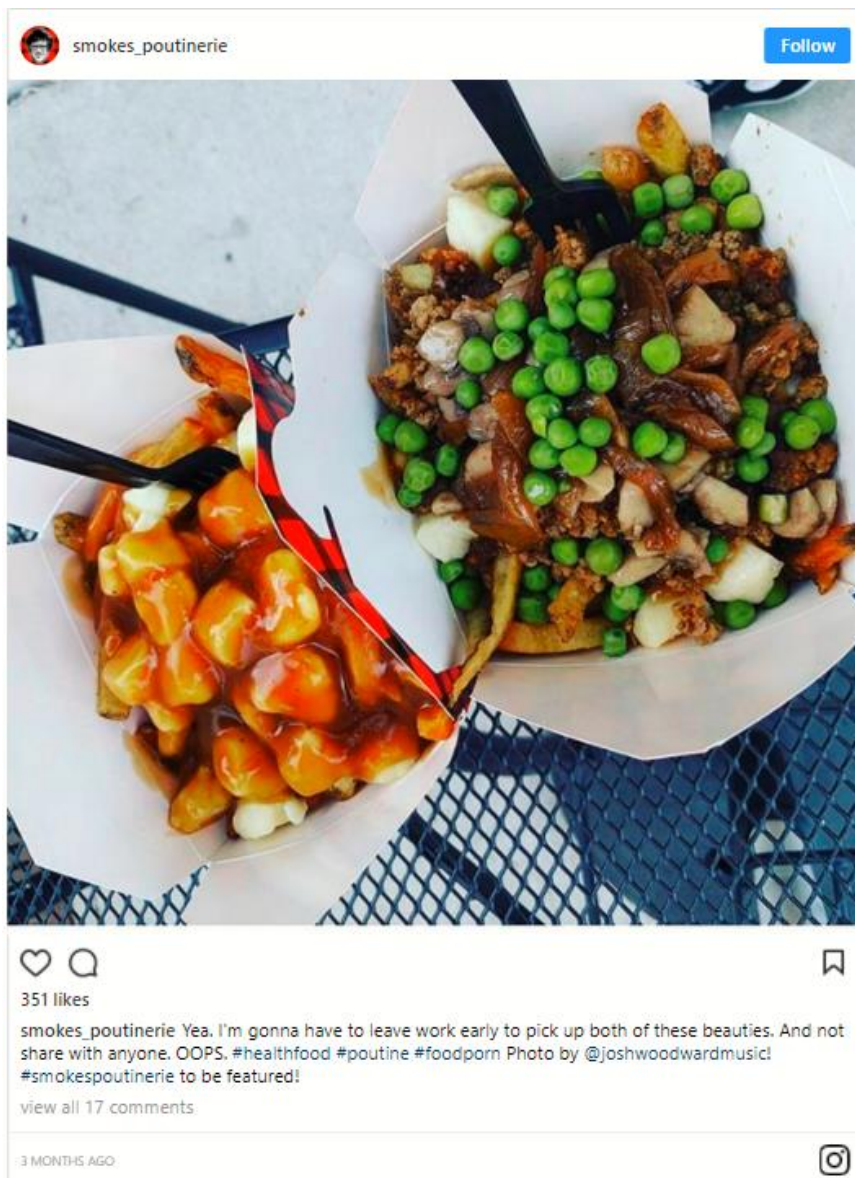


Ryan Smolkin, the man bringing Canada's only fast-casual poutine chain to the world, dispels a few myths.

ALYSSA SCHWARTZ February 21, 2018

Gold medal-winning ice dancers Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir are the Canadian match-from-heaven everyone's talking about right now; but before they were burning up the ice to *Moulin Rouge*, another long-loved Canadian combo made its way down here and sent the hearts of French fry lovers aflutter: poutine.

While the origins of the dish are hotly debated up north, some say its name comes from Quebec restaurant owner Fernand Lachance's response to an enterprising customer's off-menu request to add curds to his fries and gravy, "*Ça va faire une maudite poutine*" ("That's going to make a dreadful mess"). A mess of fries topped with cheese curds and gravy, the iconic dish has made a slow creep onto U.S. menus. And it's about to get a lot more common: Smoke's Poutinerie, Canada's only chain restaurant specializing in poutine, is set to expand from just a handful of U.S. outlets to more than 800 within the next four years (with plans also in the works for Dubai, Europe, Asia and Australia).



But much like Virtue and Moir's relationship status (if their sexy Olympic performance made you assume they're a real-life couple, you'd be wrong), there's a lot Americans still have to learn about this iconic dish. And there are few better than Smoke's founder and CEO Ryan Smolkin, who's made it a life goal to bring poutine to the world, to provide the lowdown. Here are five things you may not have known about poutine.

It didn't start out as Canada's national dish

For all its hype as Canada's national food, that status is still debatable (maple syrup and butter tarts are two other often-mentioned contenders). Invented in the 1950s, the dish is nearly a full century younger than Canada, and for decades wasn't widely available across the country. "It didn't creep its way west of the Ottawa Valley" – which lies on a similar line of longitude to Syracuse, New York – "until a few years ago," says Smolkin. What's more, even most Canadians don't pronounce the dish's name right (say poot-in, not poo-teen).

"We're one of the only countries that truly struggles with that iconic dish," says Smolkin. "It wasn't just coming to the U.S. When I first opened, people were saying poutine wouldn't work in Toronto."

You've been eating it your whole life

"Poutine isn't a whole new food category," says Smolkin. "People have been loading their fries forever. It's Disco fries; it's Coney fries; it's extreme fries. They're already loading it on. We're not trying to reinvent the wheel here; poutine is literally just loaded fries."

Smolkin's might sound like a controversial stance to poutine purists, but he's not denying the uniqueness of the dish; rather he's using what people already know as an entry point. But for loaded fries to truly count as poutine, Smolkin says, one key ingredient must be present: **cheese curds**.

Forget regular old cheese, grated or otherwise; cheese curds keep their shape even when they come into contact with the hot fries and gravy, and are what separate poutine from all those other loaded fries. “The curds are what poutine is, and how it was invented. You need that squeakiness,” which is a mark of curds’ freshness. “When you bite into it, it needs to sound like two balloons kissing. That’s the ultimate.”

In Canada, Smolkin sources his curds from Quebec, poutine’s birthplace. But he’s still working on importing Canadian curds to his U.S. locations. In the interim, “We go right to the cheese curd capital, girl,” Smolkin says. “Wisconsin.”

You can put whatever you want on top (so long as you have curds)

Purists might also balk at Smoke’s 26 varieties of poutine, which include preparations such as jerk or butter chicken, nacho grande – topped with chili, salsa, guacamole, sour cream and jalapeños – and even a version built atop pierogis (yes, that’s pierogis on top of the fries).

But underneath all that, you’ll still find classic poutine. “I think you can have fun with it as long as you’re keeping the base,” Smolkin says. “As long as you have cheese curds and gravy, you can throw whatever else you want on top of it. Have some fun, go crazy. You think of anything under the sun that you could put on top of it and I’ll try it.”

Poutine spin-offs? Delicious, but not technically poutine

What about poutine cheeseburgers? Poutine chimichangas? “Dammit those look good,” says Smolkin. But don’t expect to find any such crazy spinoffs at Smoke’s. “We serve nothing but poutine. We have thought about doing a poutine wrap ... but we try to stay as authentic to poutine as we can. If we start selling poutine burgers and other stuff, we’ll be a deli, not a pouterie.”



It just might be part of a secret Canadian plot for world domination ...

With plans in the works to open at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson and Indianapolis airports, and in stadiums and campuses across the country, Smoke's red and black Buffalo plaid is set to become a ubiquitous sight. And while not the country's official tartan (yes, Canada has one), the pattern is such pure Canadiana that its athletes are wearing it in Pyeongchang. "Do you know how many people are calling me about the Olympics. They're like 'Oh my god, how much did it cost you to sponsor the Olympic team?' We didn't sponsor them, it's just that same iconic plaid. We're Canadiana through and through."

He adds, "Poutine's at the Olympics, and you didn't even know it."