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THE HILLS OF
BAIE-SAINT-
PAUL, QUEBEC,
ARE AS LUSHLY
APPOINTED AS
THE PASTRIES AT
LA BOULANGE.





Saddle to Table

On Quebec's Flavor Trail, a crown jewel of the local-food movement, the hardest part is knowing when to stop. Or maybe when to go.

BY DAVID HOWARD
PHOTOGRAPHED BY FRANÇOIS PORTMANN

I am standing over my bike on the side of the road one fine, unseasonably warm autumn day in Quebec, my head turned, staring past my shoulder and pondering my plight. Not far behind me is a lunch stop that consisted of the Bis La Boulange bakery's nearly flawless pizza coated with pesto and local goat cheese and fleshy olives, plus a lemon brioche stuffed with cranberries, half of which now sits in my jersey pocket. Also at my back: the wind.

Just ahead of me wait pan-fried samples of Le Paillason cheese, made in the dairy right below the rustic A-frame where the aromatic wedges are served. Also, two stops for ice cider, a potent liquor made only here, the purveyors of which also dole out samples of exotic concoctions such as onion-and-maple-syrup preserves and duck terrine. Also, Cassis Monna & Filles, an establishment that grows black currants and sells them in syrups and mustards, sprinkles them over gourmet meals, and bottles them in crème de cassis. Also, a dozen or more farm stands sagging under the weight of fresh produce, many with signs offering passers-by the chance to *auto-cueillette* (pick your own). And a brew pub. And two vineyards. And the rustic inn I'm going to for dinner.

As a cyclist with an avid interest in food, I'd dreamed of just such an eclectic and remarkable gauntlet of tastes during the months leading up to this trip. But I have paused here at the side of this road not, as might be expected, to fully savor this ethereal moment. Instead, I find myself inert with consternation. I have a real problem.

In the morning, the taut breezes off the St. Lawrence River had goosed me along the eastern shore of île d'Orléans—Orleans Island—an oval-shaped lump of highly fertile land poking out of the tidal currents just north of Quebec City. I figured that once I banked around the northern tip of the island, I would be riding into a headwind that would help me burn enough calories on today's circuitous 45-mile route to justify my indulgences. So I'd plowed through a big breakfast, stopped to nibble on bitter sweetness at the *chocolaterie*, chomped a fresh Cortland apple at a roadside stand, then just plain overdid lunch.

But when I set out on the course I'd charted, the wind miraculously found my back again. Normally, that would have been one more magical aspect of what was turning out to be a memorable trip,

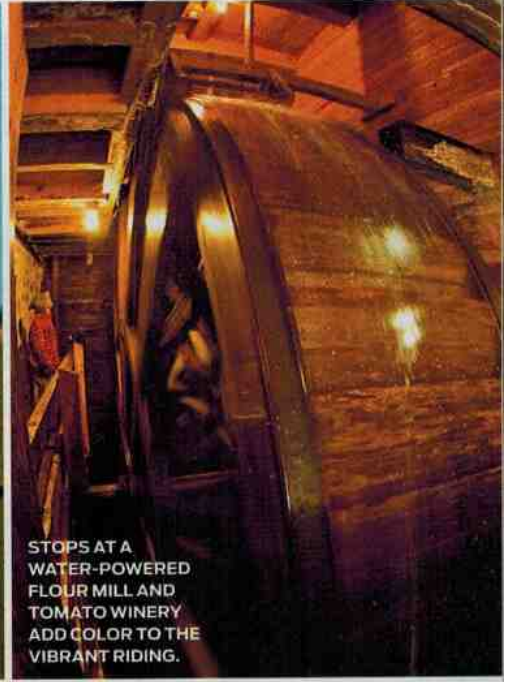
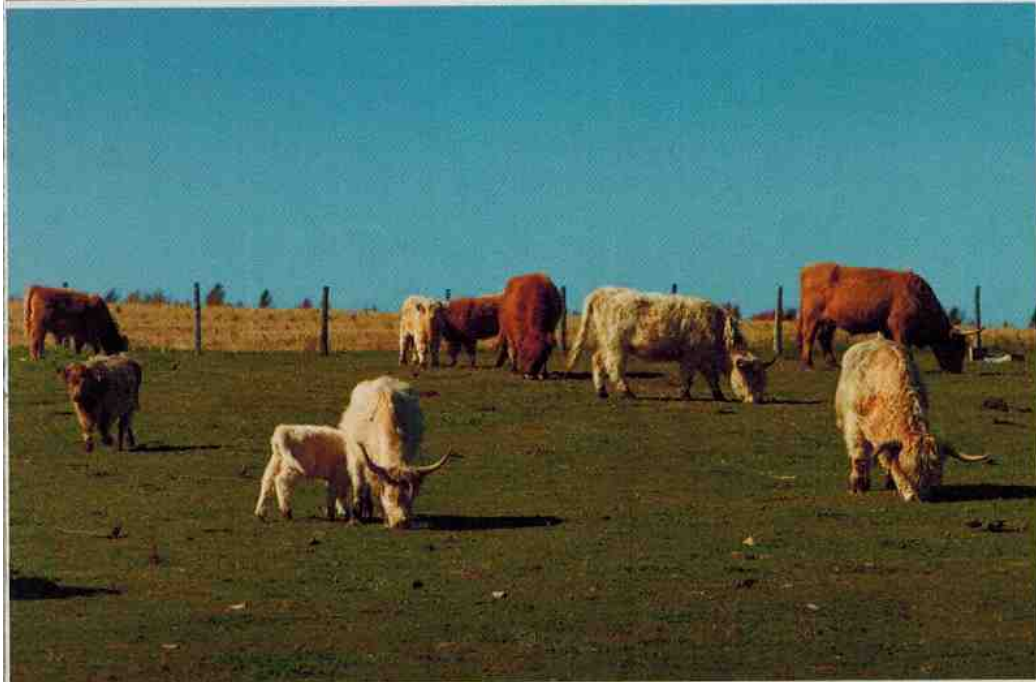
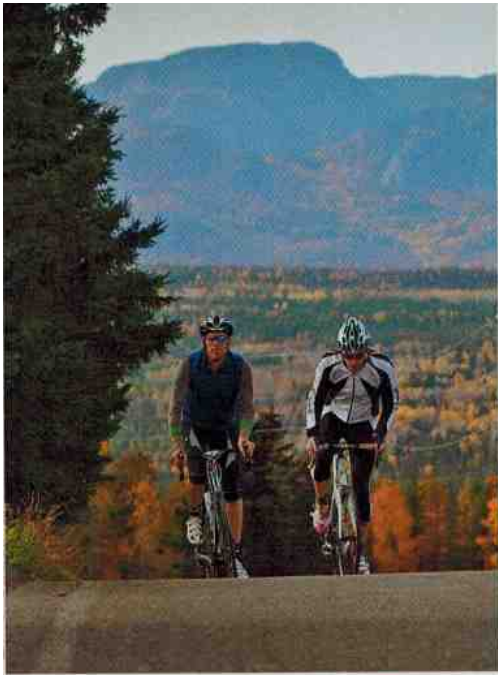
but as the roaring air pushed me along I realized there was no way my caloric output would come close to the bounty of input awaiting me. I'd imagined myself living out the escapades of a cycling gourmand, a dashing figure who effortlessly and elegantly balanced the epic and the epicurean. But it appears that I have to make a decision—right now: I can ride until I'm hungry, which means bypassing almost all of the remarkable flavors awaiting me. Or I can give in to the roadside sirens and gorge myself.

I look back and forth, up and down the road, as if an answer lies in one direction or the other.



The province of Quebec has always been known for its intense devotion to its French heritage and its food-worshipping culture. Much of this reputation is centered on the urban hubs of Montreal and Quebec City. But even out in the hinterlands, growers are creating a great variety of original and surprising fare, often using organic or old-world techniques, such as the lauded foie gras producer who doesn't force-feed poultry or use motorized machinery on his farm. All around, it's as if some live-off-the-land peasant farmer had a high-speed, head-on collision with an eccentric Parisian chef. "No, no, I got it: Mix these fresh tomatoes with vanilla, and then...and then make a jam out of it!" (I tasted that. Strangely good.)

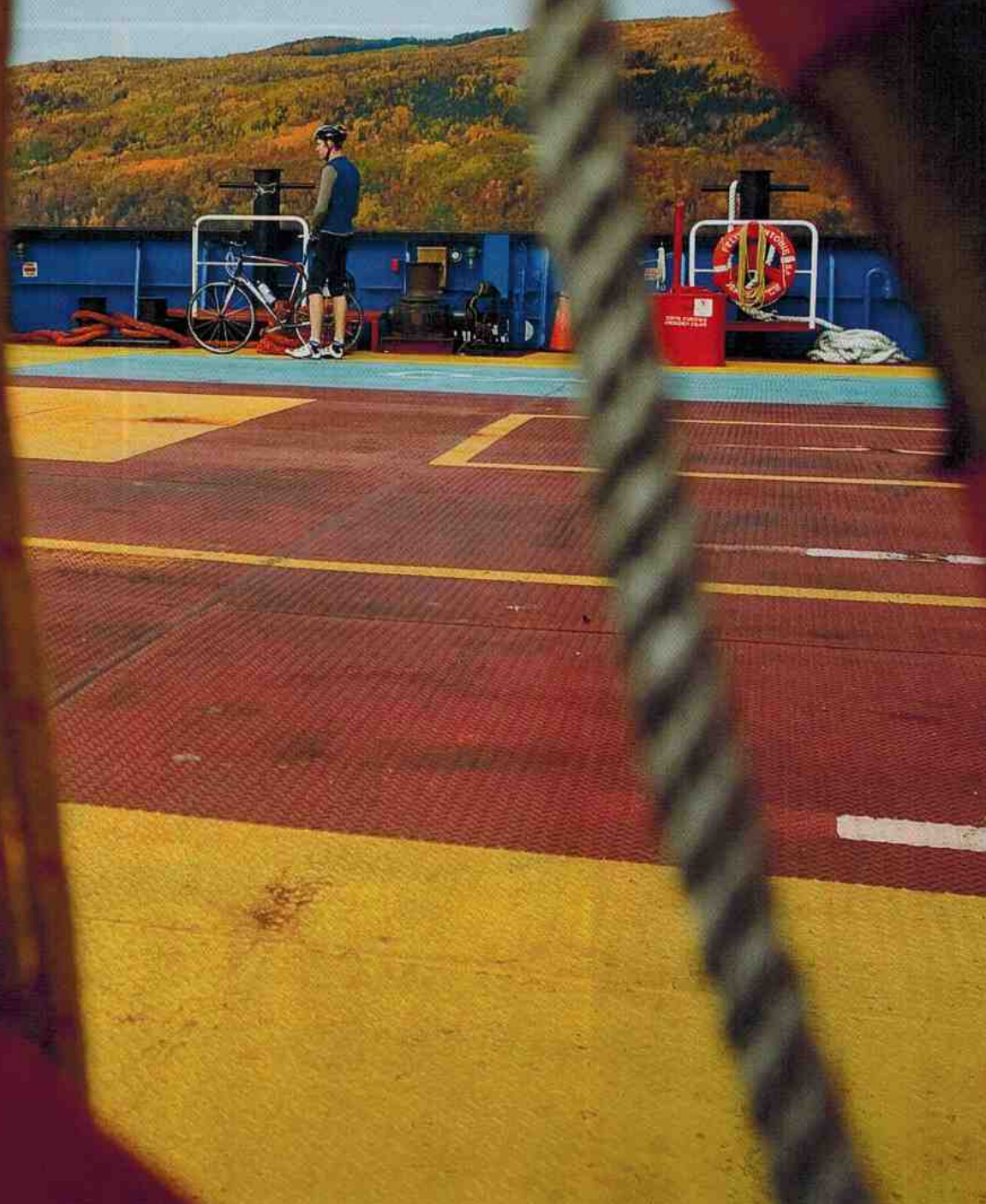
A few years back, some folks in the Charlevoix region realized they could make a tourist attraction out of their quirky, high-quality food scene. They created a guide that showed the places where people were growing all kinds of things, and where chefs were turning those products into delicious meals, then connected the attractions on the map with a colored line they called *La Route des Saveurs*. The Flavor Trail.



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FLOUR MILL AND
TOMATO WINERY
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DRINK
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ON THE FREE
FERRY TO L'ISLE-
AUX-COUDRES,
THE AUTHOR
ABSORBS THE
SCENERY AT A
SLOWER PACE.

This idea neatly anticipated the explosion of North America's farm-to-table movement, in which consumers embrace food grown locally and often organically and cooked with great care. The marketers intended for visitors to drive the trail, but I decided to ride it instead. I hoped to create a virtuous circle: By cycling, I would be able to eat more. And because I would be tucking into fresh, expertly prepared foods, I would ride stronger.

I'd long wanted to do this sort of food-centric trip, but I'd thought it would be through the Tuscan countryside or Provence, riding long through sun-splashed olive orchards before pausing for three-hour lunches at vineyards. My packed schedule and complicated life made Quebec City the far more convenient option. It's only a 90-minute flight from New York City, yet still offers both the chance to use a passport and the opportunity to embarrass myself attempting to speak French. It's kind of like going to Paris, minus the jet lag and superiority complexes.

Charlevoix lies on the St. Lawrence River, about 60 miles east of Quebec City. But it felt wrong to head there straight from the airport, so for an afternoon I tooted around the steep, twisty, cobbled roads of old Quebec City. The menu at Conti Caffè, a sleek, contemporary Italian restaurant where I ate that night, identified the milk-fed veal as a product of Charlevoix. It's a regional specialty.

Over the next few days, I realized, as I pedaled to and from points along the trail, and sometimes up into the hills beyond, covering some 130 miles in three and a half days, I wouldn't just be exploring Quebec. I would be riding my way backward up the food chain.



"I have no secrets," the man says.

He is the innkeeper and chef at Auberge Le Canard Huppé, on île d'Orléans. He is speaking of his sweetbreads, the dish for which he is now famous around much of the province of Quebec. You might think he would be coy about what he does, to build an aura around it, but he is perfectly willing to demystify the dish. He explains that he begins by carefully soaking the sweetbreads then intuiting, by touch, when they are ready to be cooked. "It is not so much preparation," he says in heavily accented English, "as it is caring."

Philip Rae shrugs. He is unshaven, his dark hair is pulled back into a ponytail. There's a little leading man there, some Colin Farrell, the same wild-eyed and manic possibilities, except for the pallid, slightly doughy complexion common to his profession.

Sweetbreads have been one unexplored aspect of my eating life. Intellectually, I understand that if a skilled chef prepares the delicacy that is certain organs removed from calves—the pancreas and the thymus gland, to name two—I should be eager to feast on it. But I've never quite been able to move from abstraction to reality. Even here, now, in the presence of a master, I'm still hesitating. Maybe, I think, we set limits for ourselves for a reason. And maybe some limits exist beyond our control. Like sweetbreads.

Rae looks me over, possibly sensing all this.

Probably seen it before. He's a guy who's worked plenty of 100-hour weeks, paid his dues, earned four-star ratings, and the last thing he needs is some guy who just showed up wearing spandex poking at him about the thing he does best in life. But he's unfailingly polite. The key to the good food in Quebec, he says, is the cold. In California, where it's warm all the time, things are always growing. That's why impressive-looking California strawberries are white and hollow on the inside, he says, whereas the fruit here grows small but with an intensity of flavor that weakens the knees.

"The land," he says, "must rest."

Rae's inn, Le Canard Huppé, has just 10 rooms. He could run a massive restaurant, but he'd rather focus on a few people, ensure that the guests who find him are able to truly relax and truly eat. "My idea is, I'm not a business," he says, waving a beefy index finger. "I'm a house, and people come to visit me."

The sweetbreads arrive in a tiny, Le Creuset French oven with prosciutto, apples, and leeks, all resting in a silky brown gravy. There is no holding back.



Charlevoix is at the bottom of a crater. Literally. A meteorite struck there 342 million years ago, and largely for this reason, I learn, it is both a great place to grow food—because the bowl creates its own protective microclimates—and to grow a hunger for eating the food, as well. The Charlevoix roads are relentlessly hilly and steep, and not just in a punchy way. Dropping off the ancient caldera into the southernmost town of Baie-Saint-Paul isn't completely like falling off a cliff, but it's close. The descent unfolds for several howling-fast miles.

Baie-Saint-Paul seems to incubate culinary creativity. There is a large Belgian man who grows organic tomatoes and makes an appetizer out of them—he claims to be the only person in the world doing

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Where to Go, Where to Stay

Visit between April and mid-October, not only because the weather is friendlier to cycling but because some of the food producers close during the winter months. One note: Highway 138, the road that links Quebec City to the start of the Flavor Trail in Baie-Saint-Paul, is heavily trafficked and not particularly bike-friendly. Unless you're a purist about self-power, you might want to rent a car and stage rides on île d'Orléans and between points on the trail and the surrounding countryside. Take the coastal road, Highway 362, from Baie-Saint-Paul to La Malbaie. For more on the Flavor Trail: routedesaveurs.com.

■ On île d'Orléans, overnights at **Auberge Le Canard Huppé** (canardhuppe.com) begin at \$98 per person (double occupancy), including dinner and breakfast. For a comprehensive guide to the island: iledorleans.com/eng.

■ In Baie-Saint-Paul, **Auberge La Muse** is a bike-friendly hotel along the Flavor Trail that also houses a farm-to-table restaurant, Chez Bouquet Eco-bistro. Rooms start at \$108 for two people; meal plans can be added. lamuse.com

■ The **Auberge des Falaises**, near the trail's northern terminus in La Malbaie, has an award-winning restaurant and rooms with lofty views of the St. Lawrence. aubergedesfalaises.com.

■ On the way to La Malbaie, catch a free ferry to tiny **L'Isle-aux-Coudres**, home to a fine bakery and ice-cider producer, among a few more notable stops.—D.H.



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it professionally. The wine is crisp and tinted only slightly red. At Le Moulin de la Rèmy, a 24-foot, water-powered mill wheel grinds organic flour. You can watch the old-school operation, then cross the property and buy a crusty bâtard made from the flour. One farm breeds guinea fowl, quail, and pheasants; another specializes in goats; yet another produces honey from 14 million bees. There is a chocolate shop with a hot-cocoa bar.

Near the end of my second full day, I ride from the *fromagerie* that recycles methane from its production process to the emu farm for jerky, then visit a duck establishment to buy a jar of terrine, for some indeterminate later. After a postride shower, I head out to sample some ambers at the MicroBrasserie Charlevoix, home to Belgian-inspired craft beers, then walk next door to the Chez Bouquet Eco-bistro, where I eat salmon prepared on a wooden board at a smokehouse a couple of miles away. As always, the waiter is flawlessly polite, and gamely lunges over to my side of the language divide, despite having an only slightly firmer grip on English than I have on French.

"Do you like this?" he says, picking up my empty plate and triggering an awkward exchange that repeats itself numerous times over the course of the trip.

"Yes! Really great. Thank you."

Without fail, the waiter then thanks me in return, which must be a custom here, after which I realize I should use one of the few French words I don't defile with mispronunciation, so I add, "*Merci*." And he nods and adds his own *merci*, and on it goes, back and forth like that for some time, until the waiter finally backs away, nodding and smiling and repeating his gratitude for my appreciation.

Next morning I head off to the east, up into the cheddar-cheese yellows and marmalade oranges of the hills above town. The several-mile-long climb out of Baie-Saint-Paul on the road that follows the river is just as brawny as the descent on the other side of town. And so it goes for the next 30 miles as I head northeast along the St. Lawrence, an unrelenting series of grueling climbs and to-the-pin descents. In places I seem to be hugging the top of the caldera, cresting to limitless views of the massive, ocean-bound river.

On top of one such vista, I see the route winding on beneath me and am struck by one of those summit revelations common to cycling: The Flavor Trail is, in many ways, just a name, as is the farm-to-table movement, and 100-Mile Diet, and all the other vaguely self-congratulatory terms that have cropped up in recent years. No one has created anything particularly new here. The people on Orleans Island, for example, isolated as they were out in the vast St. Lawrence, kicked off the farm-to-table movement about three centuries ago. If it didn't come from the farm, there was nothing on the table.

Still, the Flavor Trail is an idea worth toasting. That night, I reach La Malbaie and check in at Auberge des Falaises, a hotel with a stellar in-house restaurant. I dig into foie gras so fresh and immaculately prepared it reminds me, in texture, of foam on a cappuccino. That is followed by a plate of the famed Charlevoix veal layered over a triangle of polenta and autumn vegetables.

The waiter mentions dessert, and I hesitate. There will be little time to ride tomorrow; there's rain coming, and anyway I have to hustle back to Quebec City for the flight home. But he insists: The banana-and-goat-cheese pie is a house specialty. The cheese is, of course, made so close to the hotel you could pretty much hear the bleating.

But there have to be limits in life, I think again. Tasting sweetbreads is one thing. Relinquishing all control is another. After all, you might love Scotch, but you can't just get up and drink it every waking hour, no more than you should eat incessantly or, even, ride a bike so obsessively you neglect other needs. You have to know your limits.

But also when, and how, to blow through them. I nod: Of course, bring the pie.

Back on that road on île d'Orléans days ago, suspended between the promise of all the food that lay ahead of me waiting to be eaten, and my inability, thanks to that tailwind, to burn sufficient calories to allow the eating, I'd stood there for a while, confounded, until finally it hit me. I clicked into the pedals and pushed off the shoulder and swung into a big, lazy, parabolic arc that eventually pointed me into the wind, back the way I'd come, toward the long hill I'd just descended. A bunch of hard charges up that climb, I realized, would get me exactly where I needed to go. 