

Montreal on 6,000 Calories a Day

LONG A DESTINATION FOR MUSIC AND CULTURE, THE CITY IS NOW THE GO-TO SPOT FOR INVENTIVE, OVER-THE-TOP CUISINE.

by **HOWIE KAHN**



Clockwise from left: Montreal's Mile End neighborhood; a bartender mixes a cocktail at hidden late-night spot Big in Japan; the lobster-stuffed pig's head at Au Pied de Cochon.

The pig's head at Au Pied de Cochon restaurant in Montreal cooks for nine hours, eight of them in duck fat. It sits on a bed of fries and mussels, propped up by its own mustard-dotted tongue. Replacing the tongue in the crisped hog's mouth is a hefty red lobster. Lobster in a pig: This is how you eat in Montreal, where meaty, heavy, and huge is the norm.

Montreal has a dual identity — it's a French-speaking town on an English-speaking continent, a Canadian metropolis with a European heart. Having to account for always being two places at once, the city offers big music (the seven-member Arcade Fire came up in the Mile End neighborhood), big art (a new contemporary gallery is 41,000 square feet), and, perhaps most significant right now, big food.

TRAVEL

"Things really started to get cool about eight years ago, around the time Au Pied de Cochon opened," says Gail Simmons, the author and *Top Chef* host who attended college in Montreal and married a local. "The world has just started paying attention."

Only a 54-minute flight from New York City (or seven hours by car), Montreal's proximity to the States is a big part of the draw, especially if you lack the time and resources to leave the continent.

"It has all the charm and beauty of Europe," says Simmons, "without the expensive airfare or astronomical exchange rate, and none of the attitude."

David McMillan, chef and co-owner of the popular gastropub Joe Beef, concurs. "There's an independent spirit here," he says. "There's no putting on airs in Montreal. It doesn't mesh with what goes on."

McMillan and partner Frédéric Morin opened Joe Beef in 2005 in the fast-gentrifying enclave of Little Burgundy, a working class neighborhood on the banks of the Lachine Canal. "Back in the day, this was all industry," he says. "Boats, metal shops. In the early 1900s, people called it the Calcutta of North America because of the population density." Over the past 20 years, however, the factories and textile mills have been refitted into loft-style condos and offices. People kayak in the canal. Antique shops line the main street. And a former shipyard now houses the Arsenal gallery, a massive space which features large-scale modern work on par with anything you'd see in New York or L.A. The one mainstay is the Atwater Market, an art deco landmark built in 1933 that's worth a stop for farm-fresh produce, local cheese, and spiked ciders.

McMillan grew up eating at the seminal bistro L'Express, known as much for its affable staff — who constantly utter “the pleasure is all mine” — as its straightforward French fare. “I’m 41,” he says, “and I’ve eaten there since I was 18. On the same stool. With the same bartender.” For as much as Montreal goes big in presentation, there’s a sense of intimacy everywhere. It’s a type of hospitality McMillan has adopted. “I look out of my kitchen and think: ‘I’ve cooked for that family for 20 years, and he likes Bordeaux, and he has a pacemaker, so I better go light on the sauce or his wife will kill me.’”

On a recent weeknight, Joe Beef’s wainscoted room is packed with clientele resembling a casting call for a Canadian *Entourage*: groups of young guys (really; there were only two women), bearded and decked in flannel. They aren’t here for a pit stop en route to a night of boozing. In Montreal these days, dinner is so compelling, it’s practically synonymous with nightlife. Everyone settles in for an hours-long feast: oysters; veal headcheese; spaghetti tossed with a two-pound lobster, bacon, and cream; or perhaps a dish called “truck stop ham,” which features spit-roasted pork, pork skin, and pineapple baked into a shape like a brick.

Outside, Montreal’s public spaces come alive in summer. For starters, there’s a mountain to climb in the middle of the city. At 768 feet, Mount Royal isn’t exactly K2. But it’s a good urban hike with a serious panoramic reward, offering views at the top of downtown and the Saint Lawrence River. The mountain is situated in Mount Royal Park, a Frederick Law Olmsted-designed green space with running trails, a sculpture garden, and a lake. Bikes are also available throughout the city at more than 400 kiosks, where \$7 will get you a 24-hour rental — plenty of time to cruise the city’s 310-plus miles of dedicated bike lanes. On Sundays, the mountain’s east slope hosts the so-called Tam Tam Jam, a festival of drum circles, hippie guitarists, barefoot dancing, and other unexpected evidence of jovial Canadian geekery and bilinguist free love.



Diners indulge in rustic fare at the popular gastropub Joe Beef, in Montreal’s newly gentrified Little Burgundy district.

More polished (and signed) musical acts thrive elsewhere in the city, which in addition to Arcade Fire claims such varied performers as folk singer Rufus Wainwright, electro-funk duo Chromeo, and, of course, Leonard Cohen. Casa del Popolo is a good bet for catching an indie band any night of the week. Adam Cohen, son of Leonard and also a musician, recommends the gritty Club Soda or the multivenue Place des Arts. Post-show, Le Bremner offers quality seasonal cocktails in a grottolike room beneath the Parisian-feeling cobblestone streets of Old Montreal. And Big in Japan, a brasserie on bustling Saint Laurent Boulevard, serves beer and sake until 3, and fancier drinks in its nearby bar with the unmarked door.

The notion of hair of the dog applies in Montreal, though the cure is typically not

more alcohol but more food. Enter bagels; enter deli. These breakfast and lunch staples have long histories here and fierce followings. Smaller, flatter, denser, and sweeter than their New York counterparts, Montreal bagels are boiled in honey water and baked in wood-fired ovens. Fairmount and St-Viatour are

the heavyweights, with fans who’ll go to (polite) blows over whose bagel is king. But for a sit-down version, complete with lox, onions, tomato, and cream cheese, go to Beautys, where Freda and Hymie Skolnick (“Beauty” is his bowling nickname) started serving meals to Jewish garment workers in 1942.

For deli, you might want a pressed salami sandwich at Wilensky’s Light Lunch. And since that’s theoretically light, get something heavier at Schwartz’s deli, where Montreal’s famous smoked meat (the Canadian version of pastrami) is available in all its glory. *Vinade fumée*, as it’s known here, is a blessed kind of brisket that’s been salt-cured, spice-rubbed, smoked, and steamed. It’s been a staple here for at least a century and on the menu at Schwartz’s since it opened in 1928. At lunchtime, there will be a line out the door, but a sandwich of this caliber is always worth the wait.

Few cities can leave a man this well and full — of culture *and* food — and most of them require more than a weekend to enjoy. But Montreal will welcome you with a slap on the back, stuff you to the gills, and send you off wanting for nothing but a seat-belt extender for your ride home. ■

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