

MONTRÉAL BEHIND THE SCENES | December 2007

Written by Ronald T. Harvie

Food...both Familiar and Far-Out

Like most writers, I'm always tickled to discover a word I've never seen before. In this case, "locavore." It means someone who tries as much as possible to eat food produced within his/her local area. In Montréal, it seems that these days the number of locavores is multiplying exponentially. As one chef/locavore puts it, there are lots of reasons to join the movement. "If you just love food," said Nancy Hinton to Montréal food writer, Susan Semanak, "it will be about better taste. If you're worried about food safety, you'll be looking for traceability. If you're really into the environment, you'll care about the smaller footprint."

Add to all that a commitment to the community and a desire to support local growers who work hard to take care of the land around them and you'll see the appeal of trying to "eat local." And Montréal's a great place to do it— notwithstanding our legendary winters! The

greenhouse and hydroponic growing industries around the city are thriving—even despite the often-necessarily higher price of what they produce.

Montréal is, after all, surrounded by some of the richest black earth in eastern North America, and the micro-climate in southern Quebec is highly favourable to vegetable growing. In fact, believe it or not, there are still a few farms operating on the island of Montréal itself! Like the eight-acre La Ferme du Fort Senneville at the westernmost tip of the island, which has been in the Hackney family for a century. Today, farmer Alison Hackney and her helpers produce enough leeks, tomatoes, beans, lettuce, eggplants and squash to fill weekly orders for 125 "member" families, with enough left over to sell at local open-air markets. It's become a neighbourhood thing, a fun thing, all about eating well, taking care of the earth and knowing the people who grew the food.

Which sort of segues nicely into another aspect of locavore-ism: eating what can be found locally. There's a Montréal-area company called Gourmet Sauvage Inc. whose business is, quite literally, living off the land. It's owned by Gérald Le Gal, a Manitoba-born world traveller who has been fascinated by wild food since childhood and has pursued this interest from the forests of Northern Ontario to the reefs of the South Pacific.

Le Gal moved to Montréal in 1993 and launched a business based on his knowledge of "long lost" foods. "I started picking saskatoon berries, cattail hearts and milkweed pods...but no one knew what this stuff was!" After eight years, he was still struggling to survive, harvesting everything himself, but gradually he formed a network of people, an association called Les Artisans des Forêts, to focus on quality control and deal with the various government ministries—agriculture, forestry, environment—implicated in this kind of

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food production. "You have to be 110 percent sure of everything you pick because most of this stuff has never been on the market before."

Le Gal marketed his products by visiting Montréal chefs personally, handing out samples, showing them what to do with the food. "I told them: experiment with it. This was all new—new textures, new colours, new tastes." Today, he produces about 80,000 jars of various wild foods a year, although Le Gal points out that the Québec industry is still in its infancy—worth about \$4 to \$6 million a year, while in British Columbia, it hits about \$80 million.

And, of course, one of his key concerns is sustainability. "We have to be very disciplined in how and where we pick plants," he stresses. Overharvesting would be totally self-destructive.

Now, all this talk of hunting for food in the wild inevitably leads to the subject of...mushrooms! The edible fungus that fascinates everyone, if only for its mysterious, magical, even macabre reputation. Well, as Susan Semanak has observed, Québec is wild mushroom heaven-on-earth. More than 3,000 species grow here, in whatever location provides the right conditions, and most emerge in summer and fall—although a few hardy species even pop up in winter!

Of all these mushrooms, only a dozen or so are toxic or hallucinogenic—whew!—but only a few dozen are "gastronomically interesting," according to Pierre Noël. He's Montréal's mushroom guru, owner of an amazing shop on Rachel Street East called "Mycoboutique." It's dedicated to the cut of the wild mushroom, stocking an eye-popping variety of fresh and dried fungi from all over the world, as well as all the mushroom-related paraphernalia you'll ever need! For fun, check out the website: www.mycoboutique.ca



© Linda Turgeon, photographer

Pierre Noël has good reason to be passionate about mushrooms, since "Québec has a very low ratio of pickers to mushrooms." But times are changing, as more and more people get into the field and out into the fields. One of our best-known hunter-gatherers is François Brouillard, partner of chef Nancy Hinton and co-owner of "A la Table des Jardins Sauvages" in St. Roch de l'Achigan, northeast of Montréal.

Brouillard can identify more than 1,000 species of mushrooms—knowledge he's been accumulating since childhood when he used to tag along with his fungi-loving grandmother. He's got favourite hunting grounds all over Québec and his forays are all-day affairs—out by 7 a.m. and not back by 10 at night. On a good day, there'll be hundreds of

pounds to sort and clean and sell to restaurants in Montréal. And the take can amount to \$2,000. On a bad day? Well..."Mushrooms are a mystery" Brouillard says. "That's what makes the hunt so exciting."

Finally, I'd like to add one more item to our menu of local specialties. The "topinambour." What? you ask. Well, in English, we call it the Jerusalem artichoke or Sunchoke. It's the tuber of a plant related to the sunflower and its odd French name came from a mix-up in 1613, when Samuel de Champlain brought samples back to the French court at the same time some Brazilian aboriginals calling themselves "Topinambous" arrived. Everything somehow got lumped together and a North American vegetable got a South American name.

Anyway, the topinambour was a popular vegetable in New France during the colonial period. Potatoes, believe it or not, were considered fit only for animals and the English! But after the conquest in 1763, the potato gradually conquered the locals, too, and "patates frites" became almost synonymous with the Québécois themselves.

The topinambour is, however, making a bit of a comeback these days, reflecting the new interest in the historic roots of Québec cuisine as part of our heritage. The vegetable is harvested in October and keeps well, like potatoes, for the winter. In fact, you can do more or less all the same things with it that you'd do with spuds. The only caveat: it's the devil to peel—which is why some aficionados say to leave the peel on, for character.

There are a couple of stalls at Montréal's Jean Talon market that feature the topinambour. And it's showing up more and more on restaurant menus around the city. Which means that not only can you be a "locavore" but also a historically correct one at the same time!
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Mycoboutique © Jean-François Noël

SOURCE

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- Stephanie Whitaker, "A taste of the wild," *Montréal Gazette*, Sept. 17, 2007.
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