



Quebec's flavour trail

SELECTOR TRAVELS TO THE CHARLEVOIX REGION OF QUEBEC TO TRAVERSE LA ROUTE DES SAVEURS (FLAVOUR TRAIL) WHERE FOOD 'MILES' ARE MORE LIKE FOOD 'FEET'.

Words **Jocelyn Pride**

Patrick Turcot, Executive Chef of the Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu puts it all into perspective quite simply – “I have everything I need right here,” he says. “From meats to foie gras – vegetables to honey.”

Taking in over 40 ‘paddock to plate’ and ‘grass to glass’ experiences, *La Route des Saveurs* (flavour trail), is a gourmand’s utopia. And in true French Canadian style, Quebecois welcome visitors into their farms with open gates.

In addition to its natural beauty and artisan food producers, the region has for centuries also inspired artists, writers, musician and innovators. This is the home of Daniel Gauthier, one of the founders of Cirque du Soleil who in 2011 rolled out a train as creative as his circus to bring visitors to ‘taste’ the region.

CIRQUE DU LE TRAIN

Hugging a thread of track, Le Massif train winds the 140 kilometres north east from Quebec City along the edge

of the earth where the mountains dip into the sea. Although the journey is a year round experience, I feel fortunate to be travelling in autumn. From the panoramic windows, scenes straight out of an art gallery glide past. On the left the landscape is leaf peeping at its best – a smudged artist’s palette of crimsons, purples, oranges and reds. The vast expanse of the tranquil Saint Lawrence River is on the right, with the rocky shoreline alive with birds.

However, in true theatrical style, Gauthier has enhanced the holistic experience with an iPad at each window, not only showing the map of the route, but incorporating the sights and sounds of the region. Church bells ring as the train passes a stone church, the sound of thousands of snow geese fills the carriage through the wildlife area of Cap Tourmente and candlelight appears on the screen in the tunnels.

Le Train is also the introduction to La Route des Saveurs with a menu featuring

seasonal Charlevoix produce. Breakfast is served outward bound to Baie-Saint-Paul and dinner for passengers returning to Quebec City. For breakfast, the mushroom frittata is browned perfectly with creamy melted Hercule cheese from Laiterie Charlevoix and I have my first indulgence of maple caramel drizzled over a *terrine de pain*.

GATEWAY TO CHARLEVOIX

After two and a half hours of ‘complete sensory’ train travel we arrive in Baie Saint Paul where Gauthier has one final trick up his sleeve – the amazing Hotel La Ferme. Built on the site of an historic 100-year-old wooden building that burnt down in 2007, this is a hotel with a difference. Minimalist yet warm, lively yet tranquil, 145 rooms in five different buildings each individually designed. Baie-Saint-Paul is the gateway to La Route des Saveurs, so a few days in a hire car (avec essential GPS) is the perfect way to explore the region.



This page (left to right): A resident of Centre de L'Emeu; Patrick Gosselin's freshly made bread; cooking school. Opposite page: The Daniel Gauthier-inspired train hugs the Saint Lawrence River shoreline.



TOMATO WINE

Is a tomato a fruit or vegetable? For Belgian born Pascal Miche, convincing the Canadian authorities it is indeed a fruit wasn't easy – it took him seven years. As 'wine' can only be made from fruit in North America, seeking approval was the breakthrough Miche needed to fulfil his dream to use his great-grandfather's secret recipe to produce the world's first commercial tomato wine.

The fruits of his labour has in four short years seen Omerto's annual production grow to over 70,000 bottles and the wine is already in demand in several countries with China recently importing nine pallets. Like everyone who comes to Omerto, I'm fascinated by the colour of the wine.

"It comes out white because there's no tannin in tomatoes," says cellar manager Louis Bayens, enjoying the chance to practise his English. Usually served as an aperitif, Omerto wine matches perfectly with another local delicacy – foie gras.

"We raise happy ducks," says Isabelle Mihura, owner of La Ferme Basque de Charlevoix, who in 1999 migrated here with her husband, Jean Jacques from the Basque region of France. Using

traditional methods, the ducks live free range wandering the grassy picturesque fields and are fed whole corn kernels during the last two weeks of maturity. "Corn starch makes the liver yellow and sweet," says Mihura.

After a walk through the fields where the ducks greet Mihura like part of their flock, we stand around the atmospheric tasting room sampling duck confit, pate, and the piece de resistance, 'Foie Gras de Canard Entier Sous Vide'. With a texture like velvet and the sweet buttery taste, it's easy to see why every chef in the region reveres this foie gras.

STAPLES OF THE REGION

Another two exceptional 'must dos' on the trail are neighbours. Boulangerie Meunerie La Remy is straight out of a picture book. The mill dates back to 1827, its stone walls punctuated with blue-rimmed school house windows. Master miller, Patrick Gosselin grinds 200kg of locally grown grain every hour and delights in showing how the huge flint stone, originally brought from France, creates various flours. Bread straight from the outdoor wood-fired oven is sold in the farm shop, so with a warm loaf under my arm, we go next door to the Le Migneron cheese farm.

Maison Maurice Dufour was the first artisan cheese maker in the area. Using traditional methods and his own herd

of sheep and cattle, five cheeses are on tasting. Le Migneron de Charlevoix is renowned throughout Quebec. The washed rind cheese is a consistent award winner including the Canadian Cheese Grand Prix – Grand Champion Cheese. Nearby, the Labbe family at Laiterie Charlevoix makes an equally prized cheese from Quebec's first cow breed – *Vache Canadienne*. The 1608 cheese is named in honour of the founding year of Quebec.

Centre de L'Emeu (Emu Centre) is definitely the quirkiest place for an Australian to visit on the trail. Four hundred French 'speaking' emus are treated like royalty in heated barns to simulate Australian weather. As owner of the largest emu farm in Canada, Raymonde Tremblay is carving a name for emu products throughout the country. Emu oil is sold at markets in Quebec City and Emeu Tartar with Ciel de Charlevoix (raw cow's milk cheese) and caper berries is a speciality on the menu at the Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu. Nearby Volieres Baie-Saint-Paul is home to thousands of game birds and rabbits, Les Viandes has chickens and pigs, and further up the road, Sophie and Michel Nicole raise goats, sheep and Highland cattle at Ferme Caprivoix.

ISLE-AUX-COURDRES AND LA MALBAIE

Heading north, a detour on the trail is the tiny Isle-aux-Courdres. The ferry runs every hour and leaves from Saint-Joseph de la Rive next to the beautiful Les Jardins du Centre started by the Ouellette family in 1860. It's pumpkin season and hundreds dot the rolling hills



Asking any Charlevoix local why stock flourishes, bees thrive and fruit and vegetables have an intense flavour, the answer is universal – the terroir.

Clockwise from top left: Noelle-Ange Harvey and her famous 'Grandmother's sweet pie'; Les Moulins mill and bakery; Le Pedneault Ice Wine; Boulangerie Meunerie La Remy

spilling down to the water's edge. The 15-minute ferry trip is a chance to rest the taste buds.

Arrival at *Cidres et Vergers Pedneault*, locally called 'treasure island', sees us wander through the apple orchards and sample the award-winning ice wine. Les Moulins is another beautifully preserved windmill, grinding flour for the locals, producing a tart unique to the island. Handmade to a 'secret' family recipe by Noelle-Ange Harvey, owner of Boulangerie Bouchard, 'Grandmother's sweet pie' is worth waiting in the queue.

After sampling the southern part of the trail, the perfect base is the pretty waterfront village of La Malbaie. We stay two nights, one in the grandness of the Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu, the other in the cosiness of Auberge Des 3 Canards. In both hotels, the food is sublime and showcases the diversity of the region. "We take our staff to meet the local producers," says Chef Turcot. "Only when a chef appreciates the time and effort it takes to produce the perfect carrot can they show true respect for it."

BLUE WHALES AND DONKEY MILK

In addition to foodie pursuits, the area has many other attractions. One morning we go whale watching from Baie-Saint-Catherine and see five species of whales, including blue, in two hours.

Artists' studios are scattered throughout the area, with the major concentration in Baie-Saint-Paul, Les Eboulements and La Malbaie. Another day after stopping at Quebec's oldest ceramics gallery, Poterie de Port-au-Persil, in Saint-Simeon, we take a back road along the coast and discover Ferme de l'Ane du Saint Laurent. Sitting high on a hill above the water, this picture perfect farm is where innovative husband and wife team, Nathalie and Serge Kremer make unique soaps and cosmetics by hand, milking their herd of friendly donkeys.

Asking any Charlevoix local why stock flourishes, bees thrive and fruit and vegetables have an intense flavour, the answer is universal – the terroir. Unbeknownst to the early European settlers, who in 1708 first farmed the land,

342 million years ago, a meteorite struck the Charlevoix region. It wasn't until 1965 it was discovered the region literally sits at the bottom of a crater. Creating a series of microclimates, this enriches the soil and extends the growing season. It was declared by UNESCO in 1988 as a significant biosphere, and visiting one of the only inhabited biospheres in the world is simply 'magnifique'.

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