

Country Roads: Shawinigan showcases its microbreweries

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JULY 27, 2012



The “five-sun” B&B Gîte Le Manoir du Rocher de Grand-Mère offers a grand river view.

Photograph by: Gîte Le Manoir du Rocher de Grand-Mère, Gîte Le Manoir du Rocher de Grand-Mère

A festival of craft brewers and the sprouting of several cute cafés are among the attractions for foodies in Shawinigan, a city long known for its heavy industry.

The festival l'Île aux Saveurs, a showcase for microbreweries, will be held Aug. 11 at a crossroads that defines the changing city: Willow St., a hip, happening downtown block that has sprouted wall-to-wall sidewalk cafés and bistros, and the picturesque Promenade Saint-Maurice, which borders the magnificent St. Maurice River.

“We are in the city, but still so in touch with nature,” said Valérie Lalbin, the new director-general of Tourisme Shawinigan. “And the festival celebrates small craftsmen, so it has a community feeling.”

l'Île aux Saveurs will be a full-fledged, afternoon-to-evening street party with about a dozen kiosks of artisanal brewers from Shawinigan and around Quebec and a different musical act almost every hour belting out reggae, rock, pop, world beat and country.

The microbrewery Le Trou du diable, one of many bistro-pubs along Willow St., has made headlines with its latest creation, the Shawinigan Handshake. The beer, with light flavours of banana, citrus and pine, is named for an incident during the 1990s when then-prime minister Jean Chrétien manhandled a

protester. The politician, who is a native son, tossed off the encounter as “a Shawinigan handshake.”

The star of Shawinigan’s gourmet scene is Alain Garceau of Pâtisserie Le Palais, who was named the best pastry chef for 2012 by the Société des chefs cuisiniers et pâtisseries du Québec. His chic café is a must-stop on Shawinigan’s main downtown drag, 5^{ième} rue. Everything here is an edible treasure: the French pastries, handmade chocolates, sandwiches of charcuterie, pâtés and tourtières. Le Palais also sells such Quebec gourmet products as honey from Miels des 3 Rivières, and such cheeses as Le Baluchon from the Fromagerie F.X. Pichet.

Shawinigan must have a sweet tooth. One of the newest places in town is Minuscule, as cute and creative as a food shop can get. It’s a tiny one-counter pastry place that specializes in miniature cupcakes. The bite-sized bonbons come in such flavours as strawberry, lemon, carrot and peanut butter, and feature all sorts of elaborate designs, from trees to snowmen. But there’s only one size: minuscule.

“The city has flourished many times in the past,” Lalbin said. “We have had a history of heavy industry – forestry, aluminum and hydro power – and with our merged boroughs and our vast city limits, we have a wealth of outdoor activities on lakes and rivers and in forests, especially in La Mauricie National Park.

“Now we are revitalizing the waterfront and parts of downtown. It’s a breath of fresh air and a new direction.”

The Gîte Le Manoir du Rocher de Grand-Mère, a B&B that was built as a Bank of Montreal and later became a library, has been a part of the evolution. It is on a hilltop with a grand view of both the St. Maurice River and the woodsy national park.

A stately stone manor with white columns, Le Manoir du Rocher is a “five-sun” B&B with a gorgeous terrace, exceptional breakfasts and smashing decor.

“I didn’t want the look of my grandmother’s house,” said interior decorator Johanne Boulé, who bought the B&B two years ago. “I kept a few of the best antiques, but did away with old flowered fabrics and totally modernized. I love to marry different styles.”

With Boulé’s dramatic makeover, Le Manoir du Rocher has kept its history and heritage intact, but now it is brighter and airier. The salon is a stunning, contemporary space with a cream leather sofa and a vivid black-and-white area rug over rich wooden floors. Modern abstract art and a poster of Marilyn Monroe complete the fresh picture.

She brought the same vision to Le Manoir’s three guest rooms, where she overhauled the furnishings and added flat-screen televisions and DVDs. Parfum d’Orient has a serene Zen style with a white bed and touches of seafoam green and mahogany. Fleurs de Provence has a natural stone wall and mix of blue and white, all inspired by the traditional inns of the south of France. And Brise des Caraïbes is a two-storey suite festooned with the lively fabrics and colours of tropical islands.

Boulé is a passionate cook who constantly is creating new recipes. Her breakfasts are unique feasts of such dishes as tomato tarte with sharp cheddar; omelette with smoked trout and goat cheese; crepes

with duck, apples and Calvados; and for dessert, peanut butter pie or doughnuts with cream and berry coulis. The croissants and jams are homemade.

Does anyone order ordinary bacon and eggs?

“It happens only about once a year,” Boulé said. “I am thrilled that most of my guests are adventuresome.”

IF YOU GO

The Grand-Mère sector of Shawinigan and the downtown area are about a two-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 40 east to Route 55 north and Exits 226 and 211.

Gîte Le Manoir du Rocher de Grand-Mère: 819-538-8877, 85 Sixth Ave., Grand-Mère; lemanoirdurocher.com. Rooms, \$139.80; suite, \$159.95, for two, including breakfast. Discounts available for more than two nights.

L'Île aux Saveurs de Shawinigan: 819 244 0550, ileauxsaveurs.com; 2-11 p.m., Aug. 11.

Pâtisserie Le Palais: 819-536-7081, patisserielepalais.com; 563-5ième rue, Shawinigan; open at 7 a.m. daily, except on Sundays, 9 a.m.

Minuscule: 819-537-0777, facebook.com/cupcakeminuscule; 462 rue de la Station, Shawinigan. Closed Monday.

Le Trou de diable: 819-537-9151, troududiable.com; 412 rue Willow, Shawinigan; open daily from 3 p.m., but no food is served on Mondays.

For more information: Shawinigan: 888-855-6673, 819-537-7249, tourismeshawinigan.com, or Mauricie region: 800-567-7603, tourismemauricie.com.

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