

Trois-Rivières offers a chic mix of old and new

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE SEPTEMBER 1, 2012



Le Gîte Loïselle, in a manor house from 1899, is a fine example of the architecture of Vieux Trois-Rivières. The B&B has four guest rooms filled with elaborately carved furniture.

Photograph by: Le Gîte Loïselle

Trois-Rivières, Quebec's second-oldest community, dating to 1634, encompasses an exciting mix of attractions — some very old, others dazzlingly contemporary.

Vieux Trois-Rivières is a walkable district of such venerable architectural and cultural treasures as the Musée des Ursulines, which started off as a hospital and convent in the late 1600s. Contrast that rich history with the progressive happenings at the Centre d'exposition Raymond-Lasnier and the Maison de la culture, which showcase modern visual arts, theatre, music and dance.

All great, but my favourite part of town is the glorious riverfront promenade, the Parc Portuaire, which faces the St. Lawrence River. Here, the water views are eternally soothing, and the constantly changing riverscape features a busy port life of ocean-going ships, leisure sailboats and working tugs and ferries.

The chic restaurant Poivre Noir typifies all that is contemporary and stylish in Trois-Rivières.

Celebrating its fifth year next week, it's a large, cool space decked out in smart, spare black-and-white decor with splashes of orange and clever design elements. The best tables are against the windows that overlook the river or outside on the terrace, where it's still warm enough for lunch or dinner al fresco.

Owned by José Pierre Durand, a dynamic 30-year-old chef, and his parents, Daniel Yves Durand and Minerva Arriaga, Poivre Noir is a sophisticated dining spot that has won rave reviews. It sparkles with artful presentations of French-Quebec cuisine, with exotic Asian and Latin fusions and a strong commitment to local ingredients, especially from the Mauricie region.

"We have partnered with regional meat, poultry and fish producers for a true farm-to-fork experience," said Daniel Yves Durand. "And we even have our own rows of herbs and vegetables at some farms."

With suppliers from throughout Quebec, Poivre Noir creates such dishes as bison tartar, truffled foie gras, lobster bisque cappuccino with Parmesan mousse, oysters and bubbly cider, braised veal cheeks, Angus steak and glazed duck. José Pierre Durand uses Tonka beans and Chinese and South American spices for General Tao sesame shrimps and Chorizo stuffed dates.

A foie gras list features eight variations on the goose and duck delicacy, all sourced regionally. Poivre Noir's "bowl menu" is a creative riff on Asian dining with such tantalizing side dishes as pine-nut risotto, black truffle gnocchi or a feast of wild mushrooms.

For a finale, Durand's white chocolate and cacao dessert with black cherry coulis and Calvados won the best in show at an international cooking show.

Durand studied haute cuisine in France after learning the basics at l'Institut de tourisme et d'hôtellerie du Québec in Montreal. He shares his recipes and insider tips in a column in Trois-Rivières's newspaper, Le Nouvelliste.

The Parc Portuaire is both a public space and a Durand family affair. Arriaga runs Gelateria Minerva, a dairy parlour next door to Poivre Noir. Here she spins out such homemade flavours as strawberry-basil with seasonal produce, as well as dark chocolate or mango using only pure milk and fruit, without chemicals or additives.

The Parc Portuaire is morphing into a full-fledged foodie destination this weekend with the Festival Délices d'automne, an annual festival of about 50 producers running until Monday. More than 60,000 visitors are gathering to mingle and sample food, wine and beer, all produced regionally. It's worth staying overnight and exploring.

From the waterfront, it's a two-block walk to rue des Ursulines and Le Gîte Loïselle, a handsome neoclassical manor house of 1899 and a fine example of the architecture of Vieux Trois-Rivières.

The interiors are positively loaded with Victoriana, a huge collection of authentic antiques that creates a lasting tribute to days gone by. Loïselle is a deluxe B&B with a dignified parlour, a formal breakfast room and four guest rooms filled with elaborately carved furniture, Oriental carpets and objets d'art.

Baroque music creates a sedate mood and the fireplace, tapestry-covered chairs, tables draped in doilies and heavy tasselled drapes complete the romantic late-19th-century scene.

Owners Mario and Liette Houle were both grocers and restaurateurs, and now they split the inn-keeping duties, with Mario running the kitchen for breakfast. Here, too, the chef is inspired by Mauricie's terroir.

His favourite dishes are omelettes with Quebec cheeses and French toast using artisanal bread from Le Panetier, a bakery in town, topped with Mauricie maple syrup from the Houles' own sugar bush.

There is one drawback that has kept Loïselle from being a top-rated five-sun B&B, and that is its communal shower. But if you have to share facilities — and not necessarily at the same time — this is the place to do it. Loïselle's lone shower is a beauty, a spacious, modern granite-and-glass designer affair that the Houles installed so they did not have to overhaul the historic guest rooms.

Still, each room has been modernized with air conditioning, televisions and private WCs tucked into what once were closets.

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If you go:

Trois-Rivières is a 90-minute drive from Montreal via Highway 40 east.

Le Gîte Loïselle B&B: 819-375-2121, giteloiselle.com; 836 rue des Ursulines, Trois-Rivières; \$89-\$99 for two, incl. breakfast and parking. Packages available with massages, musical theatre, St. Lawrence River cruises and a restaurant dinner.

Restaurant Le Poivre Noir: 819-378-5772, poivre noir.com; 1300 rue du Fleuve, Trois-Rivières; lunch, Tues.-Fri., \$22 for three courses; dinner, Tues.-Sun., about \$50-60; the five-course tasting menu costs \$70 or, with wine, \$109. The Sunday night special is \$40 for three courses.

Trois-Rivières information: 800-313-1123, tourismetroisrivieres.com, 1457 rue Notre-Dame.

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