

Montmagny Manoir is a gourmet's delight

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE SEPTEMBER 29, 2012



Manoir des Érables, on a leafy estate in Montmagny, is a leader in local cuisine.

Photograph by: Rochelle Lash

MONTREAL – Quebec cuisine, haute and not so haute, is on the menu in Montmagny.

This quiet town, about a half-hour's drive past the Quebec City bridges on the South Shore of the St. Lawrence River, is a cornucopia of local foods and beverages ranging from heavenly goose foie gras and smoked sturgeon, down to the decidedly more earthy "pouding chômeur" and micro-brewed beer.

At the high end is Manoir des Érables 1814, once a seigneurie of New France and now the tourism centrepiece of Montmagny. The Manoir is a rambling, white mansion with porches, sun rooms and gabled roofs at the heart of a leafy estate with pretty gazebos.

Indoors, the impressive guest rooms and common rooms are richly furnished in rather sombre decor that recall various periods over the past two centuries. This grand manor house was built by a doctor from Quebec City at the time of the emergence of Lord Byron, the fall of Napoleon and Britain's loss at the Battle of Lake Champlain. I felt a little of all this European and Quebec history surrounded by the Manoir's antique furniture, heavy tasselled drapes, brass chandeliers and velvet settees grouped in front of real fireplaces. Then, modern-day priorities popped up. The Manoir recently added the Parfum d'Arômes Spa with four rooms for massage, esthetics and nails, and I headed over there to

spruce up for dinner.

During the 1970s, renowned chef Renaud Cyr developed Manoir des Érables into a gastronomic centre of Quebec cuisine, decades ahead of today's locavore trend. From 1982-1992, the inn was a member of the prestigious international Relais & Châteaux. Today, the local food tradition continues with gusto, even under new owners and a different affiliation with Quebec's Hôtellerie & Champêtre group.

Executive chef Pierre Gelly, who worked with Cyr long ago, works with the Manoir's wine and beer experts, Guillaume Blanchette and Marquis Émond, to showcase regional gastronomy with frequent tastings and multi-course dinners. The dinner menu features specialties such as smoked sturgeon with citrus dressing, duck consommé with flageolet beans, sweetbreads glazed with honey spice, foie gras confit of cranberry with caramel and his delectable variations on salmon, lamb, beef and quail, virtually all prepared with regionally sourced produce.

The upcoming tastings, (Oct. 18, Nov. 15 and Dec. 20), will focus on local and imported beer with fine local cheeses and charcuterie. And in 2013, there will be evenings devoted to port, Scotch and wine. Even the Manoir's wine cellar is steeped in "terroir," with a fine collection of Quebec vintages including a rosé from Cap St-Ignace and a red from St-Jean-Port-Joli. Both vineyards are a short drive from Montmagny, still in the tourism region called Chaudière-Appalaches.

Montmagny is home to at least two other must-stops for gourmet goodies. Alimentation Danielle et Serge is on the outskirts of the very walkable district of Vieux Montmagny which has lots of heritage buildings and a history that goes back to the 1600s. Home-made foods and homegrown delicacies are paramount.

The shop stocks dozens of cheeses, including Le Migneron from Charlevoix, La Sauvagine from Portneuf and the famous Riopelle de l'Isle named for the renowned contemporary artist who lived on an island near Montmagny. The kitchen at Danielle et Serge produces tourtières, cipailles, pâtés chinois and dreamy terrines of goose, duck, bison and guinea fowl. The bakery is a tantalizing corner with croissants, sugar pie and an inspired "pouding chômeur," the all-Quebec cake soaked with maple syrup or caramel and topped with brown sugar. To my family's delight, I took home a box of "les pets des soeurs," tiny, swirled buns that are as much conversation pieces as snacks. Please don't kill the messenger; the irreverent name refers to "the flatulence of nuns."

Nearby, the Marché Coli-Bris, a grocery and gift shop, is another treasure trove of "terroir" products. Clearly, beer is booming throughout our province. Coli-Bris has an astounding choice of nearly 200 kinds of Quebec microbrews, including such rarities as Pit Carbou and Le Naufrageur, both from the Gaspé. I bought a neat gift for a beer aficionado of a few different bottled brews and their companies' mugs and tulip glasses, complete with matching logos.

Coli-Bris' shelves also are over-flowing with terrific jams, marinades, charcuterie and apple products from such regional producers as the Pommeraie des Couillard, an orchard in nearby Cap-Saint-Ignace; La P'tite Ferme du Sous-Bois which raises lamb, duck, pork rabbit and poultry in Saint-Jean

Chrysostome; and Nect'art de Fleurs which produces fine honey, maple products and vinaigrettes in Saint-Ambroise-de-Kildare in Lanaudière. La Ferme Québec-Oies on the Beaupré coast near Quebec City supplies precious goose foie gras, magret of goose and legs "confit." A lot of the farms welcome visitors, but they are quite spread out, so Marché Coli-Bris is a great single stop for a huge variety of goods.

Apart from its gastronomic charms, Montmagny also is known as the "snow goose capital" of Quebec because the intrepid migrating birds stop in spring and fall on these shores of the St. Lawrence to feed on marine plants. The Festival de l'Oie Blanche will take place Oct. 11-14, featuring four days and nights of pop music, children's animation, sporting games and observation of Greater Snow Geese on their way south.

IF YOU GO

Montmagny is a three-hour drive from Montreal via South Shore Highway 20 East and exit 376. Manoir des Érables 1814: 800-563-0200, 418-248-0100, www.manoirdeserables.com; 220 Tache Blvd. E., Montmagny. Five-course menu, \$50-70 p.p. Price: Rooms for two in the separate Boulet Pavilion cost \$146; in the main building, rooms and suites cost \$180-296 for two, all including breakfast. One night with breakfast and five-course dinner, \$260-410 for two. Packages are available with golf, cruises to Isle-aux-Grues, cycling, and small-plane tours over Quebec City and Charlevoix. It's hunting season until Dec. 21. Tourism Information: Chaudière-Appalaches: 888-831-4411, www.chaudiere-appalaches.com; Montmagny: 800-463-5643, www.ville.montmagny.qc.ca.

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