

Checking In: Food tourism route maps out Portneuf's best

50 stops run along 125 kilometres

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE MAY 23, 2013



Auberge aux Quatre Délices in Fortneuf, which specializes in regional gastronomy, is one of the stops on the new Gourmet Route, a.k.a. Le Parcours gourmand, near Quebec City. The house, built in 1720, has views of the river.

Photograph by: Auberge aux Quatre Délices/Le Parcours Gourmand

Portneuf is a picnic waiting to happen.

The region has park benches with mesmerizing views of the St. Lawrence River and lots of fixings for the food basket. A new tourism trail, the Gourmet Route, a.k.a. Le Parcours gourmand, has created a movable feast along a stretch of 125 kilometres featuring more than 50 stops in and around Quebec City, including pastoral Île d'Orléans and along the Beaupré Coast that runs between the provincial capital and Mont Ste-Anne.

Here, we look at the culinary charms of Portneuf, which encompasses the villages and farms around Neuville, Deschambault, Grondines and St-Raymond. About 40 minutes this side of Quebec City, the various communities are between five and 30 kilometres apart, so both driving and cycling are appealing options.

The Portneuf segment of the Gourmet Route covers cheese producers, inns serving fine cuisine, a vineyard, a chocolatier, a farmers' market and more.

"Le Parcours is all about slow food, so take the trip leisurely," said Bruno-Clement Boudreault, who developed the Gourmet Route with regional tourism reps such as Mylène Robitaille from Portneuf. "You can spend a few days here and not cover the same ground twice, or eat the same produce," he said.

With the drive from Montreal, plus noshing your way through the countryside, you'll want to stay in Portneuf at least one or two nights. The area is not only rich in culinary delights, it is exceptionally beautiful, with historic villages and churches situated along the Chemin du Roy and on the banks of the St. Lawrence. The Moulin à vent in Grondines, one of the oldest windmills in North America, dates to 1674. The Plage Eau Claire, a beach on Lac Simon, and the Vélopite Jacques-Cartier/Portneuf, a cycling route, are both family-friendly venues.

If you have dabbled in the delights of Quebec cheese, you probably have heard of the famous products of Portneuf. Fromagerie des Grondines operates an eco-conscious pipeline with a difference. It's not only green; it's also white. A 45-metre stainless-steel cylinder pumps 500 litres of milk daily straight from the Fromagerie's dairy barn to the atelier, where it is transformed into about 55 kilograms of raw-milk cheese. Charles Trottier, his wife, Guylaine Rivard, their partner, Louis Arsenault, and 35 Brown Swiss cows, one of the oldest breeds in the world, are at the heart of this cheese success. The Fromagerie has tastings and a boutique.

A few kilometres down the road lies Deschambault, a darling village, thanks to careful zoning laws that have preserved towering trees, the church and venerable houses dating to the 1700s.

Just as compelling are the divine sweets at Julie Vachon Chocolats, a tiny shop of artisanal delights such as hazelnut tartinade and chocolates laced with maple syrup, honey or dried berries. Julie's favourites are truffles with pistachios, milk chocolate with passion fruit and a caramel tarted up with lime.

Some of the best seats around are the picnic tables at the vineyard, Domaines des 3 Moulins in Neuville, which overlooks the St. Lawrence. Named for the historic 17th- and 18th-century windmills on the estate, the Domaine produces a robust red wine, ideal for game meats and strong cheeses; a fruity, crisp white, great for seafood; and a rosé, a fresh apéritif perfumed with strawberries. In autumn, visitors can help with the grape harvest.

Auberge aux Quatre Délices is a jewel that mixes a centuries-old, Normandy-style house with choice Quebec cooking by chef Philippe Gasse, with an assist by his wife, Catherine Labrecque.

One challenge: Quatre Délices has only one large room for overnight visits, but if you can snare it, it accommodates up to five people in a variety of bed configurations. It's not luxurious living, but it is a historic experience with wonderful views of the river. The house was built in 1720 and is still decorated with some of the original wood and stonework.

The inn's strength is its cuisine, firmly rooted in ingredients from Portneuf and throughout Quebec. Some of Gasse's best dishes are: pork glazed with maple syrup from Neuville; guinea fowl from Cap St-Ignace; Quebec-raised lamb and veal; scallops atop risotto with oyster mushrooms from Terra Thera in Grondines; goat cheese from Fromagerie Alexis de Portneuf in St-Raymond served with caramelized pears and arugula; organic sausages from Charlevoix; and ravioli with beef from La Ferme Highland in Grondines.

Inn guests are supplied with breakfast baskets in their rooms, but Quatre Délices also opens to the public on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Specialties include cassoulet of pork, eggs with local cheeses and French toast with orange zest, whipped cream and maple caramel.

Other worthy stops in Portneuf include: Auberge la Bastide in St-Raymond for lodging and dining; Aliksir in Grondines for cosmetic and culinary oils made from herbs; Marché Public de Deschambault, a farmers' market; and La P'tite Brûlerie in Deschambault, where Mélanie Gagné grinds and brews artisanal coffee.

IF YOU GO

The closest point of the Portneuf region is a two-hour drive from Montreal. Take Highway 40 until Exit 281 for Neuville, Exit 250 for Grondines, and Exit 254 for Deschambault.

Gourmet Route/Le Parcours gourmand/Quebec regional tourism: 877-783-1608, www.gourmetroute.com/ www.parcours gourmand.com, www.quebecregion.com; Portneuf: 800-409-2012, www.tourisme.portneuf.com.

Auberge aux Quatre Délices: 418-909-0604, 1208 Route 138, Neuville. The inn is open for overnight stays, with continental breakfast, \$145 for two; \$25 per extra person. Dining: lunch, Wed.-Fri. \$12-\$18; dinner, Thurs.-Sat., \$42-\$55; breakfast for the public Sat.-Sun., \$14-\$17.

Domaine des 3 Moulins (vineyard): 418-876-0002, www.domainedes3moulins.com; 1333 Quebec 138, Neuville; closed Mondays.

La Fromagerie des Grondines: 418-268-4969, www.fromageriedesgrondines.com; 274 rang 2 est, Grondines; open daily.

Julie Vachon Chocolats: 418-286-6698, www.julievachonchocolats.com; 243 Chemin du Roy, Deschambault; open Fri-Sun.; after June 24, Wed.-Sun.

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