

# A delicious taste of history served at J.A. Moisan

Landmark Quebec City épicerie offers delicacies from around world, lodging

When civil engineer Clément Saint-Laurent lived in Sept-Îles, he constructed airports and shipping piers. Now retired and a resident of Quebec City, he is just as enthusiastic about foie gras, fancy furniture and floral wallpaper.

Saint-Laurent channelled his passion for creating and building into a second career as an innkeeper and gourmet grocer. He always had adored visiting the provincial capital to stroll the cobblestone streets, admire the historic architecture — and eat.

One of his favourite stops was J.A. Moisan, the fine food shop founded in 1871 that is said to be the oldest grocery in North America. After several years of sampling and nibbling, Saint-Laurent and his wife, Nathalie Deraspe, an accountant, joined with Saint-Laurent's brother, François, and bought the place. François manages the grocery, while Clément and Deraspe expanded and opened a bed and breakfast upstairs in what had been Moisan's private quarters.

"It was a beautiful old building, but we needed to modernize. We had to redo the plumbing, the electricity, the walls and the floors," Saint-Laurent said. "So we decided to take another big step to convert to an inn."

"J.A. Moisan is part of Quebec history ... it's a landmark of commerce, so we wanted to build on its legacy."

Saint-Laurent had been accustomed to working with heavy-industry materials such as concrete and asphalt, so the restoration of the house was a more delicate task, and just as detailed.

"Our goal was to be authentic, to stay true to the 1800s," said Saint-Laurent. "So Nathalie and I shopped for antiques and did the décor together."

They refurbished the original fine woodwork of pine, oak and cherry, and scraped many layers of paint and wall coverings. Saint-Laurent used his structural talents to create private bathrooms for each room, so the guest spaces all are compact but comfortable and well-maintained.



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They ran riot with textured wallpaper, using the vintage tea-stained look, festooned with large, pink roses. The parlour is a vision of times gone by: Victorian settees covered in brocade, French bergères chairs, lace curtains and tasselled drapes. A manual Victrola — complete with a set of vintage records — commands one corner, and satin Queen Anne chairs span a fireplace. Guests can help themselves to tea from an ornate, red and white Venetian tea set.

The four guest rooms are equally steeped in days gone by. I was seduced by the coziness of No. 2, named Amélia, an attic space transformed into a feminine hideaway, with lace-trimmed white cotton sheets and white and beige décor.

Deraspe handles breakfast and does a different spread every day, always combining sweet and savoury. Guests dine at a formal, eight-person table surrounded by cabinets filled with fine china and candelabra on antique sideboards. The meal starts with a smoothie and then goes on to dishes such as apple crêpes with maple syrup, trout Benedict or omelette soufflés with goat cheese. One unique creation is her oeufs cocotte, a baked delight of eggs, tomatoes, sausages and cheese served in a Mason jar.

J.A. Moisan, the grocery, is one of my must-do stops in Quebec City. It's an epicurean destination where shelves brim with the finest of everything. East meets West and both old and new items are revered. The shop stocks more than 3,000 products, including connoisseurs' selections of beer, wine, oils, vinegars and chocolates. From Quebec, the selection includes fine cheeses and jams, and Moisan's kitchen prepares five takeout dishes each day out of a repertoire of 100 — salads, quiche, braised rabbit, pork flavoured with maple, osso bucco in beer, salmon, homemade quiche and



Épicerie J.A. Moisan, founded in 1871, may be North America's oldest grocery store and is certainly an epicurean delight.



Walking into the parlour at Quebec City's Auberge J.A. Moisan is like taking a journey into the past with Victorian settees, French bergères chairs, lace curtains and tasselled drapes.

sausages.

Saint-Laurent's favourites at his shop include Quebec delicacies such as cassoulet cooked with duck from Le Canard Goulou in Saint-Apollinaire, smoked salmon from Fumoir Monsieur Émile in Percé in the Gaspé, and Victor et Berthold's raw milk cheese from the Lanaudière region.

J.A. Moisan sells rarities such as traditional blackstrap molasses and trendy Asian-fusion green pea wasabi, plus aromatic and flavourful

spices from Africa and northern Quebec. Salt takes on new meaning with a choice of Hawaiian black salt, French salt with truffles, pearls of salt from Djibouti and rose salt from the Himalayas.

The Faubourg Saint-Jean is a historic district just outside the gates of Quebec's walled city. Rue Saint-Jean is its main thoroughfare, a charming street of shops and restaurants, particularly well-known for its gastronomy, quaint housing and its gay scene. Rue Saint-Jean,

named for an early settler, Jean Bourdon, originally was a dirt road through farmland during the 1600s. By the mid-1800s, rue Saint-Jean was a centre of commerce. It has been rebuilt several times after various military occupations and devastating fires, but a few treasures have survived.

The Saint-Jean-Baptiste Church — this time named for Quebec's patron saint — dates from the late 1880s. It's an elaborate, Gothic-inspired sanctuary with marble inter-

## IF YOU GO

**Auberge Moisan:** 418-529-9764, [www.jamoisan.com](http://www.jamoisan.com); 695 Rue Saint-Jean, Quebec City; including breakfast, coffee corner, Internet and indoor parking one block away.

**Prices fluctuate:** low-season rates, \$130-\$150 for two or \$120-\$140 for one person. From May 1 to Nov. 1, it's \$140-\$160 for two, or \$130-\$150 for one.

**Épicerie J.A. Moisan:** 418-522-0685; [www.jamoisan.com](http://www.jamoisan.com); 699 Rue Saint-Jean; open daily.

**Tourism information:** [www.faubourgssaint-jean.com](http://www.faubourgssaint-jean.com); Quebec City regional tourism: 877-783-1608, [www.quebecregion.com](http://www.quebecregion.com)

iors, a wealth of sculptures and paintings, stained-glass windows and an ornate, gilded altar: (You can usually peek inside the church at 400 Rue Saint-Jean, but for a complete look, tours are given in English and French from June 24 to Sept. 4. Phone 418-688-0350.)

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