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Quebec City: Historic (and Hip) Cuisine & Culture

Talented chefs dishing up delectable Quebec terroir with a French accent

The newly reimagined Chez Muffy at Auberge Saint-Antoine, a Relais & Châteaux, has a menu of "bistronomy." Photo credit: Auberge Saint-Antoine

By Rochelle Lash

The enduring allure of Quebec City is that whatever is conspicuously old and venerable also is remarkably new and avant-garde. And when we say old, we really mean old. Here, cobblestones and convents date to the 1600s. And when we say new, we mean progressive bistronomy by talented chefs dishing up delectable Quebec terroir with a French accent.

Another attraction is price: The U.S. greenback is worth about 20 per cent more than the Canadian loonie, so that \$20 slice of Quebec foie gras will cost an American visitor about \$16 USD. Below is a trio of exciting culinary experiences, à la 2017, along with some quintessentially Quebec attractions in their three neighbourhoods.



Succulent sweetbreads with Jura wine cream, morels and wild greens at Chez Muffy. Photo credit: Auberge Saint-Antoine

Chez Muffy, Old Port: Auberge Saint-Antoine, a Relais & Châteaux, is a hub of fine living in the oldest sector of Quebec City. This boutique bijou is a seamless blend of old France and new Quebec. It's an architectural site from the 1600s with a compelling display of precious artifacts. It also is the forum for the new-in-2017 bistronomy at Chez Muffy, more accessible than formal haute cuisine, but with the same rarefied ingredients.

Chez Muffy is named for Martha Bate Price, interior designer and co-owner of Auberge-Saint-Antoine, so the décor is as outstanding as the food. The restaurant is bedecked in warm, whimsical touches such as floral denim and striped canvas in a vintage warehouse with rugged old beams and rough stone walls.

The new menu features farm-to-table produce from the Price family's own gardens on Île d'Orléans, as well as from their neighbors, who supply artisan charcuterie and Quebec cheeses.

Lunch might be Gaspé lobster rolls or crispy pork belly, and dinner adds sweetbreads, oysters, mackerel with morels and herbed hangar steak. Quebec City is the ultimate for romance, so why not indulge in succulent roast beef for two? Creative desserts range from a perky strawberry salad with rosemary and ginger to an updated version of grandmère's traditional Quebec maple pecan tart.



Yes, there are rooms upstairs, and they are très chic. The Auberge Saint-Antoine is a Relais & Châteaux with 90 contemporary, luxurious design darlings dressed in shades of grey with color pops and views of the St. Lawrence River or Old Quebec.

The Neighborhood, Old Port: Auberge Saint-Antoine is at the heart of Old Quebec, steps from Place Royale, where Samuel de Champlain, the Father of new France, founded the settlement in 1608.

Food-wise, the hotel is within blocks of the Marché du Vieux Port, a terrific stop for picnic fare or take-home gifts such as artisan charcuterie, cheeses, organic blueberry products, tourtières and apple pies and Quebec wines and micro-brews and maple everything – sugar, syrup, tarts and candies.

Bonus: The Marché is directly on the Old Port bike path.



Bistro B par François Blais changed its look in 2017, but it dishes up the same terrific gourmet cuisine. PHOTO CREDIT: Bistro B par François Blais

Bistro B par François Blais, Quartier des arts: Bistro B is fresh and innovative at any time, but it downright sizzles after its upbeat 2017 renovation. To me, the best perch is at the bar that faces the open kitchen. While you're sipping privately-imported wine, you enjoy the show of Blais' talented young sous-chefs chopping, peeling, prepping, stirring, sauteing and plating vegetables, sauces and luscious cuts of meat.



"I use the same ingredients as when I worked in a Relais & Châteaux kitchen, from the same producers, but now I work in a simpler way," François Blais said. "We serve delicacies such as caviar, duck confit and wagyu beef, but we also offer more bistro choices like gourmet mac n' cheese, risotto and game tartares."

Sweetbreads, rich and flavourful, is Bistro B's signature dish and recent menus – all on iPads — also featured rare sliced beef, dried duck carpaccio, creamy mushroom pasta, foie gras with strawberry chutney, tomato-goat cheese tarte and fish risotto.

Master bartender Jean-Charles Zonda also jumped over recently from a Relais & Châteaux to create a new line of nature-inspired cocktails. His summery offering: a zingy St. Laurent gin from a Quebec micro-distillery, with crushed cucumber, fresh basil and a whisper of vermouth.

The Neighborhood, Quartier des arts: Bistro B is two blocks from the Plains of Abraham, a hill-top parkland with compelling views of the St. Lawrence River and historic significance dating to the 1700s.

And, overlooking the Plains is the grand complex of the Musée nationale des beaux-arts du Québec, the city's cultural super-star that recently opened a spectacular pavilion showcasing contemporary Québec masters such as Marcelle Ferron, Bill Irene F. Whittome, Marcel Barbeau and Jean-Paul Riopelle.



The signature experience at the new-in-2017 La Champagnerie Québec is "saber-ing" a bottle of bubbly. PHOTO CREDIT: La Champagnerie Québec

La Champagnerie Québec, Saint-Roch district: You can almost hear the swoosh, tinkle and fizz as you arrive at this temple to bubbly. New in 2017, La Champagnerie Québec serves fine French-Quebec cuisine, plus premium spirits and about 140 different Champagnes and sparkling wines.



It's an industrial-cool place where the big show is sabering, that is decapitating a bottle of bubbly with one swipe of a large sword. The adventure of sabering is free when you order a bottle of any bubbly, and it's a bit scary because you feel you are risking the precious bottle. But everyone succeeds with a bold stroke.

"Sabering is our signature experience," says Jean-Philippe Boies, manager of La Champagnerie Québec. "And our bubbles by the glass are a great way to democratize Champagne and sparkling wine."

The by-the-glass list features an accessible range of about 15 bubbles including Touraine Beaujardin (\$10) and Ludovic David Rosé Champagne (\$27). Sommelière Pénélope Delorme also worked in France to develop the exclusive product, La Cuvée Sabrée Champagnerie by Paul Dangin (\$22).

Don't forget to eat! Some of the outstanding à la carte dishes are filet mignon with foie gras, lobster linguine, seafood soup, braised octopus and venison tartare, followed by a goat cheesecake parfait and Quebec cheeses.

The Neighborhood, Saint-Roch: The main drag of Nouvo Saint-Roch is funky rue St. Joseph, a cobblestone street with bars, boutiques and some of Quebec City's most intriguing dining spots, including l'Affaire est Ketchup, an avant-garde foodie haven, and Le Clocher Penché, which just might be the perfect French bistro.

Still hungry? You can boost your own cuisine quotient at Ateliers & Saveurs, which offers cooking, wine and cocktail workshops. You'll learn how to whip up trendy drinks, tapas, duck confit, Thai and Indian food, a brunch of crêpes, fancy BBQs or a gourmet dinner with filet mignon.

DETAILS:

For all Quebec City info: 877-783- 1608, www.quebecregion.com.

Chez Muffy at Auberge Saint-Antoine: 888-692-2211; breakfast, lunch and dinner, plus Sunday brunch; 8 rue Saint-Antoine, Quebec City/Old Port.

Bistro B par François Blais: 418-614-5444,; lunch, Mon.-Fri., dinner Mon.-Sun., brunch Sun.; 1144 rue Cartier, Quebec City/Quartier des Arts.

La Champagnerie Québec: 418-614-9802, 802 rue St. Joseph E., Quebec City/ Saint-Roch. Closed Mon.; open from 11:30, Tues.-Fri.; open from 5 p.m., Sat.-Sun.; DJs on Wed.-Sat.



Rochelle Lash is a career newspaper and magazine editor and writer in lifestyles and news. She has written about travel for the Montreal Gazette/ Postmedia Group, The Globe and Mail, The National Post, The Robb Report, The New York Times, and Town & Country. A Montrealer, she has an M.A., in Journalism from Univ. of Missouri, Brad Pitt's alma mater (he dropped out). When not traveling, she is skiing, cycling, paddle-boarding and reading. rochelle@rochellelash.com

