

LEISURE & TRAVEL

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CATHY DONALDSON/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

The Montreal skyline at night. TASTE MTL offers special deal for after hours dining.

Feast your eyes (and taste buds) on Montreal

City's inaugural TASTE MTL restaurant week takes place November 1-11

BY CATHY DONALDSON
TIMES & TRANSCRIPT STAFF

Now there's yet another reason to explore the exciting metropolis of Montreal.

Tourism Montreal is organizing the city's first-ever restaurant week – TASTE MTL – scheduled for Nov. 1 to 11. The culinary festival will allow food lovers a chance to sample the flavours of local eateries at

reduced prices.

“Considering how Montrealers turn every meal into an authentic ritual, it isn't surprising that our city overflows with great restaurants!” says Charles Lapointe, president and chief executive officer of Tourisme Montreal. “We want the entire world to know about our outstanding establishments and chefs because they represent an integral part of Montreal's unique flavour.”

During TASTE MTL, participating restaurants will offer a set price for a three-course evening meal – \$19, \$29 or \$39 – as well as

a fixed late-night menu priced at \$19. (Prices do not include taxes or gratuities.)

More than 90 restaurants are taking part, with a complete listing available at tastemtl.com. From chic five-star locales to cozy bistros, there's a variety of venues to choose from.

To preview some of the restaurants involved in the gastronomic festival, this food-loving writer recently ventured to Montreal with a pair of very willing travel companions. A 10-hour drive from Moncton, Quebec's largest city is an easy road trip, especially when you



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Everything at Peel Street's Ferreira Café was hot and tasty, including the hearty seafood bouillabaisse.

have others to share time behind the wheel (and agree to frequent caffeine/pee breaks.)

The skies were blue and the fall colours popping as we arrived in the city's downtown and soon pulled up to the Delta Centre-Ville on University Street, located at the crossroads of Old Montreal and the business district, within easy reach of many trendy restaurants.

Consider booking one of the Delta's 'Signature Club' rooms, which provides access to an excellent continental breakfast in the Signature Club lounge. (Equally delicious are the views of the city

from the 30th floor vantage point.)

Other pluses of the property: the hotel's revolving rooftop restaurant Tour de Ville, open Friday through Sunday, where you can dine surrounded by spectacular vistas, particularly impressive at night. Another advantage of the Delta Centre-Ville is that the Metro (subway) and underground pedestrian network can be accessed from the hotel, good news when the weather is not co-operating.

Fortunately, conditions were perfect as we left the hotel for the

➤ See MONTREAL'S, G3



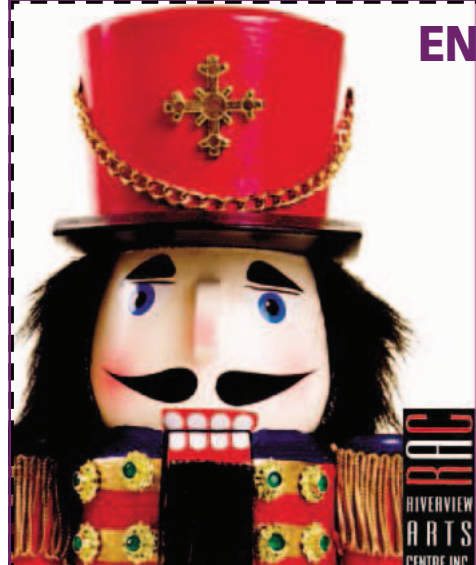
CATHY DONALDSON/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Staff at the famed Restaurant Toqué - one of Montreal's finest restaurants - work diligently to maintain the high standards set by co-owner Normand Laprise.



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Montreal's Brasserie T is often mistaken for a bus terminal, says its manager

► Continued From G1

first stop on our TASTE MTL preview tour – Le Hangar, located on Wellington Street in Griffintown, a section of the city currently being redeveloped.

On a lunch visit to the loft-styled restaurant, my travel mates and I gave high marks to a tantalizing cauliflower soup with bacon, parsley and paprika followed by a super-good brownie dessert featuring pistachio-chocolate cream and pistachio ice cream. (The soup and dessert each cost less than \$10 – a steal!)

My only regret was not indulging in the restaurant's lobster macaroni and cheese, though I'm inspired to mimic its creation.

Next was a solo trek to the lovely French bistro Laloux on Pine Avenue East. (My dining mates opted to boot shop on St. Catherine Street while yours truly interviewed a tourism official over an afternoon coffee.)

My shopping sacrifice became bearable when Laloux manager Francis Archambault delivered a sampling of desserts to our linen-topped table, tucked in a sunny corner of the pale yellow and artfully-mirrored dining room.

First came a plate with a scrumptious lemon tart, a wedge of rosemary marshmallow, a taste of citrus yogurt foam and a scoop of pink pepper and grapefruit sorbet. Barely able to contain our tastebud joy, my coffee mate and I went on to test decadent caramel profiteroles with vanilla ice cream and macadamia nuts, served with a pitcher of caramel sauce.

I'd give the boot to boot shopping any time to enjoy such sweet delicacies in such a relaxing venue. And at a reasonable \$8 for desserts, I placed Laloux on my "must return" list, eager to investigate main course dishes.

Once reunited with my travelling chums, it was off to an evening meal at Toqué, a restaurant that has become an institution in Montreal.

In 1993, chef Normand Laprise opened Toqué with his associate Christine Lamarche on St. Denis Street. In 2004, the restaurant moved to its current home, the modern Caisse de Dépôt building on the edge of Old Montreal.

White globe light fixtures hang throughout the '70s-themed room, décor items in orange, brown and turquoise tastefully fill the space while a striking array of wine bottles creates a unique chandelier over the bar.

Over the years, Laprise has become known for encouraging the use of local products and for creating a standard of excellence in Quebec gastronomy. In September, MacLean's magazine crowned him "Chef of the Year" – timely as Toqué prepares to mark its 20th anniversary and as Laprise launches his first cookbook, named after the restaurant.

Hearing much about Laprise and Toqué's subtle yet refined dishes, I was not surprised to be wowed by my appetizer of champagne-marinated scallops (\$21). My cuisine comrades also raved about their wild mushroom omelettes, seasoned with green onions, sesame salt and smoked pepper (\$18).

My main course of guinea fowl with beans, mushrooms, cherry tomatoes, apples and lemon butter (\$48) was blissful. In fact, I was so absorbed in its delight, I have no idea what my friends ate. (Were they even there?)

I can recall that we swooned over our desserts, mainly the magnificent strawberry mille-feuille, its layers of pastry cream and vanilla chantilly cream wedged between delicate layers of puff pastry (\$12).

To top off an already exceptional dining experience, Laprise appeared as we were about to leave and spent time sharing stories about his passion for local produce and his work to build relationships with the region's farmers, an approach that has been followed



CATHY DONALDSON/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Brasserie T's salmon with dill and fennel salad brightened a rainy Sunday in Montreal.

by chefs across Quebec and Canada.

Laprise then whisked us off for a behind-the-scenes look at his busy kitchen and a peek at a gigantic fresh tuna being stored on site. (Two days later, I lunched on tuna tartare prepared from the same fish, this time at Laprise's second restaurant, Brasserie T.)

The day after our Toqué tour, my foodie friends and I skipped the lunch line at Schwartz's on St. Laurent, opting for an immediate seat at Reuben's Deli on St. Catherine, where we devoured heaping sandwiches of smoked meat. While neither restaurant is participating in TASTE MTL, it just seemed wrong to visit Montreal and not consume a little viande fumée. Excuse the indulgence.

An afternoon food tour of Little Italy starting from the Jean Talon Market also kept us from our prime objective, though the tastings of speciality breads, rhubarb wine, sausages and desserts – including ultra-rich cannoli at Café International – were worth the deviation. In addition to more calories, we gained a terrific education about local foods and the neighbourhood with the help of professional foodie guide Ronald Poiré.

(For info on culinary tours, available Saturdays from mid-May to mid-October, see montrealfoodtours.com. Tours cost \$55 per person, taxes included.)

Miraculously, our hunger returned that evening. Still in an Italian state of mind, we headed to the reasonably-priced Wienstein and Gavino's on Crescent Street – one of the TASTE MTL eateries – for caprese salads (tomatoes, mozzarella and basil drizzled with olive oil) and an assortment of pasta dishes, all of which more than satisfied. (One gal pal was completely overwhelmed by the flavour of her gluten-free pasta choice and noted that the selection of non-gluten options on our outings was fantastic.)

Our last day of restaurant tours took my keen contingent and I to Brasserie T, near Place des Arts.

As we sat for lunch, restaurant manager Olivier Germain stopped to chat, noting that the restaurant often gets mistaken for a bus terminal, though I'd compare it more to a glass-domed train car.

The narrow building features massive windows, many of which are opened during the warmer months, making it an ideal site during the city's summer jazz festival, since events are staged just a short distance away.

But even on a rainy Sunday, Brasserie T is enticing, both for its contemporary style and its mouth-watering fresh fare, the latter of

some serious finger licking.

The final stop on our gourmet getaway was Peel Street and a Portuguese restaurant that had been highly recommended – Ferreira Café.

Opened in 1995, owner Carlos Ferreira had a vision of welcoming people to the essence of Portugal. The restaurant has a true Mediterranean feel and offers traditional as well as inventive dishes.

Everything from the kitchen of executive chef Marino Tavares was hot and tasty, from the grilled octopus salad to the jumbo shrimp. The restaurant's signature dish of blackened cod was superb as was the enough-for-two seafood bouillabaisse. The chicken breast grilled with spices and Portuguese sausage was also a hit with my tasting troupe, as was the friendly service. (Appetizers are \$12 to \$20; main courses \$30 to \$52.)

Our dessert choice was – appropriately – "the grand finale." (Meant for two, it was just right for three after ample earlier courses.) At \$24, the plate includes a traditional vanilla tart called natas, a luscious raspberry sorbet, a Bourbon vanilla crème brûlée and a sinful molten chocolate cake. It was the perfect end to a wonderful foodie fling.

Interested in having your own adventure during TASTE MTL?

Book your table at a participating restaurant between Nov. 1 and 11 and ask for the TASTE MTL menu. (Reservations can be made by calling restaurants directly or by reserving online at tastemtl.com.)

Bon appétit!

■ *Cathy Donaldson is a Moncton-based travel and feature writer.*

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Highlights of a visit to Restaurant Toqué included dessert - a magnificent strawberry mille-feuille.

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