



Poutine on the ritz

The dish of chips, curds and gravy might be a national favourite, but there's much more to Quebec's cuisine.

BY *Catherine Marshall*

THERE ARE 95 ways to taste poutine, and I'm only just getting started. There's the dish as its inventor intended – a bowl of hot chips smothered in cheese curds and gravy. You'll find it on the menu at practically every cafe, diner and canteen in Quebec, the Canadian province in which it originated in the late 1950s. It comes with no ancestry, no precise explanation of who first thought these disparate

ingredients might be combined into an explosion of flavour. But so popular is this messy, tasty, improbable dish – hangover food incarnate – it's often described (much to the annoyance of Québécois) as “Canada's national dish”.

La Poutine Week – a country-wide celebration held in the depths of winter each year – is almost over by the time I arrive in Quebec City, but there are still plenty of hot chips going begging. And they're being served in the most



In the snow, Quebec City's Fairmont Le Château Frontenac looks even more like something out of a fairy tale.

imaginative of guises: there's poutine onion soup from Bistro St-Malo, an elegant serve of chips bathed in onion confit and Boréale Rousse beer and swathed in bubbling cheese. There's the Don Corleone poutine from Boston Pizza Quebec, an Italian medley of sausage, meatballs, pepperoni and vegetables cooked in garlic butter and slapped on a bed of fries. There are Les Botanistes' on-trend polenta fries are delicately scattered with cheese, smoked pumpkin seeds and spruce-infused vinegar. There are poutines that are vegan and gluten-free and keto (the latter's chips are replaced with crispy slivers of turnip, parsnip and celeriac). There's even “ice poutine” for dessert – rolled waffles dressed in ice-cream and chocolate coulis.

But the snow is deep and the cold is ruthless, so I shuffle into the first eatery I find on my walk towards the Boulevard Champlain. This is Le Chic Shack, where poutine is more at home on the menu than sparkling water and Coca-Cola. I select La Forestière – hand-smashed chips dressed in wild mushroom ragout, parmesan, cheese curds, shallots and fresh herbs – and sit at the window watching the wintry city pass by as I devour its most beloved of dishes.

Stuffed, and with 94 versions of poutine still to go, I stagger out into the ice-bright air where cold slaps my face and filches the breath from my lungs. No wonder this comfort food is so popular here, where the winter chill burns up calories so fast you're hungry almost as soon as your last meal has ended. But no matter, for sustenance is abundant in this city, in the moody bistros warmed by open fires and infused with the smell of French cooking, in the chic restaurants that marry the region's seasonal foods and flavours – wild mushrooms and sea-buckthorn from the boreal forests, seafood from the Gulf of St Lawrence – with the city's rich European tradition.

It's easy, then, to be lured away from routine poutine by the charms of this city's cuisine. At night, when the snowflakes are swirling about in snow-globe extravaganzas, I dash into the warm embrace of Ophelia, an exposed-brick space where animated groups dine on braised veal tongue paired with shrimps, and seaweed-fed lamb. I order the bouillabaisse made with lemongrass-infused coconut milk and a miscellany of fresh seafood and finished with a curry aioli. It's the very antithesis of poutine – fresh and fragrant and light enough to allow for dessert – yet it encapsulates this region and its rich blend of immigrant cultures every bit as well as that old staple.

I'm hungry again next morning – yes, the cold is a marvellous digestif – so I slip from the slush-coated Rue St Jean into Le Local, a bright space filled with the work of local artists and artisans and suffused with the scent of just-baked goods. Customers sit on second-hand chairs, spread out their newspapers on vintage tables and eat their breakfast using crockery and cutlery brought from home (they'll receive a discount for their eco-friendly efforts). My own order – crêpes filled with cheese and béchamel sauce – is a relatively guilt-free choice: the cafe's suppliers are selected for their environmental credentials.

For lunch (yes, I'm positively ravenous), I steel myself against the cold, find my way to Hôtel Le Concorde Québec and take the lift to the 28th floor, where Ciel! Bistro-Bar is slowly rotating. I order the goat's cheese with crunchy salad, oatmeal and blackberry vinaigrette, but can barely focus on it, so mesmerising is the 360-degree unfurling of the snow-dusted city.

Heading home a few days later, I order my second helping of poutine from a fast food outlet at Quebec City's airport. It's served in a paper cup and smothered in stringy curd and gravy. Two down, I sigh, dipping a chip into the surprisingly tasty concoction, 93 to go. ■



Left: Auberge Saint-Antoine.
Below: pottery discovered during its renovation.



Where to stay

A PLACE BY THE RIVER

The elegant, family-owned Auberge Saint-Antoine is right at home at the foot of the ramparts beside the St Lawrence River in Quebec City's Old Port – once one of North America's busiest ports. Inside, guests and visitors

can discover the gems unearthed during the reconstruction of the three historic structures that comprise this Relais & Châteaux property. Objects dating back to the 1600s – pottery, glassware, implements – are displayed throughout the hotel and serve to illuminate more than 300 years of Quebec City's history. SAINT-ANTOINE.COM

winter. Guests can use the outdoor spa and sauna before bed. Should things turn too icy, they're assigned a suite in the adjacent Hôtel Valcartier. VALCARTIER.COM

FAIRY TALES DO COME TRUE

Quebec City's skyline would be incomplete without the turrets of its fairy-tale centrepiece, Fairmont Le Château Frontenac. Step out of the hotel's front doors and you'll find yourself on Dufferin Terrace, overlooking the expansive St Lawrence River and enfolded within the walls of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Old City. FAIRMONT.COM/FRONTENAC-QUEBEC

Below: just one of Quebec City's poutine dishes.

