



edible
MONTREAL

The 11-day High Lights Festival includes a smorgasbord of gourmet delights.

BEFORE THE FEAST. Guillermo Rodriguez from Le Bristol restaurant prepares a chef's dinner at last year's event.

Story by **Ingrid Sapon** | Photos by **Jean-F. Leblanc Agence Stock**

Every time I go to Montréal, the restaurants and meals are what I remember most fondly. So Montréal's High Lights Festival, which features world-class chefs preparing special menus at some of the city's finest restaurants, is right up my alley. The festival is actually billed as three festivals in one—11 days encompassing music, art and food. The food portion has helped put Montréal on the culinary map, attracting foodies from all over who attend to experience, firsthand, the talents of chefs from around the world.

It all began in 1999 to lure people “out of their winter cocoons with a menu of artistic and gastronomic events,” according to organizers. Every year, the culinary festival features chefs, food and wine from a featured city and a featured country or region. Toronto and Chile were featured in February 2008, so I decided a long-weekend taking in the food offerings would be the perfect mid-winter escape.

The festival program is extensive. The centerpiece is the chef's dinners, but there's much more to it than that: guided gourmet tours, special cooking demonstrations, conferences, workshops and tastings at various markets and venues throughout the city.

Choosing among the tours was the hardest part. There was a walking tour called The Tastes and Smells of Old Montréal, featuring the culinary, cultural and historic charms of the oldest part of the city; a progressive meal with one course at each of three award-winning Old Montréal lifestyle hotels; and a tour called Flavours of Montréal.

Friday started early for those of us on the Flavours of Montréal tour. At 8:30, a van picked us up at the hotel and took us to the famous Jean-Talon Public Market, a fresh food market with hundreds of vendors and food-related stores surrounding it.

I knew from our first stop, a bakery café just outside the market, that I was in for a delicious day. Sipping from my café au lait in a bowl and enjoying croissants and jam, pâtés, cheeses, breads and pastries, I thought I had died and gone to heaven—or at least to Paris.

When we had had our fill, we went into the market for a tour and some shopping. After reconvening, we walked to a nearby shop that specializes in wine and gourmet foods from Québec. There we sampled artisanal cheese and Québec's famous ice cider wine.

Back in the van, we headed off to other local specialties. We stopped at one of Montréal's famous 24-hour bagel bakeries—

God forbid we ride around without eating. Then we browsed at another small gourmet shop with breads, cheese, sausages and pâtés. From there we took a short walk to an adorable, out-of-the-way chocolate shop where we were served decadently rich hot chocolate (made with table cream) and homemade brownies.

Having had our fill, we moved on to a beautiful high-end kitchenware store to drool over the copper pots, fancy utensils and table linens. To our surprise, the owners greeted us with a homemade dessert. Later on we went to a shop specializing in oils from Spain for an olive oil tutorial and tasting.

Basically we ate our way through the city as our jovial tour guide, Ronald Poiré, described the neighborhoods we were passing through and the types of foods found in each. Though we were bursting at the seams, Ronald would not let us go without trying Montréal smoked meat sandwiches, authentic poutine (French fries with gravy and cheese curd) and Québec beer. We arrived back at the hotel at 4 p.m. I had just enough time to hit the hotel gym to try to make room for the evening's event.

The dinner I chose featured a well-known Toronto chef



PAINTING WITH FOOD. Chefs from Toronto's Canoe Restaurant made artful dishes last year.



“Basically we ate our way through the city.”



cooking alongside a Montréal chef at one of the boutique hotels in the old part of the city. The five-course fixed menu had a contemporary French flair. The dinners in the festival are all fixed price menus, but you have the option of ordering the slate of Chilean wines chosen for each course. When I saw that even the Amuse-Bouche appetizers featured a matched wine, I couldn't say no.

Trying to guess which chef was responsible for which course proved quite entertaining. Would a Toronto chef come up with the idea of a smoked salmon and white fish napoleon built on delicate, crisp potato wafers? Did it seem more likely that a Toronto or Québec-based chef would serve rabbit loin? And who was behind the roasted loin of lamb with

HERE'S TO PRESENTATION. Chefs from Susur Restaurant and Lee Restaurant in Toronto, like other chefs last year, aimed for visual as well as taste appeal. Dishes paired with wine attracted foodies from all over.





potato mousseline? We found out when the chefs came around to greet guests at the end of the evening.

My dinner the next night was by a noted Chilean chef in the luxurious Sofitel Hotel. Given how much I had eaten already that weekend, I was relieved when the dinner was “only” three courses; little did I know that they’d all be main-course size. For this dinner—unlike the previous night—we chose the three dishes we wanted. Doing so was a challenge: There



SERIOUS BUSINESS. Food and wine enthusiasts found plenty to indulge discriminating tastes.

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FINIS. Chef Darren Bergeron from Decca 77 restaurant in Montreal puts the last touches on a dish, with Anthony Walsh, executive chef at Toronto's Canoe Restaurant & Bar, looking on.

were 10 entrees to choose from and they all sounded wonderful.

Given Chile's long Pacific coast, it was no surprise the majority of dishes featured fish. What was surprising, however, was the tremendous variety and all the different ways it was prepared. There was marinated sea bass ceviche, Magellan king crab with smoked salmon, silver crab casserole, grilled tuna steak and conger-eel fillet. Even the chicken breast was stuffed with scallops.

I ordered the sea bass fillet with marinated seaweed and two of the more homestyle offerings (the chef's specialty, we were told): corn pie served in an earthenware pan and a creole stew with dried beef and quail eggs. All were delicious, but apparently—according to fellow diners—the conger-eel was to die for. Oh well—next time.

On my flight home, I was thinking about how apropos the High Lights festival name is. It was chosen to pay homage to the beautifully illuminated historic buildings of the Quay of the Old Port, but now people just assume it refers to an event that features the best of Montréal's food and culture. It was certainly a highlight of *my* winter.

See below for information on this year's event.

Ingrid Sapon is a Toronto-based writer and former Buffalo resident.

Bon Appetit

This year's Montréal High Lights Festival, the 10th annual, runs from Feb. 19 through March 1. Paris is the featured city and France the featured country. About 30 chefs from France will be paired with chefs from Montreal's finest restaurants, and French wines will be paired with the food.

The 11-day event will feature cultural activities (dance, theater and music), indoor and outdoor family activities, as well as food and wine activities. One highlight promises to be the Tenth Anniversary Ten-Star event, billed as "an exclusive kaleidoscopic meal," featuring French chefs who collectively boast 10 Michelin stars. They'll create a meal at Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth on Feb. 21. Tickets (with tip and wine included) will be \$300 Canadian (roughly \$240 U.S.).

Meanwhile, the "Festival's Finest Tables" will feature special dinners by pairs of guest and local chefs at fine

restaurants. Check the schedule (see information, below) and note that some dinners sell out in advance.

Festival packages are available (an example: The Cultural Getaway includes two nights in a charming hotel in Old Montreal, two breakfasts, two concert tickets (subject to availability), The Tastes and Smells of Old Montréal culinary tour, a Montreal High Lights "Festival Fun-Pack," a personalized itinerary and tour director on site—for \$510 U.S. Packages are available from Feb. 20 to 22 and Feb 27 to March 1.

Culinary tours range from \$45 to \$125 U.S. A number of the tours also are available at other times. For information, contact Ronald Poiré at Visites de Montréal DMC: 514-933-6674 or www.visitesdemontreal.com.

The entire program is too lengthy to list, but you can find details and information about hotel packages at www.montrealhighlights.com or by calling 888-477-9955 or 514-288-9955.