

Savoring Rural Quebec,

One Artisan at a Time

By Mary Bergin

What will it be, an aperitif of *Le Diablotin* (The Imp, a raspberry and cider liqueur) or a draft of *Sorciere Rousse* (The Red-Haired Witch, an amber ale)? Goose paté, or smoked sturgeon? Hand-dipped chocolates? Fresh strawberries?

This meal could last hours because each part comes from a different place, and most places can be toured.

The owners of small farms, wineries and other food/beverage enterprises on *Ile d'Orleans* – a quiet island northwest of Quebec – invite travelers to make a day out of visiting them.

Le Parcours Gourmand – The Gourmet Route – leads visitors onto land ripe with the artisan products of family-owned businesses. None is large enough to affordably market itself alone, but together they form a charming and enticing agritourism excursion.

Relish the remote

Only about 7,000 people live in the six parishes of Orleans Island, nicknamed the “Garden of Quebec.” Expect houses of field stone, a couple of small golf courses, pristine villages, artists at work and panoramic views of life along the St. Lawrence River.

At 21 miles long and five miles wide, Orleans Island resembles Manhattan in size, but not character. Zoning laws prevent farms from being subdivided into smaller parcels. Only three crossroads go north-south (two are closed in winter). The area thrives with just one gas station, one traffic light and at least 16 food or beverage artisans at work.

“I like to sell something that I love myself,” says Bernard Monna, owner of Cassis Monna et Filles, whose specialty is award-winning blackcurrant liqueur and port-like wines. They are made in small batches (about 20,000 bottles per year). “If you make 100,000 bottles, you can’t look at each one,” the winemaker explains.

For Philippe and Claire Steinbach, Orleans Island was a sabbatical destination in 1993, “the beginning of a dream” two years later. The Belgian couple (he sold fax machines in Europe) bought a ramshackle building and ill-kept apple orchards, then revived them.

Today, their lovely Domaine Steinbach sells dozens of all-natural



Vignoble Isle de Bacchus (top) produces ice wines and kir that are award-winning.

Philippe and Claire Steinbach of Belgium (second from top) sell dozens of all-natural products — vinegars to patés — at Domaine Steinbach.

Bernard Monna (third from top), of Cassis Monna et Filles, prefers to produce liqueurs and port-like wines in small batches.

Sea fisherman Joseph Paquet (left) sells sampler plates of what he catches, and the seafood is slow-roasted in a maplewood-fired rotisserie.

Photos by Mary Bergin



Patio seating at Pub le Mitan, a microbrewery in a former butcher shop, overlooks the St. Lawrence River.

products, including *Le Diablotin* by the glass or bottle, onion jam, thyme-garlic vinegar, patés and iced ciders.

Mineral-rich water produces distinctive beers at Pub le Mitan, a *microbrasserie* in a former butcher shop, where patio seating overlooks the water. Products also make their way into the bistro's onion soup and pork loin baste.

No-frills focus

Joseph Paquet was a sea fisherman for many years before adding a no-frills *poissonnerie*, where yellow sturgeon, trout, salmon, eel and dore are soaked in a brine, then slow-roasted in a maplewood-fired rotisserie for hours. A sampler plate costs under \$10.

At Ferme au Gout d'Autrefois, which sells goose and duck products, the fowl are raised from egg to end. "We love our birds," says

Jacques Legros, "and we decided to prove it is possible to have a successful farm without force-feeding."

"Our animals are quiet, because they have a good life," he explains. They are free to roam and eat a diet of grains; no preservatives or hormones.

Some products are precooked. Sales occur from a solitary freezer. Customers include chefs at upscale restaurants.

Six products result from the seven types of grapes grown at Vignoble Isle de Bacchus, whose ice wines (made with frozen grapes) and kir (black currant liqueur plus white wine) win global awards. Also on the property is a tidy four-room inn, one of the island's dozen cozy overnight options.

Near urban confines

The drive between Old Quebec and Ile d'Orleans averages 15 minutes. Cross the river near the thunderous, 275-foot Montmorency Falls, which extends almost 100 feet higher than Niagara Falls and is worth an afternoon on its own.

For more information: www.gourmet-route.com, 877-266-5687. Free booklets contain agritourism locations and descriptions.

Ile d'Orleans is one of four gourmet routes in the province of Quebec. (Others concentrate on the city of Quebec, Cote-de-Beaupre and Jacques-Cartier areas.)

Award-winning freelance columnist/photographer Mary Bergin loves food and travel. Reach her at mary@roadstraveled.com.

Festive at 400

Uncork the champagne for Samuel de Champlain!

The French explorer's founding of Quebec 400 years ago makes 2008 a prime time to visit. The city's grand and all-year anniversary bash is saturated with pride of culture and heritage.

Stroll cobblestone paths inside Old Quebec, the only walled city north of Mexico. Practice your French with shopkeepers. Roam the Plains of Abraham, the world's tenth largest urban park.

The UNESCO World Heritage Site meshes architectural styles with historic preservation. Queen of all: Chateau Frontenac, an enormous hotel that looms like a hilltop castle. Use the funicular (a funky cable car) to effortlessly reach waterfront boutiques and dining.

Boat excursions, walking tours and museums (for chocolate to dolls, Quebec history to indigenous artwork) are plentiful. Look for street performers around Old Quebec's public squares.

Multiple special events occur July 3 (Quebec's anniversary date). In October, Cirque du Soleil unveils a performance commissioned for the city's 400th.

For more: www.quebecregion.com, 877-783-1608.

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