How the French

Created

CANADA

From New France to French Canada

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out the world, even on airplanes. The organizaof Gilbert Rozon, the comedy celebration was Montréal because there is such a huge tourist de vivre gets us international recognition for val a truly international one. The French joie Angeles and other big cities, making the festition now has offices in Toronto, New York, Los into many languages and broadcast throughproducing television shows that are translated Juste pour rire has grown into a corporation the world, the rest of the country followed suit ing as it was also the only comedy testival in first a French-language-only festival, but seefeatures shows throughout the nation. An idea Juste pour rire (Just for Laughs), which now market right at our door. Another festival is being people who like to celebrate everything

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FRENCH CANADIAN FOOD AND DRINK



ble for two important imports to Canada: apple after all. Our Norman ancestors are responsiis derived from Anglo-Norman, the Old French French speakers, then, are not so different that was brought to the region. English and in 1066...or perhaps not. The English language of 1760 was only payback for the complete powerful, enough that they actually conquered takeover of the English nation by the French course of English history. Maybe the Conquest England in the 11th century, changing the who first lived in Normandy were extremely provinces of Brittany and Picardy. The people to Canada were from Normandy any of the French settlers who came while the rest mostly came from the

orchards and brioche. Normandy is indeed known for its many orchards, its passion for apple cider and its many recipes made with the fruit, such as mussels à la normande and tarts. In Canada, we have kept a similar interest in apples, as you can easily find orchards in almost every province. Many Canadian children remember going apple picking with their parents on a cool day in September. It was often part of the ritual of going back to school, sad for the kids, usually not so sad for the parents.

weekend mornings. A French bread made with not available, fancier bread (that is, brioche) a law existed stating that if regular bread was it was said makes sense. At that time in France, been the Queen of France, the context in which speaker of this famous line might not have once said: "Let them eat brioche." While the whose reign the French Revolution occurred) Antoinette, the wife of Louis XV (the king under wrongly—we will never know—that Marie means "to knead." It is often recalled, perhaps is a deformation of the word broyer, which butter, eggs flour and yeast, the name brioche the brioche, an import appreciated by many on had to be sold to the public at the same price. Normandy is also said to be the birthplace of

King Louis XV gets the credit for creating another very popular Canadian culinary delight—French onion soup. As history

remembers it, the king was hungry one night and only had champagne, butter and onions. He cooked the three together and created the first version of the soup.

Cretons are a well-known French Canadian food that really originated here, but it conspicuously resembles a dish from Normandy, called rillettes au greton, a type of pâté made from pork...which is exactly what cretons are. In fact, it is pork that has been cooked for so long that all the liquid evaporates, leaving only a paste perfect for spreading on toast. While it might not be considered part of a healthy breakfast, it is part of a traditional French Canadian one.

crisses could come either from the word crisser, same consistency, shape and unhealthy choin a pan until it is hard enough to have the lesterol level as chips. The name oreilles de from the cooking of a ham. The fat is then fried fat, or lard, which ideally would be collected ingredient, but traditionally, it should be pork menus. Some recipes use salt pork as the main terol—but also a classic part of sugar shack bois and are now a great source of cholessource of much-needed fat for the coureurs des pork jowls, these crunchy morsels were a great shacks). Basically chips made from deep-fried which are served at cabanes à sucre (sugar Norman food is the famous oreilles de crisses, Another French Canadian specialty based on

which means "to crackle," as in the sound this food makes in your mouth, or the name is sometimes translated as "Christ's ears"—yet another illustration of how we still include religion in our daily lives, albeit in a somewhat unceremonious manner.

Settlers from Brittany brought Breton crêpes with them, another great addition to the Canadian diet, although the crêpes that the early Canadians served were a much thicker version of the original ones. The Picards who came here brought their knowledge of a product that makes any dessert a success: crème Chantilly. Indeed, the region of Picardy promotes itself as being the home of the sweet delight. We, of course, have adapted it to whipped cream, simply omiting the vanilla.

Another typically French Canadian food. tarte au sucre (sugar pie), is actually originally from the Ardennes region of France. Graisse de rôtt, yet another food imported from France that French Canadians call their own, is made from the fat left over from roasting pork. After slow cooking the pork in water, you bring the leftover fat and water to a boil, then pour it into a bowl and let stand until it becomes hard and ready to slather onto a piece of fresh, crusty bread. Yes, you've got it right, it's a pork-fat spread. Although I am not a big fan, most Québeckers will spend countless hours explaining why one particular recipe or another

is so good and so comforting. I haven't been convinced yet—I prefer peanut butter on my toast, not the fat left over from another recipe.

Most of the foods we think of as typically French Canadian usually hark back to an old French recipe. *Boudin noir* (blood pudding or blood sausage), *tourtière* (meat pie) and *porc frais* (roast pork) were all specialty foods back in France but became staple meals here in Canada. In fact, now we go to a sugar shack to enjoy them, or we wait until Christmas because only our grandparents still make that stuff, and the food is not considered fancy at all.

gravy that is nearing the solid stage, so as neath the fries to double the flavour. Then to make the fries soggier than a hot chicken drown said crunchy fries with a thick, brown pile of fries. If you like living on the edge (of delicately sprinkle some cheese curds onto the the United States because the French always which were called freedom fries for a while in me). You take a good portion of French fries, which has been poked fun at even by American cardiac arrest), hide some more cheese underfind a way to make the Americans mad. Next, it sound good (an impossible feat, if you ask poutine is, let me explain, while trying to make for, say, 30 years, and you don't know what comedians. If you have been hiding in a cave Canadian invention is our famous poutine. The one meal that we can truly call a French

sandwich. Wait a few minutes to make sure the concoction has attained the level of sogginess and cheese meltiness required, and enjoy—ideally with a Pepsi to complete the cliché. To make the dish even more distinguished, some people add smoked meat or replace the gravy with spaghetti sauce. Lovely.

To conclude a classy meal of poutine, a similarly fancy dessert is required. French Canadians from Acadia have created a pastry they call pets de soeur, which literally means "nun's farts." I'm sure this fixation with religious connotations in swearing and cooking could be studied in depth, and some weird character peculiarities would be uncovered. In any case, the recipe for pets de soeur is pretty simple, probably created to use up any remaining pie crust dough left over after a day of cooking. It is simply pie dough slathered with (of course) butter, cinnamon and brown sugar, rolled up and baked.

My personal favourite dessert (no sarcasm here) is *sucre* à *la crème*, another offensively fattening recipe, but for which I have found no other origin than plain old French Canada. *Sucre* à *la crème* is basically white sugar, brown sugar, butter and (wait for it) heavy cream, all mixed together, cooked until dangerously hot, then cooled down in the fridge and cut into squares of absolute guilty pleasure. *Sucre* à *la crème* is also used as a spread, and extreme

remember forever. where, it was a culinary experience they will dancing jigs), and for guests coming from elsejuice running in it is not the first thing people (and no, we were not wearing plaid shirts and months of winter. As a true French Canadian, the best outing one could ask for in the last syrup has become the trademark product of would have thought about back then. Maple showed the first French Canadians how to I had my wedding reception at a sugar shack Québec and has made a trip to a sugar shack pinning a tree in the middle of winter for the extract the sap from maple trees. Let's face it, now on our table because of the Natives, who sugary liquid. As a side note, maple syrup is syrup, which even today remains a pretty pricy crème often replaced the more expensive maple ers. Sugar being relatively cheap, sucre à la cream and a signed contract for Weight Watchpie is not complete if not served with fresh try and make a tarte au sucre. Of course, this sugar lovers can stuff the mixture into pie pas-

So, French Canadians have invented some foods and adapted many recipes from their French ancestors to use whatever ingredients could be found in the New World. From fancy crème Chantilly to indescribable poutine, the French Canadian diet is sure to offer everyone a taste of the French influence in Canada (and perhaps a slight weight gain).

was really tricky for anyone who wished to ture, whereas wine had to be kept in a dry but simply because the cold weather was perfect was actually the first thing brewed in Canada French are best known for their wine, but beer over several fun things to drink. Of course, the food is probably drink, and the French brought indeed. But I think what we like more than an almost impossible feat until at least the grow grape vines to make good-quality wine warmer environment. Also, the weather here for keeping beer at a somewhat cool temperaselves. This might have been a sin because posed to share. pared beer in a caldron and kept it for them-1970s. Back in the 1600s, Recollet priests prewas taught that every Christian was sup-Canadians are experts in French

Back in France (and most of Europe), beer had been part of the diet for several centuries, at least since the Egyptians figured out how to make barley interesting. The people who ended up coming here, priests, farmers and children alike, had been drinking beer all their lives, starting with a healthy breakfast of dried bread and a pint of the devil's liquid. Water in those days was considered, if not dangerous, at least mysterious enough that people stayed away from it. Water was believed to carry germs, or at least this was the reason given to avoid bathing and to have a beer first thing in the

morning. The effects of alcohol were considered medicinal, and being drunk was not as taboo as it eventually became. Alcohol was, more than water, the solution to every ailment, and was prescribed to every member of the family, children included. Beer was the equivalent of a glass of water today, and we see beer the way they used to see water, though it's a good thing we don't use beer for our baths.

Several home breweries opened in New France, one recorded as l'Abitation in Québec, which offered beer to locals. Unfortunately, it was destroyed by fire shortly after it opened. A decree in 1650 allowed small commercial breweries to operate, but we can thank Jean Talon, a French colonial administrator, for building the first real brewery a couple of decades later. Talon grew the hops necessary for beer production on his seigneurie and called his brewery La Brasserie du Roy. But French interest in spending money on the colony was not consistent, and after Talon returned to France, the brewery was dismantled. I guess beer was not always a Canadian priority.

Beer brewing dates back to ancient Roman times, but it was during medieval times that it really evolved, thanks to, yes, priests and monks. Charlemagne, the creator of schools, considered beer an essential part of life and took it upon himself to train people to brew good beer. This convinces me to forgive him for

creating schools. Although Canadians are proud to be known for their love of beer, it is a shame that a majority of the beer we drink is produced by foreign multinationals. Even Sleemans, who once had the most sympathetic CEO ever, is now owned by the Japanese makers of Sapporo beer. At least, we can still boast that the French are the ones who brought it and drank it here first.

In 1992, a well-known Québec singer, Robert Charlebois, bought some shares in a brewery that had been declining and, with the help of two partners, renamed it Unibroue and moved its facilities to Chambly. There, they created a line of beers that are more of an experience than just a cold drink to accompany a hockey game. La Maudite, La Blanche de Chambly and La Don de dieu are all strong beers that are fermented and refermented to give them a special taste.

Although wine is the brew the French are known for, this beverage did not really have a substantial influence on the creation of Canada. However, we could say that we owe the political creation of Canada, Confederation, to inebriation. Indeed, it is a running gag among historians (yes, I know, we are quite boring) that the many conferences that resulted in the signing of the Constitution were accompanied by parties and even more drinking. Making the connection, people say that the Fathers of

Confederation were able to agree with each other because they were drunk most of the time during the negotiations. It could also be said that the country was conquered because of an another import, eau de vie (literally "water of life"; distilled alcohol). This strong liquor was an abomination for the Native population, who rapidly took up the habit of drinking it, although not as carefully as the Europeans had perhaps grown used to doing.

with (and marry) each other since the country's a twisted way, to helping Canadians connect in Canadian bars and have contributed, in ducing themselves. All of these are still staples to buy than the beer the colonists were probeverages were readily available and cheaper French brandy—relatively easily. These two their favourite drinks—Jamaican rum until well after Grand Marnier came along, after the founding of the colony and continued French Canadians were able to obtain two of Because of the free trade that went on soon sec and cognac, and is called Grand Marnier my favourite liqueurs is made out of both triple It has been served in France since the 1880s. mix it with other alcohol or fruit juice. One of which we rarely drink on its own, but rather brought to Canada by the French is triple sec. which it is produced. Yet another type of liqueur enjoy today is cognac, named for the town in Another fine French creation that we still

beginning. Elaborate wine glasses dating back to the 17th century were found in Québec City, which demonstrates that Champlain was a bon vivant and made sure his people could enjoy themselves. There is a record of Champlain actually complaining about the cold weather because it froze the booze, and it had to be distributed by the pound rather than by the currer

stop a baby from crying. Not that the French when their English counterparts took over and sions for drinking. Habits changed, however, upon and considered a sin. By 1851, there French Canadians, drunkenness was frowned strong Catholic hold on the personal lives of were any better than the English, but with the a remedy for pretty much everything, even to as drinking water—Canadians used alcohol as pretty. Drinking alcohol was a habit as cheap established themselves; the result wasn't bouts of drunkenness and the numerous occasure). The French drinkers and the Catholic ing upstairs—spotless and tidy rooms, I am say that taverns used to offer rooms for sleepdistinction between the two (some historians though there doesn't seem to have been a clear early Canadians preferred taverns to saloons, was one for every 478 people. It seems that were 1990 taverns in Upper Canada, which French colony apart from the usual exceptional Drinking was not a major problem in the

Church were not great companions, however, and an anti-drinking crusade, led by Father Charles Chiniquy, went through French Canada. Within two years, Chiniquy was able to convince some 200,000 French Canadians to give up alcohol permanently. The movement eventually died down after the excommunication of Chiniquy, who was accused of improper behaviour towards members of the female sex. How ironic. I guess he couldn't blame booze for that.

since remained. Today, Canadians still like drinkers than their predecessors their beer, but they are much more reasonable cept of "moderation" came into being and has the booze away from them? Slowly, the conpleased; if they were going to sacrifice their who were allowed to drink whenever they drinking. The notable exceptions were soldiers, 60 hours a week could now not be dedicated to lives for the nation, who could justify taking for a good reason—alcohol was forbidden in dinner table. Canadians started drinking less and appeared less often in the middle of the the workplace, which meant that some It was no longer a central element of the diet alcohol became more of a recreational activity. dian drinking habits changed, and consuming Towards the end of the 19th century, Cana-