



TORONTO LOOSENS ITS CORSET

**SMOKE SIGNALS** SHEDDING THE RESTRAINTS OF A PHANTOM MOTHER ENGLAND, CANADA'S LARGEST CITY HAS OPENED ITSELF TO THE WORLD AND AN ONRUSH OF CULINARY EXCITEMENT. INTREPID TORONTO RESTAURANT CRITIC GINA MALLET RETRACES HER BURGEONING BEAT.

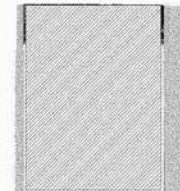
Take a Rust Belt city driven by Presbyterian probity, make it over as a gleaming financial center and the entrepôt for immigrants from all over the world, add a voracious ambition to be No. 1, shake well, and you have Toronto, one of the most multicultural cities in North America.

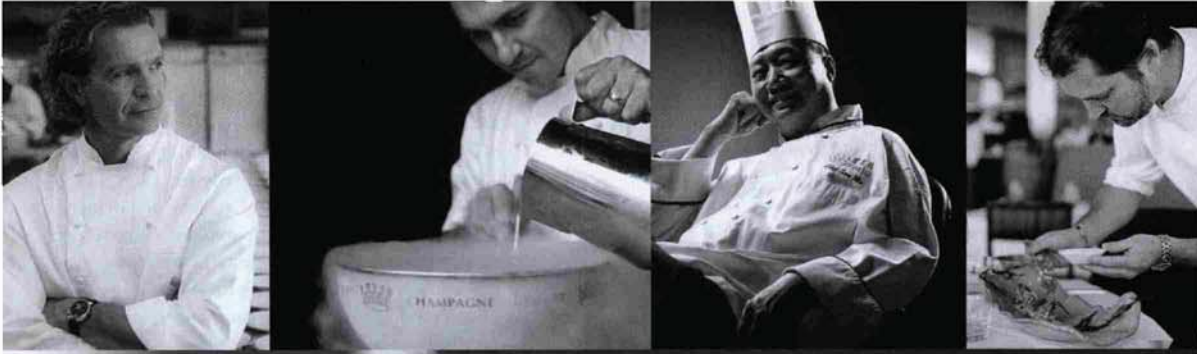
Today, the city's polyglot personality is paraded in its restaurants. There's **Buca**, a tasting tour of regional Italy. Classical Escoffier at the eponymous **Didier**. **Susur Lee's** spin on Eurofood at **Madeline's**. Haute dim sum at **Lai Wah Heen**. **Lucien**, a modern take on traditional dishes using local, artisanal food. **Massimo Capra's** buoyant **Mistura**, with its showbiz Italian-American repertoire. **Nota Bene**, for classy comfort food. And **One**, the celeb hang in **The Hazelton Hotel**, the way cool haute hotel developed by Canada's **Starwood Group**.

All these restaurants opened in the past decade, and all are casual, reflecting the way traditional dining is being turned on its head. The old three course dinner is being superseded by Chinese restaurant-style menus, where customers pick plates to share.

In 2000, Toronto's restaurant hierarchy was dominated by fine dining, American Express card places exemplified by **Auberge du Pommier**, a flossy French evocation with **Jason Bangerter**, an **Anton Mosimann** trained chef, and **North 44**, **Mark McEwan's** cool Canadian spin on middle-of-the-road international food. Sure, they're still doing well, but something happened on the way to the white tablecloth restaurant anchored by a star chef. Fine dining went into meltdown. Star chefs everywhere branded themselves as a chain; no need to go to Paris to **L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon**—there are now 11 round the world. Same now with Lee: he's taken

Above (from left): Olive cured beef with pickled fennel, grilled radicchio, and mint from Nyood. Photo by Paula Wilson. From Claudio Aprile's new *Origin*, *dulce de leche* with frozen raspberry rocks and Murray River salt. And from Aprile's Colborne Lane, goat cheese filled beet sponge, gels of red and yellow beets, toasted almond shreds, almond milk foam, and dehydrated onion. Photo by Margaret Mulligan. Basics of the Arame, a cocktail served at Ame: arame seaweed muddled with sake and rooibos syrup (ginseng, water, red bean paste, black miso paste, sesame seeds, sugar, and rooibos). Mark McEwan, chef about town at One, Bymark, North 44, and creator of McEwan's take-out/catering enterprise. Claudio Aprile working with his chemistry set. Photo by Margaret Mulligan. Veteran chef Sam Ma, culinary consultant at the haute dim sum/Cantonese Lai Wah Heen in the Metropolitan Hotel. Anthony Walsh, executive chef of the longstanding fine dining Canoe. Opposite: To deliver a "surreal experience" for bathroom-bound guests, Nyood distressed a sagging hallway chair and manipulated lighting to cast stark shadows over an epistolatory mural.





his restaurants to New York City, Washington, D.C., and Singapore next. You don't have to go that far to buy McEwan's formerly exclusive seared halibut baked in banana leaf; the gourmand has merely to pick it up at McEwan's, the chef's big box grocery store.

Still, there are plenty of three-piece suit places for the nostal-

gics. In Toronto this means the Bay Street brokers'/lawyers' watering holes like **Canoe** on top of the Mies van der Rohe TD Bank Tower, which has a spectacular view of the city and serves a \$100 tasting menu featuring Alberta Spring Bank elk loin. And **Bymark**, which offers a pound of whole roasted foie gras for Can\$124.95 (U.S.\$116.16), and **Harbour Sixty Steak House**, Gay Nineties decor and beluga and Kobe beef on request. But a careful look at the menus shows unusual items: truffled mac-and-cheese! Bymark offers crisp *frites* with lobster and classic béarnaise "poutine-style." Canoe lists tourtière, the homely Quebec covered meat pie. **The Fifth Grill**, poised on top of an old industrial building reached by the original hand-managed elevator, has both truffled mac-and-cheese and lobster poutine.

It's not just the economic downturn. Toronto's changed its eating habits. Eating out used to be divided between local ethnic greasy spoons and the special event place. But today the neighborhoods are blossoming with restaurants that inspire a steady following. Small intimate places pock the city. Uptown, there's **Mogette**, the passion of a retired schoolteacher, with an irreproachable menu of bistro faves. In Chinatown west, chef **Jean-Jacques Texier** hangs his shingle at **Batifoile**, classic country French. In the decaying Junction district, **Anant Singh** is drawing customers to **Curry Twist** for his Ayurveda cooking. Along the University of Toronto beat, the Palestinian chef **Isam Kaisi** is showing he's a master of Middle Eastern cooking. Downtown on the booming Ossington strip, **Teo Paul** emulates his favorite Paris bar at **Union**, open at 9:30 a.m. for pastis and croissants, with the roasted chicken coming later in the evening. Far west in an old Polish quarter, chef **Fabio Bondi** of **Local Kitchen & Wine Bar** is making his own charcuterie. But talk about charcuterie and the aficionado must go to **The Black Hoof**, in the West End, where **Grant van Gameren** offers venison bresaola, duck prosciutto, and horse terrine on a menu that includes beef cheeks and marrow bones. At **Reds Bistro & Wine Bar**, **Michael Steh** plumbs his Slovenian roots to compose a baroque 20 item charcuterie plate, including his family's take on *kolbassa*, pâté, jerky, ham, and pickled asparagus and fiddleheads. Swallow it down with wild mushroom/*ribana kasba* noodle soup. Now that would be unthinkable a decade ago.

"We've become more sophisticated," acknowledges **Michael Bonacini** of **Oliver & Bonacini Group**, which includes **Auberge du Pommier**, **Canoe**, and **Biff's Bistro**, although he doesn't think he'll be putting offal in his middle-of-the-road restaurants soon. Still, he underlines how customers have become "food and wine savvy and have a heightened level of expectation." Other influences in the awakening of Toronto's palate: the Food Network, of course; the cookbook boom, which



Top: The interior of veteran restaurateur Simon Bower's Lucien belies its curbside storefront appeal. Photo by Monica McKenna. Above: Susur Lee's Madeline's references China in look, Europe on the menu. Photo by Paula Wilson.

smartened up home cooks; and inevitably, the Web, which has hugely expanded restaurant criticism.

But it's the organic, fresh'n'local movement that has had the most profound impact. **Toronto**, once dependent on imports, has learned how to mine Ontario's own natural resources and in doing so has transformed the foodscape and, in turn, the restaurants.

First there was the wine. Ontario wine used to be a foxy joke. Now it's palatable and more, wines like Tawse and Norman Hardie are listed proudly alongside imports, and Niagara has got its own niche market with ultrasweet ice wine. Ontario cheeses like Bonnie & Floyd (sheep's milk) and Niagara Gold, a rich semisoft cow's milk, have pride of place on the cheese plate at **Pangaea**, eclectic grazing. And, then, of course, there's the produce. It's almost forgotten now, but 10 years ago, Toronto menus were monotonously similar because the restaurants relied on the same imports, which were cheaper than local food even when local food was in season (such is the economics of food marketing). It took a French trained



Flying the Canadian maple leaf at Canoe: Nunavut caribou with marrow ravioli and Cookstown root vegetables, localism, and nationalism on one plate.

**A hotel with buzz** The Fairmont Royal York Hotel

is the landmark hostelry of downtown Toronto, looming large near the shores of Lake Ontario with the giant Union Station across the street. A relic of the golden age of the railroad, the hotel was built in 1929 by Canadian Pacific Railways and was briefly the tallest hotel in the British Empire, an Art Deco behemoth with more than 1,000 rooms, its own concert hall, futuristic plumbing, radios everywhere, and stamped with the royal warrant, with a floor reserved for the monarch.

A new age, a new queen. The old lady still retains its magisterial dignity with a grand lobby that evokes a more leisurely luxurious time, 2,600 rooms, WiFi, 20 restaurants, and a shopping mall. But the queen who counts is on the 14th floor roof. That's where executive chef **David Garcelon** tends an herb and vegetable garden and some six beehives, named The Honey Moon Suite, The Royal Sweet, The V.I.Bee Suite, The Bee & Bee Suite, Stayin' A Hive Suite, and Home Sweet Comb. Despite a rainy summer last year, Garcelon harvested nearly 500 pounds of a dark pungent honey that won a prize at the 2009 Royal Agricultural Fair, another glorious throwback. The honey trickles down to **EPIC**, the Royal York's signature restaurant, which promotes a fresh'n'local menu featuring Wellington County lamb, organic Fenwood Farms chicken, and Lake Huron whitefish as well as its very own veggies from upstairs. Next thing perhaps: wine from the rooftop vines.

"Location, location, location and some amazing staff!" writes one fan about the Royal York. Ask for the VIP floor—the 12th. The old-fashioned rooms are small but have excellent beds. The Library Bar is a cozy throwback to the city's oligarchy. Afternoon tea provided. Locals love the romance packages, including the Valentine's Day special of a deluxe room with a city view, king size bed, large sofa, bathrobes, a bottle of bubbly, and chocolate dipped strawberries. —G.M.

chef, **Jamie Kennedy**, to imagine California in Ontario, to turn the short growing season into a virtue, inspiring chefs to look around them for unfamiliar ingredients. Roots, not just beets but turnips and parsnips, became popular.

Suddenly the overlooked pickerel from local lakes appeared on menus along with whitefish and perch. Almost every good restaurant serves boutique meat. **Scaramouche**, the Rosedale grande dame, serves only Kerr Farms' grass-fed beef. The Elora chicken has restored the fowl's tarnished reputation. One butcher, **Stephen Alexander** at **Cumbræ Meats**, actually raises the beef he slaughters. The Tamshire pig and its ilk have helped to put pork belly on many menus along with smoked meat. And for the first time, Ontario is producing artisan cheeses—**Glengarry's Figaro**, **Thunder Oak Gouda**—and the cheese plate has become a fixture.

No restaurant dares not to be fresh'n'local. Chef **Peter George** at the CN Tower, the city's top tourist attraction, has his own ground level garden of herbs and vegetables. **Bob Bermann** serves **Cumbræ** burgers at the city's oldest diner, **The Senator**. Kennedy's flagship, **Gilead Bistro**, is the city's **Alice Waters'** outpost, the menu featuring heritage foods, organic tomatoes, and red fife (a heritage Canadian wheat) sourdough.

But what's that I hear? The hoof beats of the new generation. The Boomers wanted casual. Millennials, now entering their 30s, want casual-plus. They're looking for entertainment, cocktails, fun, and small plates—all found in the bar-driven restaurants called resto-lounges. Newly opened **Cinq or** is emblematic, a long friendly bar and a pretty flickering dining room with a menu that includes a foie gras hot dog. At **Nyood**, **Roger Mooking** designs shared plates of tuna niçoise tartare and *chimichurri* tiger shrimp with crispy lentils, smoked tomato, and spiced honey. And their influence is going mainstream.

Ame, chef **Guy Rubino's** take on Japanese, uses a superhot *robata* grill as the underpinning for a showy shogun's palace with a big bar selling exotic cocktails. **Claudio Aprile**, the most adventurous chef in the city, fuses Asiatic influences with some of **Ferran**

Adrià's techniques to make food vignettes like a plate of vanilla-cardamom poached lobster with veal cheek/oyster ragoût, parsnip puree, and ponzu hollandaise consciously paired with tracks by the Red Hot Chili Peppers and U2 in a resto-lounge environment at **Colborne Lane**. "I don't want to challenge but entertain," says Aprile. "I want people to say, 'Wow! What's that in my mouth?'" His newest project, **Origin**, scheduled to open late last month, is a complex idea of simplicity: a beet injected with saffron vinaigrette stands alone. He has a raw bar in the open kitchen, where he features live side-striped prawns in season, served with just olive oil and salt. And a cherry ice cream/Guinness float made with soft serve swirled from his own machine. At the extreme is a Vancouver

import, **Guu Izakaya**, a Japanese pub with this mission statement: "This is a short trip to Tokyo. Don't worry about things in your life. Get drunk and have fun! Our friendly staff will help you forget everything." It's packed. Customers hang off the walls for a table, serenaded by the staff's unison calls of welcome and thanks.

As Lucien's owner **Simon Bower**, who's owned several restaurants over 30 years, says: "There's a new jungle out there."

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**Gina Mallet** is the restaurant critic for Canada's *National Post*, a food/culture blogger at *ginamallet.com*, and the author of the James Beard Award-winning book *Last Chance to Eat: The Fate of Taste in a Fast Food World*.

**Slurp City**

"I tell everybody I know that Toronto is the best oyster eating city in North America," says Jon Rowley, the Seattle-based seafood flavormeister whom Julia Child called the "fish missionary" for his work in defining how a fish should taste. Oysters are his addiction, and whenever he visits Toronto he never fails to drop in on **Rodney's Oyster House**, hoping to get another taste of a Sand Dune, a meaty lime-green shelled oyster from Prince Edward Island, or a briny Galway Flat from Ireland over at **Starfish Oyster Bed & Grill**. Fact is, Rowley can't find anywhere in the United States the number of oyster varieties that matches what's available in Toronto, noting that the city imports the great European oysters prohibited in the U.S. by health and ecological concerns.

**Patrick McMurray** of Starfish (right) puts Toronto's primacy down to its location far from the ocean. The great seaboard cities rely on local oysters, he notes, adding, "Why the heck would you bring in oysters when you have them at your doorstep?" Toronto, like Chicago, has to import oysters, and thus gets the pick of them at a time when shipping has never been so fast and reliable and when the public's appetite for them so insatiable. McMurray is now negotiating to import Scotland's only native oyster, the Loch Ryan. It's hard to find, he says, and has a "dry metallic flavor and big ocean sea salts upfront."

Toronto is tops in presentation too. "When you order an oyster in Toronto you invariably get a beautifully shucked oyster, just glistening, that you don't find in other cities," Rowley says. That's due to P.E.I. born **Rodney Clark**, the city's grand old man of oysters. He opened his eponymous restaurant 21 years ago; it was the first dedicated oyster house in the city, and its success turned the city on to bivalves. Today Clark sells almost two million oysters a year, and he's the source for the oysters on the best menus in town, spurring the opening of **Oyster Boy**, **Pure Spirits Oyster House & Grill**, and **Rodney's By Bay**.

But it's the way they must look on the plate!  
 To Clark, shucking should yield oyster *au naturel*. His son, **Eamon**, 25, a two time Canadian shucking champ, can open an oyster in 4.3 seconds, and, says Rodney, "the oyster doesn't look like it came out of a Cuisinart but like it was cut by a laser. An Eamon



Clark oyster looks like it never left the shell." McMurray, who is a four-time Canadian champ and the 2002 world champ (a title won at the Galway International Oyster Festival), cracks open the hinge and severs the top, a quick one-two he calls "Hogtown style." Other oyster houses have their own idiosyncrasies. For instance, he notes, at one fabled stateside establishment, shuckers bang the shell on the knife blade, insert the tip of the blade into the hinge while holding the oyster up in the air, and then swing it down so the butt end of the knife hits a cobblestone.

One other thing: buying oysters. Oyster quality has never been higher, notes Rowley, but he says it's best to purchase directly from the source. Oftentimes, oysters are branded by processors, distributors, and/or brokers, which can lead to confusion about a particular oyster's defining characteristics. One example cited by Rodney Clark is the popular Malpeque brand from his hometown, which, he claims, rarely exhibits its distinct shape and size. A true Malpeque, he says, is available only from the growers themselves, all of whom are neighbors of his oyster farm, where he raises Rodney's Own Depot Prince. His other favorites? Says Clark: the rare Sand Dune is "the best oyster I've eaten in my life. The meat consistencies are so wonderful"; P.E.I.'s Grand Entrée; Washington State's seaweedy Totten Inlet; and the slim little raccoon oysters on Bowen's Island in Charleston, South Carolina, that grow in clusters. —G.M.