

Jewish Life

A taste of smoked beef at Lester's Deli and bagel making at St. Viateurs.

SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTO

FOOD

BOOKS

POP CULTURE

CLASSIFIED

PARASHAH



A taste of Montreal's Jewish culinary sites

SANDY BORNSTEIN
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

I put on a pair of comfortable walking shoes and grabbed a bottle of water before boarding a taxi to meet Mélissa Simard, the founder of Round Table Tours, for a guided tour of Montreal's Jewish culinary sites. In 2013, she was singled out as the best female entrepreneur by the Concours Québécois de l'entrepreneuriat and was on the cover of the business section of the *Montreal Gazette* in 2015.

Simard is not Jewish but she understands the connection between food and culture. She successfully intertwined tidbits of useful information as the tour group tasted a cross section of foods and passed places of interest in the neighbourhood where Eastern European Jews opened up restaurants in the 20th century.

Black-and-white photos complemented her presentation as she brought us back and forth in time while talking about notable personalities such as writer Mordecai Richler; singer-songwriter, poet and writer Leonard Cohen; trade union activist, social organizer and feminist Léa Roback; social worker Maimie Pinzer and others.

Note: of the spots toured, only Cheskies bakery is kosher.

Lester's Deli

Lester's Deli, located at 1057 Bernard, was the tour's first stop. A bright yellow sign with black lettering reminds people that this family-run business has been serving hot smoked meat sandwiches to Montreal's Outremont neighbourhood, on the north side of Mount Royal, since 1951. Hints of an Ashkenazic Jewish presence remain. As I entered the restaurant, conservatively dressed women with sheitels were pushing baby strollers on the adjacent sidewalk, while several bearded men with oversized hats and knee-length coats clustered in front of a doorway a few yards away.

Once inside, I couldn't stop staring at the deli signage, display cases and knickknacks on the walls that took me back to the 1960s. It was hard not to inhale the smoky aroma inside the shop. The main draw is the beef brisket that is cooked in spicy brine, then smoked and later reheated. This hand-sliced meat is served fresh daily. The original owner's son, Billy, has infused his comedic personality into the running of this well-known restaurant.

Rays of sunshine warmed the outside seating area where we waited for our prepared plates. Simard handed out individually wrapped kosher fortune cookies with the Wing's imprint. From the 1880s to the start of the First World War, many Ashkenazic Jewish immigrants lived alongside Chinese immigrants in Chinatown. A few decades ago, a Jewish businessman paid the company \$60 to place an engagement ring inside a fortune cookie. This episode sparked a relationship with the Jewish community. Eventually, the Wing Noodles Ltd. product line was certified kosher.

Since I'm a pescatarian, I was treated to sliced nova salmon that had been smoked onsite along with a mound of tuna fish and a couple of slices of rye bread. The other tour participants smacked their lips as they bit into multiple layers of moist, lean meat served on rye bread coated with bright yellow mustard. The scoops of chopped liver and slices of smoked salmon remained on their plates until they had wolfed down their half-sandwiches.

No one at the table was able to explain how this tender meat compared to corned beef served at American Jewish delis. However, it was clear that the

foodies were savouring every bite.

Boulangerie Cheskies Heimishe Bakery

We walked for a few blocks to this kosher bakery on 359 Bernard Quest. I peered into the window and saw trays of kosher desserts sorted on several rows in glass display cases. We waited patiently in line while local residents swarmed inside and outside the small shop. Cheskie Lebowitz, along with his wife Malkie, began operating this bakery in 2002. His brother owns a similar place called Schomie's Heimshe Bakery in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Our on-the-go sample was a warm, rectangular shaped chocolate babka. This chocolate lover's dream dessert had a dark chocolate filling that was generously drizzled with another layer of chocolate. As I devoured my delicious treat, Simard shared Rokhl Korn's (1898–1982) poem, *A Song of Yesterday*, in a nearby alley close to where Korn once lived. She artistically compared the "folds of the dress" in the poem to the delicately folded dough in our individual babkas.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Inside Schwartz's. SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTO

St.-Viateur Bagel

Before starting the tour, I was aware of the ongoing debate among locals as to which store made the best Montreal bagels. To begin my taste test, I pulled a tiny piece off of my warm sesame bagel while I was leaving St.-Viateur and put the rest of the bagel inside a small bag.

While inside this shop, I watched as one man cut and shaped the dough on a long table while another man boiled the bagels and then placed the partially cooked items into an open oven. When the bagels were done, they were heaved onto another surface with an oversized spatula where they were eventually sorted into open bins. Pedro, the bagel roller, claimed that the shop produces 1,000 dozen bagels a day.

I'm fairly certain that when Myer Lewkowicz, a Holocaust survivor, and Hyman Seligman opened the shop in 1957, they never dreamed that their bagels would become so popular that bagels would be sold 24 hours a day in the city.

La Maison de L'Original Fairmount Bagel Bakery

My view of the bagel preparers was partially obstructed at this store. On tiptoes, I watched bagels being made by hand like the other shop. Ever since Isadore Shlafman opened the first Montreal bagel shop, the family has followed his traditional methods. When Shlafman relocated his house and business to Fairmount Street in 1949, the store was renamed. His grandchildren now run the business.

I once again took a tiny bite and stored the rest in my bag. I have to admit that I'm not a bagel maven and can't weigh in on whether one

is better than the other. The Montreal bagels appear to be smaller and perhaps sweeter than their New York City cousins. Perhaps the honey-infused boiling water makes the Montreal bagels stand out.

Wilensky's Light Lunch

I walked into this corner shop and was affectionately greeted by Sharon, the granddaughter of the original owners. The long narrow counter with simple wooden stools reminded me of some of Chicago's West Rogers Park neighbourhood hotdog shops from my youth.

While I vaguely remember the movie *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, I don't recall the scenes that were shot in this iconic place. Almost every inch of wall space is filled with memorabilia that provides a daily reminder of the shop's history.

The Wilensky Special is a simple sandwich comprising grilled meat and melted cheese with mustard on a whole kaiser bun. I was accommodated with an egg salad sandwich with deliciously sour sliced pickles. I splurged on a chocolate egg cream that was whipped up with a homemade chocolate syrup, soda and milk. Once again, I felt like I was back in the 1960s.

Hof Kelstein

At this contemporary restaurant, our group shared an oversized strawberry and walnut rugelach and a bialy with onion and poppy seeds. This shop represents Jeff Finkelstein's effort to create Jewish classic foods in a modern style. Finkelstein hopes that his restaurant will last for decades like some of the Jewish restaurants from his youth.

Schwartz's

By the time we reached our last restaurant on St. Laurent Boulevard, I couldn't eat another morsel. As Simard passed out goodie bags to everyone else, she mentioned that Jews no longer own this notable landmark. A few years ago, a group of investors purchased Montreal's famous "Hebrew delicatessen" so that it could continue operating.

When the sandwiches were taken out of the brown bag and unwrapped, I saw that the smoked meat was laced with more fat than Lester's version. Bits of meat fell easily from the sandwiches while everyone ate.

Back in 1928, two brothers, Reuben and Maurice Schwartz, started smoking meat using a 10-day method that combined a secret formula of dry rubbed spices. Today, people continue to line up on the sidewalk outside so they can indulge in one of Montreal's favourite meals.

Unlike other food tours that have introduced me to unfamiliar ethnic foods tied to a region, this tour refreshed my cultural roots. I journeyed back in time to my childhood when my parents frequented storefronts where bagels were handmade, boiled and baked, delis served their locally sourced products and bakeries sold traditional Jewish goodies. Even though American and Canadian Ashkenazic Jews share a similar immigration history that includes common foods and traditions, each region has created its own version of their favourite foods. Learning about these subtle differences helps me appreciate the complexity of the Jewish experience. ■

Sandy Bornstein attended this food tour as part of 2018 Travel Classics International Writers Conference tour of Montreal.

ADVERTORIAL

CANADA DAY A CELEBRATION OF COUNTRY AND OF ITS SENIORS

With Canada Day fast approaching this year, I found myself pondering how to celebrate this special day with our One Kenton Place residents in a way that recognizes the many amazing contributions they've made to our society and country at large.

To do this, I felt I needed to go back to the times of Confederation itself, so please humour me while I start with a short history lesson.

July 1st marks the anniversary of the enactment of the Constitution Act, 1867 which, united the three separate colonies of Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick into a single entity within the British Empire called Canada. Although Canada had been around pre 1867, this was the day that Canada – as we know her today – was born.

A lot has changed in 151 years, and according to Canada's "memory banks" her population has grown tenfold from 3.2 million to just over 35 million, and for the first time since Confederation Canada is older than it is young. In 1921, only 4% of Canada's population were considered seniors (65+). In 2016, that number had grown to 16.9 percent. In fact, 2016 was also the first time in census history that there were more people over 65 than children under 14, according to Statistics Canada, and by 2030 it is estimated that one in four Canadians will be a senior citizen.

There is no doubt that our Canadian population is growing, both in numbers and in chronological age.

To think that our seniors, the 16.9 percent mentioned above, have played such an integral part in shaping today's Canadian society is incredible and humbling, to say the least. Speaking to our residents at One Kenton Place, I can confidently say that their combined life experience is absolutely priceless. Our One Kenton Place heroes have defended our freedom in several wars, they've built homes and businesses, overcome tremendous challenges, advocated for human rights, raised families, led large organizations, contributed to Toronto's city landscape and skyline, invented products that are widely used today, helped to shape the laws of this country, and they've raised and donated more money for charitable causes than I could even count.

Canada Day is a good time to reflect not only on what a great country we live in, but also the incredible contributions our seniors have made to support the life we live today. So, on behalf of our residents who can't thank you Canada, we thank you, for the Country that you are, and for the opportunities that our home and native land has given us!

Happy Canada Day!



RUTH DAYAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Ruth Dayan has almost two decades of experience working in the healthcare industry, with a special focus in Alzheimer's and Dementia care. Her experience spans across all sectors of healthcare, including the management and day-to-day operations of two large Long Term Care homes. Ruth is a certified Long Term Care Administrator. She also holds certifications in Quality Improvement Facilitation, Alzheimer's and Dementia Care (Montessori, GPA, Hush no Rush) and Lean Principles.