

THE GOURMET ISSUE

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FIELD TO FORK
FORAGED FOOD IS
BACK ON THE MENU

AMERICAN HEROES
THE SIGNATURE DISHES
THAT HAVE SHAPED THE US

Marvels of MONTREAL

STROLL THE CITY'S MULTICULTURAL FOODSCAPE



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Eat Street

Montreal's dining scene has come full circle thanks to a wave of immigrants whose culinary ventures are bringing Boulevard St-Laurent back to life.

Words DAVID SZANTO





dUBBED 'THE MAIN' by locals, Montreal's Boulevard St-Laurent cuts a swathe through a rich and storied foodscape. Starting at the Old Port on the Saint Lawrence River, the tourist traps of *Vieux Montréal* quickly give way to the dumping shops in Chinatown, which then lead on to the venues of the entertainment district and the student quarter's late-night eateries. Further north are the Portuguese shops and Jewish delis, as well as a scattering of hipster bistros, bakeries and butchers. Later, it turns into Little Italy with its buzzing pizzerias and bars, and then there's the Jean-Talon Market.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Owner of Hof Kelsten, Jeffrey Finkelstein; a walking tour organised by The Museum of Jewish Montreal; Pâtisserie Solognac; Xavier Martinelli and Angus Castran of Café Melbourne. **PREVIOUS PAGE** Rue St Paul in Old Montreal.

In 1792, Boulevard St-Laurent was officially declared the dividing line between the east and west parts of the city and thus became the main street of Montreal. It evolved into a major transportation artery — moving food between the port and the inland areas — and a key location for new businesses.

Immigrants to Canada often made Boulevard St-Laurent their first home, creating communities steeped in the flavours of Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, and later influenced by Asian and Caribbean tastes. In the middle of the 20th century, the Main bustled with Greek, Jewish, African, Italian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Portuguese voices, all mingling together in shops, restaurants and markets.

Subsequent generations, however, began to move to more suburban districts, sometimes creating their own cultural pockets, or else integrating into a broader mosaic. By the 1990s, Boulevard St-Laurent's multicultural heyday had faded and, while many established eateries remained, a homogenous culture set in.

But lately, a curious generation of foodies is emerging. Not quite old-world, they are what you might call 'neo-immigrants'. Their sleek bakeries and cafes offer old favourites, such as dense Jewish *babka* and chewy pumpernickel, as well as perfectly executed croissants and artisan panettone. They serve Polish sausages alongside a shot of health-conscious green juice and carefully calibrated flat whites. These new arrivals are remaking the Main in its original image and their energy is most welcome on a street where culinary gems seem to come and go.

THE NEW GUARD

Café Melbourne, which opened on the Main in 2013, is run by Australians Xavier Martinelli and Angus Castran. Martinelli had been in Montreal for about three years when he convinced his countryman to join him in this start-up. It serves as a mini Australian embassy, as well as a stop for tourists and new arrivals to the city. A collection of souvenir spoons greet clients at the front door, along with familiar tastes of home, including the signature snack, cheese and Vegemite jaffles.

Martinelli and Castran take particular pride in their coffee — a Brazilian and Ethiopian blend that took time to get just right. "Australians complain about coffee a lot," says Martinelli, laughing, "so we're pretty fussy about making sure it's good." As he pours an espresso for one customer, Castran offers up a muffin he has just baked in the oven behind the counter.

Do the pair feel like part of the change taking place on the Main? In some ways they do, says Castran, although there's always a lurking feeling of otherness. Up until this winter, a sandwich board used to sit outside, proclaiming "Notre Français" ➤

DO

The **Museum of Jewish Montreal** (4040 Blvd St-Laurent; www.injm.ca) runs food-focused walking tours of the Main.





n'est pas très bon mais notre café l'est" (our French isn't very good, but our coffee is). It was a sly comment on language politics in Québec, which attracted both positive and negative feedback.

Across the street at Hof Kelsten, artisan bread is the star. Owner Jeffrey Finkelstein's Russian grandfather came to Montreal in the second wave of Jewish immigration, and settled just a few blocks off the Main. Now, Finkelstein has returned to his family's geographic roots with his bakery, where he integrates tradition with what he learnt at New York's International Culinary Center (formerly The French Culinary Institute). His offerings, he says, carry "the taste of grandmother's baking, but with a Michelin touch". His croissants, and ricotta and poppyseed twists are elegant, just as the chocolate (or maple) babka and caraway-flecked rye are both earthy and refined. With typical deli fare on offer, including comforting matzo ball soup, it's no surprise that weekend brunch has the place hopping.

Opening up further south on a stretch where some original food places still do business, is Ana Meilleure Cuisine. Tucked between Charcuterie Fairmount and Charcuterie Hongroise (two old-world butchers), the multinational eatery is a dream come true for Croatian-born Ana Kadic. She left then-Yugoslavia in 1978 to see the world and her shop borrows from many countries. There are fresh juices, German pretzels, Jewish *latkes* (pancakes made with potato), bagels and doughnuts. Kadic also cooks up roast pork, moussaka and salads for lunch and evening take-away. The mix is not quite Croatian and not really French, a little Mediterranean and very St-Laurent.

At Pâtisserie Solignac, a mix of national heritages once again represents. French-born Geoffrey Solignac, who calls himself an artisan migrant pastry chef, lived and worked in San Francisco



FROM LEFT The Jean-Talon Market; Ana Meilleure Cuisine; Mexican fare at La Capital Tacos.

and the Republic of the Congo before settling on the Main, a place that echoes the *vie de quartier* (community spirit) of his home town in the south of France.

Solignac has been overseeing baking operations for Polish company Wawel, while also operating his own shop and fulfilling orders of rum baba and other cakes. His speciality is a range of light and fluffy doughnuts (*beignes*) filled with a plum preserve, apple compote and pastry cream. Solignac bakes them throughout the day so that whenever you arrive, they are still fragrant and warm.

La Capital Tacos is one of the few non-Asian joints to open in Montreal's Chinatown, on the lower Main. Co-owner Geoffrey Moreau came to Montreal in 2002 to study English, and worked at different restaurants after class. He invited his friends Paulino Martinez Cardenas and Rafael Hernandez Vaillard to join him: the result is a taqueria that focuses on classic Mexican dishes. There are tacos made with regional recipes (the *carriitas* recipe comes from Vaillard's grandfather), and the occasional new item suggested by one of the Mexican kitchen staff.

They source pork and beef from the Jean-Talon Market at the top of the Main, where a Mexican butcher cuts the meat just the way they like it. "There's no school for *taqueros*," says Moreau, "so we just keep learning and doing better as we go along."

With an impressive list of mezcals, and plastic Chinese dishware sourced from the Asian import shop next door, the restaurant appears to be fitting in nicely on the Main. What was considered old has become new again, as diversity and deliciousness once again characterise this ever-evolving community. 🍷

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DETAILS

Ana Meilleure Cuisine
3839 Blvd St-Laurent.
Café Melbourne 4615
Blvd St-Laurent. **Hof
Kelsten** 4524 Blvd
St-Laurent; www.hofkelsten.com.
Jean-Talon Market
7070 Ave Henri-Julien;
www.marchespublics-mtl.com. **La Capital
Tacos** 1096 Blvd
St-Laurent; www.lacapitaltacos.ca.
Pâtisserie Solignac
3628 Blvd St-Laurent;
www.patisserie-solignac.com.

ON THE MAIN

Locals recommend their favourite spots on the St-Laurent strip.

The boys from Café Melbourne suggest **Main Deli** (3864 Blvd St-Laurent; www.mainedeli-steakhouse.com) for a smoked meat sandwich, and **G&D Supermarket** (Basement, Swatow Plaza, 998 Blvd

St-Laurent; www.swatow-group.com) for Asian groceries. Jeffrey Finkelstein of Hof Kelsten goes to **Moishe's** steakhouse (3961 Blvd St-Laurent; www.moishes.ca). For a night out, it's **Majestique** (4105 Blvd St-Laurent; www.restobarmajestique.com). Pâtissier Geoffrey Solignac recommends the oysters at

Maestro SVP (3615 Blvd St-Laurent; www.maestrosvp.com), and **McKibbins Irish Pub** (3515 Blvd St-Laurent; www.mckibbinsirishpub.com) for drinks. Meanwhile Geoffrey Moreau of La Capital Tacos heads to **Le Mal Nécessaire** (1106 Blvd St-Laurent; www.lemalnecessary.com) for tiki-style cocktails.