

MONTREAL PICNIC RENAISSANCE

by TALIA WOOLDRIDGE



ANDRÉ CHIVINSKI



Montreal

WHERE ON EARTH

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD FROM
LEFT Picnic in the
park; Sculpture of
ladies chatting in Old
Montreal by Rose-
Aimée Bélanger.

THE UNRULY QUARANTINE foisted upon the global restaurant scene this past year has been equally challenging in la belle province. Although hundreds of restaurants have been forced to stop in-house dining, Montrealers took it in stride and embraced the new restrictions with their usual creative flair. Instead of attending dinner parties and restaurants, Anglophones and Francophones took to the city's beautiful parks and various backyards with *pret-a-manger* meals from fabulous local haunts. Despite curfews and lockdowns, the food remains just as delicious as ever.

I joined a dear Anglo-Italian colleague to enjoy the best Montreal had to offer. Given her Italian Montrealer heritage, it was no surprise I was embarking on a tour of some of the best Italian restaurants and pizzerias in the city! And what easier meal to go than pizza? Pizzeria Magpie is an upscale wood-fired Neapolitan-style pizzeria in Mile End. The signature dishes include a delicious nod to Montreal's smoked meat in pizza form along with a Greek-inspired 'Spanikopizza' topped with, you guessed it, spinach and feta. Another favourite is Little Italy's famed and celebrated Gema Pizzeria, owned by restaurateurs Stefano Faita and Michel Forgione. Gema is fondly named after Faita and Forgione's four beloved children: Giovanni, Emilia, Anna and Massimo. We ordered a Salade de Pieuvre (octopus, fennel potato salad) and Salade Gema with fresh heirloom tomatoes, buffalo mozzarella and basil sprouts. Their array of savoury pies led me to »



PHOTOS THIS PAGE FROM TOP The Plateau, heritage houses and a tribute to Leonard Cohen; Fine dining at Nora Gray.

MATTHEW PERRIN



«choose the Menina pizza which is a perfect blend of spinach, anchovy paste, capers, olives, pecorino, onions and Quebec buffalo mozzarella while Desi enjoyed the cheesy Stefano with Quebec buffalo mozzarella, taleggio, pecorino, gorgonzola and mint (to help digest!).

While picnicking and discussing brunch options at the lovely Parc La Fontaine, I learned about Le Pontiac, a brunch-pan pizza joint in the Plateau serving up crisp-edged, extra cheesy pan pizzas in the afternoon. It's a perfect one-stop shop: they offer healthy fresh fruit smoothies, brunch including *tostones con carne*, pizza 'croque Madame,' pancakes and Gravlax until 2 pm followed by smoked salmon and egg benedict sandwiches and six delicious pizzas in the afternoon — all available to go. Talk about perfecting a take-out menu.

Shifting off of the picnic-vibe, we enjoyed an after-dinner drink at Club Pelicano, a tucked away speakeasy under Japanese-Peruvian restaurant, Tiradito. The signature cocktails include Pisco sours and the Don Pelicano (Tequila, Cointreau, lime, wasabi and celery syrup) — honouring Tiradito's cuisine. I enjoyed the refreshing Spritz Pelicano (prosecco, gin, *cordial de bleuet*, lime) and Limonata (Bourbon, limoncello, mint, vanilla and ginger beer). Fans of Peruvian-Asian cuisine can enjoy kimchi dumplings, yuca fries, various tangy ceviche dishes and a mouthwatering selection of meat and seafood dishes off the Tiradito menu.

The following afternoon, we moved to outdoor dining at a friend's backyard potluck. St Louis style ribs from Aylwin Barbecue, a popular stand at the busy Atwater Market serving seasonal selection of meats, salads and a daily taco, were flanked with a homemade potato salad with fresh garden dill and peppers, along with a selection of salads and slaws from Lloydies, Montreal's Jamaican patty producer with locations in St Viateur and St Henri. Their macaroni pie and jerk chicken are also highly recommended. I, smartly, was saving room for dinner at my first patio in months.

With a little careful COVID planning, we were fortunate enough to book a late dinner reservation at Chef Emma Cardarelli, Lisa McConnell and Ryan Gray's lovely, sought-after Sicilian bistro, Nora Gray. Fresh in-house focaccia with Pacina's olive oil arrived on point. We paired a dry prosecco with summer salad, an offering of fennel, radish, sunflower seeds and parmesan, and a near perfect *crudo antipasti* — a concoction of scallop, zucchini and pumpkin seeds with a honey vinegar. For the *primi*, we feasted on scrumptious corn flour cavatelli with wild mushrooms and braised chicken, topped with marsala; and *spaghetti alla puttanesca* with plump mussels, *taggiasche* olives and fried caper leaves. The popular *Scarpinocc* (summer beets and gorgonzola served with beet greens and walnuts), that looked equally as scrumptious, was sold out. For the *secondi*, I sampled the grilled halibut served with roasted black pearl mushrooms, crushed peas and a smooth Alexander sauce. Their *dolci* looked divine but we were too full. And I wanted to save room for an aperitif at Montreal's bona fide Tiki bar, Ke Nak Becessaur. Located in Chinatown, this local's secret is known via word-of-mouth.

For those who are not able to secure a table at Nora Gray, Moccione, a cozy Italian restaurant in Villeray, is a strong second

option. Opened in late 2018 by former Toque chef, Luca Cianciulli, and partner Maxime Landry, Moccione offers a savoury take-out and *terrace* menu, alongside a well-stocked *épicerie* (grocery store) with homemade pastas and ready-to-cook, vacuum-sealed meals.

The following afternoon, I joined old friends at the Parc du Mont-Royal for another delicious feast. I popped into Nadine Boudreau and Julie Romano's Le Butterblume to pick up some divine cakes, cookies and scones from their takeout counter. Le Butterblume is a must for creative, mouthwatering lunch, *apéro* and dinner, as they have a nice wine list, and cocktails! Similar to Moccione, they also have an in-house *épicerie*. For the picnic today, however, I treated myself to the towering McArthur schnitzel sandwich with chickpeas, eggplant, cucumber on challah from Arthurs Nosh Bar — a chic luncheonette on Notre Dame Ouest. If you're a Caesar cocktail aficionado, this is your spot.

Another worthy mention from Montrealers, who love their late-night poutine and shish-taouks, is Falafel Yoni's yummy falafel with crispy chickpea patties sandwiched in fluffy pitas. Located on St Viateur, this is a great stop, especially if you're stocking up on bagels nearby. Actually, there's no better way to cap off a delectable weekend in Montreal '*pret-a-manger*' style. 



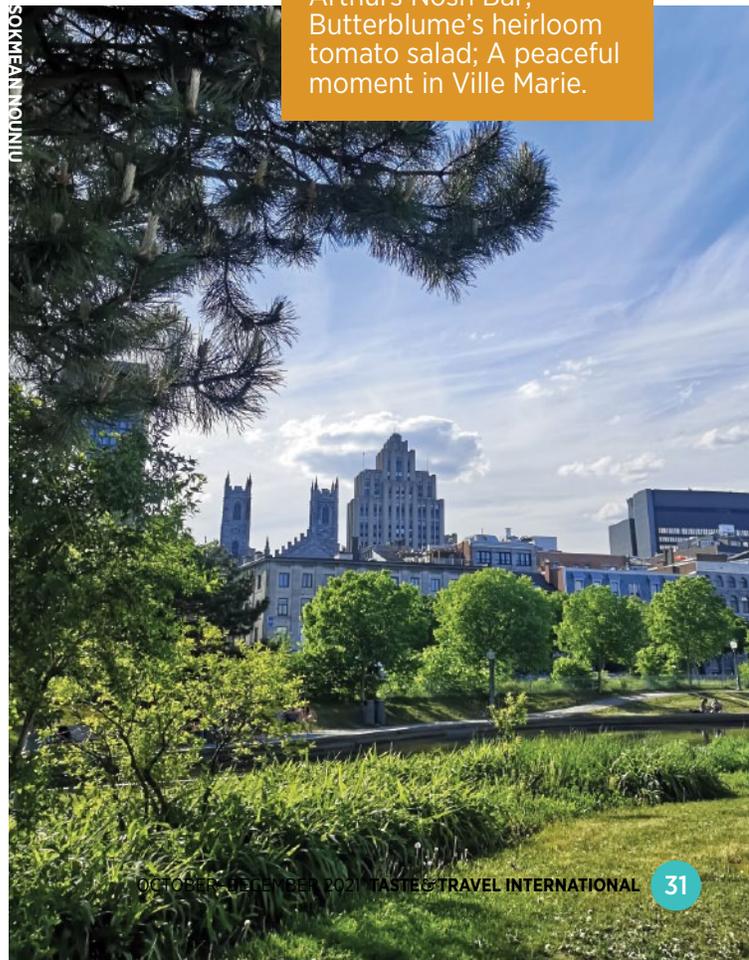
SUSIE ELLISON

CANADA



ALISON SLATTERY

PHOTOS THIS PAGE FROM TOP
Arthurs Nosh Bar;
Butterblume's heirloom
tomato salad; A peaceful
moment in Ville Marie.



SOKMEATNOUNI

Pizzeria Magpie
www.pizzeriamagpie.com

Gema Pizzeria
www.pizzeriagema.com

Le Pontiac
www.le-pontiac.ca

Club Pelicano
www.clubpelicano.com

Aylwin Barbecue
www.aylwinbarbecue.com

Lloydies
www.lloydies.ca/fr/cuisine-caribeenne

Nora Gray
www.noragray.com

Moccione
www.moccione.com

Le Butterblume
www.lebutterblume.com

Arthurs Nosh Bar
www.arthursmtl.com

Falafel Yoni
www.falafelyoni.com



TALIA WOOLDRIDGE is a Toronto-based freelance writer, fashion designer and music lover.