

Dining in St Donat

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Published in *Hour*, Montreal

"You don't have to review a Montreal restaurant, you know," said my editor, since I was spending the weekend in St Donat as usual. "You can do an out-of-town one."

I've been going up north since I was born. Though officially in Lanaudière, St Donat has all the feel of a Laurentian town, nestled between two large lakes and among the highest hills in the area.

When I spent my summers there growing up (no roads, no electricity – the real McCoy), we used to take trips from our cottage across Lac Archambeault to the village. The first stop for us kids was always the five and dime, where we'd stock up on Pixie Sticks and, if we had enough saved up, a new Carmine or True Blue Prismacolor pencil. And if the accompanying mother let us, we'd feast on cotton candy or soft ice cream that only cost a dime.

Then, before leaving, we'd go to the *boulangerie*. This was a real old-fashioned bakery, the kind that knocks you over with its ambrosia the moment you walk in right into the area where they bake the bread. Sweating men in undershirts heaved the goods out of the brick, wood-fuelled ovens with long, wooden spatulas, while overweight, efficiently cheery women put your money into an ancient cash register with built-in wooden bowls for the change.

Then we'd all trek back down to the dock and load the boat for the trip back. By then we were pretty hungry. Once, nestled in the back of our turquoise 40-horsepower "speedboat," I couldn't resist the scent of the fresh bread at my feet. I pinched off a piece of crust. Then my finger dug further in, plucking out more of the starchy nectar. Before I knew it, I'd hollowed out about a quarter of the loaf, and rode the rest of the way in mortal fear of the consequences once it was served at dinner. (Miraculously, they all thought the missing part was caused by a huge air bubble!)

But if the mother had taken us for French fries like we begged ("You'll spoil your appetite!"), I never would have dipped into the bread. St Donat had and still has, the world's best French fries. The woman who bought the Chez Henri-Paul patates frites stand (369 Rue Principale) in the seventies kept the original

recipe. They're the greasy kind you spread out on your paper place mat and liberally douse with salt and vinegar. Exquisite.

Though Henri-Paul had good cheese-burgers, the kind with chopped onions and squashed buns, there's really not much to write about. And because the best kitchen in the area for me is *chez ma mère*, I almost never eat in town. So as a gesture of thanks, I took the pair of them, my parents, out to the place they recommended as the best eats, Chez Hayes.

It's a typical cozy, tasteful restaurant, complete with *terrasse* (the town is lousy wid'em). The atmosphere is quiet; the lighting soft. Though the menu is broad, they really can do it all. I'd had their pizza before, and it definitely made the grade. *Maman* ordered the fettuccini Alfredo from the special pasta menu (Thursdays and Sundays; surely the best deal at \$8.95) with the cream of mushroom soup. I chose the linguini Florentine from the table d'hôte (\$12.50), with the smoked salmon entrée plus dessert. Dad ordered the rib-steak, Caesar salad, and onion soup. The only entrée that delighted was the salad: crisp (the croutons too), topped with grated mozzarella, and only a hint of anchovy. The lox was second grade and the soup had tinned mushrooms.

Good thing I didn't fill up on bread this time: the main courses were excellent. Mom's fettuccini was creamy yet not too rich. My linguini, with marinated chicken breasts, was a paradise of tastes from the pesto, spinach and poultry kingdoms. My taste buds were so stimulated I could hardly define why: It was simply splendid. As for the grill: "The best steak I've had all summer," growled dad. Medium rare, it was so tasty I stole more later on. And the French fries, the restaurant kind that you season with only salt, reinforce St Donat's French fry reputation. Served with the steak were gently fried sliced zucchini and carrots. We ate well. (The white wine, by the way, was just fine for house). And my dessert, a chocolate-layered cake resting next to a white sauce with chocolate swirls and orange sections, matched anything on Rue St Denis.