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FOR PEOPLE WHO LOVE TO *read*, LOVE TO *eat*, AND LOVE TO *travel*



THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Havre-aux-Maisons patisserie; Breakfast at Auberge Havre-Sur-Mer; Magdalen hospitality; Chaudrée; Serving beer at L'Abri de la Tempête; Cliff arches, Parc de Gros-Cap; Exhibit at Musée la Mer; Red bike outside Gourmande de Nature. MAIN PHOTO LEFT The beach at Parc de Gros-Cap.

LETTERS FROM THE EDGE

CANADA

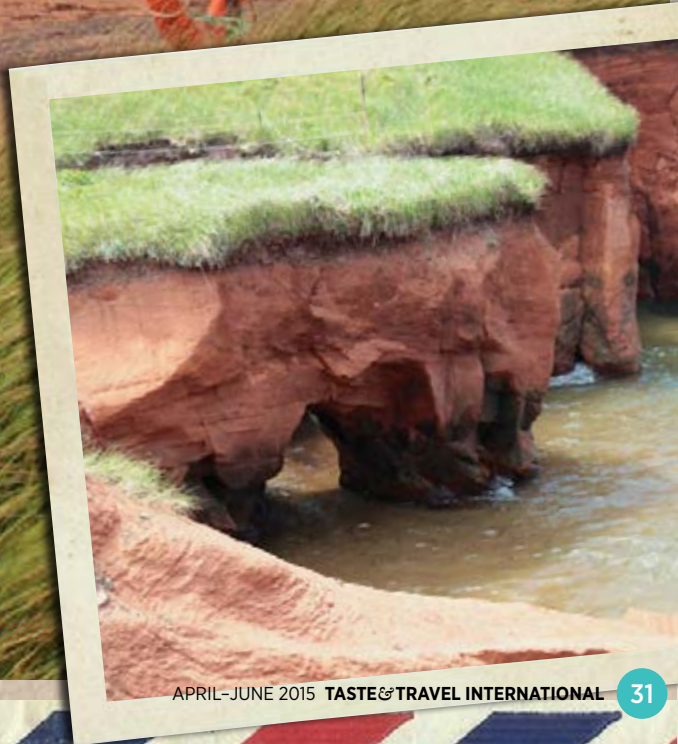


Îles de la Madeleine

WHERE ON EARTH

ÎLES DE LA MADELEINE

by NATHAN FONG
PHOTOGRAPHY
by MICHEL CHICOINE





ABOVE PHOTO White sand beach at Parc de Gros-Cap.
BELOW Interior of La Table des Roy.



In the middle of Quebec's mighty Gulf of St Lawrence lie the Îles de la Madeleine, an isolated archipelago of seven islands, six of which are linked by road and bridges, and one accessible only by boat. With fewer than 13,000 inhabitants today, the islands' original settlers arrived in 1765, coming from the New France colony of Acadia to Île du Havre-aux-Maisons.

Although there is a ferry from Souris on Prince Edward Island, the only other major route is by air from Montreal or Quebec City. After a short stop in the quaint Maritime town of Gaspé, we fly over the intense terrain and dense forest of the Canadian Shield, over the swift, white capped currents of the gulf, and land on the narrow strip of Havre-aux-Maisons.

Fishing and agriculture were the main source of income for the early settlers of the Magdalen Islands but that has changed with the growth of tourism and an ever-increasing cornucopia of artisans, from glassblowers and painters to cheese makers and craft brewers.

... What better summer fare than a bowl of wonderful *chaudrée*...

It's easy to navigate the islands by car, as there's only one major road, Route 199, linking the islands together, except for the sole Entry Island accessible only by boat. Driving south from the region's only airport, we reach the *Domaine du Vieux Couvent*, the 100-year-old stone edifice originally built as a teaching convent for the nuns of Notre Dame. When the education system changed hands from church to state in 1967, this stately building was turned into a charming 10-bedroom inn and restaurant. The newly renovated rooms with their high ceilings and breathtaking views have had their original wooden floorboards refurbished, along with heated bathroom floors, glass showers and comfortable goose-down bedding.

Down a slope from the *Vieux Couvent* the island's harbour lies in full view, filled with brightly painted fishing vessels anchored in line and sheltered from the rough waves of the gulf beyond. It's here we find the intimate dockside *Bistro du Capitaine*, one of many restaurants serving the finest and freshest from the briny local waters. What better summer fare than a bowl of wonderful *chaudrée* (chowder), golden battered fish and house-made fries?

Driving east into rolling meadowlands, we are stopped on the narrow roadway by a herd of brown cows. These are *Canadienne* cattle, the only dairy cattle breed developed in Canada. Descended from foundation stock brought to the New World by French settlers in the 16th century, the *Canadienne* is only found in certain areas of Quebec and is prized for the high butterfat content of its milk. To protect the breed, in 1999 the Quebec government gave the *Canadienne* official heritage status. It's this stock that bring us to the *Fromagerie du Pied-de-Vent*. Since 1998, the *Arsenault* family has been using these prized cows for cheese production. In the winter, the herd is fed hay, while in the summer they graze in the fields where most of the growth is wild. Add to that a pinch of salt carried by the wind and their unique raw milk cream unfolds into *Pied-de-Vent*, a splendid, luscious cheese with a lightly washed rind.

As in so many of the Maritime provinces, fishing here was once a vibrant and economic industry. The rich waters surrounding the islands were abundant with herring, and because of European»



Cook
L

SERVES 6

Pot en Pot

THIS COMFORTING AND hearty pie is a specialty of the islands. Every household has its own recipe using seafood from the local waters — from smoked fish to various shellfish — but most will typically include succulent morsels of lobster, tender scallops and plump shrimp.

Bacon 4 slices, finely chopped
Leeks 2, white part only, finely chopped
Carrots 2, peeled and ½-inch diced
Garlic 1 clove, minced
Butter 2 Tbs
Cayenne ¼ tsp
Dried Thyme ½ tsp
Salt and Freshly Ground Black Pepper to taste
All-Purpose Flour 3 Tbs
Whole Milk 1 cup
Chicken Broth 1 cup
Cooked Lobster Meat ¾ lb, cut into 1-inch pieces
Scallops ½ lb medium
Raw Shrimp ½ lb medium, peeled
Potatoes 2 cups ½-inch diced, blanched
Frozen Peas 1 cup
Flat-Leaf Parsley 2 Tbs chopped
Frozen Pie Pastry 1 pkg, thawed
Egg Yolk 1 beaten with 1 Tbs **Water**

- 1 PREHEAT** oven to 400°F.
- 2 HEAT** a large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add the bacon and sauté until it starts to brown. Add the leeks, carrots, garlic and butter and sauté until the onions and carrots are fork tender. Season with the cayenne, thyme and salt and pepper. Sprinkle with the flour and mix to combine. Stir in the milk and broth, bringing to a boil, stirring constantly. Gently simmer for about 3 minutes until the mixture starts to thicken. Remove from heat and stir in the seafood, potatoes and peas. Pour into a large 10-inch round x 2-inch deep casserole dish. Or use individual large ramekins.
- 3 ROLL** out the pastry into a 12-inch round, or cut out rounds to fit individual ramekins allowing about 1 inch to hang over each side. Moisten the rim of the casserole or ramekins so that the pastry adheres to the dish. Place the dough over the filling and press the edges on the dish to seal. Brush with the egg wash. Make an incision in the middle of the pastry. Place on baking sheet and bake for about 45 minutes, for large casserole, or 30–35 minutes for individual ramekins, or until crust is golden brown. Remove from oven and let stand 15 minutes before serving.



SERVES 6-8

Crab, Tomato and Avocado Cocktail

THIS SIMPLE YET refreshing recipe is adapted from the wonderful one served at the quaint Auberge chez Denis à François. The crab can also be substituted with fresh shrimp.

Fresh Crabmeat
1 lb

Tomatoes 2
medium, seeded and chopped into ½-inch dice

Avocados 2
medium ripe, peeled and cut into ½-inch dice

Red Pepper ½
medium, seeded and finely diced

Red Onion ½
small, finely chopped

Green Onion
2, finely chopped

Lime juice, 3 Tbs

Jalapeno 1, seeded and finely chopped

Salt 1 tsp

Freshly Ground Pepper
¼ tsp

- MIX** all ingredients together, divide and transfer to chilled serving dishes.

«demand, smokehouses dotted the islands. The method of smoking herring was introduced in the late 19th century and production peaked in the 1960s when some 1200 workers were employed in 40 operations in the islands. By 1978 overfishing and poor stock management led to the near extinction of herring in the island waters and by the end of the decade practically all the smokehouses were closed. Twenty years later, herring started to reappear in local waters and family-owned Le Fumoir d'Antan was founded in 1996 to revive this once staple industry. Their living museum and

working smokehouse is the only remaining traditional smokehouse still in use in the Îles de la Madeleine.

The Vieux Couvent's new restaurant, La Moulière, offers spectacular views of the sea and the fresh, local cuisine of chef Denis Landry. It's here I sample the regional specialty of *loup marin* (seal), in a pork tartiflette. The tender, slowly braised pulled pork is tossed with morsels of seal fin and enrobed in a cream sauce with a gratinée cheese crust. Surprisingly, the flavour of the seal is more gamey than fishy. A sublime lobster risotto follows, enriched with Fromagerie du Pied-de-Vent's earthy Tomme des Demoiselles. Another seafood showstopper is Fruit de Mer en Croute, a sinfully rich, cream-based "pot pie" filled with lobster, shrimp, scallop and baby potatoes, topped with a golden-hued puff pastry crust.

For culinary enthusiasts there's chef Johanne Vigneau's new cooking school and cookware shop Gourmande de Nature. We arrive to see a full and busy class in session learning how to prepare an important local catch, lobster. Johanne's shop in the midst of a somewhat isolated area is surprisingly well stocked with kitchen gadgets, food gifts and a pantry of homemade products, from sorbets, jellies and jams, to infused vinegars and *sel d'herbes*, the island's rich salt infused with dried local herbs. This culinary oasis, we discover, is just Vigneau's side interest — her warm and quaint island restaurant, La Tables des Roy, is her tribute to the island's passionate farmers and producers, showcasing local ingredients with a combination of traditional and innovative techniques.

For history buffs, the Musée de la Mer overlooks the fishing town of La Grave, Havre-Aubert. Although modest in size, the museum is fascinating and well designed, with various mini dioramas showing the many hardships and obstacles the settlers had to overcome in their island home, isolated from the mainland and surrounded by swift and difficult currents.

The picturesque fishing village of La Grave, with its colourful and historic waterside architecture, was the birthplace of the Magdalen settlement over 300 years ago. En route to La Grave, look for the unique Artisans du Sable, a family-run art gallery and studio where the fine sand from the islands is transformed into unique sculptures and *objets d'art*.

Overlooking the charming town of Havre-Aubert is the historic Auberge Chez Denis à François. Set in a turn-of-the-century home, the inn features 14 comfortable, traditionally furnished rooms plus an intimate dining room that showcases local specialties from the surrounding waters. A crab cocktail is partnered with a fresh avocado salsa. Local Pied de Vent cheese features in a crisp phyllo casing paired with seasonal asparagus. For the adventurous, there's *loup marin* (which certainly sounds more elegant than seal), slowly braised and served with caramelized shallots and a beet tuile. Or the regional *pot en pot*, a sublime seafood pie with plump and succulent morsels of scallop, shrimp and lobster bathed in a rich cream sauce under a golden, flakey crust.

Except for the miniscule Anglophone population descended from the original Scottish settlement on the northern tip of Îles



PHOTO LEFT
Canadienne
ribeye steak.
RIGHT Wheels
of Tomme des
Desmoiselles at
Fromagerie du
Pied-De-Vent.



de la Grande Entrée, the islands are truly Québécois. Driving along Route 199, across the bridges and narrow peninsulas that connect the islands, it is interesting to note how the Magdalen Québécois accents change in a matter of minutes once over the short water crossings.

Spectacular scenery prevails throughout the islands but nothing is as stunning as Parc de Gros-Cap. Protected from the prevailing winds, the western coastline around this region is dotted with scarlet-hued cliffs and caves that contrast with vibrant fields of wildflowers and herbs, and nutrient-rich algae. Foraged local ingredients such as these are important for the wonderful beers of À l'Abri de la Tempête, a microbrewery located in the village of L'Étang-du-Nord on the island of Cap-aux-Meules. Surrounded by fertile grasslands, this artisan brewery is committed to using as many local ingredients as possible in order to protect the fragile ecology of the islands. Incorporating a smoked malt from locally grown barley, fresh herbs and foraged greens, their beers are both unique and flavourful.

Driving westwards, with isolated coastline on one side and remote pastureland on the other, we arrive at the quaint Auberge Havre-Sur-Mer, a cozy 12-room inn

located on a sandy stretch of beach. Innkeeper Suzie Baillargeon has a deft, artistic touch, showcased in rooms with contemporary wood furniture and natural light flooding through French doors that overlook the expansive beachlands beyond. The inn also has a tranquil outdoor gazebo spa housing a massage room, sauna and jacuzzi tub.

Although the Îles de la Madeleine lie in a remote and sublime sanctuary, local Magdalens are hospitable and embrace their beautiful islands and long sea-faring heritage. The islands have become a popular tourist spot for Quebec mainlanders and those seeking beautiful wind-swept scenery and quiet villages from times gone by. It's a treat for someone living on the opposite side of this vast continent to discover another hidden treasure in our culturally rich country. 



Vancouver born **NATHAN FONG** segued from cooking and catering to a brilliant career as an award-winning food stylist for culinary print and film advertising with a distinguished international client list. For the past 26

years, he has hosted food and travel segments on the Shaw and GlobalTV networks and is a columnist for *The Vancouver Sun* and the Chinese lifestyle magazine *Boulevard*.

www.fongonfood.com 



Domaine du Vieux Couvent

www.quebecmaritime.ca/vieuxcouvent

Auberge Havre-sur-Mer

www.quebecmaritime.ca/havresurmer

Bistro du Capitaine

Chemin de la Pointe, Havre-aux-Maisons

À l'Abri de la Tempête

www.quebecmaritime.ca/alabridelatempete

La Table des Roy

www.quebecmaritime.ca/tabledesroy

Auberge chez Denis à François

www.quebecmaritime.ca/denisafancois

Fromagerie du Pied-de-Vent

149 Chemin de la Pointe-Basse, Havre-aux-Maisons

Le Fumoir d'Antan

27 Chemin du Quai, Havre-aux-Maisons

Gourmande de Nature

www.quebecmaritime.ca/gourmande