

FULL COURSE MEMORIES

MARY ANN R. HUNT

Crossing the St. Lawrence River onto the island of Montreal I can see Mont Royal standing like a sentry behind the sky scrapers, like a backdrop on a stage. The mountain's edges have worn down over time. From a distance they almost blend into the sky. It's been standing guard over the island long before the river ran with trade, before the French trappers, even before the Algonquin Indians settled in this strategic location between the Atlantic Ocean to the north and Lake Champlain to the south.

I always approach the city from the southeast, from my home in Vermont. My bridge, Pont Jacques-Cartier, is just one of several bridges onto the island. After brushing by the Old Port, the bridge dumps me right in the center of downtown, very near to where our first apartment was nearly 20 years ago. My former husband and I had stored our car to save on expenses so I spent most of that first year tackling the city by foot or metro. I know these streets. As charming as the Old Port is, with its warehouses now converted to boutiques, galleries and restaurants, I will bypass it this time. The narrow cobblestone streets are inhabited by artists and buskers, and it is as alive as it was 300 years ago when this part of the

city was within the fortification walls that no longer stand. A well trained eye or amateur archaeologist would recognize crumbs of them here and there. But this is a day trip. I am on my own, and with a mission: to restock my pantry and satisfy cravings.

I have tried to return to Montreal at least once a year since we lived there for a couple years almost two decades ago. We were just starting out; he was a student at McGill and I had an appetite for exploration. Since I had grown up in a very monochromatic neighborhood in the Midwest, both visually and culturally, the only other place I had experienced so many cultures in one location was on a family trip to Epcot Center's International Village in my early teens. But in Montreal diversity is not confined to neat villages, it is everywhere. We soaked up each experience the city offered us. Picking up a dinner of simple baguette, French cheese and Hungarian salami spiced heavily with paprika, we looked forward to every day and the arrival of our first child. Not yet burdened by family responsibilities, we spent days following exotic aromas and new musical beats. Every turn revealed something new to us: a brightly painted mural, a shocking sculpture, or a bilingual child playing peek-a-boo. We satisfied our wanderlust by trying the foods of the various ethnic groups present on the island. And everywhere we went there were others walking, appreciating, drinking coffee, laughing and smoking with friends. Like the cafés bulging with customers, our future was full with possibilities.

Now when I return I usually have a specific agenda that I carefully

plan to recapture the flavors of that time in my life. I consume some of the city while I am there, but the mission is to bring enough back with me to spice my very different current life with the comfortable, familiar flavors of what is still my favorite city in North America; the first place I made a home for my own small family. The route I take is generally the same each time. Even when I am staying for the weekend or longer, I still take this same route. If I am staying for more than one day I might throw in a couple other treats for myself, like a trip to the Musée des Beaux-Arts or a stop at the underground mall that runs for city blocks downtown. As I approach the city I always ponder whether I should shake it up, do it in reverse, go way off my usual routine, find something new and eat somewhere other than at my favorite old haunts.

But this route works well for me; I have adjusted it over the years to be the most efficient path: designed for collecting the most ingredients, with the least amount of backtracking and zig-zagging. I use my familiarity with the neighborhoods to procure strategic parking locations. I start on Boulevard Saint-Laurent, what used to be known as “The Main.” It was the seam of the English speaking and French speaking sides of the island; a thread that weaves the neighborhoods together. It has remained a place where different populations mingle, and as one of the major arteries serving the island, it has retained the imprint of many of the later waves of immigrants that have settled in the neighborhoods along it. As I navigate the one-way side streets, it takes me only a second to translate the parking

signs from French to English. Although I never acquired the language skills to be fully conversational, I am competent with street signs, directions and numbers. Able to conjugate verbs and traverse tenses my children—we later added another child to our clan—have much better conversation skills than me. They often get frustrated when we are in Montreal together and I attempt to speak. They jump in to save me and possibly themselves from the embarrassment of association. But when it comes to French food vocabulary, I am the reigning champion in my family. A couple years of grocery shopping and eating your way through a city will do that to you. I manage to find a spot in one of the many residential neighborhoods of connected triplexes that is roughly between my starting point on Saint-Laurent and Rue Saint Denis where I will finish this leg of trip.

My first stop, *Vielle Europe*, is the quintessential practical stop for anyone who appreciates Old World flavors. Your nose is immediately hit by the moldy aroma of cheese. True to the deep French roots of the province, you can grab a baguette immediately upon entering and then peruse a variety of cheeses, sausages (cured and uncured), mustards, olives, and many imported sweets things. After living the first year near the English speaking campus we moved to the French speaking side of the city, and this little shop was on my way home from the café where I worked waiting tables. I spent a large portion of my tip money there, buying the most simple and delicious dinners. After working the lunch shift and with a newborn at home, I had little to no energy left for elaborate meal preparations.

Montreal always took care of us, especially where food was concerned.

Vielle Europe also carries a wide array of coffee beans, and this is where I pick up a small supply of my children's favorite chocolate bars. Many years ago, after tasting several varieties, we came to the unanimous decision that the Swiss' reputation as the world's best chocolatiers was some sort of public relations hoax, because the title clearly belongs to the Belgians. So I add a conservative several bars of *Cote d'Or* to my basket, heavy on the milk chocolate and hazelnut fondant.

Where the Saint-Laurent brushes up against the Portuguese neighborhood you see—and smell—a take-out restaurant that serves primarily slow roasted chicken seasoned heavily with paprika, garlic, and lemon. A bakery nearby sells *Pasteis de Belem*, little tarts with a sweet custard filling; small enough to allow you to indulge with minimal guilt, and sweet and rich enough to satisfy a craving, and a side street houses an unremarkable bar with old men smoking and playing dominoes.

Further along, there is the usual long line of costumers outside Schwartz's deli, a mecca for every fan of Montreal's renowned smoked meat. In the evenings when the nightlife is in full swing, I remember seeing lines a block long for one of their sandwiches. Not only did we live in this neighborhood, but it also conveniently housed several of the popular bars and nightclubs. We may have frequented a few of them. But smoked meat has never really appealed to me. I am saving my appetite for shish taouk at Amir's.

By the time I turn on to Boulevard Mont Royal, which runs perpendicular to Saint-Laurent and I reach my next shopping stretch, Rue Saint-Denis, my arms are heavy with bags. Rue Saint-Denis will eventually take me back in the direction of the car, and Amir's is right about where I begin this segment of the trip. There I set the bags down and recharge with Lebanese chicken, flavored with yogurt and spices wrapped in a warm pita with pickled beets, onions, and creamy garlic sauce. Saint-Denis is more of a boutique and café street than a practical shopping street, but there are some jewelry and colorful, ethnic clothing stores that I enjoy browsing. One of the advantages of doing this mission *sans famille*, is that there is no one along to be visibly impatient with me as I browse my favorite non-edible indulgence, the bath product store Fruits and Passions. But even there I am drawn to the fruity and spicy scents. Picking up a café au lait for a little extra injection of energy, I am nearly back to the car. Piling my wealth of flavors into the trunk, I get in and drive up Saint-Laurent, heading west. One would think that being a one-way street would facilitate a steady traffic flow, but with so many cars double and triple parked it feels like an artery that is 80% blocked by plaque.

En route to the Jean-Talon market and Little Italy, I make a quick stop at *Fairmount Bagel*. I buy at least three dozen. They freeze well and will be a good incentive to get up in the morning in a couple months. They only take cash in the simple narrow store where a team of at least a dozen bagel

bakers are boiling and inserting bagels on long paddles into their special ovens. They are open 24 hours, and friends who lived in that neighborhood (the Anglo-Jewish version of our neighborhood), reported that like Schwarz's deli, the line out the door grows just after bar closing time. It's a quick stop, so I risk a very questionable parking spot a little too near a corner. In my car the aroma of garlic and onion battles the scent of the pear and peony.

From there I drive towards Jean-Talon market, passing under the arch announcing my arrival to Montreal's Little Italy. Walking through the market, it is not uncommon to hear people speaking Arabic, Italian, eastern European languages, and some African dialects too obscure for me to recognize. I think I love this market more than any other place in Montreal. After we moved from Montreal to Vermont, we made it a point to take our children to Jean-Talon specifically to expose them to the energy and variety that we did not have at home; the shades of skin, colorful clothes, dingy Arab grocery stores, and spicy foods.

The main square of the market has a roof, but is open at the sides and it houses the fruit and vegetable vendors that are typical of markets everywhere. I can get fruits and vegetables at the farmer's market at home, so I hone in on the Arab stores on the periphery, with their olive bars and spicy merguez sausage. If I am going to risk tangling with border patrol guards it will be for the merguez. We discovered this spicy North African sausage in Montreal and sampled the offerings of many stores, but *Al-Khair*

on the corner of Jean-Talon and Henri-Julien is believed by connoisseurs to be the best in the city. My former husband had read the reviews—yes, there are reviews of, and websites devoted to, merguez—and this small grocery store just off the market square proudly advertises its title as “*La meilleure merguez en ville*” in its window. *Al-Khair* carries lamb and beef, spicy and mild versions of merguez. Using my stellar vocabulary, less impressive number pronunciation and no verbs I order 4 kilos of the spicy lamb variety. This usually raises a couple of dark eyebrows on the other side of the counter. If this were a comic strip, the thought bubble above his head would read, “*Why is this fair-skinned, blond woman who can barely speak French ordering enough sausage to feed a Bedouin tribe?*” Here, I must confess that I rather enjoy the attention I receive for being such a curiosity. Growing up a northern European mutt in the heavily Germanic populated Milwaukee, I looked pretty much like everybody else and did not garner any special attention. Perhaps this is one of the admittedly shallow and self-gratifying reasons I gravitate to the Mediterranean or Mediterranean populations wherever I find them. The warm weather and flavorful, fresh food only intensifies this attraction that borders on being a vice. The man behind the counter coyly decides to practice his English on me, which is about as good as my French. With a hand gesture to his mouth he warns me, “*It’s spicy?*” Exhausting my conversation skills, “*Oui, je le préfère piquant!*” I raise my eyebrows in response and add a Cheshire cat grin. I can play coy too. I also pack a couple containers full of spicy olives and buy some of the spicy

red pepper paste, Harissa. And since good pita bread is rare and expensive at our local Co-op grocery store, I also add a half of a dozen bags of reasonably priced pita bread to my overflowing basket. After another stop at the car to free up my arms and place the precious sausage in the chilled cooler brought along specifically for this purpose, it is time to head to my favorite spice store, *Épices Anatol*. Chatting with the owner over the virtues of real versus artificial almond extract a couple years ago, I learned that he is not from Turkey as I had always assumed, but from the Greek island of Crete. He and his male staff (family members?) are always very chatty with me as they scoop and weigh my choices: sesame seeds, whole cumin and coriander seeds (the flavor is much stronger when ground fresh at home), mild *and* spicy, yellow *and* green curry powder, the house spice blend for kefta (lamb meatballs grilled on skewers served on pita with garlic sauce, parsley and onions) and the deep, reddish-purple Za'atar. His raised eyebrows say, "*Why is this fair-skinned, blond woman buying Egyptian Za'atar?*" Without making him have to verbalize it, I volunteer, "*We dip warm pita bread in olive oil and then Za'atar. My kids love it.*" Za'atar gets its distinctive color and slightly sweet tart flavor from sumac. He is impressed.

Next door is my usual last stop, *Marché Milano*. Wandering the aisles of cheeses, fresh pasta, olive oil and vinegars in this truly Italian grocery store, I use this stop to fill in any gaps in my culinary shopping trip. I am inspired to pick up some fresh gnocchi and Italian coffee, which will pair well with the Fairmount bagels. All of my senses have been stirred.

Some people might think that a 3 ½ hour drive (each way) just to do grocery shopping is a bit extreme. They have probably never tasted merguez or shish taouk. The trip is a reminder of the great variety in the world; and of the time in my life I learned to enjoy it. It is a relief to know the flavors of the city are still as strong as they were then, even though they are now fused with the landscape and with my memories. And as I begin to work my way through the traffic and off the island, I inhale deeply the mingling scent of coffee, garlic, cumin, and a hint of pear. My mind wanders to planning the next few meals, strategically plotting how to stretch my precious Montreal cargo. For weeks to come, each nourishing meal will be seasoned with vignettes of my past, allowing the present to reach its full potential.