

Huron Hospitality

Quebec City's Huron-Wendake community immerses visitors in traditional customs and cuisine.

By Michelle Newman

"So, how would you like your porcupine cooked, Mee-shell—medium or well done?" I was stumped for an answer. Porcupine isn't exactly on my top 10 list of favorite foods, and this was the first time I was brave and curious enough to try it.

Rolland Sioui, a Huron elder, had killed a 35-pound porcupine on ancestral hunting grounds 60 miles north of Quebec City.

Porcupine meat is sacred to the Hurons and traditionally reserved for respected tribal elders. In the Huron culture, porcupine symbolizes hope and the wish for a good afterlife. To the Hurons, porcupine is a "clean" animal because its diet consists of spruce and fir needles, forest roots and wild berries. It is considered "survival" food, Rolland said, because it can be eaten raw in the wilderness if necessary.

"After the animal is killed, it's a Huron custom to say a prayer and sprinkle the ground with tobacco in appreciation for giving its life to provide food for us," Rolland said.

No part of the animal is wasted—the bones are made into sharp needles used for stitching birch bark canoes and baskets; the quills are harvested, dried and dyed for use in decorative quill work and jewelry.

Open-fire Cooking

It was nauseating watching Rolland dress the porcupine. With bloody hands he strung it up on a handmade rack of fresh tree branches, suspending it above the open fire to cook.

Rolland shared the secrets of cooking wild game over an open fire with me. He explained that it's important for the meat to be slightly off center and not directly over the fire so it cooks evenly as the wind spins it around. "It's kind of like the original outdoor convection oven," he said adding, "It's disrespectful to the animal to use plywood for the fire."

As the porcupine cooked, Rolland carefully opened a long, rectangular wooden box. It was Rolland's precious treasure box that held a large brown eagle feather with red strings and a little leather bundle attached by a handmade cord to the wooden handle. "I traded many beaver pelts for this," he said. "I use it for dances, special ceremonies and celebrations."

After the porcupine cooked for more than an hour, Rolland used his surgically sharp hunting knife to slice a piece of meat off the porcupine's leg. After sampling it, he announced it was ready to eat. I was a bit skeptical; it still looked pretty raw to me.

Following Huron tradition, we said a prayer thanking the creator and mother earth for providing our food. Even though I was repulsed, I didn't want to insult my host and mustered up the courage to take a bite. Surprisingly, porcupine isn't a particularly gamey-tasting meat. It was rather mild and tasted like a cross between chicken and pork.



Rolland Sioui prepares the porcupine for cooking.
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Yolande-Okia Picard, a legend teller and native artist, beats her hand made drum as she shares stories of her people.

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Huron Immersion

Welcome to Wendake, a Huron-Wendat community in Quebec City. When the French explorers arrived in the 16th century, they named the Wendats “Hurons” (pronounced who-runs) because their bristled Mohawk hairdos and headdresses resembled the hair of a wild boar.

A 14-minute drive from Quebec City, Wendake offers an array of cultural experiences. Visitors can make necklaces, visit a re-created Huron village or sleep in a replica of a longhouse, where a native storyteller brings ancient Huron legends to life beneath the stars. Guests can also participate in traditional crafts taught by native artists, such as making dream catchers and talking sticks and, depending on the season, making porcupine quill earrings. Another highlight is cooking bannock (a flat quick bread) over a campfire.

The best way to kick off a visit to Wendake is with a narrated tour of the Musée Huron-Wendat, with a native guide explaining the collection’s highlights. The museum’s extensive collection includes

wampum, turkey feather headdresses, birch bark baskets and canoes, snowshoes, quillwork and beadwork, and other Huron regalia.

Cultural Flavors

The annual powwow provides a true taste of Huron culture. Adventurous eaters can sample beaver, muskrat, elk, moose and porcupine. But less exotic culinary options allow more timid diners to also experience authentic native cuisine.

Nek8arre, a restaurant located in the re-created village of Onhoüa Chetek8e, offers a vast selection of First Nations cuisine that is mostly wild game-based. Duck, bison, deer, elk, caribou and wapiti (elk) are featured on the menu, along with maple-flavored bison sausage, wild rice and wild cranberry tea.

Sagamité, or Three Sisters Soup, is made with squash, beans and corn. Additional ingredients may include vegetables, wild rice, brown sugar, beans or smoked fish. Sunflower seed and leek soup is also popular. [Click here](#) for Yolande-Okia Picard’s Three Sisters Soup recipe.

In downtown Wendake, at La Sagamité Restaurant, the signature dish is potence—pre-cooked chunks of deer, elk and bison meat hung on hooks on a metal rack and flambeéd at tableside. This unusual dish pays homage to the importance of fire in the Huron culture.

La Traite Restaurant offers a fusion of fine dining with First Nations flavors. Spices from the Boreal forest are used in dishes with partridge, seal, hare, elk and other game. A variety of local smoked fish such as salmon, char and trout are also favorites.

Planning Your Trip

For more information on visiting the Huron-Wendate Nation, go to quebecregion.com/en/special-events/tourisme-wendake. For trip-planning assistance, contact your AAA Travel agent or visit AAA.com/travel.

Try Yolande-Okia Picard’s [recipe for Three Sisters Soup](#).

Michelle Newman is a freelance writer and designer from San Antonio.