

TRAVEL

In Quebec, Creativity Fuels Neighborhood Revivals



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The arts cooperative Méduse in the St.-Roch neighborhood. Catherine Côté for The New York Times

Next Stop

By DAN SALTZSTEIN

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The undying love for the Old City of Quebec is understandable. “Stroll the only walled city north of Mexico and its cobblestone streets,” reads the city’s [tourism website](#). “Discover 400 years of history.” (The city celebrated its 400th anniversary in 2008.)

Hard to resist. And indeed, the city inside the fortifications can be charming — if often filled, wall-to-restored-wall, with tourists.

But outside those walls, in neighborhoods not quite as picturesque but plenty vibrant, young creative types — chefs, artists, night-life impresarios

— are fueling a revival worthy of Quebec’s much larger sister to the southwest, Montreal.

“In a cultural way, [Quebec City](#) is a very modern city,” said Emile Tremblay, the 29-year-old chef de cuisine at the restaurant [Légende, par la Tanière](#). “I don’t want to go to war with Montreal, but if you take in mind the amount of people, if you take the ratio, the creativity is more in Quebec City.”

During an early summer visit, my wife and I started our exploration at the workplace of another of those young chefs: the restaurant [La Planque](#) in Limoilou, a working-class neighborhood on the other side of the St.-Charles River now peppered with hipster types. We wandered through its broad, leafy streets, passing a street fair where a girl not older than 7 wowed a small crowd with her skateboarding technique. (Having to survive long, hard winters means Quebec is packed with fairs and festivals all summer.)



Guillaume St-Pierre in his kitchen at La Planque. Catherine Côte for The New York Times

Inside La Planque, which opened in 2012, we were given menus printed in French only. (“I’m glad you didn’t order the special,” one enthusiastic server said. “I’m not sure how to translate the fish!”) It’s a quirky and charming spot, with décor that does not make a lot of sense: rustic in some

parts (repurposed wood), industrial in others (construction lights).

But the atmosphere was friendly; we saw probably a half-dozen customers greeted with a hug.

“We haven’t done a lot of marketing about the restaurant,” the 30-year-old chef, Guillaume St.-Pierre, told me later. “People hear about the restaurant and want to come in.”

Almost as local were the ingredients on the plate, something that we found at almost every meal we had during our trip.

“It’s part of me, using products from Canada,” Mr. St.-Pierre said. A tartare of bison (from Alberta) was rich and pleasantly funky. Delicate, lightly cooked New Brunswick salmon arrived mingled with blue mussels escabeche, like sweet and sour candy from the sea. We shared three Québécois cheeses, an excellent end to a spectacular meal.

Afterward, we wandered a few quiet blocks to Parc de l’Anse-à-Cartier, which hugs the St.-Charles River. Once a polluted mess, after extensive cleanup efforts it is now gorgeous, if not yet swimmable. Dusk settled over the walking paths that wound riverside, right near where the French explorer Jacques Cartier first made landfall in 1535.

Across the St.-Charles is St.-Roch, probably the epicenter of the creative revival. Quebec is set on a series of bluffs, which must be scaled or descended by elevators or intimidating staircases. St.-Roch (pronounced san-ROCK) is at the bottom of a particularly steep one, so we took an elevator down to Jardin St.-Roch, a park with waterfalls and pretty flower beds.

At one corner is [Centre Materia](#), a small, white-walled gallery and artist-run center in its 15th year. It was the last day of “Confettis,” a show that also served as the final student project for the [Maison des Métiers d’Art de Québec](#). I spoke to Nathalie Gagné, 31, a student with a piece in the show: small twists of white porcelain connected to white blocks of various sizes, which she said represented the connection between intuition and rationality.

“Everybody knows everybody,” Ms. Gagné said of the Quebec art scene. “It’s why it’s so active.”

Later, I visited Amélie Marois, the center's 37-year-old director, in her modest office. She stressed that the art produced by and for the center is not meant to be precious; every piece in "Confettis" was for sale.

"When you have a piece of art in your home, you are connected to art," she said.

A few blocks closer to the bluff is [Méduse](#), a 20-year-old arts cooperative. The center was created when the city converted abandoned houses into usable space. The co-op, which sprawls over 43,000 square feet, is now home to 10 organizations that each specialize in a different art form — lithography, film, photography — and are connected by a dizzying series of hallways and staircases. (Just after my visit, yet another arts space, [Le Spot](#), opened down the block.)

Méduse also services the city: One organization curates films for free summer screenings and another has provided interactive exhibitions for the [Musées de la Civilisation](#) in the Old City. The co-op also houses a visual arts center for people with mental health issues.

This is all largely thanks to funding received by those organizations from various levels of government — city, provincial, federal — which has benefited St.-Roch as much as the center itself.

"They really saw it as the starting point of a revival of the neighborhood," said Mériol Lehmann, a 42-year-old hip professor-type who is the president of Méduse. The funding is modest, though, which makes the fact that the co-op is artist-run all the more important.

"People think that artists can't manage, but it's really the opposite," he added. "We know how to make do with less."

It also means that the artists are not hemmed in by the economic necessities of a private gallery.

"The art here is more experimental and bold," Mr. Lehmann said. "We aren't afraid to take risks."

The public-facing galleries were closed during my visit, but judging by what I saw in one of the Méduse's two black-box theaters — a handful of young artists hunched over laptops, next to dummy heads wearing headphones — it seemed a reasonable claim.



An exhibition at the gallery Centre Materia. Catherine Côté for The New York Times

Earlier that day I had coffee at [Dose Bar à Café](#) with Marie Asselin, a 36-year-old writer and [food blogger](#). Like nearly everyone I spoke to about St.-Roch, she attributed the neighborhood's revival largely to the removal of a covered mall along rue St.-Joseph, which began in the late 1990s and was complete by 2007. Though the roofs were intended to create a space for shopping during Quebec's harsh winters, "it wasn't a safe place," Ms. Asselin said. "I would go there, but I wouldn't tell my parents."

Now sans covering, St.-Joseph is thriving, especially with restaurants and shops focused on all things Québécois.

"It's very recent that chefs wanted to focus on local ingredients," she said, noting that the scene seems to be taking some inspiration from the New Nordic movement. Originally, that spawned a trend that she found overly focused on technique. "Now it's not as flashy, but it's still adventurous," she said.

I met another local blogger, [Allison Van Rassel](#), 36, at one of those spots on St.-Joseph, [Le Clocher Penché](#), for brunch. As we dined on duck confit with roasted spaetzle and house-made bostock (a sort of pumped-up French toast), she said that the trend was predicated on old Québécois values.

"Quebec City was doing farm-to-table before Montreal was doing it," she said. Local chefs "want to make authentic food. It's a cliché, but it's true."

As we left, Ms. Van Rassel pointed out photos of the farmers who provide the restaurant with their bounty, hanging above the bar near the entrance. Those portraits are tributes to the close relationship Mathieu Brisson, the 33-year-old chef, has with his purveyors.

“My vegetable grower, we tell him what seeds we need and he grows those for us,” he said later. “And we share with other restaurants; I’ll take one half of a veal or beef, they take the other half.”

After brunch at Le Clocher Penché, I stopped at an even newer addition to the neighborhood, right across the street: [Deux22](#), a clothing boutique that opened in late spring and just added a bar serving local beers, Mexican food and tequila.

Pierre-Yves LaPointe, the longhaired and tattooed 33-year-old co-owner, is a graduate of Le Cercle, the restaurant-slash-bar-slash-music-venue next door, where he was a bartender. Part of the reason the St.-Joseph strip has become so popular is the ease of venue hopping.

“No one sticks to one place,” he said. (Just down the block, the tiny restaurant L’Affaire est Ketchup — loosely, “it’s all good” — is packed nightly.)

[Le Cercle](#) serves as a cultural mother ship for the neighborhood. Opened in 2007, it is run by Bruno Bernier, 43, a larger-than-life figure who greeted me at the cavernous space clad in a djellaba. He is given to sketching schematics on a pad to illustrate his ideas, expressed by phrases like “we’ve put a lot of thought into reality and virtuality.”

Le Cercle hosts about 300 events a year, he said, from concerts of all sorts to workshops for entrepreneurs. The walls are scattered with politically provocative art; the selection during my visit depicted the plight of the First Nations, as indigenous people are known in Canada.

“We want to use our platform here to create a way of interacting with the city and the province,” Mr. Bernier said.

Later that night I returned to Le Cercle. It was relatively sedate, perhaps owing to it being the eve of St.-Jean-Baptiste Day, a major provincial holiday (notably, Quebecers call it a “national” holiday). A handful of patrons drank at the bar, while a D.J. spun thumpy tunes and psychedelic patterns flickered on the wall. Next door, though, Deux22 was hopping, as

revelers gathered at the bar and on the patio out back.

Not every example of the cultural revival is in this part of town. Down by the Old Port, just 50 feet or so outside the fortifications, is *Légende, par la Tanière*. *Légende*, which opened last year, is the outgrowth of *La Tanière*, a restaurant outside of town that has been a beacon for fans of locavore cuisine since 1977 (the name means “animal’s den”). As at *La Planque*, the décor at *Légende* is more wacky than welcoming: gaudy prints on blond wood, in this case.



A bike path in the Parc de l'Anse-à-Cartier. Catherine Côte for The New York Times

We started with a platter of charcuterie (mostly house-made) and some oysters, all excellent. The food that followed was the most ambitious (and expensive) we had in town, but also satisfying, even homey: pork belly with radish and fennel; a brouillade of morels and ram’s head mushrooms and foie gras in consommé. We paired it all with two bottles of wonderfully crisp, fruity white wines from the Niagara region.

Mr. Tremblay, the chef de cuisine, is another alum of *Le Cercle*, where he was the chef. He is also a purist; our server told us everything on our plates was from the province, which turned out to be a bit of hyperbole, but not by much.

“We want to take part in defining the cuisine of Quebec,” Mr. Tremblay told me later, and that means embracing its ingredients. A dish of pan-seared mackerel included “capers” that were actually buds culled from a local plant; another was perfumed with the green tips of the balsam tree.

“It takes some commitment,” he said. “One night, we finished cooking at 1 in the morning, and I went out with a chef here to go pick those flowers along the side of the river till 4.”

But most importantly, he said, was putting the emphasis on who comes through the door, something classically Québécois.

“It’s written in our DNA that we love to take care of the customer,” he said.

If You Go

Food and Drink

La Planque 1027, 3e Avenue; 418-914-8780; laplanquerestaurant.com.

Le Clocher Penché 203, rue St.-Joseph Est; 418-640-0597; clocherpenche.ca/en.

Légende, par la Tanière 255, rue St.-Paul; 418-614-2555; restaurantlegende.com/home.

Deux22 222, rue St.-Joseph Est; 581-742-5222; deux22.com.

Dose Bar à Café 542, Boulevard Charest Est; dosebaracafe.com.

Culture

Méduse 541, rue de St.-Vallier Est; 418-640-9218; meduse.org/en.

Centre Materia 395, Boulevard Charest Est; 418-524-0354; centremateria.com/en.

Le Cercle 228, rue St.-Joseph Est; 418-948-8648; le-cercle.ca.

Le Spot 707-731, rue de St.-Vallier Est; spotqc.com.