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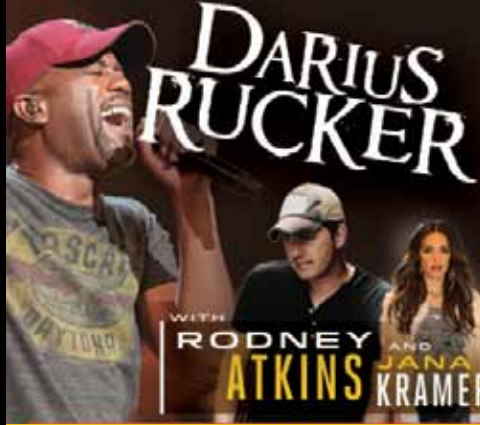


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HUNGRY EYE



Français

ou

Franco?



We're a food-crazy border state, so where are the starry Franco-American restaurants?

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

Everyone knows *poutine*, the retro pile-up of french fries, gravy, and cheese curds. The hearty Canadian treat has rocketed into the wider foodie-sphere and can be found all around Portland, including in a few fancy iterations like the East Ender's lobster poutine and Duckfat's silken version with local cheese curds and duck gravy.

But where is the rest of traditional Franco-American or Acadian cuisine? Not the fancy dishes from France that everyone knows, such as *escargots* and *boeuf bourguignon*, but the hearty, filling home cooking based in French and French Canadian traditional recipes, later invigorated with seasonal ingredients available in Acadian settlements in Aroostook and Hancock County—pork, salmon, and potatoes. *Ployes*, the pancakes or griddle bread, spring from milled Aroostook buckwheat. *Tourtière*, a holiday meat pie made of ground pork and onions in a pastry crust, was once the traditional meal after midnight mass on Christmas Eve, and *tarte au saumon* (salmon pie) also baked in pastry, can be wrapped and taken into the woods for a day of logging, hunting, or fishing. *Cretons*, the lightly spiced coarse *pâté* of minced pork, make a sturdy breakfast when spread on bread.

The legendary E. W. Mailhot Sausage Co. in Lewiston produces pork sausages, blood sausages, cretons, salmon pies, and pork pies and distributes them to markets large and small, from mom and pop shops to Hannaford supermarkets, all over Maine and into New Hampshire and Massachusetts. So why does the wholesale business

extend to just a few restaurants? Is there no way to recast these savory specialties as upscale offal in the manner of sweetbreads and brains? Remember when everyone was mad for bone marrow?

"You got me there. I just don't know," says Marc Mailhot. "I'm doing what my father and grandfather did, and this is my market. People cook at home. They tell me new things they do with our products. Someone told me they put *cretons* into crab rangoon shells and fried them up for appetizers. People put it on crackers with cream cheese to have with drinks." Alive and well in home kitchens, must Franco food remain on the fringe, the stuff of ethnic fairs and festivals?

AU CONTRAIRE

"You can find Franco-American food at restaurants and diners in Aroostook," says Lisa Michaud of the Franco-American Centre at the University of Maine in Orono. Two Rivers Lunch in Allagash serves a few Franco dishes, such as pea soup, chicken and dumplings, raisin pie, and sugar pie. At Crystal Lynn's in Madawaska,

The *cretons* chronicles, from top: Pork cretons on toast with a dab of mustard make a classic Franco-American breakfast; Sunday brunch at the Frog & Turtle in Westbrook includes subtly spiced, house-made cretons in their signature Franco-American eggs benedict; country *pâté* at Petite Jacqueline is very French and very likely the inspiration for the New-World cretons that followed in Acadian Canada and Maine.

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you can order cretons with your ployes, as well as chicken stew and *patates fricassées*.

Then there's Robin's Restaurant in Van Buren: "Oh sure, we have the poutine, and ployes with butter and syrup for breakfast. And stew on Saturdays," says server Velma Ouellette. "It's kind of a thick soup, with chicken, potatoes, and dumplings, and that's pretty much it, but the big thing is the dumplings. They're really good."

In Auburn, Rolly's Diner is a cheerful outpost of Franco tradition and assimilation, owned by Ken and Rolande (Rolly) Blais for the past 19 years. "We serve salmon pies from Grant's Bakery in Lewiston on Fridays. A wedge of pie with a choice of potato and egg sauce—real simple, but traditional—it's a bechamel sauce with hardboiled eggs chopped up in it," says Ken. He acknowledges the difference between French and Franco-American food. French restaurants "are really *fine* French dining." Deep down, "Franco food is comfort food." He calls *patates fricassées* thrifty reuse: "They'd take cold leftover potatoes and fry them like home fries with pieces of salt pork.



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We don't make them here, but we serve cretons—people spread it on toast or make it into a sandwich. Then there's our creton-and-cheese omelet. And ployes, sure. A lot of the traditional Franco things make great breakfast." Call Rolly's a full participant in the local Franco-American food economy, serving Grant's pies, Mailhot's sausages, and using ploye mix from Bouchard Family Farms in Fort Kent.

Bags of Bouchard's mixes, like Mailhot's sausages, can be found in markets all over Maine. The company grows and mills its own buckwheat and has been packaging and selling it for 30 years. As a fat- and gluten-free vegan product, ployes, the humble breakfast companion to maple syrup and dipper for chicken stew, is poised for stardom.

THE INVISIBLE BARRIER

Delicately spiced house-made cretons headline the Franco-American eggs benedict offered for brunch at the Frog & Turtle pub in Westbrook. Owner/chef James Tranchemontagne says the story of Franco cuisine is "complicated...it doesn't translate to com-

mercial success...a lot of it is filler food—turnips, apples, carrots, head cheese, sugar pie. I do a lot of stuff here [at the pub] that stems from my upbringing, but...French-Canadian is more of the culture of the people than a style of their food. I come from a large family. There was no money to go out and the meals at home were way better."

Rhea Côté Robbins, author of the memoir *Wednesday's Child*, echoes Tranchemontagne's sentiments. "Atmosphere provides the flavor in which the dishes are served... You can go to places in Maine and get the full-fledged real-deal atmosphere of the culture at some of the festivals in the French heritage towns, [where] you can find the traditional foods for sale. [But] class is assigned to those foods, and that is an invisible barrier." Regarding the concept of a four-star Franco-centric restaurant: "Given the climate in which the Franco-American culture exists, a parallel or underground universe, it will take some time. We need some type of youthful creativity that takes the ordinary to places such as the [Frog & Turtle does] in

Westbrook. But I bet it will happen."

And maybe we ought to just appreciate the similarities between French and Franco food and not over-think the issue. You can order crêpes at Rolly's, made with *Memère* Blais's recipe, and you can find French crêpes in Portland at the Merry Table crêperie and at Petite Jacqueline, after all.

Steve Corry, executive chef and owner of Petite Jacqueline with his wife Michelle, insists, "We stick to classic French bistro dishes here." But when Jacqueline's chef Ian Hayward presents a wooden board on which neat triangles of *pâté de campagne* with baguette toasts and grainy mustard are prettily arranged, who can argue that this is not the city cousin to country cretons?

None of which will put Justin Timberlake in a booth at Rolly's Diner in Auburn, as was claimed in a TripAdvisor posting that spread elsewhere on the internet. "Just a prank, but we got a kick out of it," says Ken Blais. Hey, it *sounded* plausible. Maybe that's all it takes. For anything exciting to happen, it has to begin with wishful thinking. ■



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