

[Home](#) + [Food and Drink](#)[Share](#)

From Bagels to Brisket, Montreal Has Incredible Jewish Food — Here are the Best Spots

Sample the best Jewish food in Montreal on a tour of the city's delis, bagel shops, and luncheonettes.

By **Nathan Englander**

January 29, 2022

Two years in and it's still a surprise to find myself living in Canada. Back in 2019, I followed my Houston-born wife from Brooklyn to Toronto for her job. I have no connections up this way, but Rachel's family history gives me and the kids instant Canadian roots. Unfortunately, on the bagels-and-lox, pastrami-on-rye front, those roots haven't done much to convert this New Yorker to the northern versions of those cherished immigrant foods.

My Toronto neighbors shook their heads. If I wanted to be successfully evangelized to Canadian Jewish cuisine, they said, I needed to visit Montreal, their capital of kosher-style eats. So last September I rented a car, threw my toothbrush and a defibrillator in the trunk, and headed off for a weekend marathon of nitrates and carbs.

This sort of gastronomic pilgrimage called for a spiritual guide. Who better than my Montreal-born father-in-law, Louis, who could give me the family history while we ate *karnatzel* at his beloved Snowdon Deli and tucked in to the time-honored breakfast of hungover McGill students—the "mish-mash" at Beautys Luncheonette? I called Louis in Texas, where he's lived for nearly 50 years, and told him to hop on a plane.



From left: Cream cheese, smoked salmon, tomato, and onion on a bagel at Beautys Luncheonette; the menu board at Lester's Deli, a study in old-school Montreal. | CREDIT: DOMINIQUE LAFOND

Louis and I started out early on a Saturday in the old Jewish neighborhood of Mile End. St.-Laurent Boulevard, which cuts through it, was a kind of immigrant thoroughfare a century back. With the French settling to the east and the English to the west, Greek, Chinese, and Jewish immigrants were crowded along the boulevard in the middle. This is where Louis's grandparents (and my kids' great-great-grandparents), Litvaks from Belarus, opened their fruit stand and where Louis's father grew up.

Peek at a side street and you can't help noticing a winningly bizarre architectural feature of this very wintry city. Perilous-looking and often beautiful outdoor staircases and landings are affixed to the fronts of the houses, as if you took the common spaces that go inside a building and stuck them outdoors—which is literally what they did. I didn't even get to ask what happens when they freeze before Louis told me the story of his father, as a little boy, tumbling down a flight of those icy stairs.



A honey-boiled, wood-fired, crisp on the outside, light and chewy on the inside, St.-Viateur's sesame bagel delivered a life-changing first bite. I was in love.

We met Méli^ssa Simard, our guide from ['Round Table Tours](#), outside [St.-Viateur Bagel](#), a storefront empire that churns out a thousand dozen bagels a day. You may be wondering: if I invited Louis along for that very purpose, why would my guide need a guide? First, he's been in the States so long he doesn't have any information about anything that happened in the province of Quebec after 1969. And second, Méli^ssa's Jewish Montreal tour came so highly recommended that we couldn't resist. I'm glad we didn't. Every minute was pure pleasure.



From left: St.-Viateur bagels, fresh from the wood-fired oven; the breakfast melt at Beautys: bacon, eggs, cheese, and tomato on grilled challah. | CREDIT: DOMINIQUE LAFOND

Inside St.-Viateur, three people work the wood-fired oven, the rings of dough going in on one side, and a mountain of hot sesames resting on a kind of off-ramp to the cooling bin on the other. No need to fear the weekend-morning bagel line in Montreal. It just moves and moves. There's no scooped-out- oat-with-a-light-shmear-double-toasted-with-onion-tomato-and-a-black-coffee- please at this location. You just get your bagels and go.

My first hot-out-of-the-oven St.-Viateur sesame was a truly transcendent, fully religious experience. I don't know what the term for polyamory is in the bagel world, but—with due respect to my home city—a honey-boiled, wood-fired, crisp on the outside, light and chewy on the inside, St.-Viateur's sesame delivered a life-changing first bite. I was in love!

Mélissa took us from there to [Lester's Deli](#), which is in a fancy-looking French-Canadian stretch of the neighborhood, though at that hour it was mostly dog walkers on their morning constitucionals and Hasidim in big fur *shtreimels* heading off to shul. Despite my sesame-bagel success, I was still nervous about trying the deli. I calmed myself with the knowledge that, should the restaurants fail us, Louis and I could make our own gefilte fish back at the hotel. We were staying in a [Four Seasons](#) that lives on top of the Holt Renfrew Ogilvy department store. Both of our rooms were equipped with luxuriously giant soaking tubs perfect for stocking live carp (exactly as Louis's grandmother did in a smaller bathtub not far from where we stood).



From left: Slicing into the famous smoked meat at Lester's; the finished sandwich, in all its nitrate-steeped glory. | CREDIT: DOMINIQUE LAFOND

I needn't have worried. Lester's more than delivered from the instant that its owner, Bill Berenholz, came by to say hello and pretended to squirt mustard on my father-in-law—a gag he'd clearly repeated infinite times but that still killed. The deli itself has a 50s-era, sepia-toned interior, with tchotchkes and bric-a-brac on every non-table surface. The walls are covered with photos, including the requisite signed headshot of William Shatner, captain of the *Enterprise* and Montreal's favorite Jewish son.

When our tasting plates showed up, each had a half sandwich, chopped liver, and a lightly cured lox. The half serving made sense, as we had many more places to go. Also, it was still only 8:30 in the morning.



By afternoon, I felt like the deli version of a coal miner at the end of his shift. My hands were half-cured themselves, and I had mustard lining my nails.

Then, dear reader, I had my first taste of a Montreal smoked-meat sandwich, on the softest rye bread I've ever had. This is what I had driven all this way for—and the smoked meat was absolutely astounding. It was moister and more melt-in-your-mouth than pastrami, its New York cousin. Bill told me that they cure their beef with a wet brine before smoking and then steam-heat it. They use the brisket cut, whereas pastrami comes from the navel. With no shortage of pride, he said that it's an intentionally more tender cook, before tracing smoked meat's history back to Romanian charcuterie.

After I cleared my plate (and most of Louis's), Mélissa took us on a Jewish literary spin. We passed the homes of poets Melech Ravich (who translated Kafka into Yiddish) and Rokhl Korn, and stopped outside a former residence of Mordecai Richler, Montreal's most famous Jewish writer. The neighborhood library now bears his name, and an artsy mural of Richler graces a small building

nearby. It's an impressive tribute, as long as you don't compare it to the 20-story mural of Leonard Cohen over on Crescent Street.



From left: The exterior of Wilensky's Light Lunch; the Wilensky's counter. | CREDIT: DOMINIQUE LAFOND

Richler's career-making novel, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, was made into a movie that was partly shot at [Wilensky's Light Lunch](#). Sharon Wilensky, whose father, Moe, was the restaurant's founder, told me he appeared in the film as "Sid," the assistant to the actor playing his fictionalized self.

Wilensky's is a perfectly appointed time capsule, with a classic lunch counter and a working soda fountain from which Sharon drew my first-ever chocolate egg cream, a drink I'd only ever heard my Brooklyn-born dad wax lyrical about.

Sharon had tears in her eyes when she shared that, despite taking over, it was

still her father's store. She continues to serve "the special," their signature sandwich, composed of grilled salami and bologna on a roll that has likewise been grilled and, in the process, flattened. The sandwich comes with mustard—always. There was a stretch where you could order one without mustard for a nickel surcharge. Those loosey-goosey days are long gone.

Louis and I said our goodbyes to Mélissa and roamed the city before our meal at Beautys Luncheonette. Opened in 1942 by Freda and Hymie Sckolnick, Beautys is a sparkling white-tile and chrome diner with sensational blue banquettes. We walked in on a sweet scene, as three generations of Sckolnicks were working that day. There was Larry, the gray-haired son of Freda and Hymie, along with Larry's daughters, Julie and Elana, and Elana's 17-year-old daughter, Ruby, in a white apron, waiting on customers and learning the business.



I swooned over their cheese blintzes before digging in to the aptly named "mish-mash," an omelette with everything thrown in. There are peppers and salami and hot dogs and onions, along with a side of home fries and a toasted bagel for your troubles.

For every multigenerational restaurant like Beautys keeping the faith, there's a new one bringing its own twist to Jewish deli traditions. [Arthurs Nosh Bar](#) is the shining star on that front. I'd eat everything there, including the pink neon sign hanging over the door. Its owners—Raegan Steinberg and her husband, Alex Cohen—magically turn everything under their roof into something both delicious and visually stunning. I went for the "latke smorgasbord," which consists of a pressed challah roll, scrambled eggs, gravlax, a latke, and Israeli salad. We couldn't resist ordering the *syrniki*, their extraordinarily fluffy cottage-cheese pancakes, for the table. In the words of my people, they're to die for!

On Sunday, Louis and I checked out of the Four Seasons, telling ourselves we couldn't live there forever. (Though, with a number of floors dedicated to apartments, apparently some people can.) We had cleared the day for the family-history tour, which meant a visit to the cemetery and Louis's schools, as well as pilgrimages to other ancestral sites. Then we'd partake of the sandwich that had been built up to me more than any of the others. Lunch would be at Snowdon Deli, Louis's lifelong spot, whose smoked meat I'd been hearing about ever since Rachel introduced me to the parents.

To get to the other side of town we crossed Mount Royal, the mountain in the center of the city after which Montreal is named. It's home to a massive park designed by none other than Frederick Law Olmsted, of Central Park fame. At the top there's a scenic overlook, an easy spot for Louis to point out the St.

Lawrence River, in the middle of which the island of Montreal sits. And not only is Montreal an island. It's part of an archipelago—which makes it sound like it should be more tropical than it is.



Alex Cohen (left) and Raegan Steinberg of Arthurs Nosh Bar. | CREDIT: DOMINIQUE LAFOND

On the west side of the mountain, beside a Gordian knot of highway interchanges, a fetching three-story orange sits in the middle of a parking lot, like a rising blood moon. This structure is home to [Gibeau Orange Julep](#), the single place to which my wife requested I pay homage. To her, skipping it would be like visiting Paris without seeing the Eiffel Tower. Louis handed me my cup with a bottoms-up look, and we both took a pull off our straws. The drink that Orange Julep churns out is neither shake nor juice. What it tastes like is the milk you'd get if you mated a Holstein cow with a navel orange and then fed the offspring a diet of pure sugar.

It's a short drive from there to Louis's childhood home. After possibly frightening the current owners with our lurking, we walked to the one and only Snowdon Deli. From the outside—well, let's say it has the façade of a well-maintained medium-security prison. But inside, it's all *heimische* communal warmth. A waitress called me "sweetie," and the hostess made sure we were cozy in our booth.

At this point, I was worried for my father-in-law, for his Proustian smoked-meat memories, for the exalted claims he had made. We ordered two sandwiches, kasha and bow ties, poutine, and, to top it off, a *karnatzel*—a dried sausage specific to Montreal Jewish delis—because you shouldn't starve.

Without generosity or favoritism, I can tell you it was an extraordinary smoked-meat sandwich. Better even than I dreamed. Louis's deli did not let him down. And I implore you, even if you're staying by McGill or Mile End, it's worth crossing the mountain to get to Snowdon Deli. The sandwich is that good.

By afternoon, I felt like the deli version of a coal miner at the end of his shift. My hands were half-cured themselves, and I had mustard lining my nails. That's when we hit [Schwartz's](#), the most famous of all the delis, which is partly owned by Celine Dion. Rumor has it that she sings and picks up everyone's checks when she pops by. We ate our sandwiches and then checked in to the newly renovated [Le Germain Hotel](#). The redesign has a 1960s theme, so that, for Louis, it's a modern, Peloton-equipped embodiment of his Montreal heyday. The bathrooms are wallpapered with images of former Habs hockey greats. I was sincerely happy for him, knowing he could brush his teeth while staring at his hero, Big Jean Béliveau.

Even if you eat eight lunches, dinnertime comes regardless. We pointed the car toward a restaurant called [Beba](#), out in the borough of Verdun. When Louis was growing up, Verdun was a working-class, "dry" county. It's not where he'd expect to find a cutting-edge bistro.



From left: Brothers Pablo (left) and Ari Schor in the dining room of their Argentine-inspired restaurant, Beba; guinea fowl with chanterelle mushrooms and poached livers at Beba. | CREDIT: DOMINIQUE LAFOND

We pulled up to Beba, a little gem on the corner. Though I was happy for a romantic dinner with my father-in-law, I was already dreaming of coming back on a date with my wife. Beba's owners, Ari and Pablo Shor, are Argentine Jewish brothers who moved to Canada as boys. They opened in the summer of 2019, meaning they had a scant few months before the pandemic shuttered the place and they found themselves selling empanadas out of the front door.

Ari, the chef, is humble despite an impressive kitchen pedigree. He describes himself as "cooking the food of immigrants." True to the brothers' heritage, the restaurant has an Argentine-Jewish-influenced menu, which allows for Ashkenazi, Spanish, and general Mediterranean and South American flavors.

The eggplant arrived, topped with end-of-the-season romano beans, *ajo blanco*, and bright, roasted red peppers, which Ari said are exactly as his parents always made them.



From left: Rue de la Commune, a boulevard in the Old Montreal neighborhood; Gibeau Orange Julep, a roadside fast-food joint known as much for its spherical 1945 building as for its signature orange drink. | CREDIT: DOMINIQUE LAFOND

Whenever Ari describes a dish's origins he says something like, "We were doing it this way, then someone in the kitchen had an idea and I said, 'Let's try it.'" Beyond being charming, his open-mindedness infuses the whole place with a collaborative feel. Nothing summed that up more than the day's special, inspired by a friend of Ari's in Hong Kong. It was Beba's take on drunken chicken—a plate of guinea fowl au jus, brined for two weeks and served with chanterelles and poached livers. I've been writing for more than 20 years, and I don't think I've typed this word before, but here it is: that dish was straight-up *sublime*.

All the while, Pablo worked the wine, offering up dizzyingly great choices. We drank a Vermentino from Liguria called Meigamma, followed by a glass of a super-smooth volcanic red. Louis thought the wine a perfect complement to our whole weekend. "Some sulfites to go with our nitrates," he said at first sip.

It was a dream final dinner that brought it all home. The ancestral foods. The family-run kitchen. And all of it served with a side of locally sourced Canadian culinary gumption—every dish a testament to a tradition-loving and ever-changing Montreal.

Eat Your Way Across Montreal

Where to Stay

Four Seasons Hotel: This 169-room property near downtown offers true elegance. *Doubles from \$380.*

Le Germain Hotel: A modern hotel steps from McGill University. *Doubles from \$244.*

Where to Eat

Arthurs Nosh Bar: A super-stylish space. Don't miss the syrniki! *Entrées \$9–\$15.*

Beautys Luncheonette: A cheerful atmosphere and homey food. *Entrées \$4–\$16.*

Beba: An elegant Argentine bistro. *Entrées \$33–\$64.*

Gibeau Orange Julep: A giant orange that serves hamburgers, hot dogs, and its signature drink.

Lester's Deli: Spectacular smoked meat. *Entrées \$4–\$18.*

Schwartz's: The most famous smoked-meat deli. *Entrées \$6–\$19.*

Snowdon Deli: A family-friendly spot off the tourist track. *Entrées \$6–\$18.*

St.-Viateur Bagel: The classic Montreal bagel.

Wilensky's Light Lunch: The star is "the special": salami, bologna, and mustard on a roll. *Sandwiches \$4–\$6.*

What to Do

'Round Table Tours: Eating and drinking adventures, including Mélissa Simard's 3½-hour Jewish Montreal tour. *From \$58.*

A version of this story first appeared in the February 2022 issue of Travel + Leisure under the headline From Bagels to Brisket.