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Culture and cuisine, the Magdalen way

by DEE HON

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Houses near the shore of La Petite Baie, on Île du Havre aux Maisons in the Magdalen Islands.

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*Quebec's Îles-de-la-Madeleine are just a couple of hours from
Montreal by air, yet feel a world away*

Dominique Arseneau stands on his hilly

pasture overlooking the Gulf of St. Lawrence, banging on plastic pails. The clatter pierces the gusting wind. Soon, the muddy ground starts rumbling under his rubber boots. More than a dozen heifers burst over the ridge line, piling toward feeding troughs Arseneau, a dairy farmer, has filled with barley.

"C'est comme des bonbons," he shouts at me — the grain is like candy for the young cows, who have roamed all day, foraging on grasses, buttercups and clovers seasoned with briny spray whipped inland by gales. Arseneau serves dessert to earn his animals' affection, and to gather them so he can check on their well-being. These are carefree adolescents, but in a few months they'll

join the main herd of cows old enough to breed, give birth, and produce milk for the nearby Fromagerie du Pied-de-Vent, which Arseneau co-owns with two other islanders.

We're on the southern coast of Île du Havre aux Maisons, one of the eight major islands that make up Quebec's Magdalen Islands. Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine, as it is known in French, is a small archipelago of red sandstone cliffs, emerald meadows and narrow sand spits sprinkled into the middle of the vast gulf. It's part of Quebec but closer geographically to Cape Breton Island, and to Prince Edward Island by ferry. The crossing from the latter takes five hours. A flight from Montreal can take a little more than two. And yet, these islands can feel like the edge of the world, as remote as they must have been in the 18th and 19th centuries, when people commonly arrived by shipwreck and never found a way to leave. Researchers have documented more than 400 vessels dashed along these shores.

Settlers and stranded survivors raised generations of children in such profound isolation, you can hear it in Madelinots' voices today. Pronunciations differ from one island to the next, echoing a time when journeys of just a few kilometres required a boat and calm seas free from the pack ice that enveloped everything from December to May. Today, with modern roads, bridges and rental cars, Google Maps tells me it'll take an hour to drive the 76 kilometres from Havre-Aubert, on the southern end of the chain, to Old-Harry, in the northeast.

I plan to take four days.



Dominique Arseneau brings in his cows for their evening milking on Île du Havre aux Maisons in the Magdalen Islands.

I've come to the Magdalen Islands, like about 78,000 visitors do each year, to marvel at scenery, commune with wildlife and get lost in a way of life that, as an urbanite from Vancouver, I'm utterly unfamiliar with. And I've come to eat. Over the last dozen years, the islands have become a culinary destination, an ironic reversal of fortune made possible by modern transport.

Throughout most of their history, islanders could only imagine the luxuries of the outside world. A correspondent from *Maclean's* visiting in 1947 described 10,000 hardy residents carrying on without bakeries, dairies, running water or

electricity. Welfare workers from the mainland lectured Madelinots to improve their impoverished winter diets, but now mainland tourists overrun the islands' restaurants each summer to feast on local delicacies.

Arseneau's cows get milked every day in a barn a few steps from their pastures. Their milk runs downhill through a pipe into the Fromagerie du Pied-de-Vent's cheesemaking room. A young bilingual employee with the surprisingly Anglophone name of Stacey Dickson explains how the cheesemakers separate the milk's solids from liquids, and how they turn and brush the cheese wheels by hand every day as they age. They make six cheeses here, including the namesake Pied-de-Vent, a buttery soft-ripened wonder with a nutty, slightly salty flavour. The cows' wild diet affects the flavour of the final product, Dickson explains, sometimes pausing to find her words in English.

Dickson is a lifelong islander and English is her first language, but she's grown out of practice. She grew up on Île d'Entrée (Entry Island), a small community an hour's ferry ride south, which was first settled in the 1800s by mostly Scottish emigrants and their descendants. Dickson left when she was 10. Today, with just 90 residents and five children under 15, young people on Entry Island must go elsewhere to finish their education or find jobs. By contrast, 11,900 people live on the rest of the islands, which are connected by roads. "School and work are over here," says Dickson, before casting her eyes across the water. "If not, I'd be on Entry."



Renée Landry (left) and Stacey Dickson from Fromagerie du Pied-de-Vent stand outside the cheese shop on Île du Havre aux Maisons.



A cheese platter from Fromagerie du Pied-de-Vent.

Madelinot life has always revolved around the sea. Cod, herring and lobster took turns through the centuries providing jobs and filling bellies. So for my first dinner, I dive into the seafood tasting menu at La Table des Roy, on Île du Cap aux Meules. The restaurant opens from late May to late September each year, closing as supplies of scallops, halibut and tourists run dry.

Chef and owner Johanne Vigneault doesn't just celebrate the bounty of the islands — hard-smoked herring from Le Fumoir d'Antan on Île du Havre aux Maisons, fresh fish and shellfish, and rosehips from outside the restaurant's front door, for instance — she finds room to play and experiment with it. Lobster and fried cod swim in an Asian-inflected bisque flavoured with ginger, lemongrass, coconut milk and sambal olek. The ginger returns to add zest to scallop sashimi with rosehips and black sesame. Vigneault's food reflects a modern Madelinot spirit: steadfastly connected to their environment, community, history and terroir, yet self-reliant, inventive and adaptable to new challenges.



A ceviche amuse-bouche in a ginger and carrot vinaigrette at La Table des Roy, on Île du Cap aux Meules.



Oysters and codfish cakes at La Table des Roy, on Île du Cap aux Meules.

I rise for sunset the next morning, still reminiscing about my meal as I watch plovers flit about a marshy lagoon, then I hike over grassy dunes to Dune de Nord, an endless beach. By the afternoon, I'm eating smoked herring again, this time at Le Fumoir d'Antan itself. The shingle-walled building was built in 1942 but ceased operating when the industry was shuttered in the 1970s, when overfishing extinguished local herring stocks. The Arseneau family (not the cheesemakers) revived the business in 1996 when the fishery reopened. Modern, mechanical smoking takes just a few hours, but Le Fumoir d'Antan does things at a much slower, more traditional pace. Daniel Arseneau, co-owner of the smokehouse, demonstrates how rows of fish are hung high in the rafters for two to three months over smouldering maple and birch, a process that infuses the herring with such deep and intense flavour it's as if the fish has been transformed into fillets of chewy smoke.

The taste lingers in my mind, so I revisit it for a nightcap at the microbrewery À l'abri de la Tempête, back on Île du Cap aux Meules. The name means "sheltered from the storm," and appropriately enough, its cosy seaside bar becomes a refuge for Madelinots who endure the winter after the summer tourists have gone. I order the Corps Mort from among the more than 20 beers on tap or in bottles. It's a barley wine made with malt grains that have been smoked under the Fumoire d'Antan's herring and have soaked up dripping fish oils. It's punchy, smoky and sweet, with an added touch of maple. There may be a better example of tradition blending with invention, but I haven't tasted it yet.



Jean-Philippe Déraspe slides open a door at Le Fumoir d'Antan to reveal racks of herring hanging high in the rafters of the smokehouse.



Smoked malt from the À l'abri de la Tempête brewery on Île du Cap aux Meules.

Madelinots helping Madelinots is as old as life on these islands. People treat each other like family — with maybe a few sibling rivalries. My mission the following morning is to visit the village of La Grave on Île du Havre Aubert, where I want to track down a local culinary conflict involving what locals tell me is the truest expression of Madelinot cuisine — a deep-fried braid of dough called a beignet.

At La Grave's Le Four à Pain bakery, the entire staff seems excited to watch me try my first beignet. Its crisp, hot crust captures a core as fluffy as cotton candy, and I alternate between dipping it in caramel sauce and in *fripette*, a jam made with eggs and molasses. Other restaurants have their own variations with different braiding styles, and locals debate which is best. They can't even agree on its name. In the village of Fatima on Île du Cap aux Meules, for instance, they call the treat a *banax*.

Later that morning, I walk with Élie Vigneau, sampling crisp ciders from his orchard, Le Verger Poméloi. He whispers that people from Fatima are sometimes called *banaxes*, but that's not considered polite. "They think they

are better than everyone else,” he explains, but doesn’t sound like he believes it.

Vigneau, who is 40 but looks 10 years younger, is one of many prodigal Madelinots. He left for school and to work for videogame giant EA in Montreal until three years ago when he came back to run Le Verger Poméloi, the cidery-distillery his father started as an experiment in 1990. “At 18 you want to see something else,” he says of the islands’ gravitational pull. “And eventually, you do.”



A bottle and glass of La Poméloi liqueur from Le Verger Poméloi, a cidery-distillery on Île du Havre Aubert.

I have yet to pay a visit to the sparsely populated English-speaking communities of Grosse-Île and its hamlet, Old-Harry. So I drive east at sunset, stopping to watch a family of fox kits play by the empty road. My inn that night, La Salicorne, offers a variety of activity packages and provides me a guide for my final morning. Rosie Rankin has a sunny energy she may have acquired from the 20 years she spent in California, but she studied at Old-Harry’s one-room schoolhouse as a child. Her family was among the first settlers here in 1828. She takes me through the dunes at the 724-hectare Pointe de l’Est National Wildlife Area, a beautiful, almost alien world, with insect-eating sundew plants and endangered crowberries.

My flight home beckons, but we detour off the official tour to drop by Rankin’s cousin Carol Davies’ house. “We share a great-great-great-great-grandfather,” Rankin says. Our kitchen chat turns to talk about their family, and their stories about relatives in the 1800s come alive like they happened last week. Davies’ great-great-great-grandfather, Henry Clark Jr., helped save 300 people from a ship called *Miracle* that crashed into a reef in 1847. “There were 446 people on the boat. He buried 146 in one grave down there,” Davies says, pointing toward the shore.

Time doesn’t stand still on the Magdalen Islands, but the past lives on and mingles with the present. At the airport I think of those who settled these islands, whether by circumstance or accident, and never left, and how simple it is for me to be home in just a few hours. Then I think of their situation in a different way. What if the people who became Madelinots so long ago didn’t see themselves as being stranded? What if they just didn’t want to leave this extraordinary place?



Where to eat, stay and play in the Magdalen Islands

Writer Dee Hon's top picks for places to eat, stay and play in the Magdalen Islands

Eat & Stay

Auberge Chez Denis à François, Île du Havre Aubert The bouillabaisse here captures much of what's great about the islands. The locals translate this classic French stew into a dish that's simultaneously rustic and luxurious. The lobster, prawns, mussels and scallops come from "over there," the server says, pointing toward the harbour. A hearty meal at the traditionally styled hilltop inn is best followed by a good night's rest in the cosy upstairs rooms, where you'll have a commanding view of the ocean. aubergechezdenis.com

Play

Parc du Gros Cap, Île du Cap aux Meules The spectacular rust-red cliffs here are home to roosting cormorants, which you'll often see hovering over the water. Glide among them by taking one of the guided kayak tours available at the park. parcdegroscap.ca



An aerial view of L'Étang de la Martinique (Martinique Pond) on Île du Havre Aubert. The pond is a prime birdwatching area.

Dee Hon's writing has appeared in Postmedia newspapers, Time Out and Vancouver Magazine. Christian Fleury (@christian_fleury) is a documentary-style photographer whose work has appeared in Time, Reader's Digest and Canadian Geographic.

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