

A cuisine whose time has come once again

Continued from C1

"The first week I was a little suspicious," chef Ben Genaille says of when his cooking team, accompanied by a spiritual leader, arrived in Hong Kong from British Columbia. "The staff were so nice, so genuinely interested in us — our food, our past, our history — which made me feel suspicious.

"By the second week I understood why I was feeling like that — because in Canada you don't get that interest or respect. After 40 years of living here, I've never experienced such genuine interest.

"It totally blows," he says about being celebrated as a native chef everywhere but his home country. "When I was young it made me sad. But now I'm determined to educate people."

As director of the Musqueam Food Services Training Program in Vancouver, Genaille believes aboriginal cuisine is on the verge of becoming mainstream there. An open house in January drew the city's top chefs, eager to meet elders and curious about indigenous products not commercially sold.

"The interest on the West Coast is growing," he explains, saying it's easy to find buffalo, venison and muskox at butcher shops — creating competition that's driving down prices.

"You can go to a pow wow every weekend in downtown Vancouver and grab food at a bannock or buffalo burger booth. There's a different value out here. Pow wows are well attended by non-natives and the response is very good.

"I think it could work in Toronto. It's working in Vancouver."

But in Toronto, not everyone agrees on what aboriginal cuisine even is. Toronto chef David Wolfman runs the only aboriginal cooking program in the city at George Brown College. He says aboriginal cuisine is the foods that First Nations people lived off of for centuries and still hunt today, such as salmon and venison.

In which case, aboriginal cuisine is alive and cooking in upscale downtown restaurants like Canoe and Zoom, both of which deserve credit for help-

ing pioneer Canadian haute cuisine — you can always find game and other regional products on the menu. However, chefs at both restaurants insist that what they cook is Canadian and not aboriginal fare.

"I don't think anything we do is aboriginal," says Canoe's executive chef Anthony Walsh, who includes bannock in the restaurant's breadbaskets. "Sure, we do smoked salmon, but everyone does now. But I suppose it was the natives who did have the first crack at it."

Walsh uses national products and fuses them with international influences, creating a Canadian cuisine that reflects the cultural diversity of the country and not just of one people. Walsh prefers to define aboriginal cuisine as one that follows traditional methods of preparation, such as being cooked in hay, cedar bark or clay pots.

Over at Zoom, executive chef Lorenzo Loseto has a similar definition of Canadian cuisine.

"It's supposed to reflect the multiculturalism of our country," he says. "I think original Canadian cuisine is aboriginal, but in the city, a Canadian cuisine has developed."

But there are also some who argue that there is no real Canadian cuisine — what exists has been appropriated from the First Nations. Or as Ruth Cyr, a nurse at the native Canadian Centre on Spadina Rd. puts it, has become "yupified."

Gordon Peters, president of the Centre for Indigenous Sovereignty, agrees: "I don't even think there is such a thing as Canadian cuisine. But there is an aboriginal cuisine, which has always been the wild game, berries, corn and fiddleheads."

Whether natives have exclusive rights to it or not, it's clear that aboriginal cuisine is defined at least in part by its use of game meat, whether it's farm-raised or hunted in the wild. But patriotic palates wanting to bite into bison, duck or venison need a wallet full of cash to get them into the city's higher-end restaurants or a friend with game to share. But why is that?

In Toronto, the lack of aboriginal restaurateurs, the high cost of game and the tough sell



MEET THE WOLFMAN: Chef David Wolfman: "We need more natives opening restaurants."

of game meats make the accessibility of aboriginal food not so much a mystery but a sad reality. The lack of authentic "Kanata" cuisine boils down to a simple but potent reduction: labour, cost and indifference.

The greatest obstacle to a flourishing aboriginal cuisine partly stems from the lack of natives in the food industry, says Wolfman, who hosts his own cooking show, *Cooking with the Wolfman*, on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network.

"I think what we need to do is have more native people and graduates opening restaurants," he says. "If the native population is lacking culinary experience that won't help."

Wolfman's landmark show features aboriginal fusion dishes. In other words, he'll make

lasagna with moose or bear meat and layer it with polenta.

But he's close to a lone Wolfman. He recounts one incident that occurred years ago when he was visiting the aboriginal-cooking program at another school in Sudbury.

"When they asked me if I wanted to meet the teacher, I was expecting a native person. Out walks this short, little, German woman," he laughs. "I couldn't believe it. I thought they were playing a joke on me."

Wolfman, who's gained celebrity status amongst natives through his show, says it's sad there aren't more to share the honour with — aside from the short German woman, of course.

In addition to the lack of native labour, there's also a lack

of funds to get aboriginal restaurants rolling. Not only are start-up costs high but the inventory costs of game can shoot through the roof.

Traditionally, game was free — it was hunted off the land and easily sold. But that's not the case today.

"Indigenous people aren't allowed to use wild game for commercial use. You can hunt it, take it home and eat it, but you can't sell it," explains Peters, calling the prohibition "a crackdown" by the Ministry of Natural Resources.

In turn, the ministry defends the practice as a "cornerstone of conservation," directed at both natives and non-natives. "It's not a crackdown," insists Jerry Ouellette, minister of natural resources. "It's been going on for hundreds of years." Ouellette argues a ban on selling wild game meat is needed for health and conservation purposes. Also, he says, a government treaty dating back to 1701 states First Nations people can only hunt wild game for self-sustaining or ceremonial purposes.

It's hard to believe that natives have never sold a piece of game meat for 300 years, but one factor in the high price of game meats has been those government regulations. As a result, the bulk of the country's natives can't afford to eat the game meats served in the city's high-end restaurants. Traditional native meats, once the sole domain of the aboriginal hunter, have become the food of the wealthy in Canada.

But even at Zoom, one of the city's top restaurants serving game, Loseto admits people are less likely to dish out \$60 for six ounces of bison tenderloin when they can pay half for the same portion of beef.

"Bison, wild boar, duck, venison, short rib ... we want to have it on the menu to support Canadian farmers, but we don't want to scare away customers with the price. You have to be a real diner to appreciate that food," he says. "I don't think there are enough people who appreciate it who can afford it."

But at Canoe, where game sells regardless of price, Walsh insists there are local taste buds that salivate over caribou,

Alberta red deer and Quebec quail. But when you ask Walsh if an aboriginal restaurant would do well in the city, he says he's not sure.

"It depends on who's behind it, how authentic it is and how hardcore it is," he explains. "You've got to be sensible from a business point of view as to how many people can afford it and how many people are willing to take the risk."

Call it risk, apathy or indifference, it all comes down to one thing, says Peters. People aren't as likely to frequent a restaurant touting aboriginal cuisine as they would one serving up Canadian dishes.

The Canadian Aboriginal Festival, held each year at the SkyDome, is a weekend celebration of aboriginal culture, music and food. But how many non-natives does it attract? A few thousand, at best, Peters says. Whereas other cultural events, like the CHIN Picnic, Caribana and Taste of the Danforth draw hundreds of thousands of people eager to feast on different cuisines.

But Duke Redbird, who co-owned Eureka Continuum, an aboriginal restaurant that lasted for a year on Richmond St. W, says there is a market out there to be tapped into.

"It was definitely a money maker," he says of Eureka, explaining they were forced to shut down the restaurant because of a rental increase after the building switched owners.

"We served a buffalo steak ... and people liked it so much we expanded the menu and built the restaurant to satisfy their needs. Eureka Continuum sat about 60 people and we were busy all the time. "Tourists have eaten cuisine from all over the world but they haven't tried native — it's appealing to them."

Wolfman agrees with that sentiment. Like Genaille, the toast of Hong Kong, he's discovered after trips abroad to England and Germany, that his food is better received there than here at home.

"Sometimes," he says, "you just have to leave home to make it big."

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Native Recipes

Baked Rack Of Venison

From chef David Wolfman. We ordered venison racks from Whitehouse Meats in St. Lawrence Market (416-366-4465). Expect to pay about \$75 a rack.

- 2 venison racks, french cut, each 3 to 4 lbs (1 1/2 to 2 kg)
- 1 tsp each: fresh chopped rosemary, thyme, parsley
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- Salt, freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1/2 cup bread crumbs
- 1 onion, sliced
- 1/2 cup dry red wine

Preheat oven to 350F. Trim sinew from venison. In medium bowl, combine rosemary, thyme, parsley, garlic, salt, pepper and oil.

Place racks, rib side down, in roasting pan. Rub herb mixture over outside of racks, coating exposed side. Sprinkle bread crumbs on top; let sit until they soak up excess oil, about 5 minutes. Cover with onions.

Bake 12 to 15 minutes per pound for medium-rare. Remove racks from oven, remove from pan.

Pour wine into pan. Put on stove over medium-high heat. Cook, stirring, while scraping up bits of meat, 3 to 4 minutes. Pour contents through strainer, discarding solids, reserving gravy in serving bowl. Makes 6 to 8 servings.

Mohegan Succotash

From *Spirit of the Harvest: North American Indian Cooking*.

- 4 ears sweet corn, husked, cut into 1 1/2-inch pieces
- 20 oz (600g) frozen lima beans
- 1 1/2 cups water
- 1/2 cup butter
- Salt, pepper to taste
- 1 1/2 cups sliced green onions
- 1 green + 1 red pepper, seeded, chopped

In large saucepan, add corn,

beans, water, butter, salt and pepper. Cover, bring to boil over high heat. Reduce heat to medium-low; simmer 10 minutes. Stir in onions and peppers. Simmer, covered, 6 to 10 minutes, until beans are tender and peppers are tender-crisp. Remove lid, raise heat to high. Cook 3 to 4 minutes, until liquid is reduced to about 1/2 cup. Makes 6 servings.

Wild Mushrooms And Onions

From *Spirit of the Harvest*. Wipe mushrooms with damp cloth before cooking.

- 4 strips bacon
- 1/2 lb (375 g) oyster mushrooms
- 1/2 cup sliced green onions
- Salt, pepper to taste

In large skillet, fry bacon over medium-low heat until crisp, 5 to 7 minutes per side. Remove bacon, chop into pieces, set aside. Reserve drippings in skillet.

Heat bacon drippings over medium-high heat. Add mushrooms and onions. Sauté 1 to 2 minutes, until just tender. Return bacon to skillet, toss and serve. Season with salt and pepper. Makes 4 side servings.

Sage And Onion Bannock

Adapted from David Wolfman's Web site, www.cookingwiththewolfman.com.

- 4 cups all-purpose flour + extra for dusting

- 1 cup vegetable shortening
- 1 tbsp baking powder
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 1/2 cups warm water
- 1 tsp dried sage
- 1 tbsp chopped onion

Preheat oven to 350F. In large bowl, combine all ingredients. Mix by hand to create a thick dough.

On lightly floured surface, using rolling pin, roll out dough to 1-inch thick. Dust with flour. Using milk glass or biscuit cutter, cut into 2-inch circles.

Place on cookie sheets. Bake 15 to 18 minutes until browned on edges. Makes 20 pieces.

Rabbit Hot Pot Casserole

Possibly the easiest and the tastiest ways to cook rabbit.

- 2 to 3 lbs (1 kg to 1 1/2 kg) rabbit, cleaned, cut into pieces
- 4 carrots, peeled
- 4 white potatoes, peeled, sliced
- 40 g (1.4 oz) package onion soup mix
- 2 1/2 cups hot water

Pre-heat oven to 350F. Grease casserole dish.

Fill large saucepan with water; bring to boil over high heat. Add rabbit, cook 1 minute. Remove rabbit to casserole dish, discard water. Cover rabbit with carrots and potatoes.

Mix soup with water and pour over vegetables. Cover and bake 2 hours. Makes 6 to 8 servings.

Get more feedback, Taurus

ARIES (March 21-April 19)

What you say could vary with how others approach you. You might wake up on the wrong side of the bed, but others cheer you up with their different attitudes and playful ways.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)

Get plenty of exercise and pace yourself. As the day gets older, many approach you with requests. Don't be negative; remain optimistic. If you're not sure of yourself, ask questions and get more feedback.

GEMINI (May 21-June 20)

Reach out for someone. Examine what is important to you. Another might not have the patience or the desire to handle a personal matter, dumping it on your lap. Make it your pleasure.

CANCER (June 21-July 22)

Work with fundamentals. You might be overwhelmed. Carefully consider options that surround your home and/or an investment. Once you make a decision, you're home free. Allow your upbeat self to flow into your work and play.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

Make phone calls and catch up on news. Allow more creativity to come forward when dealing with others. Speak your mind, and others will respond to your high energy and inner enthusiasm.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

Observe a flashing financial yellow light. You might think a boss or parent has a great idea. Just

Today's Horoscope

JACQUELINE BIGAR

because this person has authority doesn't mean that he or she will be able to always help you in certain realms of your life.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22)

Your personality melts barriers. Someone at a distance might withhold important information. Use your skills to help this person loosen up. Make plans later in the day, after you have a grasp on your work demands.

SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21)

Reach out for a touchy partner or someone with whom you might have a financially touchy situation. Consider alternatives involving your funds. Another might whisper some gossip, which you find to be good news.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)

Make the most out of a meeting. Not everyone will be as easy to convince as you are to see that a solution heads your way. Don't worry; others will come around to your way of thinking.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)

Your serious attitude seems to sober up associates. Everyone buries his or her nose into work. Yet, understand there is a right moment to loosen up. Under-

stand that all work and no play doesn't work for others, even if it might work for you.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)

Get away from risk-taking and perhaps a difficult emotional problem. Detachment proves to be the answer. Dig into work or a project, and before you know it, you're much happier. Accept an invitation involving a co-worker.

PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20)

Dig into your bag of tricks, understanding that there is a serious change happening with a family member. Try to make this person feel better.

TODAY'S BIRTHDAY (June 19)

Cut the unduly serious attitude and loosen up this year. Allow happiness to flow through your day-to-day life. Often, you will take your responsibilities too seriously. Realize what is going on with a loved one you're close to. Sometimes your grave attitude takes away from the fun associated with you. You will gain financially and, as a result, become much more carefree with your spending. When you go overboard, you go big time. Learn to detach from immediate issues. Learn to relax. If you are single, a relationship will become far more important to you. The likelihood of meeting someone increases as the year gets older. If you are attached, your lack of levity takes a toll on your bond.

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