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NORTHERN COUNTRY FOODS



Photo and text
by Cam Lockert
Yellowknife, N.W.T.

These words bring to mind images of rugged prospectors sitting around a campfire with their bannock and hard-tack.

As they swap tales lifted from the pages of a Robert Service novel, they chew lustily on joints of fire-cured caribou.

While modern jets and computer terminals have changed forever the face of the North, a bit of this romance can still be found on the dinner table of several Yellowknife restaurants who continue to serve country foods.

Popularized by the exposure of the Icicles Lounge in the N.W.T. Pavilion at Expo '86 in Vancouver, Northern

Foods, including musk ox, caribou and Arctic char have increased in popularity.

The Yellowknife Inn, the Explorer Hotel and Our Place Lounge are three establishments offering the unique cuisine.

"I think caribou is awesome to work with," says Yellowknife Inn Executive Chef Patric Cane, "It's a lot nicer to cook than beef."

Cane has reason to be enthusiastic. Caribou is known for having little, if any, fat marbling. In his words, it is lean, lean cuisine. "It is much superior to more familiar wild meat, such as venison. It has a great deal less gamey taste to it," he says.

Cane uses caribou much like beef in his recipes, finding the flavor lends itself to Stroganoff-style preparation.

He also has a liking for musk ox, a meat he describes as "tasting like moose, only lighter".

"The difference is musk ox feed only on lichen, the moose get into willow twigs

and such. That's what gives moose it's gamey taste," he says.

The lighter taste is ideal in making musk ox-caribou paté. "It's very, very fine grained, very much like a liver paté. It's not at all coarse grained like, say a country paté," he says.

Arctic char is another dish he speaks highly of. "The closest taste is a Salmon caught in Scotland. The taste is similar to West Coast salmon, but not quite the same, it's much finer," he says.

Grace Savinsky, owner of Our Place Lounge offers fewer choices in country foods, but finds that suits her clients just fine.

"Most of the people who try our caribou or char dishes are in Yellowknife for the first time. They want to be able to tell the folks back home they tried Northern foods when they came here," she says.

Her main dish is a Caribou Vol-au-vent, served in a puffed pastry shell. "You have to marinate the caribou in white wine for at least two days to get the right taste, and you have to be very careful about the spices you use," she explains.

Caribou feed almost exclusively on the lichen which carpets the Barrenlands where they roam. This diet gives their meat a distinctive salty taste. "We don't put any salt in when we prepare the caribou, but we still have people mentioning the meat was a bit salty for their tastes," she says.

Savinsky also notices as many women try the dish as men. "I've found that women don't usually try wild meat, but something about caribou is attractive," she says.

Jacques Rodrigue, Executive Chef at the Explorer Hotel, agrees. "I hadn't worked with caribou or musk ox before I came North from Vancouver," he says, "I find it a bit of a challenge." ♦

A la carte

FRESH TOMATO SOUP WITH GIN



Serves 4 - 6 as an appetizer.

1 kilo fresh tomatoes, peeled and seeded
salt and white pepper to taste
5 1/4 oz. thyme butter (scant 2/3 cup)
1/4 lb. fresh mushrooms, sliced
1 3/4 cups whipping cream
4 - 6 shot glasses of gin (one shot per person or according to individual preference and tolerance for gin)

Drop tomatoes into boiling water for about 10 seconds, then into ice water. Peel and cut out the stem. Roughly chop peeled and seeded tomatoes to make a 'tomates concassees'. Put in bowl and add salt and pepper.

Melt thyme butter in a saucepan and saute the sliced mushrooms until lightly browned. Add the tomato pulp and bring mixture to a boil. Add the cream

Fresh Tomato Soup with Gin.

Photo: R. Bob Hogarth - Calgary, Alberta.

and adjust seasoning. Add the gin just before serving and serve immediately.

Thyme Butter:

7 oz. very soft butter (scant cup)
1 shallot or small onion, finely chopped
1 - 2 tsp. thyme
4 slices bacon, fried crisp and broken into tiny bits
salt, pepper, Worcestershire sauce and tabasco sauce to taste.

Beat or whip the butter until light. Add shallots or onion, thyme and bacon bits and mix together well. Add seasonings and mix again. Chef Hegnauer says this butter must be well-seasoned with thyme.

The above recipe has been furnished by Chef Beat Hegnauer of Le Rendez-vous Restaurant, Calgary, Alberta.

GRILLED VEGETABLE SALAD



Serves 4

A selection of:
firm fleshed vegetables, such as carrots, zucchini, peppers, leeks and mushrooms, artichokes, fennel, tomatoes, salt and white pepper

Sauce:

1 cup mayonnaise
1 bunch cilantro, minced (Chinese parsley)
1 tbsp. red wine vinegar
3 drops (or more) Tabasco sauce
salt and pepper

Grilled Vegetable Salad.

Photo: Don Brenneman - Vancouver, B.C.

Brush vegetables with oil, season with salt and pepper, and grill, marking both sides. Allow to cool, then chill.

Blend sauce and spread evenly on plate. Arrange vegetables on the sauce and garnish with cilantro leaf and a wedge of lemon.

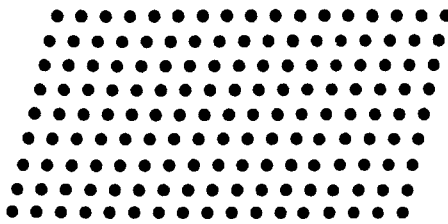
This recipe has been furnished by Chef Ken Iaci of Joe Fortes Restaurant, Vancouver, B.C.

One of the difficulties he finds is determining the correct amount of cooking time to meet the customer's taste. "You can't tell how rare it is by the texture, it isn't like steak. It could feel well done, but inside, it could be rare," he explains.

Unlike the other restaurants, Rodrigue offers musk ox burgers on his menu. This poses another slight problem. "Because it is so lean, we have to add bacon fat when we prepare the patties," he says.

He is also very fond of char, which he prepares in a Wellington style. Unfortunately, he finds the fish is something in short supply. "The season for char starts in October, but May to June is when the largest demand is. I've learned my lesson, so next year, I'll stock up when there is plenty available in the fall," he says.

These cooks all take different approaches to their creations, but they do have one thing in common. They get all their meat from Ulu Foods in Inuvik, N.W.T., a settlement on the northern end of the Mackenzie River Delta.



Caribou migrate in vast herds throughout the North, while musk ox are found on Baffin Island. Harvesting is still done the traditional way. Native hunters stalk and shoot the animals, then butcher them on the spot.

Ulu Foods acts as a wholesaler, both to protect the consumer and the hunters involved. "There are no laws governing the sale of wild meat inside the N.W.T. border, but once you cross it, the meat comes under Federal jurisdiction, and must meet all of their criteria," says Doug Stewart, an official for the Renewable Resources Department of the Territorial Government.

"Take the musk ox harvest, for instance. Ulu Foods wanted to sell some of their musk ox in southern markets, so they had Federal Inspectors with them the whole time; they made sure all the standards were met," he says. Because of

the increasing demand for wild meat, the Territorial Government is in the process of drafting regulations covering the sale of meat within the borders.

In the meantime, regulation is left up to the wholesalers. "Ulu Foods has led the way in this area, they know their business depends on producing a quality product. For instance, they recently held a course for the hunters who supply most of their meat. "They brought in a butcher to teach them modern techniques, how to prepare a carcass for market and where to shoot the animal without spoiling the best cuts," he says.

"We're in the process of upgrading our lockers, getting everything ready," says Ulu Foods Manager, Paul Marks.

"Right now, we have to store our musk ox in a packing plant in Edmonton to meet the regulations. But soon we will be able to do it all from here," he says.

While caribou are harvested in many areas in the Territories, most of the char is caught near the tiny community of Cambridge Bay, located on the southeast coast of Victoria Island. 🐻

CONTINENTAL LEADS NORTH AMERICA'S BREW PUB COMEBACK

Written by Marty Westerman

Restaurants and taverns that brew their own beer are making a North American comeback. In the past five years, more than 60 have opened in Canada and the U.S., and another dozen will debut by this winter. Throughout the continent, legislatures are realizing how much revenue this format can generate, and are scrambling to change their laws.

In Canada, new statutes are coming province by province, as in the U.S., where in just the past years, five states and the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms have incorporated the concept into their liquor and tax laws.

"This is the most innovative format to hit the restaurant business in 30 years," cheered Allan Calford, former food service consultant and President of Continental Breweries, Inc., North America's largest microbrewery manufacturer, based in Mississauga. Continental has installed the brewing systems for the Rotterdam Pub in Toronto and The Crocodile in Montreal, plus two dozen others.

Someday soon, no one will have to go far to find hand-made beer.

"A freshly-baked cookie is more appealing than one out of the package," explained Dan Bradford, Marketing Director for the Boulder, Colorado-based Association of Brewers. "And a fresh-brewed beer is more appealing than one out of a bottle or can."

Bradford credits the major brand beers with the "brilliant achievement" of brewing beer on a multi-million barrel scale with consistent quality. However, his pride and joy are the small brewers, whom his association represents. In the past few decades, North Americans have broadened their tastes in food and drink with increased travel abroad. And today, with delight, they are welcoming fresh local beers to their palates as they began welcoming domestic wines ten years ago.

For beer, freshness is the key. Most imported beers are at least three weeks old by the time Canadians drink them. It has taken that long to ship them from the brewery, then warehouse and stock them at retail outlets. Their bloom of freshness is off.

Enter the neighborhood brew pub. "For anyone who enjoys good beer, the stuff that's brewed next door is a dream come true," said Bradford.

Calford calls this "the return of a classic, rather than the creation of a new restaurant format."

Before Prohibition, thousands of "corner taps" dotted the North American

landscape, and people routinely "rushed the growler" -- dropped by the tavern with an empty jar, or "growler", they could fill with local brew to carry home and drink.

Then, Prohibition killed the first generation of brew pubs.

Aside from the temperance issue, the government sought to break the brewers' monopolies on wholesaling, distribution and retailing, which had resulted in severe trade restraints.

Today, brewers on both sides of the border are safely locked into two, three, and four-tier distribution structures, and a few national companies control 90% of the market. In a happy irony, legislators see the brew pub giving small scale brewers another opportunity to compete in the on-premise trade - by opening their own restaurants.

Calford sees it differently. He explains that every brewpub manufacturer wants to help his clients make good beer. But there is a higher purpose. "Our main goal is to make our customers money."

Calford asserts that on-site microbreweries have boosted his customers' sales between 20% and 35%, all of which he can substantiate.

Mark Cruden, co-owner/manager of Tracks Brew Pub and Houston's Restaurant in Brampton, Ontario, is a believer. He and his partner decided to invest the \$100,000 for an in-house Continental micro-brewery last year, after suffering a prolonged downturn in business.

Though he projected a five-year payout period, Cruden's quarterly business this year, with the micro added to Tracks is up more than 10% over the same period last year.

"We're not out to make beer cheaper than people can get it at the store," Cruden said. "We want to create excitement in the restaurant. The shiny copper tanks have eye-appeal. People across the street spot them through our windows and come in to look. Customers call to say, 'Reservations for four, and by the way, is your home brew ready?' When we overhear patrons talking about our beer, we invite them to see the brew tanks, and show them how the beer they are drinking is produced right here."

Brewpubs may not be the right investment for every entrepreneur, but it appears the concept is here to stay.

"I think it will last beyond being a fad, because our interest in good beer is grounded in the home, in home brewing," said Jeff Mandel, Research Director of the Brewers Association. "Local beer was certainly well-established before Prohibition, and I don't see why it can't be that way again."