

DECIDING NOT TO FORGET

Let's be clear from the outset...what follows is nothing short of a love-letter to Quebec, and for good reason. As soon as I arrived I felt like I'd come home. Which is very strange, of course, because I'd never been to the province before. And you'd hardly call me a Francophone, or even a Francophile. But the longer I stayed, the stronger that sense became.

For me Quebec is very much like what I see when I close my eyes and try to conjure up a perfect place to live. All around there would be rolling hills covered with deciduous trees that shine freshly green in spring, and turn a thousand shades of red and brown and yellow and orange once the summer ends. Creeks would tumble down out of those hills, finding their way to a coastal shore, and whales and porpoises would play in the waves.

Little farms would dot the hillsides, and there'd be orchards full of apples. Quaint mills with water wheels would turn the fruit into fresh cider, my favourite and often-longed-for drink. And every once in a while you'd find villages, with old houses all fixed up and freshly painted, and small shops full of wonderful, locally-made things to eat.

Neighbours would still bake their own bread, or buy some at a local bakery where it would be hand-made the night before. The bread would be crusty and chewy, and sold in a paper bag. Cheese would come from a dairy farm right down the road, and would be both inexpensive and taste divine.

Finally, everywhere and in everything there'd be a sense of style. Not the over-the-top, rich-people-flaunting-it version. Rather just little touches -- in the way the *pâté* was packaged; how the coffee was set out in its little cup; the extra bit of trim that makes a house look less than ordinary; and the roses planted along what could easily have been a boring roadside fence.

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If Quebec felt like coming home to me, the place that best fit my ideal turned out to be an island sitting in the middle of the St. Lawrence River called *Île d'Orléans*. It's small, about 35km long, and never more than 8km wide. And it's a mere 15 minute drive over a bridge from Quebec City, an urban centre with 800,000 people. But thanks to miraculously intelligent land use rules, and what can best be described as a special French understanding of the importance of rural areas over and above the demands of the almighty dollar, it is a truly special place, and not just in Canada.

Île d'Orléans has only one road, really, that runs all the way around its perimeter. And like France, there are villages every 5km or so, including a sizeable church, and with it a large open area to the front and side that provides both parking and a place in winter to put all the ploughed snow. You also see this type of arrangement elsewhere in Quebec, but what sets *L'île* apart is that the nearby houses are so much older, and always so well preserved.

And then, of course, there are the farms. They're properly laid out and maintained, but a bit different to France. They're not big squares, at least not along the St. Lawrence. Instead they're often little more than 150m wide and stretching up from the water for a kilometre or more. The reason for this strange configuration is that when the farms were first established in the mid-1600s, each wanted its own water access. For several centuries the river was the one decent means of transport, and it was certainly the most economical way to get whatever the farm produced to the markets in Quebec City.

One of the best places on the island to see how this is all arranged is the village of Saint-Jean. You'd hardly know the farms were even there. They sit back on top of the hill which you soon realise is an escarpment, carved out by the river thousands of years ago. Below, in amongst well-tended maples and oaks, sit probably the most perfect collection of historic houses you'll see anywhere in Canada. This is where the farm tenants (the

habitants) lived, as well as all the other people who made their living on the river as fishermen or sailors.

At the east end of the village there is a small lane that turns up off the main road at an oblique angle. There's no road sign, and it looks for all the world like a little thoroughfare to a further extension of houses. When you drive along it, however, you soon realise that it's more than a farm access road; it's also a short-cut across the island to the other side, the one that faces the north shore town of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, with its uniquely Canadian basilica, and the magnificent Chute-Montmorency, a falls 30m higher than Niagara.

On one side of the lane there's a major dairy farm, with a set of massive barns and silos. On the other is a substantial acreage of strawberries, and smaller patches of vegetables. And to the back of both properties, at the centre of the island, is the "sugar bush", glorious stands of maple that are tapped to make maple syrup early each spring.

Île d'Orléans has a resident population of under 7000, and comprises only 19,000 hectares. But as the wonderful cookbook *Les Producteurs Touqués* (with its intriguing English translation title, *Farmers in Chef Hats*) chronicles, it manages to produce commercial quantities of over forty different food stuffs, ranging from endive to lamb, and farmed trout to wine and beer.

Clearly the locals don't just sit on their hands, or commute to the big city. And in fact those land use rules I mentioned earlier don't allow it. If you buy a productive piece of property on the island, you have to continue to farm it. You can't let it sit unused, or divide it up into little pieces and make a fortune by selling them off again. If that were allowed, Île d'Orléans would long ago have become a high-class suburb of the metropolis.

What L'île is instead is a place where people pursue the sort of agricultural lives that have been common there for over 400 years, and where city dwellers can come on the weekend to pick apples in an orchard (*auto-cueillette*), walk along a country lane amongst the falling maple leaves, buy fresh *croissants* and *café au lait* in a *boulangerie*, and sample delicious cheeses while watching the products actually being made.

A significant development in cuisine is *terroir* (loosely “sense of place”), the production of foods nearby, and the cooking and serving of those foods in restaurants that try to be as true to the locality and its traditions as they can. In the case of L'île, however, and much of Quebec for that matter, this isn't some stylish trend. They've been doing it all along because it wouldn't feel natural to do it any other way.

You see, Quebec is different. It's different because that's the way everyone living there wants it to be. And it's different because people remember. To put it bluntly, they've decided not to forget.

Quebec is my favourite province more than anything because of the people. They're kind and friendly. They say *bonjour* and *bonsoir* to you as they pass, even if they don't know you (and more importantly when it's obvious you're from somewhere else). And to their eternal credit, they don't seem to get upset that you can't speak their language, and since they happen to live in Canada they must try to speak yours instead.

Most importantly, though, I like the fact that the people of Quebec have shown me what is possible, both about Canada as a whole, and about living next to not just one, but two societies that could so easily have dominated the province to the point it became not much different to anywhere else. The Quebecois have a strength of character, and a belief in their own way of life, that re-affirms my faith in the human spirit.

“*Je me souviens*” is the phrase you see printed on every Quebec vehicle registration plate. It’s usually translated as “I remember”. In fact, that’s a very rough rendering of words that mean so much to every *Quebecer*.

It would be far better to say something like, “I remember our history, and I will never forget the customs and values that make us who we are.” It is a phrase of a once-conquered people who have nevertheless decided not to succumb to North American culture or the English language.

And really, the way most Canadians feel about the U.S., and how steadfast they are about wanting to retain their “Canadian-ness”, it’s probably a phrase that should be etched on everyone’s passport, no matter where they live in that vast country, and whether they speak French or not.

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