

Forays Into First Nations Food & Culture | Visiting the Huron-Wendat in Quebec, Canada

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When I was a child back in the Seventies, the only terms I knew for the aboriginal peoples of North America were Red Indians and Native Americans. As a child, I understood that the former was considered offensive, a relic clinging to the clichéd coattails of Hollywood Westerns. It also surprised me that early European travellers had confused the indigenous people of the North America continent with my own ancestors in India, or indeed with any of the various distinct peoples of East Asia. After all, their appearance and behaviour were completely different, each tribe with its own rich history, culture and traditions.

As a member of a minority ethnic group myself – albeit a large one – I was keen to give others the respect of addressing them as they preferred, rather than use terms associated with exploitation, marginalisation, derogation and prejudice. Of course, it's never that simple – I've since discovered that there are some who still choose to identify as American Indians while others use Native American and others who ask for their tribal identity to be used, rather than a generic term that groups all tribes together.

The best way of finding out how someone prefers to be labelled, if such a label is even relevant to the conversation, is to ask them!

The reason it became relevant for me recently was my desire to find out more about the food of Canada's indigenous peoples during my recent trip.

Until I started researching the trip, I didn't realise the term Native American is not commonly used in Canada, indeed it's pretty much only used in the United States.

In Canada, the collective term for the country's indigenous peoples is First Nations, with an individual referred to as a First Nations person, man or woman. Generally this covers all the nations except the Inuit of the Arctic regions and the Métis, a formally recognised cultural group that was born of mixed-race unions between First Nations people and Europeans and between those of different First Nations.

Just as Native Americans has (somewhat) replaced American Indians in the United States, so First Nations has replaced Indian bands in Canada. There are more than 850,000 Canadians who are officially recognised as First Nations people on Canada's Indians Register. As well as protection from discrimination (under the Employment Equity Act), Indian status also confers a range of additional benefits including property rights and tax exemptions related to Reserve lands, carefully controlled traditional hunting rights and access to a range of social programmes.



Hôtel-Musée Premières Nations, artwork in the museum and hotel lobbies

For those interested in learning more, Tourisme Wendake operates the Hôtel-Musée Premières Nations in Wendake, less than half an hour's drive from Quebec City. Established in 2006 by the Council of the Huron-Wendat Nation, Tourisme Wendake is a non-profit organisation created to promote aboriginal culture and tourism. Their website is a mess – the navigation will make you weep; I recommend navigating directly from the [Sitemap](#).

Visiting in person, however, is a pleasure and the site is a Must-See for anyone seeking an insight into First Nations history and culture.

At the heart of the museum and hotel complex, located on the banks of the Akiawenrahk river, is the Huron-Wendat Museum. Named for the Wendat people – also known as Huron and Wyandot – the museum opened in 2008 with the aim of protecting and promoting the nation's heritage through permanent and temporary exhibits, activities and workshops. The museum also serves as a gateway for visitors keen to explore Wendake's numerous heritage sites.

The complex is decorated with traditional and modern arts and crafts created by artists from many of Canada's First Nations; indeed some of these items are available to purchase from the onsite shop.

I am shown around the museum, hotel and longhouse by Jason Picard-Binet, Marketing and Tourism Development Coordinator for Tourisme Wendake. Jason is part of the Huron-Wendat nation and takes enormous pride in sharing his culture with visitors. Indeed he says that many of the staff working in the complex are First Nations people.

As we stand in the entrance lobby to the museum, Jason points out colourful paintings on floor and ceiling, and tells me the

story they represent. The creationist saga of the Huron-Wendat people relates how Aataentsic was banished from the sky world for breaking the rules. As she fell through the sky towards the world of water below, the water birds flew up to help her and gently held her above the water with their wings. As they tired, Great Turtle arrived to relieve them and held her on his back instead. Toad arrived, and dived into the water to retrieve earth from the ocean bed, giving it to Aataentsic to sprinkle over Great Turtle's back. Soon after, Aataentsic gave birth to twin sons and they created all the elements of the earth and sky. Where one created light and human life, the other created darkness and destruction. The twins fought, and when the good brother won, the other was banished into the underworld where he remains.



Chef Martin Gagné, La Traite Restaurant, some of the dishes served during my Autumn visit

One of my key interests is to find out more about First Nation cuisine, including some of the unique ingredients traditionally farmed and foraged from the local landscape.

Jason introduces me to Martin Gagné, the Executive Chef at Restaurant La Traite, an elegant restaurant at the museum-hotel. In summer months, tables on the peaceful outdoor terrace are particularly sought-after.

We sit down for a chat over tea. Martin offers me a choice of teas and infusions, highlighting those made with herbs and berries that have long been a part of the First Nations diet. Arctic Blend features juniper and other local berries and herbs. **Cloudberry** and **crowberry** teas are both fruit infusions. I follow Martin's lead and choose **Labrador tea**, an infusion of a flowering plant in the *Rhododendron* genus which has a refreshing, mildly minty and rosemary-like flavour. Some of the traditional First Nations ingredients are becoming more popular of late, says Martin. Labrador tea is one such ingredient; traditionally used to cure headaches, to relax and to help mothers through childbirth, it is now being investigated by Western Pharma and has tripled in price in the last few years.

Although Martin is not registered Indian, he is part Algonquin and has always had an interest in First Nations culture. I ask him how he came to work at the Huron-Wendat Museum and Hotel.

After studying catering Martin worked at a number of prestigious restaurants, eventually taking up the head chef position at Manoir St-Castin, not far from Quebec City. It was here that he became more inspired by First Nations food traditions, and began to incorporate them more regularly into his cooking. Indeed it was during a visit to Wendake to purchase a teepee in which to host events at Manoir St-Castin that he first met the Grand Chief of the Huron-Wendat nation. Later that year, he was invited to cook at the community's Harvest Festival. There, the Grand Chief told him of the nation's plans to set up a new museum and asked Martin to head up the restaurant.

Other First Nations restaurants in the area tend to serve traditional First Nations food, but Martin wanted to take things further – to take the traditional and bring it up to date. At La Traite, he uses local products to create a modern, nature-focused menu with strong influence from First Nations traditions, but not bound by them. The cooking is informed by his classical French training, the wider Canadian-Quebecois food culture and some international references. These he skilfully fuses with a larder of wild game, seafood and many vegetables, fruits, herbs and spices foraged from boreal forests that still cover much of Canada. It is a celebration of the abundance of nature, seasonality and the ethos of sustainability.

As much of the restaurant's customer base is repeat diners and corporate clientele, Martin is keen to offer a menu that not only changes seasonally but introduces diners to new ideas and dishes each time they visit. Alongside traditional game meats of the region, he also assimilates ingredients and ideas from aboriginal traditions elsewhere in the world – hence the menu has also seen dishes using Australian kangaroo and Mayan shrimps (from modern day Belize) over the years.

When it comes to adding flavour, Martin uses herbs and spices favoured by First Nations cooking to complement his main ingredients, but often looks to use them in new ways. Gathered when in season, some are dried and preserved for use throughout the year.

'We want our customers to discover new flavours in our forest', he says, 'but we also want to show them that with our local products, we can produce similar tastes as the spices of the Orient'.

Dune pepper (poivre des dunes), for example – the small buds from the green alder tree – is traditionally used with game meat such as buffalo; Martin describes its aroma as the perfume of the forest, adding that it has a peppery flavour but not the heat of peppercorns; it is good in a creamy sauce, much as one might use peppercorns.

Balsam fir (sapin baumier) is similar to pine; Martin uses it to smoke fish, imbuing the fish with a citrusy woodland flavour.

Coltsfoot (tussilage) flowers are found all over Quebec and traditionally used in medicinal infusions; with a flavour reminiscent of chamomile, Martin likes to pair them with fresh fish.

Myrical gale (myrique baumier) is also known as bog-myrtle, sweetgale and royal piment (pepper); the leaves and buds have a nutmeg-like aroma and taste and can be used in similar recipes.

Horsetail (prêle des champs), also called sweet grass, is a sacred medicinal plant for the Nation and has a very particular scent. Martin grinds it to make a marinade for prawns.

There are over forty such herbs and spices in Martin's kitchen, each of which brings a unique flavour to his cooking.

As restaurant service starts, Martin heads back to the kitchen and Jason and I take a table in the restaurant, to enjoy some of the flavours I've recently learned about.

With traditional bannock cornbread rolls, we have a refreshing 'rhubarb water' – I'm not usually a fan of rhubarb but the perfect balance between sweet and sharp, and the gentle flavour, is delightful. Our first course is a traditional Sagamité Soup featuring the three sisters, red beans, squash and corn, in an elk broth – the ingredients are so known because of the way they are

traditionally grown together – the tall stalks of the corn provide a frame for the beans to climb, and these in turn provide shade to the squash plants growing beneath; an early and enduring example of companion planting.

Next comes a beautiful tasting board with several perfectly-presented little dishes including smoked salmon, lemon 'caviar', salicornia (a beach or marsh-growing succulent) and capers; foie gras with a spiced apple butter; a fresh vegetable salad; venison with parmesan and cheddar cheeses, confit onion and wild blueberry jam; crab rillettes with sweet peppers and gherkins and a smoked L'Algonquin Cheese, grilled with pear.

To finish, we enjoy fresh fruit with maple syrup mousse and maple syrup – of course the First Nations people harvested and used sap from the maple tree long before the Europeans arrived in North America!

As I'd hoped, the cooking is accomplished and delicious; the way Martin and his kitchen team weave together ingredients, techniques and dishes I already know with those I've not previously encountered is a special experience indeed.

I'm reminded that there are many such ingredients available in Europe – foraged for centuries, perhaps even millenia, but somehow forgotten by modern cooking, yet readily available in our local woodlands, verges and untended grounds. First Nations food is above all about that link to the local environment, and making best use of the produce it offers; surely a good lesson to take home.



The Ekionkiestha' longhouse at Huron-Wendat

After lunch, Jason shows me more of the site.

The main hotel is within the same complex of buildings as the museum and rooms are gorgeous. Spacious, attractive, decorated with traditional and modern First Nation art and crafts, they are really delightful and of course, staying one or more nights gives you more time to learn about the First Nations as whole and the Huron-Wendat nation in particular. It's also a great base for outdoor activities in the region such as hiking, boating, fishing and more.

Just outside the hotel and museum buildings is the traditionally constructed Ekionkiestha' longhouse. Here, guests can learn traditional First Nation myths and legends over a cup of Labrador tea and some bannock bread. Guides are also available to teach interested visitors about First Nation cooking, hunting and craft-making. For a more immersive experience, guests can book to spend a night in the longhouse, under the supervision of the firekeeper.

My visit this time is too short to stay overnight. I'd like very much to come back and spend longer next time, learning more about Huron-Wendat culture and traditions.

Kavey Eats visited Wendake courtesy of Destination Canada, with the assistance of Tourisme Quebec. Huge thanks to Jason and Martin for their time and all that they taught me.

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