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| **Savoring ethnic Montreal** It has everything from brochettes to blintzes**By Joel S. Denker, Globe Correspondent, 05/10/98** ONTREAL -- La Caverna Greque, La Cabana Greque, Brochetterie Alexandre, and other bistros vie for customers on Rue Prince Arthur, Montreal's pedestrian mall, off Boulevard St. Laurent. The eclectic Greek restaurants promote a ``Festival Du Homard,'' a lobster festival, and advertise a bill of fare whose staple is the brochette, a kebab prepared for a French audience.The street, named for Queen Victoria's third son, once Canada's governor general, is an entertainment stage. A musical duo -- he playing a steel guitar; she plunking a washtub bass -- draws a crowd with blues renditions. A fortune teller sits in the back of a carriage pulled by a bicyclist and chats away on her cellular phone. Peruvian pipe musicians, a fire eater, and caricaturists sketching portraits amuse Prince Arthur's gawkers. During the summer, sunlight-starved throngs overflow the restaurant cafes, whose floor-to-ceiling windows open on the avenue.One evening, my wife and I sat on the terrace of Mazurka, a venerable Polish restaurant. Watching another diner attack a mammoth plate of pigs' knuckles, we decided on the meat combination. We got a heaping serving of pierogis (steamed dumplings) and sour cream, stuffed cabbage, sausage, and potato pancakes. For the abstemious, Mazurka offered a vegetable combination of cheese blintzes and cheese pierogis.Enjoying hearty Eastern European food in a festive Latin setting was an exhilarating experience. The closely spaced tables made for easy conversation. We began chatting with a couple next to us about Montreal's battle over traffic signs -- should they say ``Stop'' or ``Arret''? Michael and Linda guided us through Quebec's cultural thicket.A French tour group started gathering in front of the restaurant next door. Friendly travel agencies steer a steady flow of customers to Le Prince Arthur Brochetterie, Michael explained. A menu of ``fruits de mer,'' lobster, and moussaka awaited the visitors. On Prince Arthur, most of the ``French'' restaurants were owned by Greeks.``I call myself an ethnic,'' Michael said. He was a member of that large middle group in Montreal who were neither French nor British. His father had emigrated from Ukraine during the Depression. He settled on St. Dominique Street, a few blocks from where we were sitting. Like many newcomers, this Ukrainian gravitated to a neighborhood off the Main, the affectionate name Montrealers have given Boulevard Saint Laurent. The city s principal north-south street was the dividing line between east and west. A cultural divide as well, it separated English Montreal on the west from the French enclave in the east. The immigrants huddled in the crannies between the two.Mazurka, too, had its roots on the Main. Stanislaw Mazurek, a Polish immigrant, opened the restaurant on this boulevard of ethnic commerce in 1952. After operating for 12 years, he moved the family business to Prince Arthur.I set out to explore the liveliest portion of the Main, the area north of the intersection of Sherbrooke and St. Laurent. Like many urban frontiers, this district has attracted a variety of newcomers. I passed through an island of chic boutiques and white tablecloth restaurants. The Allegra Cigar Lounge adjoined a sushi bar. I sipped a latte at the Cafe Republique, one of many coffee houses on the avenue that have become gathering places for Montreal's hip set. I took in the parade of costumes. Baseball hats, combat boots, and torn stockings were as common as leather jackets and the latest Euro-styles.The landscape quickly changed. It was now Old World. Salaison Slovenia, a combination butcher shop and specialty food emporium, displayed an array of mustards -- green pepper, tarragon, raspberry, and black currant -- in the window. The delicatessen would sell you several pounds of wurst or a spicy sausage sandwich. A few doors down, Hofner's, a German grocery bulging with cheeses, smoked meats, preserves, rye breads, and chocolates, makes its own liver sausage.Champs, a sports bar, was bringing its customers the soccer match between Serbia and Croatia. I spotted a Ukrainian music shop that stocked the nostalgic recordings of Eastern Europe. Waves of immigrants from Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia, fleeing hunger, war, and revolution, had found refuge on the Main.St. Laurent was once the heart of Montreal's Jewish immigrant quarter. In the late 19th century, the newcomers were crowding into cold water flats on streets off the Main. They toiled at the Better Made Button Hole Co., the Cute Hat Manufacturing Co., and at countless other factories in the district's rag trade. The greenhorns shopped for smoked fish, farmers' cheese, and bagels on the boulevard.It was also where they collided with older settlers. The writer Mordecai Richler, who grew up on St. Urbain, a street that runs parallel to St. Laurent, remembers brawling with the ``Pea Soups,'' the hated French Canadians, on the Main.As I walked, I observed the remnants of this once-bustling colony. Stephen Goodman Textiles proclaimed itself ``The Greatest Discount Fabric Store On Earth.'' The Colonial Turkish Baths, where the faithful immersed themselves before the high holidays, had survived. Benson Monuments was still making gravestones with Yiddish engravings at its store on the Main.Across the street from Benson's, locals and tourists were lining up at Schwartz's, a delicatessen landmark. I met an Asian family from Vancouver, originally Montreal residents, who were revisiting an old favorite. While Putters, Shagass, and other competitors in the once thriving trade had fallen, the Montreal Hebrew Delicatessen carried on.Founded more than a half-century ago by Ruben Schwartz, a young Rumanian immigrant, the lunchroom is still turning out smoked meat sandwiches. The peppery brisket is marinated and smoked on the premises. It may look like pastrami, but Canadian devotees will bristle if you call it that and lovers of garlicky New York deli will consider it a pale imitation.The Bagel Shop, another culinary temple, has clung to its ancient baking technique. The bakery on St. Viateur, whose founder once sold bagels from a pushcart on the Main, boils its product in kettles. After draining the bagels, the workers place them on paddles, sprinkle the sesame or other flavorings, and shove them into a hickory fired oven. The workshop was the eldest of St. Viateur's immigrant businesses. He was here before all of us, the waiter at Arahova, the Greek eatery across the street, commented. Greeks had descended on the Main as Jews were pushing north. When Richler returned to his old neighborhood in 1968, he found that it had become a Hellenic bastion. Starting with luncheonettes and snack bars, the Greeks moved up to become Montreal's preeminent restaurateurs.Arahova was one such success story. Its owner had turned a small souvlaki joint into a spacious restaurant. It was still being renovated when my wife and I came for lunch. The 30-year-old institution was decorated in the Mediterranean blue beloved by Greeks: blue tables, blue ceiling, pictures of blue ocean vistas on the walls. The blue windows in the front reached from the ceiling nearly to the floor. The cooks worked at an open grill behind the stone counter.We started with ``spanakopita,'' spinach pies in a flaky filo pastry, that were redolent of dill. The souvlaki, skewers of tender lamb, had a rich charcoal taste. It arrived with a Greek salad enlivened with oregano-flecked feta cheese. A side dish of ``tsatziki,'' the garlicky yogurt and cucumber dish of Turkish ancestry, complemented the kebabs.Our garrulous waiter warmed up when he learned we were Americans. He had no sympathy for the nationalist cause: We could have made this the 51st state. ``Why does everybody hate Bill Clinton?'' he asked.The Portuguese, more recent arrivals, have given the Main an Iberian flavor. At Waldman's, a once-popular Jewish fish store on Roy Street, I met the proprietor of a nearby Portuguese restaurant inspecting the grouper. The shop, now part of a Greek-owned chain, carried octopus, sardines, cod, stickleback, and other fish these immigrants prized. Cans of eel from Portugal were stacked on display cases. I discovered a rack of local Portuguese newspapers and a flyer publicizing a forthcoming bus trip to Fall River, Mass., a large ethnic community, for a feast day celebration.The Portuguese, who began migrating to Montreal in the 1950s and 1960s, congregated in the Prince Arthur Street area before it became fashionable. The community is now concentrated a few blocks farther north on Duluth, which runs off the Main. The immigrants spruced up the neighborhood, which once housed a red light district, and transplanted their cafes, bakeries, and ``churrascerias'' (grill houses).Walking up Duluth, I see the mountain (Mont Royal), the city's touchstone, looming in the distance. Montrealers call this district the ``plateau.'' Duluth is a street in flux. Work crews are busy renovating flats.Another group of pioneers is moving in. A short walk from Cafe Portugal, a haven for lonely Portuguese men, stands a Jus Bar, which serves up offbeat drinks like the Vampire, a mixture of orange juice, strawberries, and grenadine, along with fajitas and empanadas. Sitting in Tasca, a Portuguese restaurant, I watch a stylist at the Coupe Bizarre, a hair salon across the street, working on a Dennis Rodman ``do'' for a customer. New ethnic restaurants like the Golden Elephant (Thai) and the Blue Lotus (Vietnamese) are springing up along Duluth.I walked back to the Main and wander into a delightful Portuguese bakery. The counter women in their white caps were taking orders for sausage bread, turnovers, sponge cake, and sweet bread, the festival treat that has become a morning snack. I bought a coffee and struck up a conversation with an elderly Jewish woman, who reminisced about her days in the neighborhood. She remembered Montreal winters when the snow was shoulder high. The young today, she kvetched, don't know from hard times.The Portuguese are passionate about barbecue, a taste they brought back from Brazil and their African colonies. I walked over to Rachel Street to sample the grilled meats at Rotisserie Portugalia, owned by Rocino Costa, who used to live in Angola. The small counter was buzzing with conversation and male camaraderie. The customers in this ethnic clubhouse seemed to be old friends. Costa, who wore a white-peaked paper hat, joined the repartee while he worked the grill. He was also tending to a big pot of beef stew, the lunch special.I squeezed past the crowd into the small dining room next door.On a stand were a wooden replica of a Portuguese vessel, hockey trophies, and a large wooden fork and spoon. Pictures of soccer teams hung on the walls. A straw hat, a mini sombrero, dangled from the door. I sat down at a table with a blue-and-white-checked tablecloth and looked for a waiter. Restaurant service was an afterthought in a cafe that moved to its own rhythms.The waiter, who was mingling with the customers, finally noticed me. He plodded over and greeted me in a friendly manner. He brought out a plate of black olives, a fixture of the Portuguese meal, and reached into a paper bag for a large, crunchy roll. I waited for my barbecue chicken, which required 30 minutes' cooking time -- there was no rushing traditional food.The piri piri chicken was charred on the outside and moist on the inside. Its fiery flavor crept up on me. The bird had been marinated in piri piri (pronounced PEE-dee PEE-dee) sauce, a blend of olive oil and chopped Angolan chili peppers, for which the dish is named. I savored the afterburn and soaked up the amiable atmosphere.On a second visit, I felt less the outsider. The waiter addressed me as ``my friend.'' I tried a peppery pork filet, part of a repertoire that included steak, rabbit, and ribs. A regular at the next table effused about the Rotisserie's grilled sardines. The ex-colonial, who had been a settler in Angola, quipped, ``This is a 10-star restaurant.'' I left the restaurant, and walked up Rachel, stopping to gaze at the Portuguese parish church with its vividly painted rooster atop the bell tower.Farther north on the Main, I discovered a new group of Latin transplants selling their wares. Customers were picking over the boxes of ``tomatillos'' (the small Latin green tomatoes), mangoes, and avocados in front of the Super Marche Andes. Inside, they could choose from a variety of snacks: ``arepas'' (the Columbian corn meal rolls), burritos, and ``pupusas'' (the Salvadoran variation on the tortilla) or browse the latest music videos. On the bulletin board were announcements of pop concerts and other community events.Travel agencies, which doubled as money transfer shops, pitched their services. The sign at Andes Travel promised the immigrants rapid turnaround. ``Urgent'' transfers to Chile would take an hour, normal postings 24.I passed Hispanic takeaways, a Mexican taqueria, an Argentine rotisseria vending the continent's street food. Peruvian cooking was taking hold on the Main. A ``depanneur'' (Montrealese for convenience store) was selling ``papas'' (potatoes stuffed with ground meat), empanadas, and grilled chicken served with aji, a blazing green chili sauce. Farther up St. Laurent, the Peruvian Chinese owner of the Puca Puca restaurant was introducing Montrealers to the ``piquante'' cuisine of his homeland.Just as I wondered who would next replenish the Main, I spied the Agami Cafe. I munched on a falafel, dressed with salad and hot sauce, and chatted with the Egyptian proprietor of the two-year-old Oriental restaurant. Wearing a skull cap, the emigre looked more the imam than the chef.He prepared hummus, tabboule (the Arabic bulgur salad), and couscous for the patrons of this humble cafeteria. Behind the counter, a shawarma, a sort of Middle Eastern gyro, rotated on a vertical rotisserie.He called his bean fritter a falafel but it was more like ``ta amia,'' the ancient Eyptian lenten snack made from fava beans.The established Middle Eastern merchants considered him an interloper. Eateries like the Lebanese restaurant chain Monsieur Falafel had already staked out the turf on St. Laurent. But the intrepid Egyptian was not deterred. Like so many ethnics before him, he had journeyed to the Main to chase a dream. |

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