

# Eating to stay, truly, alive

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A single leaf of sorrel! Sometimes that's all it takes to make you never want to eat a certain way again. Even a single, perfect, bright-green leaf of fresh sorrel lovingly plucked from the perfect herb garden at the 13th Street Winery in St. Catharines, Ont., on a perfect evening in June.



June, when all the food juices start to teem and boil and the foodies and the gourmards and the oenophiles and the just plain hungry start to roam the land, searching for that ... perfect bite. For that ineffable deliciousness that makes you glad to be doing nothing for a moment but eating – as long as it isn't going to kill you, hasn't been fed a pail of pesticides, respects the environment and doesn't make you feel too guilty.

I thought I would roam the land myself, looking for those delicious moments. I would eat Canada. Because there are a vast number of people who think about food more or less

incessantly. It's a national delirium. It ranges in intensity from obsessive to slightly less obsessive, at every level of sophistication and meaning. It's often competitive, and occasionally wiener-ish.

And contrary to the stereotype that there's nothing to eat anywhere but Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver (maybe Calgary), there are astonishing things to eat everywhere. The trick is finding them. I hope this is a chronicle of that adventure.

I decided to start posh, so I called my brother, Tim, and invited him to an elaborate tasting at 13th Street, a once-tiny winery now expanding and becoming more commercial in Niagara, the Queen Mother of Canada's wine lands. The meal was to be made by the chef at Treadwell, easily one of the best restaurants in the country.

I always call Tim on any daunting culinary adventure. He's a stockbroker, but his real love is food and cooking. He's very accomplished at all three, and an ex-waiter, which, coupled to the stockbroker persona, guarantees Vulcan standards. I often feel sorry for the waiter when we have lunch. The poor server – if the server is a man, at least – soon takes on the look of a small dog in a thunderstorm.

Tim has a way of conveying to the waiter that he, the waiter, is an imbecile because (and this is just one of many possibilities) the cretin has described the chicken supreme inadequately. He does this silently, or with the single word: “Really.”

The trouble started when a bearded Saxon named Peter Bodnar Rod gave us a tour of the new 13th Street facilities. Mr. Bodnar Rod calls himself a sommelier, but he's also a marketing consultant. His last commission was to convince Eastern Canadians that B.C.'s Mission Hill makes serious wine. (He succeeded.) His current task is the commercial expansion of 13th Street. (That's working too. Its wines were served at the G8, the G20 and this week to the Queen.)

He showed us the sculptures installed around the winery. They were bright and enamelled, the creations of a Transylvanian artist, Karoly Veress. “This one is called *Encounters*,” Mr. Bodnar Rod said. “It's his wife and him meeting for the first time. Then they come together and sort of solidify.”

“Really,” Tim said.

### **First bite: A searing issue**

Which brings me, once again, to the sorrel leaf and the scallop. The scallop was a single scallop, seared and served on a tidy altar of pork belly marinated in 7UP and roasted with brown sugar. Between the pork belly and the scallop was a plop of fresh pea purée graced with a hint of truffle oil. On top of the scallop was the aforementioned single, perfect, very green leaf of sorrel. I felt like Albert Mummery standing before Nanga Parbat.

I was nibbling the sorrel on its own when a middle-aged woman down the table spoke. “Does the chef sear his scallops on cast iron?” she asked.

She had a voice like a sharp blow to the forehead. A sinuous wreath of gold twigs around her neck matched her golden tan and her dyed golden hair. She had been acting up all evening.

Each course was preceded by a new wine, which in turn was preceded by explanatory talks from Michael Pinkus, a respected taster at the Ontario Wine Review, and James Treadwell, the son of Stephen Treadwell, the chef at Treadwell. This is a feature of obsessional fine dining: You learn as you eat.

I hadn't thought it was a competitive sport until Golden Throat started one-upping everyone like General Stanley McChrystal in the situation room. The first time was over the winery's 2009 gewurztraminer – a crisp wine with the tang of a lippy teenager.



“What notes do you taste?” Mr. Pinkus asked.

“Violets?” someone ventured, so tentatively it was touching. Because this is another thing in the 21st-century world of eating: You don't want to get the foodies on you. You don't want to be wrong, or anywhere but totally in the know. You don't want to be singing the praises of, say, the famous thin Finnish pancakes at the Hoito restaurant in Thunder Bay, which are practically worth driving to Thunder Bay to eat, unless you're willing to have some uber-foodie there let you have it between the ears for not knowing about local gouda producers or the bakery in Agostino Deli or the social life of the Maltese Grocery.

I'm not blaming the fellow. But this is supposed to be about pleasure.

“A little lemon?” someone ventured. Mr. Pinkus's eyebrows shot up. That was worth watching on its own, as his eye that seemed to have been designed by Maurice Sendak.

“Lemon balm!” Golden Throat declared. After that, no one tried again.

Mr. P instructed us to suck air in and bubble our wine in our mouths like three-year-olds. “Grapefruit!” Golden Throat commanded. It didn't sound like a compliment.

“I'm getting a little Bounce laundry softener off mine,” I whispered to Tim, who seemed to be having a coughing and sneezing fit. He doesn't really sneeze like other people; instead, his head seems to explode momentarily and then retract to normal.

Yes, the country of fine dining is an irritable land! “Who knows the two main wines of Burgundy?” Mr. Pinkus asked as he – “Four!” This from the tall, grey-haired lawyer to my left, the president of a Niagara food and wine association.

“I mean the two main ones,” Mr. Pinkus sighed.

The lawyer knew that answer too, of course. He was a genuine expert. He was also a type. He hated Toronto, a city he left as a young lawyer for the endless charms of St. Catharines because big-city traffic drove him crazy. (The farther you get from Toronto, the more people hate its traffic.) As a result, he knew a truly impressive amount about Niagara's wines.

He and his wife served bottles in brown paper bags at their dinner parties, so no one could make any assumptions about the local fare. “The problem we had in the wine business here in Niagara,” he told me, “was that for many years Toronto wouldn't admit how good our wine was.”

Toronto, in other words, has a too large, diverse, messy and even ignorant population to be won over decisively to any single consumable thing, even 13th Street's excellent wines. This is unavoidable, but it still ticks Niagara oenophiles off, and it's why Mr. Bodnar Rod referred to Toronto as gastronomically “insecure” and “still searching” as a food market. Vancouver, he said, is more confident and united.

Every once in a while, Mr. Pinkus grasped one of the Schott Zwiesel glasses in the forest of Schott Zwiesel stemware on the table and bonked it on the table to demonstrate how resistant Schott Zwiesel stemware is to breakage, thanks to the give in Schott Zwiesel stems. Have I mentioned that Schott Zwiesel was the brand name of the stemware? I see I have. “And of course all these Schott Zwiesel glasses are available for purchase this evening,” Mr. Pinkus said.

“There's a lesson,” Tim said quietly. “A little give means more durability.”

We left soon afterward. It was an excellent meal, and the wines were impressive. But I no longer wonder why some people call these parts “Niagara-on-the-Make.”

## **Second bite: Their cheerful symmetry**

The food at the 12th annual Friends of Fort York fundraising dinner, a while after the 13th Street glassfest, was an exact replica of a Georgian dinner that could have been eaten in the officers' mess at Fort York, the buggy hill that became traffic-torn Toronto, any time between 1790 and 1812, not to be too precise.

Except that being precise was the entire point, and was why John Hammond, a retired air-traffic controller, Elizabeth Baird, a cookbook writer, and Mya Sangster, a former Scarborough high-school history teacher, were huddled with Bridget Wranich, director of the fort's historical-foods program, in front of a metre-high, hand-drawn diagram of the evening's serving layout.

The dishes to be served to 120 paying notables were “not ‘Georgian-style,’” Ms. Sangster insisted, “or ‘sort of Georgian.’ They are Georgian.” The recipes had been culled from original period cookbooks such as Hannah Glasse's 1747 blowout bestseller, *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*. “She was probably the *Joy of Cooking* of the 18th century,” Ms. Sangster said. Ontario didn't publish a cookbook of its own until 1831.

Every dish in each course had a prearranged spot on the table. “It has to be displayed in a pattern,” Ms. Sanger said, “because the Georgians liked symmetry.” Plates were passed to the food, not food to plates; because of all that plate-passing, the Georgians never said please or thank you at the table. The space over the table resembled the approach corridor at Pearson International on a Friday afternoon. Fort York soldiers liked to eat. (There weren't many other pleasures.)

The dinner was three courses of six dishes. It began with a tureen of truly fantastic soup (made precisely from Maria Rundell's 1806 *A New System of Domestic Cookery*: onions, potatoes, turnips, celery, butter, bread, parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme, mushrooms, ketchup and anchovy). What followed was roast beef au jus and horseradish, Excellent Shrimp Pie (that's the name, not the verdict), beetroots with button onions, fried sausages with apples, broccoli salad and curried eggs. That's the first course, fatso.

When it was removed – “Everything goes on the table at once,” Ms. Sangster instructed in her lilting Welsh accent, “and then it is a remove. It's called a remove” – the second wave arrived.

There's Ragoo of Sweetbreads, Peas the Portuguese Way (with lettuce, mint, sugar, olive oil, parsley, onion, shallots, garlic, savoury, nutmeg, vegetable broth and poached eggs), apricot custard (the Georgians mixed sweet dishes with savoury ones, apparently believing that life is too nasty, brutish and short not to take dessert ASAP), mutton kebabbed, Rhenish cream (a palate-cleansing sabayon) and a spectacular herb pudding (of spinach, parsley, sorrel, thyme, currants, salt, eggs and cream, but nuted and intensified with the addition of oatmeal).

Remove! Third course: fruit and nut platter, and trays of sweetmeats – macaroons, mince biscuits, and chocolate and lemon puffs. Port and toasts ensued. Sleep and bizarre dreams shortly followed.

It was English food from an era when the English were still proud of their butchery, their meat-roasting and their vegetables, just before the French invented the restaurant in Paris and set off 200 years of culinary domination.

“If you're talking 1760,” Ms. Sangster said, “people are eating at noon. If you're talking about 1840, they're now eating in the evening.” (Why? Queen Victoria liked to eat late.)

Lunch was rare, “but, oh yes, they ate breakfast. They usually ate a late breakfast. They worked for a couple of hours first. That would be typical of Jane Austen. She breakfasted about 9:30, after a few hours of writing. Breakfast was served in one's bedroom, by one's personal servants.” One would, frankly, very much like to have a personal servant.

Ms. Sangster was rabid about these details. “I spend my time reading 18th-century cookbooks,” she laughed, as if surprised by her own behaviour. Her hero is Ivan Day, the historian ([historicfood.com](http://historicfood.com)) who designed, among other spectacles, the table settings in the movie *Young Victoria*.

Ms. Sangster's knowledge was no less impressive. She couldn't mention food without bubbling out an enlightening detail: that the first rhubarb recipe (which came late, because rhubarb required so much sugar, and so was an expensive treat) was a puff, not a pie; that macaroni was popular in the 1800s, in both sweet and savoury versions (Kraft's, weirdly, is both); that early versions of blancmange were set with isinglass rather than gelatin, and that “isinglass is the swimming bladder of a sturgeon.”

One of her prized possessions is an 18th-century pewter ice-cream maker. Not the mechanical hand crank, which wasn't invented until the 1840s. No, the 40 ice-cream merchants in England by 1800, mostly Italian immigrants, churned their wares by hand in pewter vessels.

“Ivan owns nine of them,” Ms. Sangster said, “and he offered to sell me one. Ninety pounds. I took my money out of my pocket so fast!” She said she keeps it at home for safekeeping, and brings it out for Fort York's annual Canada Day celebrations.

It was an eccentric and pleasant way to spend an evening. We sat boy-girl-boy-girl (a seating arrangement that had come into fashion via France during the reign of George III, though occasionally condemned at the time as “promiscuous”) and shyly passed plates and chatter back and forth, trying to make our way, via food, into the consciousness of another time.

We didn't eat the way I had with the Niagara super-gourmands, looking for our precious individuality to be expressed in ever rarer and more unusual combinations.

The Fort Yorkers were attempting just the opposite: to dissolve their lonely originality through the social experience of food, as Toronto's early soldiers would have longed to do.

### **Sound bite: Living flavourfully**

I ran into Norman Hardie, one of Canada's most promising winemakers, a few days later. A week before, in a blind tasting of Ontario chardonnays in London, England, Mr. Hardie's 2008 unfiltered Niagara chardonnay had topped the tasting with an unheard of 17.5 (out of 20) from wine critic Jancis Robinson in the Financial Times.

That's like Ron Jeremy saying you're good in the sack. (The tasting had been organized by Southbrook Vineyard's Bill Redelmeier, trying to replicate what similar tastings did to explode California reds and New Zealand whites into world consciousness.)

But Mr. Hardie wasn't talking about that. He was talking about the most unforgettable meal he ever had, with his wife, years ago in a tiny trattoria in Tuscany, and how the dessert was a lemon pancake.

“No cream, no drizzle, no nothing,” he said. It was simple, and the Tuscans have been cooking with lemons for centuries. But “obviously what made it so great is not just simplicity. There's a personal feel in a restaurant like that, that you're going into someone's home. And for a few hours, you live as they live their day. And they're so content with the way they live.”

Mr. Hardie paused, thought, then carried on. “Most people in our day and age don't eat because they're hungry. We're looking for a more ethereal experience that we don't get in our daily lives. Someone serves a meal, and we know it's going to touch our brains, make us very happy, almost like an endorphin.

“But the effort matters as much as the chemistry. You have your grandma's apple pie. It might not actually be the best apple pie in the world. But you notice the effort. She may have used Crisco rather than butter, but you don't notice that. You notice that she picked the apples and made an effort. The real pleasure is going back into someone else's life.”

Or going forward into their lives, on the pretext of talking about what they eat. A few days later, I drove north out of the city and set out on my two-month odyssey of eating across the country.

Not a day has gone by so far that I haven't been reminded of what Mr. Hardie said.

Food, life, life food: It's often impossible to separate them. And why would you want to.