

## Not Your Average Joe: Joe's Smoked Meat, Baie-St-Paul, Quebec



It's summertime, it's a week of vacation and travel, and here we are in a tourist town, wondering where to get a decent lunch. Some of the usual methods of discerning a good place just don't work in tourist towns—like looking for a restaurant that is crowded or perusing the menu for specials or unique items. Here's one that works for us: we follow our nose. Stand outside and peek in the establishment you are considering, and sniff. (Of course, in this respect, barbeque joints have an advantage!)

A further challenge on this day is the fact that we are way up in the province of Quebec and do not speak French very well. The menu is not in English, restaurant staffs may or may not speak English, and asking other patrons "how is this place?" requires confidence and facility with the language.

We are in Baie-Saint-Paul, which is a cute and busy town on the route that leaves Quebec City. The road, Route 138, heads ever-eastward along the north side of the majestic St. Lawrence River, up and down hills past farms, forests, and villages, for a couple of hours, until it crests a hill above a dramatic bay and descends steeply into this popular stop. The town center is rather small and compact. Its main street full of boutiques, shops, bakeries, and restaurants, Quebec flags are flapping in the summer breeze, fragrant roses are blooming in the summer sunshine. It's hard to find a parking spot. There are lots of touring motorcycles, plenty of cars and campers, very few American vehicles. The sidewalks are jammed with strolling day-trippers, some with ice-cream cones in hand, some, like us, seeking a meal.

If you have traveled north of the border, you may already know that a Quebec specialty is "smoked meat" or viande fumée. Schwartz's of Montreal is a legend and always has lines down the street, at practically any time of day. The place across the street from it, The Main, which we tried once when the wait at Schwartz's was formidable, is almost as good. "Smoked meat" is not barbeque. It is a bit like pastrami. In its classic form, it is kosher beef brisket that has been cured in salt, cracked peppercorns, and aromatic spices, slowly smoked until cooked, then steamed until moist and tender. At Schwartz's of Montreal and their competition, it is usually served up as a sandwich, on rye bread avec moutard, with a sour pickle, pardon, a cornichon, and a can of cherry soda on the side.

In Baie-Saint-Paul, our noses take us to Joe's Smoked Meat—smoky, spicy aromas waft out the door. This is not an urban establishment. It is smaller than Schwartz's, dim and cool inside, with a counter and wooden tables. The atmosphere is laid-back and saloon-like (music, present but not intrusive, is American blues). A streetside porch with stools and a counter overlooking the bustle

is also available and a fun spot to settle in, assuming there is some shade at the time of day that you arrive. The staff is busy and casual. We order le sandwich and one salade smoked meat.

While we wait, we watch the fellow we assume is Joe. He is ensconced behind the bar, calling out instructions to his staff, bantering with customers like a grillman in a small diner, all while continuously and deftly extracting slabs of meat from the steamer and neatly slicing off generous pieces. He works quickly and cheerfully. B.B. King and Lucille provide the background music. A light breeze sifts in. We're all in a fine mood.



Our food arrives quickly. It is, as the Quebecois say, incroyable. The meat is moist and rich with smoky, peppery flavor, the rye bread fresh and fragrant, the mustard spicy.

The salad—a mix of greens, diced peppers, tomatoes, and scallions topped with a generous serving of smoked-meat slices, is superb, the crunch of the fresh vegetables offsetting the heft and fat in the meat.

The dressing is delicious, a slightly sweet, slightly sour vinaigrette. When we inquire, in our limited French, about the dressing, the waitress laughs heartily, says it is a secret, and “if I told you what was in it, I would have to lock you in the basement and shoot you!” Or maybe she said, “If I told you what was in it, you would have to remain in the basement.” Ah well. We're tourists, passing through; we can't plumb every Quebec mystery. We're just grateful for a marvelous, localiste lunch.

Joe's Smoked Meat, 54, rue Saint-Jean-Baptiste, Baie-Saint-Paul, Quebec. 418-240-4949.

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