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BODY TO BODY
RESPECT THE FOOD

THE SECRET TO WITHSTANDING A MONTREAL WINTER

Poutine

By Nikko Pendleton

I have lived all over the world, from Asia to Europe to the Middle East, but the biggest culture shock of all was a move just across the border to none other than Canada. I adjusted easily to the rushing life of Asia and the etiquette of the Middle East, but something in my Californian soul wouldn't let me adjust to a Montreal winter. I moved in the middle of one of the coldest recorded winters from sunny California where my experience with winter thus far had included drinking hot cocoa and peppermint schnapps from safe inside a ski cabin in Tahoe. It would be an understatement to say I was unprepared for the six feet of snow that turned everything white until mid June (June! California starts its bikini season in March I tell you!), for shoveling snow from the car every morning, and to this day it baffles me how women in heels can gracefully walk on the iced pavement while I waddle slowly in giant show boots with my hands awkwardly out in front of me, eventually falling. In California I would cancel plans and stay inside if it so much as rained. So to get me out of my heated apartment aside from going to work was not an easy task. The only thing that would happily get me out of hibernation was the promise of a good meal. And I found in poutine, a comfort food for the long winter days. It also helped that I lived around the corner from

the famous poutine restaurant La Banquise. What is poutine you ask? It is a giant plate of French fries with cheese curds and covered with thick gravy. Now non-Canadians don't knock it until you've tried it. At first mention of this dish I adopted the same "ick" face that most non-Canadians make when hearing of it. But after a trying it, it became a favored dish to coat my body in warmth and hearty goodness.

La Banquise, my favored poutine restaurant has been a small 24-hour Montreal family run restaurant since 1968. La Banquise has a full menu of burgers, hot dogs, and a breakfast menu, which I'm sure is all wonderful, but I always went there just for the poutine. There are thirty different kinds of poutine such "La T-Rex," ground beef, pepperoni, bacon, and hot-dog sausages, or for an international twist "La Grecque," feta, cucumber, tomatoes, black olives, and spices, or "La Taquise," guacamole, sour cream, and tomatoes. For lovers of Italian, such as myself, there is the "L'Italienne" with tomato meat sauce. While at first these heaping plates may seem like too much goodness, soon you will realize your plate is empty and a satisfying food coma will block out the cold on your walk back home.

Owner, and daughter of the founder of La Banquise, Annie Barsalou was kind enough to answer my questions about her restaurant.

Q: What makes La Banquise the best poutine restaurant?

La Banquise became renowned for the quality, freshness of our product but also for the ambiance that changes within the hour of the day. During daylight, we love to put some action but pleasant music and the service is a bit conventional. The more the hours go we love to put eclectic music. We always let the personality of our employee take place anytime of the day. They are all different!

It is important for us to serve something good with personality in an ambiance that you will remember.

It makes the food taste even better.

Q: Which poutine combination is the best to eat on a cold winters day?

Even if we have about 30 or more different kind of poutine, and, poutine is a part of comfort food, I would say that the T-rex or the Savoyarde are great!

The T-Rex is a classique poutine with a lot of meat (pepperoni, shredded beef, bacon and hot dog sausages) and the Savoyarde is a classique with bacon, onions, Swiss cheese and topped with sour cream.

Delicious... and that, is comforting.

Q: What would you say to Americans who think that poutine is gross?

They really need to try before they judge. There is nothing comparable of melted cheese by gravy on fried potatoes. Sorry but it's been 20 years that I own the restaurant and it is always a fight to not pick a little plate each day.

Maybe they should keep it simple for their first time, a classic, or a classic with bacon, but usually they come back and want the whole package after.

We just started a new poutine for the vegan who could not believe they would not eat poutine anymore. And the answer is awesome. We have so much variety that they would find one.

Q: You are open 24 hours, what hours are your busiest? Why? (I imagine after the bars poutine is a must stop).

Of course a poutine is a good late snack after a drink or two. So you are right, the busiest hours are during the night of the weekends. But now that our customers have grown (age and numbers), it really starts at 7pm 'till 5 am. 3am will always be the biggest peak hour.

As Annie Barsalou's answers show and as I have witnessed, La Banquise is a restaurant not only with great food, but also with great personality. The vibe is modern and unconventional. There is often a long line out the door, no matter the weather, and I have never seen La Banquise without a crowd, be it 10 am or 2am. After you try their poutine, you won't be able to eat fries any other way.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nikko Pendleton is an expat who has lived all over the world, trying new foods wherever she can find them.