

A TASTE OF

NEW BRUNSWICK

A combination of an abundant natural larder and creative, enterprising locals means foraging and farm-to-fork eating are the lifeblood of this Canadian coastal province

WORDS: NEIL DAVEY

LOCAL FARE SAINT ANDREWS

If you suffer from an Instagram addiction, New Brunswick is the cure — if you were to stop and take a photo every time you saw a beautiful vista, you'd never get anywhere. The province is a land of big skies, beautiful lakes, rugged coastlines, and swathes of trees that put on a dazzling autumnal display of oranges and reds.

Forests and water are at the heart of New Brunswick's impressive food culture too. While foraging and farm-to-fork have become modish clichés elsewhere, here they're a way of life. Take, for example, acclaimed local chef Chris Aerni, of the Rossmount Inn in the pretty seaside town of Saint Andrews. It's clear he doesn't see the use of the "wild harvest" — mushrooms, edible plants, wild vegetables and seafood — as a marketing hook. The Rossmount stands at the foot of the Chamcook Mountain, named by the Passamaquoddy, the region's original inhabitants. "It translates as 'place where there is always food,'" Chris explains.

But, although the area is full of delicious plant-based surprises — dulce and pickled fiddlehead ferns, in particular — it's the fish that has me really buzzing. Like its close neighbour Maine — so close, in fact, my phone regularly welcomes me to the US — fresh fish is celebrated from roadside to restaurant, be it oysters, fried clams, mussels, haddock, salmon, scallops or, of course, the lobster.

While there's no shortage of places in New Brunswick utilising this wild harvest to great effect, it's at Savour in the Garden that the region's ingredients really take flight. The garden in question is Kingsbrae Garden, 27 acres of flowers, plants, trees, art spaces and wildlife in Saint Andrews. Of course, there's a

small irony in celebrating 27 acres of greenery in a province that's pretty much all greenery. But chef Alex Haun is a young man who's doing things with local ingredients that are worth shouting about.

The meal I eat there is both exceptional, and exceptionally beautiful. It offers up its fair share of cheffy flair — 64-degree eggs, gels, etc — yet never loses sight of each dish's key regional ingredient, from the Beausoleil oyster that's served up deep-fried on a plate resembling the shoreline, to handmade raspberry truffle, eight courses later.

Alex admits to a minor obsession with steelhead trout. And later on during my trip, at a province-wide heat of a national cookery competition, he serves it in three ways — cured, caviar, and smoked pate — in a dish that, frankly, should have won. But for my lunch at Savour, the trout is smoked and served with a potato pancake, the aforementioned egg, horseradish cream, pickled chard and shavings of cured yolk — at once familiar and comforting, yet also creative and aching pretty. The cooking is beyond anything I was expecting to find in New Brunswick. And this is marginally the best of the many incredible meals I enjoy across the province.

A few days before my arrival, Alex had taken his team wild harvesting and brought back a haul of lobster mushrooms — a fungus that grows on other mushrooms and has the reddish-orange colour of a cooked lobster. For my lunch, he pitches 'forest floor' — a mushroom 'cappuccino' decorated with edible flowers from Kingsbrae — against 'ocean floor' — lobster ravioli. It's a playful battle of the key elements of New Brunswick's larder. I declare it an honourable draw. rossmountinn.com kingsbraegarden.com/dining



Clockwise from top: Pabineau Falls; Distillerie Fils du Roy; fiddlehead ferns; cooked New Brunswick lobsters

IMAGES: GETTY

CREATIVE SPIRIT

DISTILLERIE FILS DU ROY

While the Acadian French influence is evident throughout New Brunswick, it becomes more noticeable the further north you go. En route to Caraquet — for a fine dinner at Origines Cuisine Maritime — I divert to Petit-Paquetville to meet master distiller Sébastien Roy, who shows me around his premises.

The tasting room at Distillerie Fils du Roy is packed, and it's soon easy to see why; the multi-award-winning Gin Thuya — flavoured with white spruce — is astonishing. The whiskies aren't bad, either. And Sébastien clearly loves the theatrical nature of his absinthe 'ceremony', not least because absinthe was the original inspiration for the whole project. But it's a beer experiment that really impresses me. As Sébastien tells me the tale of Evangeline and Gabriel, a tragic Acadian story of lost love and all-too-late reunion, he fills two glasses with beer: Evangeline, a nut-brown ale, and Gabriel, a spruce beer. While both are good, it's when Sébastien pours them into the same glass that the magic happens. "Like all great romances," he explains, "they're better together." distillieriefilsduroy.com

THE FINER THINGS

STURGEON AND CAVIAR

Cornel Ceapa, a Romania-born former professor with a PhD in sturgeon biology, is the man behind Acadian Sturgeon and Caviar. "In Canada you have the best sturgeon population in the world," he explains. And Cornel's operation, just outside the port city of Saint John, produces "a small amount of the last wild sturgeon caviar in the world that's legal".

As we enter the hatchery, he explains that, as well as producing his own caviar, he's trying to do his bit for the beleaguered fish. "They blamed the weather and other things, it was never the fishermen's fault. But globally sturgeon were overfished, so something has to be done," Cornel says. The solution? "We ship eggs to the Baltic, to restock the sea." He grabs some of his own hatched sturgeon — around two months old. "They're healthy," he says, laughing as one wriggles free and jumps back into the tank. "And active!"

Next, it's time to sample the end result: not just the caviar ("We average about 0.5kg of caviar per sturgeon," Cornel explains) — but also the delicious meat of the sturgeon itself. After a chilled glass of local sparkling wine to cleanse the palate, I'm instructed to hold the eggs on my tongue before popping them. The results are a rich, creamy, umami kick.

Tastings are a regular event for Cornel, and he also takes people fishing on what he calls Sturgeon Safaris. "Sturgeon is my passion," he explains. "I hope to die with a sturgeon in my hand." He laughs. "But not now. Much later!" acadian-sturgeon.com



Marc Surette's chicken fricot

Chicken fricot is a traditional Acadian dish — a hearty stew made with leftovers and dumplings, wonderfully comforting on a cold New Brunswick night. This version is, as Marc Surette of Moncton's Bistro 33 says, "the Cadillac of fricot recipes"

SERVES: 4 | TAKES: 90 MINS, PLUS OVERNIGHT RESTING

INGREDIENTS

1 small chicken
2 large onions, chopped
1 tbsp dried summer savory (or a mix of sage and thyme)
2 carrots, peeled and sliced into ½cm chunks
1 medium potato, peeled and chopped into 1cm cubes

FOR THE DUMPLINGS

150g plain flour
1 tsp baking powder
1 tsp dried summer savory (or a mix of sage and thyme)

METHOD

- 1 Put the chicken in a large saucepan and fully cover with water. Add the summer savory and simmer over a medium heat for 45-60 mins, until cooked.
- 2 Lift out the chicken; set aside. Rest the resulting broth in the fridge overnight.
- 3 Once the chicken is cool, pull it apart into small pieces, discarding the bones. Keep it in the fridge until you need it.
- 4 The next day, skim the fat off the broth (reserving the liquid) and use it to fry the onion in a saucepan over a medium heat, until soft. Add the carrot, potato, chicken and broth, bring to the boil and simmer over a medium heat for 30 mins. Season to taste.
- 5 Put the dumpling ingredients into a bowl with 1 tsp salt. Gently mix in about 100ml of broth to form a loose dough. Dip a tablespoon in the bubbling broth to get it hot, then use it to drop spoonfuls of dough into the broth. They should fall off the spoon. Cook for 8-10 mins; serve.



DO IT YOURSELF BISTRO 33

Marc Surette, of Moncton's Bistro 33, is one of life's unflappable. Whether he's turning out 300 plates of food in a regional competition or, some 12 hours later, offering tips on making a regional classic (see recipe), he remains cool and calm. He's a natural teacher, but the cooking classes he runs were born out of necessity rather than a strong desire to pass on knowledge. "It was a birthday party. We had 12 teenage girls coming in and we were looking for something different for them to do" he tells me. "So I showed them how to make tomato sauce, bechamel, and pasta from scratch." The response was encouraging. "They wanted more than recipes," he says. "They wanted to learn the tricks of the trade, how to set tables, that kind of thing. So, when the parents arrived, we sat them down, and the girls and I made dinner and served them."

Marc now offers twice-weekly courses covering everything from butchery to sauces. And for Marc, who's cooked for the likes of the Queen and former ice hockey professional Wayne Gretzky — both British and Canadian royalty, if you will — it's been hugely rewarding. "I've probably got more out of it than the people attending," he says. bistro33.ca/classes

WASH IT ALL DOWN WITH UNCORKED TOURS

New Brunswick is home to around 50 breweries, plus an impressive number of bars brewing their own beers. Gilliane Nadeau started Uncorked Tours in 2013, giving behind-the-scenes access to breweries, brew pubs and bars in Saint John, Moncton and Fredericton. Visitors can expect tastings and snacks, served up with a smattering of fascinating local history. uncorkednb.com ●

Above: Local brews

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Air Canada operates one-stop flights from Heathrow to Saint John, and non-stop flights to Halifax, over the provincial border in Nova Scotia. From the latter it's a 2.5 hr drive from Moncton and a 3.5 hr drive to Saint John. aircanada.com

HOW TO DO IT

Atlantic Canada Holidays offers a five-day trip to New Brunswick, from £1,250 per person. Price includes accommodation, car hire and flights with Air Canada from London Heathrow to Halifax Nova Scotia. atlanticcanadaholidays.co.uk



ONLY IN NEW BRUNSWICK

The DLT

If life gives you lemons, make lemonade. If life gives you access to a lot of seaweed...? Make DLTs. That's what Slocum & Ferris, a cafe at Saint John's City Market, has been doing since 1895. The star ingredient in its dulse, lettuce and tomato sandwich is fried dulse — similar, in terms of taste and texture, to bacon and extremely nutritious. slocumandferris.com

Lady Ashburnham Pickles

Pickling and preserving has long been a popular practice in New Brunswick. One of the province's best-loved varieties is Lady Ashburnham Pickles — a mustard-and-turmeric-heavy relish packed with cucumber and onion. The lady in question was a Fredericton phone operator; she married a prominent British soldier who ended up inheriting his father's title.