

WEEKEND LIFE

Social

ABE & MARY'S
VIP launch of
L'Atelier 1958
boutique, features
a samples sale
and charity.
PAGE j8

Wine

BILL ZACHA-
RKIWI gets re-
acquainted with
versatile riesling
and gamay, as
should you.
PAGE j6

EDITOR: EVANGELINE SADLER | esadler@montrealgazette.com



PIERRE OBENDRAUF/THE GAZETTE

From left, Louis André Joyal, Sylvie Boissonneault, André Habit and Benoit Payant, at back, with their baguettes at La Petite Boulangerie.

THE STATE OF THE MONTREAL BAGUETTE

LESLEY CHESTERMAN
GAZETTE FINE-DINING CRITIC

As a child growing up in '70s Montreal, I knew baguettes by only one name: Cousin. In operation in Quebec since 1921, the Cousin bakery, founded by Léon Cousin, cornered the market on the Quebec baguette. I can still recall the baguettes and the "demi" loaf on the table alongside Tour Eiffel pâté for special occasions, and how my cousins from Manitoba always coveted our great French bread.

Montreal's great French bread only got better with the arrival of Au Pain Doré. Founded by the Étienne family in 1956, Au Pain Doré offered baguettes in a different league: crisper, lighter, sleeker, better-tasting. Eventually, the Étienne family opened up a chain of stores (there are eight today, owned by Groupe Le Duff as of 2008) where one could purchase a multitude of baked goods.

AS THE NUMBER OF ARTISANAL BREAD-MAKERS increases and supermarkets feature more and more name-brand breads, is the Montreal baguette in its heyday? Or are we faced with a multitude of artisanal impostors? We test 19 baguettes to find out

The time seemed long in baguette years until Première Moisson, run by the Colpron-Fiset family, came on the scene in 1992. Nabbing locales at the city's two main markets, Première Moisson opened big, beautiful bakeries, imported talented bouchers from France to consult, and offered customers baguettes baked on site (as opposed to Au Pain Doré's centralized production).

The company brought up baguette

making a notch further in 2007 by working with local mills to produce flour from wheat grown in Quebec.

It also went the organic route, committing to producing only bread that was made with unbleached flour made from pesticide-free wheat. Customers embraced their new baguettes, and today there are 18 Première Moisson stores and three Express counters in Quebec.

The big three — Cousin, Au Pain Doré,

Première Moisson — have also begun selling their baguettes in supermarkets. Première Moisson and Au Pain Doré go so far as to compete with themselves by selling bread in both the retail and "grande surface" markets.

Today, our baguette choices have increased tenfold — to an all-time high — as artisanal boulangeries have proliferated. It seems as if almost monthly a boulangerie is opening up in happening neighbourhoods like Ahuntsic (La Bête à Pain), Little Italy (Joe la Croûte and Le Pain dans les Voiles), Hochelaga-Maisonneuve (Arhoma), Mile-End (Boulangerie Guillaume) and Outremont (Mamie Clafoutis).

And yet, are the baguettes any good, as in, worth my while to drive across town?

To judge the state of the Montreal baguette, I enlisted master baker James MacGuire on my quest.

Please see BAGUETTE, Page J2



MY
VISION
IS
WORTH
\$ _____.

We know your vision is priceless.
But it doesn't have to be costly.

Say goodbye to glasses and contacts with
laser vision correction **starting at \$490/eye***

Find out how we do it at lasikmd.com
Free consultation: 1-877-786-4040

LASIK MD
VISION

*Prices are subject to change without prior notice and vary based on prescription strength. Custom LASIK at \$1,750/eye. Applicable on procedure for both eyes only. Other conditions may apply.

BAGUETTE Judge on crisp crust, feathery crumb and flavour

CONTINUED FROM J1

This immensely respected chef and baker is well-known to Montrealers as the man behind the wonderful bread at N.D.G.'s late, great Le Passe-Partout. Funnily enough, MacGuire never made baguettes, preferring to focus on his "pain rustique" instead of the sure-to-be-more-popular yet more-time-consuming-to-produce baguette.

We evaluated both artisanal and industrial (supermarket) baguettes. As baguettes are greatly affected by humidity, storage and temperature, we decided not to crown one baguette "Best in Montreal," but rather score each while understanding that there can be variances in baguettes from even the same baker.

Criteria included appearance, degree of doneness; crispness of crust; texture ("holiness") of crumb, aroma, taste and mouth feel. (See MacGuire's adjoining article

for more baguette specifics).

That said, it was difficult for MacGuire to judge his peers. So, instead we chose a top three, followed by a recommended and highly recommended category.

All the baguettes were paid for in full, and we settled on 19: five supermarket baguettes, and 14 artisanal baguettes made primarily by hand instead of machine. We also sampled baguettes from Au Pain Doré and Première Moisson in both cat-

egories, as the quality of the bread is quite different. Here are our results:

What our ratings mean:

No stars: not recommended (feed to the pigeons).

★: A faulty loaf, usually poorly fermented or underbaked. Best suited for thin slicing, making fondue cubes and croutons.

★★: Starting to be interesting, but not ideal. Okay if it's sold within

walking distance of your home. The "in-a-pinch" baguette.

★★★: Now we're talking! Crisp on the outside, feathery (but not too fluffy) within. Ideal crunch-to-crumb mouth feel contrast. Good flavour.

★★★★: Baguette nirvana. You would drive far to buy one, and eat the entire stick of heavenly bread in one sitting — without butter, olive oil or cheese. Rare. Yet to be found in Montreal.

Supermarket baguettes

Some nice surprises to some all-round disasters here. Almost all were too heavy; the worst were downright gummy and flavourless. They were also expensive. Though the artisanal baguettes averaged \$2.25, some of the supermarket baguettes passed the \$3.50 mark. Ouch. Besides the Quebec-made breads, Ontario's Ace Bakery and Stonehill Bakehouse are now available in Quebec supermarkets. Here's how they fare:

RECOMMENDED:

Au Pain Doré: Classic look, cuts are flat (undesirably underdeveloped); good colour; crisp crust; good holes and airy crumb; definite wheaty aroma and flavour; not too gummy-textured. Chewy. **Rating: ★★**

Première Moisson: "Strangled" appearance of dough shows that some cuts were too shallow; okay pale golden colour; lacking crisp-

ness (doesn't crackle when squeezed); texture of crumb not great but not bad; next to no aroma (smell), chewy texture without much flavour. **Rating: ★**

Ace Bakery: Cuts opened up nicely; medium-golden colour; bit of crispness; many holes, but the crumb is tightly packed; not much aroma or taste. Heavy texture. **Rating: ★**

NOT RECOMMENDED

Maison Cousin: Anemic looking, pale and undercooked; zero crispness of crust; gummy texture; smells of yeast and tastes of uncooked flour and plain white bread. **Rating: No stars**

Stonemill bakehouse (organic): Pitiful appearance, white on the sides, shrivelled; undercooked; cornmeal adds crispness to an otherwise soft; tight crumb with few holes in the dough; acidic aroma and taste. Most expensive baguette in the tasting. Ugh. **Rating: No stars**

Best artisanal baguettes

What was interesting here was how much better the chain bakeries' baguettes were when purchased in their retail stores than in supermarkets or Express counters. Also, the inconsistency of many of the artisanal breads: Though on the right track, the way they were cooked and fermented often had disappointing results. Here are the top three:

La Petite Boulangerie: 1412 Fleury St. E. www.lapetiteboulangerie.ca

Expert slashing and ideal shape; perfect deep golden colour; good crispness of crust; interior filled with large holes surrounded by a wispy crumb; nice flavour with a hint of butteriness, great crispness, not chewy, light. One beautiful baguette! **Rating: ★★★ ½**

Joe la Croute: 7024 Casgrain Ave. www.joelacroute.com

Slashes in the crust were uneven, and this was the smallest baguette of the tasting; perfectly baked; very crisp crust; the holes in the dough were a bit tight, less volume than with other loaves; slight brioche aroma, nice crunch, not at all gummy, good flavour. Want to eat more! **Rating: ★★★ ½**

Boulangerie Guillaume: 17 Fairmount Ave. E. www.boulangerieguillaume.com

Different look here with one big slash, well developed (opened); excellent deep golden colour; good crust but a bit hard on the gums when chewing; nice bubbling crumb, good wheaty aroma; slightly chewy with appealing flavour. **Rating: ★★★**

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Première Moisson: For list of stores see www.pre-

mieremoisson.com
Slashes are a bit shallow, but the shape is perfect as is the baking (good colour); very crisp crust; holes in the crumb but should have more large holes, true wheaty aroma; crust is a bit tough, but the bread is crunchy and flavourful. **Rating: ★★★**

Au Pain Doré: aupaindore.com

Slashes not open enough, ideal golden colour; very crisp crust; quite compact crumb with few large holes; pleasant "freshly baked bread" aroma; pleasant chewy/crisp contrast in texture, delicious breadly flavour. A classic. **Rating: ★★★**

Mie âme: Available at Latina (185 St-Viateur St. W.) and IGA (Louise Ménard) supermarkets (865 Ste-Catherine St. and 371 Victoria Ave. in St-Lambert).

Appearance is rustic, artisanal looking; slightly grey tint to the crumb; ideal deep-golden colour; nice crisp crust; excellent texture of crumb (best holes of all the loaves); faint "levain" aroma; not a lot going on tastewise. **Rating: ★★ ½**

Le Pain dans les Voiles: 250 St-Georges, in Mont-St-Hilaire (also sold at Latina, 185 St-Viateur St. W.)

Rough, rustic, spiky crust; baked to the ideal golden brown; good crispness of crust; crumb uneven, parts are too dense; clean, wheaty aroma; good flavour, but a bit too dense to chew with ease. **Rating: ★★ ½**

De Froment et de Sève: 2355 Beaubien St. E. www.defromentetdeseve.com

Cuts are underdeveloped (closed) and the baguette is overbaked on the ends; pretty good crispness of crust; good texture, but verging on fluffy; aroma has a slight "levain" (sour) smell; a slightly acidic and salty aftertaste. **Rating: ★★ ½**



JEANINE LEE/THE GAZETTE

FINDING THOSE ARTISANAL BAGUETTES

- 1 La Petite Boulangerie:** 1412 Fleury St. E. www.lapetiteboulangerie.ca
- 2 Bête à Pain:** 114 Fleury St. W. www.labeteapain.com
- 3 Joe la Croute:** 7024 Casgrain Ave. www.joelacroute.com
- 4 Mamie Clafoutis:** 1291 Van Horne Ave. and 3660 St. Denis St. www.mamieclafoutis.com
- 5 Mie âme:** Available at Latina (185 St. Viateur W.), and IGA (Louise Ménard) supermarkets (865 Ste-Catherine St. and 371 Victoria Ave. in St-Lambert.)
- 6 Boulangerie Guillaume:** 17 Fairmount Ave. E. www.boulangerieguillaume.com
- 7 Le Fromentier:** 1375 Laurier Ave. E. www.lefromentier.com
- 8 De Froment et de Sève:** 2355 Beaubien St. E. www.defromentetdeseve.com
- 9 Le Fournil Ancestral:** 4254 Beaubien St. E. www.fournil-ancestral.moonfruit.com
- 10 Arhoma:** 15 Simon Valois Place and La Fabrique ArHoMa, 1700 Ontario St. E. www.arhoma.ca
- 11 L'Amour du Pain:** 393 Samuel de Champlain St. in Boucherville. www.lamourdupain.com
- 12**
- 13**
- 14**
- 15**
- 16 Le Pain dans les Voiles:** 250 St-Georges, in Mont-St-Hilaire (also sold at Latina, 185 St-Viateur St. W.)



PIERRE OBENDRAUF/THE GAZETTE

Our tasters rated the baguettes at La Petite Boulangerie in the top three with an almost perfect score.

Mamie Clafoutis: 1291 Van Horne Ave. and 3660 St-Denis St. www.mamieclafoutis.com

Strange-looking bread with many small holes beneath the slashes, slightly beige crumb; bit underdone; not a very crisp crust, crumb offers a good mix of dense crumb and medium-sized holes; breadly and clean aroma smell; crunchy texture verging on heavy with a pleasant wheat flavour. **Rating: ★★ ½**

RECOMMENDED

Bête à Pain: 114 Fleury St. W. www.labeteapain.com

A bit squat in appearance, with underdeveloped cuts; undercooked on the sides; crisp crust; good amount of holes in the crumb, homogeneous; slightly undercooked-dough smell; good taste, not gummy, nice crunch. **Rating: ★★**

Le Fournil Ancestral: 4254 Beaubien St. E. www.fournil-ancestral.moonfruit.com

A bit puffy but otherwise a classic baguette look; perfect deep golden brown in colour; fine crispness of crust; crumb has lots of small bubbles, very fluffy, "white-bread" aroma; not that flavourful with zero tang, but crispv light, ideal

for a sandwich or those who don't like dense baguettes. **Rating: ★★**

Arhoma: 15 Simon Valois Place and La Fabrique ArHoMa, 1700 Ontario St. E. www.arhoma.ca

Poorly slashed, oddly shaped, skinny; well baked; not very crispy; very good, relatively airy crumb; acetic aroma (like overly sour sourdough); unappealing sour taste follows. **Rating: ★ ½**

Le Fromentier: 1375 Laurier Ave. E. www.lefromentier.com

Excellent, well-developed

cuts; slightly undercooked; good crispness with a slight crunch when squeezed; crumb is much too dense; little aroma; taste is floury with a slightly spicy undertone. **Rating: ★ ½**

L'Amour du Pain: 393 Samuel de Champlain St. in Boucherville. www.lamourdupain.com

Good cuts, but the baguette is skinny, a little underbaked, especially on the sides; not much crispness; tight crumb with small holes; slight wheaty aroma; more of a "grainy" than wheaty flavour. **Rating: ★ ½**