

Poutine: Simply a Brilliant Dish



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Montreal is one of my favorite cities in Canada. With a European flair and an eclectic mix of shops and restaurants, the city always has something to offer. And I am never let down by the food.

On my latest trip to Montreal, I wanted to find the “best” foods from a local’s point of view. Montreal is famous for a lot of things, but two foods are standouts in my book.

The first is Montreal smoked meat. It is not quite pastrami and not quite corned beef, and, in my opinion, it’s best when served in one of the old delis that perfected this simple sandwich. Most know Schwartz’s as the go-to favorite. They make these very simple sandwiches combining great rye bread, juicy smoked meat and mustard. I am not sure how someone can improve on this sandwich, though many have tried. Simple is better—and by the lines in front of Schwartz’s every day, no matter what the weather, they are doing it right.

The other decidedly Montreal food is poutine (pronounced POO-tin if you want to order it in proper Québécois style). Like smoked meat, poutine is a rather simple dish that is excellent in its basic form—french fries topped with gravy and cheese curds—and over the top with the variations that are now available. It is also a dish that is frequently copied by restaurants across Canada but rarely done well, mainly because they do not take the time to analyze what makes this dish so good.

During this trip, even in restaurants that had “the best,” I always asked the server where he or she could go for “the best” of something. You can find the true gem of a meal or a future LTO item in these interactions and discoveries.

Easily Versatile

I remember hearing a speaker say something to the effect that while poutine was getting a lot of airplay and press across the United States, it was not a significant menu item. There was a lot of talk but little action on the part of foodservice operators to actually put it on the menu.

I think he was missing the point about poutine and the interest in this dish. While menu items may seem too fringe for your guests, you can still take lots of inspiration from them.

The interest in poutine comes from its seeming simplicity—but with so few ingredients, getting it right is the first step. Are the fries not too crispy? Is the gravy the right proportion of salty and meaty? Is the cheese (the most important part) the authentic cheese curds that are also a great snack item themselves? The operators who fail with this dish do not understand that it is the combination of the right ingredients that makes it great.

The other thing we can learn from the simple poutine is its versatility. It can be a snack, a side dish, a main course and even a topping. Entire restaurants have devoted their menu to variations, although one can’t add just any food or topping; the flavors and textures must improve upon the original.

I have always believed that we need to learn from and be inspired by others who are doing food well. This can be everything from fine dining to a local food truck—or even the

Poutine’s roots trace back to **1950s QUEBEC**. It’s a worthwhile Google search to read about its origin claims.

There is no monopoly on good food done well.

one-store operator with no culinary training, but with a passion for food and preparing it with care and attention. There is no monopoly on good food done well.

Nor is there only one type of inspiration for us. One of the best pieces of advice I’ve heard is from a former JetBlue executive. She described looking outside one’s industry for ideas that can build your brand. This applies to offers and products, too. What are others doing to present and merchandise? How are retailers reinforcing quality and variety that we can apply to our business? It does not have to be only the food; it could include packaging, presentation or visuals.

Get Inspired

What should you look for when seeking inspiration from others?

First, build innovation into your process. It can be store visits and tastings, or even menu and LTO searches in trade magazines. The idea is just the beginning.

Second, don’t be afraid to emulate others. Wendy’s recent BBQ Pulled Pork French Fries (see p. 64) was not only a unique twist on poutine, but the pork was also used in a number of other LTOs—which kept the number of SKUs needed in check. Wendy’s was inspired by the traditional poutine, and you in turn can be inspired by Wendy’s own rendition.

Third, make it your own. I see poutine topped with steak, onions and mushrooms for a take on a Philly cheesesteak. I’ve seen it covered in bacon, chili and even that other Montreal classic, smoked meat.

I am not sure I found the “best” poutine or smoked meat on this last trip, but I did find great food that I can use in future menu development. I also found variations on items that I never would have thought to put together, but were wonderful.

Wherever you look for inspiration, seek out those operators that are “the best” and see if you can’t be inspired.