

# Maple Marvels

going places



STORY BY GARY SINGH

Almost like a cocoon, Auberge des Gallant lays buried away in the seclusion of the Montérégie countryside in Quebec. A 50-kilometre drive from Montréal takes you to the vast array of self-indulgent activities available at this thriving, family-run, rustic resort.

Proprietor Linda Gallant's latest adventure at the auberge is a brand new spa — one she believes should have a direct relationship with the inn's rich food offerings. "I feel that the Auberge des Gallant experience is sort of a multi-sensory hedonistic experience," she explains. "You're going to stuff your face with food and really fantastic wines. To turn around and have a spa that is about calorie counting or of a dieting ideology — I just didn't think it fit in well with the auberge."

Instead, Linda found it only fitting to pair the decadent foods prepared by her husband, Gérard, a chef with 35 years of experience, and their 20-year-old son, Neil, with decadent spa experiences such as chocolate or wine body wraps or honey therapeutic baths. "I find food that nourishes your outer body to go very well with food that nourishes your inner body."

In Quebec, maple syrup is the 'in' thing come springtime, so Gérard's *Gastronomie à l'érable* (maple-tasting menu) includes several unique dishes made with his own maple syrup. As the main chefs

The Gallant family  
serves up exceptional  
food and hospitality  
at their country inn



Gallant's formal dining room



Inside the Sugar Shack



Gallant's Maple Pavilion, also known as the Sugar Shack

of the auberge, Gérard and Neil are continually serving up regional cuisine at its best.

In 1972, Gérard sold his Montréal restaurant and purchased 400 acres of secluded property that eventually led to the haven now known as Auberge des Gallant. Several phases of reconstruction took place over the years, the most recent of which is the Maple Pavilion, an ultra-advanced version of the typical Quebecois sugar shack. Gérard built a gargantuan log cabin by recycling hundreds of damaged trees from the devastating 1998 Quebec ice storm. Throw in a massive maple syrup operation with 80,000 lines tapping into the surrounding forest and the project caps out at nearly one million dollars. During the March to April sugar shack season, the pavilion hosts numerous events, running the gamut from wedding receptions to rest-stop meals for cross-country skiers.

The Auberge des Gallant does not offer guests what Linda describes as the normal sugar shack experience. That is, sitting at picnic tables on a cement floor in a shack with no windows while pouring syrup on beans, omelettes and pancakes. "Being an Anglophone Quebecker," she says, "I have the opportunity of seeing things the way a tourist sees them. The first time I went to a sugar shack, I was quite disappointed. You're in a dark, damp building and you can't see outside. You want to taste, eat and discover maple syrup fare, but nothing is made with maple syrup. You have to pour it over the food. So [for our sugar shack] I wanted to make sure the syrup is in the food on the menu."

So whether it's pea soup, ham, sausage or even beer from nearby Schoune Farm Breweries, the food you devour at the Maple Pavilion will be made with maple syrup. You can bet on it. The result is a very comfortable, elegant experience in a handcrafted building where guests can celebrate the coming of spring in a slow, laid-back fashion. Guests can actually see the maple syrup being made right on site — both the old-fashioned way (individually tapping trees, then collecting and boiling the sap by hand) and the new-fangled way (using tapping lines

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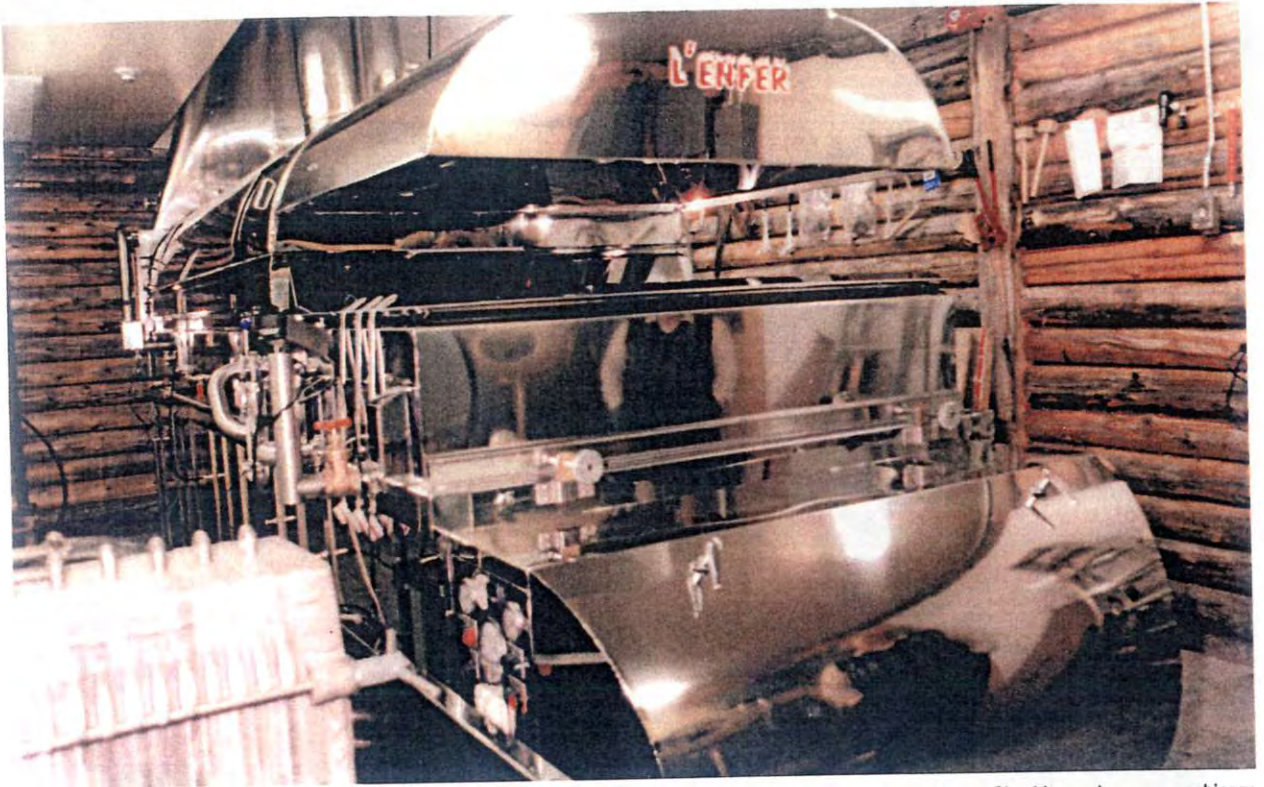
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The Sugar Shack's maple syrup machinery

that connect hundreds of trees and runs the sap directly to evaporator machinery).

In the auberge's formal dining room, the menu has been upgraded to include elegant entrees made with maple syrup, straight from the nearby forest. Gérard's menu includes such delights as pheasant breast with maple and pepper sauce and game consommé made with Schoune maple beer. Neil concocts an outstanding Atlantic salmon filet with Jack Daniel's whiskey and maple syrup jus.

Linda attributes a good portion of the auberge's appeal to the fact that it will always remain a family-run operation. Both Linda and Gérard feel the need to pass down the reins to their kids. Fresh blood is absolutely necessary, they say. According to Linda, this often doesn't occur because a lot of the time business owners' personalities are so entwined with their operations that the business dies once the owner is gone.

"We don't want that to happen," she emphasizes. "Our children — they were raised here at the inn. So [many of our regular guests] have seen them grow up. And the kids are used to the guests."

So when Neil concocts new delights such as the Atlantic salmon dish, it's more than par for the course. He's grown up without being afraid to try new things,

especially when it comes to cooking with whiskey at a young age. And of course, Linda doesn't hesitate to remind this American writer that the minimum drinking age in Quebec is 18. "Listen," she declares. "Don't forget that we gave our kids wine from the time that they can drink a glass by themselves."

When travelling to Quebec during the maple syrup season, one should not leave without devouring maple taffy, fresh from the snow. Auberge des Gallant is a perfect place to experiment. First, the syrup is boiled down to reduce the water content, leaving a higher sugar percentage. "At that point, it's still a thick liquid," Linda explains, "but when we pour it on the snow, it hardens and we roll it on a wooden stick like a Popsicle stick and you eat it like a sucker. It is absolutely to die for."

Above all else, the best thing about Auberge des Gallant is the price. For what you pay for a room in a deluxe chain hotel, you get eclectic sleeping quarters for a night plus a gastronomic dinner and an activity of your choice, whether it's bird watching, spa treatments, golf, sleigh rides or just a plain old stroll through the country. ✪