

Life just got sweeter for Canadian foodies

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The Hamilton Spectator

24 November 2004

The Hamilton Spectator

This is really two gourmet tales rolled into one. And fortunately there's a happy ending, as the stories relate to foods we can all enjoy.

Gourmet is one of those words that is grossly misused and overused, like "luxury." It is frequently used to intimidate people.

Truth is, everyone can be a "gourmet" if they're willing to appreciate and savour what they eat.

There certainly was a lot of savouring and appreciating going on one afternoon last week in a building in Toronto's glitzy Distillery District.

It was the European Gourmet Products show, the first event in a three-year commitment by the European Union and the food federations of Spain, Portugal, France and Italy to jointly promote their foodstuffs in Canada and the U.S.

Less than half of the almost three dozen exhibitors at this trade and media-only show currently have a wholesaler or distributor in Canada, but they were looking for an opening.

Bottom line is they'd love to sell their olive oils, cheeses, pastas, cookies, jams, pickles, soups and meat products here if they could.

And while everything on display for sampling -- yes, you toss back a little cupful of straight olive oil and suck it through your teeth to assess its character -- was of top quality, not all of it was what we would expect as a "gourmet" price.

There was some outstanding Portuguese olive oil that, rough calculation, would retail here for about \$8 a bottle.

And some crafted Spanish cheese that would compete with supermarket prices for plain old cheddar.

And then my eyes lit upon the kiosk for Campofrio Alimentacion. There, perched upon the counter, was a succulent Serrano ham. "Don't taunt us like this," I thought to myself. "You can't get Serrano ham, the icon of Spanish cuisine, in Canada. The government won't let it in. It's that cured-meat phobia we have."

What joy to learn how wrong I was. The barrier has indeed been lifted, and there's a company, **Serrano Imports**, that now can supply the vaunted ham to Canadian shops.

"OK, it'll all be in select retailers in Toronto and Montreal, right," I mused. Wrong again. These Serrano hams are just making an initial appearance and are in limited supply at the moment, but they have migrated to Denninger's stores and to Bernardino's in Burlington.

Denninger's expects a bigger supply for its outlets by next week, but in the meantime will be offering a Serrano demonstration and sampling at the flagship store on King Street East in Hamilton, this Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

So what is the fuss about? The Spanish feel a pain in the chest whenever Serrano is compared to prosciutto, but that is the easiest way to describe it. Frankly, I know why the Spanish feel that way. With all due respect to the excellent prosciutto they make in Italy, Serrano is better.

It's sweeter, far less salty, has extremely fine fat marbling, and caresses the tastebuds with a distinct walnut flavour.

Serrano means "from the mountains," a reference to the traditional curing of the hams in special sheds high in the sierras that ring Spain. Today, technology allows the creation of the same conditions in controlled, hygienic factories.

They take the hind legs or "jamon" of white pigs -- preferably the Duroc or Landrace breeds -- clean them (but leave the hooves on) and massage them with coarse salt. The salting preserves the meat and draws out moisture. The ham is eventually washed and hung to cure for six months, which renders the fat.

Then it's air dried in cool conditions for six to 18 months.

And then you have official Serrano, which is sliced transparently thin and eaten at room temperature, on its own or wrapped around a sliver of melon or pimiento. And just in time for Christmas.

End of gourmet story number one.

Tale two has a modern, high-tech spin to it. It's about a company that pioneered bringing international gourmet products into Canada for exclusive use by professional chefs.

Some of those products eventually made it to the general consumer, brands such as Lindt, Toblerone and Perrier.

Now that same company -- the name is Qualifirst Foods, for those of a corporate bent -- has gone online with a new virtual gourmet store.

Go to www.epicureal.com and click through all the options. It's quite impressive. You start with categories for sweets, "café," maple products, "gourmet staples," and "special occasions."

Inside each is a selection of sub-groupings, so you can shop for white or black French truffles, escargot accoutrements, Forbidden China rice, fair-trade coffees and herbal teas, Quebec organic maple syrup, the list goes on for some 800 products.

In many cases, epicureal.com has exclusive Canadian distribution rights, so this is the only place you can find certain things.

The prices look quite reasonable, and they specify shipping times for your purchases, usually 1 to 3 days.

The biggest advantage, of course, is this is all Canadian based, so your order will in fact reach you.

Over the years, it's been frustrating to flip through various foodie magazines and see offers for mail-order or online gourmet products, knowing that they are on the wrong side of the border and customs won't let the package into the country.

So now there's another new window onto the world of food.

Still in an upscale vein, the 10th annual Gourmet Food & Wine Expo is on at the Toronto Convention Centre (south building) from tomorrow (6 to 10 p.m.) until Sunday.

It features foods, wines and spirits from some 250 exhibitors from around the globe. The central theme this year is California.

Admission is \$15. Then you buy food and beverage samples as you go. Visit www.foodandwineshow.com for details.