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Taste of Champlain: Cross cuisine borders

By Jay Craven, *Special to the Free Press*

Editor's Note: This column is one in a series of previews and behind-the-scenes looks at the upcoming Burlington International Waterfront Festival.

The Burlington International Waterfront Festival's <http://celebratechamplain.org/content/view/193/135/> "Taste of Champlain" food events, to be held July 8-12, will highlight distinctly Native American, French, and Quebec cuisines and use Vermont's own impressive and diverse network of fresh foods as ingredients. Food provides our most accessible and widely practiced international experience. Even rural Vermont boasts fine restaurants for Indian, Mexican, Thai, Japanese and Italian meals. We love our food — and our experience of it informs us about other people.

Our Champlain-themed festival examines our historical and cultural connections with each of our historical partners, including the French, whose wines and cheeses have long branded each province. Indeed, former French President Charles DeGaulle once quipped, "How can you govern a country that has 246 varieties of cheeses." Today, that number is even greater, and the assortment of French wines and small vineyards is even larger than that.

The food festival's opening day on July 8 will focus on "taste of place" and include a special evening tasting event of prestigious French and Vermont cheeses and wines from 7 to 9 p.m. at Burlington City Arts. Earlier that day a series of informative discussions will include French and American experts sharing case histories about regional food production. Vermont producers will compare notes with their European peers, on ways to enhance local industry's impact for sustainable economies, tourism, nutrition and cultural identity.

The Essex Resort and Spa will host a July 9 French dinner featuring celebrity chef Loic LeGarrec, courtesy of the French Consul General in Boston. On July 9 Magnolia Bistro and chef Shannon Reilly will host a special Native American dinner featuring Iroquois strawberry bread, wild Mohican succotash, fluffy cranberry pudding, and Misty Knoll honey-basted roast turkey breast with blueberry gravy. I remember asking Abenaki historian Marge Bruchac what she thought would be right for an American Indian festival meal. "Thanksgiving dinner," she said.

July 10 marks the festival's Quebec Day so Magnolia Bistro will feature a Quebec-flavored Franco-American dinner, with browned rainbow trout with mushroom gravy, leg of lamb, poutine with fingerling potatoes, and local berries and cream. Also on July 10, a Quebec Blues Cruise will tour the lake, offer food and drink, and feature music by Quebec City blues master Bob Walsh, Huron Indian guitarist Gilles Sioui, and harmonica ace Guy Belanger.

The festival's central day, July 11, will be marked by a huge performance parade, indigenous Abenaki encampment, Native American concert, and post-parade performances including "From the New World," Heddy Maalem's Champlain-themed piece featuring 60 dancers from Vermont, Quebec and the American Indian Dance Theater. On the food front, July 11 will include the City Market Specialty Food Fair, in partnership with the Farmers Market (8:30 a.m.-2 p.m. at City Hall Park), and an old-fashioned strawberry festival (11 a.m.-5 p.m. on the corner of College and St. Paul streets), to benefit Burlington City Arts.

Attention turns on July 12 to Burlington's Intervale for family events including a wild edibles tour (9:30-11:30 a.m.) and visits to the Center's Abenaki Traditional Garden, where storytelling and crafts will provide the backdrop for "wheat to bread" and flatbread cooking demonstrations.

I love the experience of "border crossing" through food, but I had a hair-raising experience several years ago in a remote part of central Asian Turkmenistan. It taught me more than I ever wanted to know about "taste of place." After showing one of my films in a local middle school, I was invited to eat at the home of the head teacher. I was feeling more than a little queasy from food sickness so I asked for something light. But before I knew it, the family's lovely pet sheep that greeted me at the door was boiled and staring at me from the center of the tablecloth spread out on the floor.

With my stomach throbbing, I tried to be a good sport as the "honored American guest" but could not stop from leaning back against the wall, hoping for a reprieve. That's when Guyip, my host, brought on the steaming bowls of internal organs. "You must eat from each of them," he said, personally doling out my portion of liver, kidney, lungs — and eyes. Wanting to please my hosts, I tore into the boiled sheep stomach and tongue. "Good," I said, giving Guyip a thumbs-up sign. "Very fresh." The truth is that boiled mutton is a long way from the leg of lamb that will come from the Magnolia kitchen.

Filmmaker Jay Craven teaches at Marlboro College and directs Kingdom County Productions. He's producing Burlington's 2009 Samuel de Champlain Quadricentennial celebration. For more information on Champlain Festival events, visit <http://www.celebratechamplain.org/> target="_blank">www.CelebrateChamplain.org.

Additional Facts

If you go

Tickets are required for Taste of Champlain meals, tastings, and the Blues Cruise.

They are available, along with brochures, at City Market and the Waterfront Festival headquarters at 90 Church St., or by calling 802-264-0766.

Information is also available at www.CelebrateChamplain.org.
