



The Saturday morning coffee group at Howard's Bakery & Deli in Maple Creek, Sask.

Diners, Slow Plows and Dives

The cure for the winter blues, **Amy Rosen** reports, can be found on a road trip through southern Saskatchewan, home to the best maple-smoked cauliflower you'll ever eat

On a sunny, minus 40 C wind chill kind of day in Mortlach, Sask., about an hour from Regina, I peruse the menu at Little Red Market Cafe. I spot Eggs Sardou, an artichoke and creamed spinach take on Eggs Benny. It's a dish I tried and loved in New Orleans more than a decade ago, but haven't seen it on a menu since. With memories washing over me like a Cajun-spiced fever dream, I order it without a second thought.

I look around the place as I wait. The red-brick building that houses the café began its life in 1912 as a butcher shop, but it has also been a library and the town office. Now, it's a cozy restaurant (and liquor store) where chef Chad Forrest cooks Cajun food, while his wife serves guests, and their daughter uses a four-top table as her playroom. The kitchen serves Southern comfort such as Acadian picklerel, lentil gumbo and jambalaya. And the honey in the cornbread? It's from the apiary down the block.

Twenty minutes later, my Eggs Sardou arrives. The dish is satisfyingly rich, eggs aquiver with buttery Hollandaise, albeit with jarred artichoke hearts subbing in for fresh bottoms. My Louisiana-bred brunch may seem unlikely, but — over the past 48 hours — I've learned that if I were ever going to find Eggs Sardou outside of New Orleans, it would be here, in Mortlach, population: 261.

But let's backtrack a bit.

I've spent the past two-plus days driving around the province's southern plains to see — and taste — how small-town Saskatchewan beats the winter blues. It's been such a rough winter in my hometown of Toronto, I was curious to learn how the middle of the country

lives through even more frigid times. My theory was simple enough; that the local coffee shops and restaurants become the hearth and heart of the communities. I was also hoping the food would be comforting and maybe even a little surprising. The "Land of the Living Skies" (as poetic as licence plates get), didn't disappoint.

I began my trip motoring down Highway 1, away from Regina and toward Moose Jaw. About an hour later, I'd parked on Main Street ready for a matcha pit stop at Mitsu Sweet Cafe & Sushi. I'd read buzz-worthy reviews online and was naturally drawn to the idea of having a matcha in Moose Jaw because, not only is it unexpected, it's also a great alliteration. Owner Emiko Hennenfent opened this Japanese bakery two years ago (she'd emigrated after marrying a local), figuring area residents and visiting passersby would enjoy a taste of her homeland. She was right; the place is full of people eating maki and street-style crepes. The pastry cases are stocked with colourful macarons, cream puffs and Japanese soufflé cheesecakes. Meanwhile, the latte art is Hello Kitty-level adorable: There's a bear in my foam.

Back on road, the scenery changed from pancake flat to an undulating lunar landscape, further enhanced by the whiteness of cold. A couple of hours on and the sky started to mellow, turning pale green and grey — the perfect backdrop for silver silos standing six-afield like toy soldiers. I turned off of the highway and onto Pacific Avenue in Maple Creek (population: 2,176).

Tina Cresswell and her husband, Dave Turner, (she claimed she couldn't take his name for obvious reasons) have owned

the Star Cafe & Grill for more than 10 years. The restaurant is the most recent in a long line of tenants in the handsome building, including its predecessor, a Canadian-Chinese restaurant called the Star Cafe. "We didn't want to take the name out of the town," Cresswell explains, "but we weren't going to be a Chinese restaurant, either." Instead, their menu reflects the culinary traditions of their chefs, past and present, which is why you'll find dishes from Mauritius, Italy and Britain, and especially the Guyanese specialties from the smiling chef Joel Fitzpatrick.

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A train rumbled by as I prepared to place my drink order. The train is the heart of many a Saskatchewan town, including Maple Creek, where this dining room would have been part of a "traveller's hotel" owned by the Canadian Pacific Railway. That day, diners from Medicine Hat to Swift Current streamed through the tall fir door frames in their tuques and work boots. A group of twentysomethings polished off a round of striploins, while two ranchers discussed bovine pregnancy tests over bottles of beer at the long bar.

I ordered a martini made with Black Fox Gin (from an excellent local distillery). The drink tasted so lovely and herbaceous, I felt as though I was sipping it in a pine forest flooded by moon-

light. And for dinner: Guyanese jerk chicken and haddock cooked in Caribbean curry. The chicken is upbeat; its skin almost coated in a crust of chili, ginger and spices (tamed by the side of beans and rice cooked in coconut milk). And I'm glad Fitzpatrick was true to his word: The fish is both homey and incendiary.

The next morning, the sun finally popped up after 9 a.m. — did you know that Saskatchewan doesn't follow daylight savings? The darkness means it's hard to find a coffee anywhere before 10 a.m. I eventually located some at Howard's Bakery (voted best bakery in Saskatchewan, 2013), where I also met a cabal of retirees sitting around Formica tables sipping from ceramic mugs of "help yourself" coffee.

Howard's is 40 years old, give or take, and is frozen in time in the best possible way, from the 1970s paint job to the vinyl chairs and flooring. I nibbled on a cinnamon bun, which was unfortunately studded with raisins, but had also been warmed and spread with so much salted butter at first I thought it was cream cheese frosting. I asked the group how long they'd been coming here. The class clown offered, "You see these faces? You don't ask people this old how long they've been going anywhere!" Many laughs and even more guffaws later, one by one, the Maple Creek gang gets up to leave. But not before buying loaves of soft white bread from off of the bakers' racks.

Later that night in Shaunavon (population: 1,756), I visited Harvest Eatery, a room burning with candlelight and an open kitchen. The restaurant, which is situated near herds of cattle and fields of grain, was created by

chef Garrett (Rusty) Thienes and his wife and partner, Kristy, to be a sort of just-behind-the-farm experience. And they weren't afraid to do it so far from Regina, either: Sweden's Faviken, Denmark's Noma and Spain's Arzak have all proven that people will travel great lengths for great food. So why not small-town Saskatchewan?

Thienes makes red fife steam buns stuffed with confit pork belly and pickled vegetables, and bison tartare spun with brandy and cured egg yolk. Then, there's the bestselling Harvest burger. But the chef is also doing vegetarian his way, "to get the steak eaters to eat a cauliflower steak instead." He maple-smokes cauliflower for hours, oven-roasts radicchio in garlic oil, purées butternut squash into a silk and sautés criminis before putting all of the kick-ass components together and sprinkling them with goat cheese. It's a dish that dares you to just try and not love cauliflower.

On my final morning, the weather took a turn. The wide-open plains mean flurries blow across and around Highway 1 like it's a prairie snow globe. The once-friendly looking derricks became Star Wars walkers on this grey, foreboding landscape. But then just like that, I emerge from the swirls and the sky turns peacock blue again.

The food here tells a similar story: Saskatchewan is a land of surprising contrasts, where international cuisine is dished out in historic rooms and where people seek shelter from the cold. What they get is an ironically exotic experience, and one that's just about as Canadian as they come.

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Cajun-spice infused brunch at Little Red Market Cafe in Mortlach, Sask., top left and centre; Mortlach's 2nd Avenue, home of the Little Red Market Cafe, above; and Harvest Eatery in Shaunavon, Sask., bottom left and centre, home to maple-smoked cauliflower. PHOTOS BY JENN SMITH NELSON