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## HOT, CHEESY BRUNCH

**BY MICHELE FISHER**

**Photography by Maria Papadakis**

On any given Sunday you'll find them lurking behind their New York Times, sipping from a seemingly bottomless cup of coffee. The soon-to-be-seated implore them to leave with stares as sharp as pitchforks. Defiant parents push mammoth strollers into tight spaces. Parties of mid-day revellers wait endlessly. Line-ups circle around the block, conversations visible in the cold winter air. What brings such dedication week after week? It can only be brunch and its promise of creamy eggs, buttery treats, freshly squeezed juices and steaming cappuccinos.

Only a decade or two ago, brunch-goers would happily stumble into greasy spoons or pubs, eating fry-ups with gusto. Today, brunch has become an art form, a lifestyle; some might even venture, a rite. Ontario chefs are outdoing themselves, blessing the meal's basic ingredients with an ever growing bounty of local and house-made products. Patrons happily return the love, beating a weekly pilgrimage to their doors.

In reverence to this weekend ritual, three noted Toronto chefs – Suzanne Baby, Brian Morin and Edward Levesque – share some of their coveted mid-day dishes, each richly endowed with local cheese.

Whether you opt for savoury frico, sweet porter pancakes or sophisticated crespelle, one thing is certain: on a snowy winter day, nothing pleases more than a hot, cheesy brunch. And the only lineups you'll be facing are those of your family and friends circling around for seconds.

**BRIAN MORIN**



**Beerbistro**  
18 King St. East, Toronto



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owned  
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(416) 861-9872

[www.beerbistro.com](http://www.beerbistro.com)

Brian Morin is the ultimate do-it-yourselfer. Order a modest hot dog from his Beerbistro and you're in for the exceptional. It might be a Mennonite Smokey, made on the premises with Hope Eco Farms' pork shoulder and belly, flavoured with apples and sage. The bun, the toppings, the ketchup and the mustard, all are made from scratch.

As for that side of fries, the potatoes are blanched in half beef- and half duck-fat for flavour, and finished up in peanut oil for crispness. "They are so utterly good," exclaims executive chef Morin. "Even the gourmet dog is fun because we make it all ourselves. As a chef, I want to know how to do things."

At this upscale homage to the world's best beers, the ales and lagers might be the only things Morin and his team do not make by hand. They do, however, liberally pour from the tap as they finesse this city's haute beer cuisine.

"Craft beers have flavour properties like fine wines," says Morin. "You get incredible flavours with beer when you use it as an ingredient. It gives food so much complexity."

Morin's artistic quest for beer-infused foods has led him to experiment with cheese, as well. From the Beerbistro's back kitchen cave, he cultivates new varieties like a blue-veined Camembert-style cheese rind-washed in Belgian Triple Ale. Fresh cheeses, like the mascarpone that oozes over these sublime Porter Pancakes, are made on the premises almost daily.

One bite and you'll agree: brunch made with beer makes for a very happy hour, indeed.

[PORTER PANCAKES WITH MAPLE MASCARPONE AND BROWN BUTTER APPLES AND PEARS](#)

### SUZANNE BABY



#### **Hart House Gallery Grill**

University of Toronto

7 Hart House Circle

(416) 978-2445

[www.harthouse.utoronto.ca](http://www.harthouse.utoronto.ca)

The wild mushroom bread soufflé comes to the table piping hot and proud. A server deftly carves a hole in the top and pours in the pièce de résistance – a rich, creamy bleu béneédictin fondue. When the server returns twenty minutes later, not a drop remains on the plate.

Such are the creations of Suzanne Baby, who reigns over mid-day dining with a warm and unpretentious grace. Not one to court publicity, it follows her nonetheless. As executive chef at Hart House Gallery Grill, Baby consistently finds herself at the top of the lists of the city's best brunches.

"I love it here," she says. "I put my heart and soul into this place. It brings pleasure to me to bring pleasure to our guests. Cooking is a form of giving happiness."

Drawing inspiration from her French background (her ancestors came to Canada in 1665) and from Asian cuisine, Baby continuously invents new dishes using the most local of offerings. Artisan cheeses from producers like Back Forty and Fifth Town often take centre stage, flavouring up to one-third of Baby's menu.

"When I started, it was difficult to get good local cheese. Now, more serious contenders are raising the bar. Their cheese is special and great. I have to hold back!" she enthuses.

From Baby's winter menu comes this Chestnut Ricotta Crespelle. While it can be served with maple syrup, Baby's accompaniments of crispy sage, sautéed shiitakes and balsamic honey make the humble Italian crespelle rise to the grandest of brunch occasions.

#### CHESTNUT RICOTTA CRESPELLE

### **EDWARD LEVESQUE**



#### **Edward Levesque's Kitchen**

1290 Queen St. East, Toronto

(416) 465-3600

[www.edwardlevesque.ca](http://www.edwardlevesque.ca)

A sign in the restaurant proclaims Monkeys Always Welcome!

"Who wouldn't want a monkey in their restaurant?" quips Edward Levesque, whose sense of the whimsical permeates the room.

His humour extends to the menu, which warns parents that unaccompanied children will be given espresso and a new puppy. But it stops at the food. Since he opened Edward Levesque's Kitchen on a then-barren stretch of Queen East in 2002, Levesque has been doing a serious business in brunch.

"Brunch is such a hit because it's the perfect antidote to a late Saturday night," says Levesque. "It's the meal that people want to eat most."

Levesque's credo is simple cooking with the best possible ingredients. For these, he often looks no further than his partner's 52-acre farm in Dunnville. Lettuce and kale, fennel and carrots, and fresh mint for Levesque's unbeatable Moroccan tea, all these and more are picked from their organic garden. The sunny abundance is preserved for winter on shelves of luscious jars. "In January, it only takes a tablespoon of peach-and-ginger chutney to bring you back to [summer]," he notes.

It was a trip to New York City that first put frico on Levesque's culinary radar. For

five days in 1996, renowned Italian chef Lidia Bastianich took Levesque under her wing and introduced him to the cheesy possibilities at Frico Bar, her son Joe's Manhattan restaurant. (Bastianich closed Frico Bar a few years later and reopened it as Esca.)

In this latest variation, Levesque fills a lacy Montasio crisp with fluffy scrambled eggs and parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. Simon and Garfunkel could not have composed a better antidote to the mid-winter blues.

[MONTASIO FRICO WITH HERBED SCRAMBLED EGGS](#)

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