

HUT CUISINE

by Stewart Dudley
Photographs by André Rozon

WE WEREN'T SUPPOSED TO GET THIS MUCH SNOW.

Out on the ice it feels like a good fifteen centimetres. I'm told one member of Caviart's crew has arrived ahead of me, but the snow has snarled Nicole and André in traffic on the way from Aylmer. I decided to leave my car at Oziles—the bait shop—and hoof it in on the ice road. Good call. I've got snow tires, but the car sits low. I'm sure I'd have ended up stuck, although there is no shortage of four-wheel pick-ups that could yank me free.

At Oziles, owner Yves Grandmaitre gave me directions. Down the hill, onto the ice, follow the main drag, take a right just after the porta-potty, then another right. No wonder they call this “the village.” If indoor plumbing ever arrives, will it be a town?

It's deliciously silent on the river. The snow is still falling, insulating me from the distant rumble of Highway 174. There's little wind. I bundled up, expecting we would be outside for most of the day. Luckily it's not too cold. I had to go digging through closets for my serious snowboots, a generic pair I bought at the general store in Kazabazua at least twenty years ago. They could use new liners.

Family fun

At the bait shop, I watched a man in his thirties rent an ice hut for the day. He had three young children in tow. He's as new to this as I am, asks all the rookie questions and takes possession of a tip-up, the simple hand-made device you plant in the snow beside your hole in the ice. He hands a clear plastic bag of minnows to his eldest daughter. She might be eight. She and her siblings are captivated by the silvery life within the bag.

Out on the ice road, I get lost momentarily, wander about fifty metres in the wrong direction then see my error and find myself knocking on the door of Al Macintyre's hut. He's the *de facto* host today, president of the Petrie Island Ice Fishermen's Association (PIIFA). Al is waiting inside, grizzled in the way I hope I'll be if I'm ever able to retire. He looks to be in his early sixties, his hair a bit squirrely, a few days' growth on his chin. He's been ice-fishing since he was a kid in Sudbury, where his family had moved from Scotland when he was eight.

“My uncles were fishermen on the Isle of Skye,” he says. “They worked trawlers in the North Sea.”

This is a vastly different form of angling. Seasickness is rare, frostbite being the greater hazard, although Al's hut is cozy thanks to a 1948 Coleman oil heater that cranks out a reliable warmth. There's a small table between two bench seats. The walls are papered with photos, the colour in many faded to a distinctly 1970's patina.

A second home

“I've been here in the village twelve years,” Al tells me. “I had a hut in Rockland from 1988 to 2003, but there was a lot of vandalism. I came down to go skating with my girls one day and the hut was gone. Stolen. That was it for me.”





When he first set up a hut at Petrie Island, the village on Bait Shop Bay featured a scant fifteen huts. Today there are more than 120. Most have an inside hole—for fishing—but we'll be dropping our line in the water outside to get the most of the experience today.

Nicole and André arrive and Yves joins us as Al bores a hole in the ice with a gas-powered auger.

"We didn't do much ice-fishing here when I was a kid," admits Yves, whose grandfather once owned Petrie Island. "You had to cut your hole in the ice with an axe. After that workout, you were pretty much done for the day."

The thickest ice ever

The heavy equipment is welcome this year. There's forty-one inches of ice to penetrate, thicker by ten inches than the previous PIIFA record in 2006. The drilling doesn't take long, but then you've got to carefully clean the slush from the hole using a large, long-handled ladle. This ends up being my job. The line must slip easily into the water. Too much slush, the line snags and you lose the feel for its descent. Al slips a hook through a minnow's dorsal fin and plays out the line.

"Once you feel the sinker hitting the bottom," he says, "you pull the line back just a bit. When the tip-up falls, you know you've got a bite." And now we wait. Al wanders off to check his generator. He plans to watch the Canada-Austria Olympic hockey game this afternoon, and that's not going to happen without some portable electricity.

I'm left to marvel at the odd series of events that has landed Caviart here. The idea was to bring a little culinary flair to the ice. There's fresh fish in the dead of winter, we reasoned. What if we did it up fancy? What if we brought in a chef to cook it *à la cabane*?

Al scoffed. "Don't think we don't know how to cook out here. You should see some of the dishes people prepare. And not just fish: venison, bear, moose. Recipes handed down across generations. You can go from hut to hut on a weekend and eat like a king."

Dining in the wild

And what is it about food prepared in the rough—camping, at a remote cottage or here on the ice? Even Kraft Dinner tastes better (not to cast aspersions on the Great Orange Miracle). Maybe outdoor cooking yanks some appreciation trigger in us. When we're in the wild, we're closer to our Neanderthal roots, thankful for every mouthful we eat and every mouthful we avoid becoming.

We reached out to Yves, Oziles' owner, who works closely with PIIFA. He passed the word to Al, who took a call a few days later from Jason Juarez, looking to rent a hut. Jason's daughter was hosting a girl from France on a student exchange. They'd already been out dogsledding. Wouldn't ice fishing be the ideal way to top off their guest's Canadian experience?



ICE-FISHING REFERENCES

2013–2014 Guide to Eating Ontario Sport Fish
[www.ontario.ca/environment-and-energy/
guide-eating-ontario-sport-fish](http://www.ontario.ca/environment-and-energy/guide-eating-ontario-sport-fish)

Petrie Island Ice Fishermen's Association
www.piifa.ca

Oziles
www.oziles.com

The Ottawa Riverkeeper
ottawariverkeeper.ca

After a little chitchat on the phone, Al realized he'd found our chef. And no slouch either. Jason has twenty-one years of professional cooking under his belt. A graduate of the St. Pius Culinary Institute in Montreal, he was lured to Ottawa in 2003 by his friend John Leung to help launch Restaurant Eighteen. He was sous chef at the Chateau Laurier and then the Marriott before taking over as executive chef at the Rivermead Golf Club. After a stint as executive chef at the University of Ottawa, Jason stepped into the same role at Tulips and Maple, one of the region's top catering houses.

"I worked all the big houses in Montreal," he tells me. "That's where you learn. I tell the young guys, 'You've got to move around. Learn from many. I can only teach you so much.'"

Prepping the kitchen

While the lines are in the water, Jason sets up in a hut about thirty feet away. It's bigger than Al's, with a small four-burner propane stovetop and room to accommodate the six of us who are now trying to make this work.

Jason's planned the menu in advance. By email, he proposed two catch-of-the-day dishes: one with white bean and smoked bacon cassoulet and a chive Hollandaise, the other with macédoine of seasonal vegetables and fish fumet. The "catch" turns out to be walleye. Our intrepid anglers produce four of them, about a kilogram each—a good size, Jason tells me as he scales them outside the hut. The sound is harsh, gritty, like scraping your windshield clear of a thick coat of ice.

"Atta boy, Jason," says Al. "You're a real fisherman."

"Walleye is a very good eating fish," says Jason. "Ranks right up there with trout, bass."

"My fish of choice," adds Al, "followed by perch."

Food-safety concerns

I'm curious about the risks of eating fish from the Ottawa River. If bacteria levels can shut down Petrie Island beach in the summer, how safe is it to eat the fish that swim there?

"There was a huge sewage spill in 2008," recalls Yves. "People have a long memory for those kinds of events. That one branded the river as badly polluted. I think it's cleaner now than it's been in decades." Al chimes in, "One of the reasons you avoid the larger fish is that their flesh is more likely to be contaminated with heavy metals, mainly mercury. In the summer, the water's warm and, depending on the type of fish, they often get worms." Now that's hardly appetizing.

Later I consult *The Guide to Eating Ontario Sport Fish*, an annual publication of the Ontario Government. Sure enough, mercury is the major contaminant in fish caught inland in Ontario. The guide also tags walleye and pike as having the highest mercury levels because they're at the top of the inland waterway food chain; smaller fish are the safer bet. The recommended limit is eight servings of walleye per month for fish between eight and sixteen inches in length. For walleye between fourteen and twenty-four inches, the number of servings drops by half, then half again—to only two per month—for catches of twenty-four to twenty-six inches. Today, we're safe.



Rustic conditions

Jason has come prepared, although his rig is surprisingly simple: a few pans, bowls, knives and other utensils. I ask him if these are the roughest kitchen conditions he’s ever encountered.

“Nah,” he replies. “My family loves to camp, and that’s as rustic as it gets. It’s all about the prep. I cut and prepack everything in zip-locks and plastic.”

He starts on the cassoulet as he points out how much you can do with simple tools.

“You could do a shepherd’s pie out here. It’s as easy as putting a baking sheet on the heater and covering a Pyrex pan with foil. Instant oven. Spend a few hours out fishing and come back to a hearty meal”

I’ll always opt for a good cassoulet, one of the ultimate comfort foods. “It’s sort of the French version of baked beans,” says Jason. “I add a little béchamel to make it a bit creamier. I like that texture. We’re using bacon, but some cook it with ham hocks, pork chunks or beef cheeks. Add a little thyme, bay leaves, beer if you want.” He grins. “No shortage of that out here.”

The hut fills quickly with the sounds and smells of gourmet cooking, the hiss of sizzle, the earthy aroma of simmering root vegetables: potato, carrot, parsnip. Jason flips the pan instinctively. We’ve drawn a small crowd, locals curious about what’s going on.

“If I add the béchamel now,” he tells me, “the beans wouldn’t be soft enough.” Instead, he adds stock to moisten the beans and coax out

their flavour. The root vegetables get a soaking as well. “Add a little steam and flavour,” he mutters. “You don’t want them to pan roast forever.”

The aroma leaps from the pan as he adds a spoonful of Dijon to the beans. “It’s an emulsifier as well as a great flavour booster,” he says. “If you find Dijon too strong, use grainy mustard. It’s not as pungent.”

Sauce time

By now, it’s hot in the shack, warmed by bodies and flames. Jason finally stirs in the béchamel, creating a thick, creamy stew, then sets it aside to tackle the Hollandaise.

“Normally you do this over a water bath for the indirect heat. You don’t want to end up with scrambled eggs.” He starts over the oil heater then moves to a low flame, whisking to stave off curdling.

“Most people don’t know that you’re not allowed to prepare real mayonnaise in restaurants,” he tells me. “It’s a food-safety issue, although it shouldn’t be. Eggs go through a pasteurization process. No one will get sick from eating a raw egg.”

His arm must be sore from the whisking; I’m getting sore just watching him, but I chip in by drizzling the clarified butter.

“Slowly at first,” he says, “but once it begins to emulsify you run less of a risk of splitting.”

Now a dash of salt, some lemon zest and a splash of the juice. Jason washes his hands with what remains of the lemon, then returns to the

whisk and adds some chives. Meanwhile, the fumet is warming on the heater. Three litres of fish stock has been reduced to just one.

“Maple syrup would be a good alternative to the fumet,” he says. In part, it’s because they look alike. The fumet is thick and gold, rich with the distinct stain of saffron.

Writers talk about *profluence*, the current of a read, the effortless thought-to-thought transition that characterizes good writing. Watching any chef work with his hands brings to mind this sense of flow. Practice fuses the synapses, cooking is no longer a series of steps, it is the conscious stream associated with just one task—and maybe the effect is more pronounced in this rustic setting. I cook just enough to appreciate the great gulf that separates my skills from those of the man now heating a pan over a high heat in front of me.

He seasons the walleye fillets with salt and pepper. “Skin side down first,” he says. “I want them crisp.”

They appear to swell, but it’s really the skin curling beneath, shoving the meat high.

“If you want to minimize the curling,” he tells me, “slash the skin across the fillet.”

Final touches

The fish is thin and cooks fast. Jason splashes a bit more stock onto the cassoulet; the beans are sucking up the liquid and he wants the dish to remain creamy. He adds the last of the clarified butter to the vegetables along with the Brussels sprout leaves, which quickly wilt.

I ask if he cooks at home. He nods. “I love what I do. Dinner time, you’re cooking, you can have a glass of wine or a beer.” But he rarely gets to sit down. He eats in the kitchen, feeds from a bowl—the chef’s trough of choice—while he does dishes and continues to cook.

“If I was out here with the family, I’d serve right on the pans—just lay the fish on top and let everyone serve themselves.” But he’s plating for the benefit of André’s camera. Jason serves the cassoulet on the side and gently places a fillet over a swath of Hollandaise. On the other plate, the fish comes to rest atop a bed of roasted root vegetables. He drizzles them with the fumet, which glistens like melted butter, the colour spectacular.

It’s now early afternoon and we’re all hungry. We pounce on the food, each of us with a glass of wine, finally able to connect taste with the aromas that have been teasing us for an hour.

“Everything in a bowl!” Jason mutters, shoveling some beans into his mouth. “That’s the downfall of this business. You never get to eat at regular hours.”

Out here on the ice, it doesn’t seem to matter. ✍