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WINEMAKING GURU PETER GAMBLE  
GIVES NOVA SCOTIA A SENSE OF PLACE

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## FROM MILE END TO NYC

**IN THE BIG APPLE, DELICATESSENS ARE VERITABLE INSTITUTIONS, AND PASTRAMI THE PIÈCE DE RÉ-SISTANCE.** North of the border, however, few foods spell Montreal like smoked meat. Among the Jewish delis from New Jersey to the Upper East Side, in keeping with tradition in la Métropole, Mile End Deli slings the latter, or what Anthony Nassif calls the “much better, tastier big brother of pastrami.”

“[Smoked meat] is dried cured for two weeks, then it is smoked for six, seven hours and then it is steamed for two [hours],” says the Montreal-bred chef. “You [get] that melty, smoky, very spicy, coriander, seedy kind of flavour.”

Ensnconed in the lush, trendy neighbourhood of Boerum Hill, Brooklyn since 2010 (with a second location in the more tony NoHo district of Manhattan established in 2012), Mile End Deli deals in more than just Montreal smoked meat. Tourtière (meat pie) also makes the cut, as does poutine, another distinctly Québécois offering. But more so than its Nouvelle France-inspired bill of fare, a menu that riffs on traditional Jewish cuisine — sweet and sour meatballs, potato knishes and latkes, varenikes (or pierogies), borscht and other delicacies — with the unmistakable pluck

and brazenness of Montreal’s culinary character, sets the emerging deli apart from its age-old contemporaries.

“I’m bringing that Montreal over-the-top flavour,” says Nassif. “Our stuff is very tasty, there’s a lot of flavour, and it’s all very playful.”

The deli’s erstwhile blini cake — blini pancakes stacked 70 layers tall with smoked white fish, smoked salmon, eggs, herbs, bacon, salmon roe, pickles, pickled shallots, red onion, chives, fennel and a slather of sour cream spilling over its many edges — epitomizes Nassif’s high-end meets off-the-wall aesthetic. Informed by his Lebanese-Jewish heritage, the culinary consultant’s menu is also peppered with Middle Eastern influences, with dishes such as beet fattoush and slow-roasted lamb merguez.

“It’s all stuff that your Jewish grandmother would make for Friday dinners, Sunday lunches,” says Nassif. “It’s all very close to home.”

Before his cousin, Mile End Deli’s owner Noah Bernamoff, coaxed him to uproot to New York and oversee food operations one year ago, Nassif held the reins at Montreal’s SuWu, and cut his teeth at a number of Montreal culinary spots, including Laurie Raphaël, Lucille’s and Greasy Spoon. He has also worked under chefs Joe Mercury,

David McMillan and Frédéric Morin of Joe Beef among others, and even traveled to Beirut to help open several restaurants. A graduate of St-Pius X Culinary Institute in Montreal’s East End, Nassif has worked the line since age 16, though his culinary acumen was bred long before, within a family of accomplished home cooks across many generations.

“My mom and my dad, my grandparents are all really great cooks and everything revolved around food in my family,” recalls Nassif. “When I was five or six, I watched my mother make eggs one day and all the steps registered in my head, and since then, I was always cooking.”

Elevating Jewish cuisine above its humdrum reputation is a full-time job, one Nassif is happy to fulfill for as long as he can, though the dearth of innovative Middle Eastern eateries akin to what Mile End Deli is to Jewish food beckons. One such restaurant in NYC is the Holy Grail. So is a cookbook.

“There’s no leading authority on Lebanese food,” says Nassif. “You have all these Israeli cooks, and the Italians, French, but who could I get a Lebanese cookbook from? There’s no real cool Lebanese food cookbook, so that, I really want to do. And fast because someone soon is going to come up with something.” \*