

HISTOIRES SANS SUITE

SUITE STORIES



LE
S^TSULPICE
HÔTEL MONTRÉAL



Steven Raichlen

Steven Raichlen is a multi-award-winning author, journalist, lecturer, television host, and novelist. His bestselling books and his popular TV shows—Primal Grill and Barbecue University in English and Le Maître du Grill in French—have redefined barbecue. His 30 books include the international blockbusters The Barbecue Bible and How to Grill (each with more than 1 million copies in print) and the New York Times bestselling Planet Barbecue. In June, 2012, Forge Books (MacMillan) published his first novel, a foodie love story set on Chappaquiddick Island (Martha's Vineyard) called Island Apart and published in French as Refuge à Chappaquiddick by Les Éditions de l'Homme. In May, 2014, Workman Publishing published Raichlen's latest book, Man Made Meals: The Essential Cookbook for Guys. His books have won five James Beard Awards and three IACP-Julia Child Awards, and been translated into 17 languages.



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“Before we start this interview, let’s get a few things straight. First, I’m not a chef. Or a grill master. Or the barbecue king. I’m a simple man doing what men did back then, when we worked the lumber camps deep in the woods north of Lac Saint-Jean. I’ve lived calm and quiet for 85 years and I’m not about to start making a hullabaloo now.

“Second, I will not disclose any ‘secret’ recipes—I don’t have any. I have never followed or written a recipe in my life.

“And third, I did *not* invent barbecue—Quebec-style or otherwise—and if you write that in your newspapers, I’ll call it what it is: moose poop.”

I look at them—reporters, photographers, cameramen, what have you—gathered around me in the courtyard of the Saint-Sulpice Hotel in Old Montreal. They fidget like kids during Sunday sermon. I never should have let the young woman and the American talk me into this press conference.

It’s one of those warm spring evenings you think will never come after a Quebec winter. Leaves have started to bud on trellis vines and the sunlight dances through them onto paving stones. You can smell the pig roasting over a maple wood fire on the huge steel rotisserie in the far corner of the courtyard.

I’ve never stayed in a hotel like this before, all fancy with marble and mirrors and a balcony overlooking the rooftops. It’s a far cry from that guesthouse way back when, where Marie and I went for

our honeymoon. We traveled all the way to Chicoutimi, where Marie had a sister. Water pitcher and basin on the washstand. Commode down the hall. We thought we were in a palace.

The fact is, I've been to Montreal only one time before—looking for our daughter, who up and left town with the foreman's son. That cost me plenty, starting with my job at the logging company. The foreman called my little Louise a tramp—like his son was some choirboy—and not a good-for-nothing who seduced a 17-year-old. Last thing the foreman saw of me was my fist. It took out two teeth and broke his nose, which was none too attractive to begin with.

What the devil is that? Smells like burning bacon. I turn toward that spit-roasting hog, which we had stuffed with roasted apples and saffron earlier this morning. Flames shoot up all around it like the burning bush in the Bible. I charge across the courtyard fast as my 85-year-old legs will take me, elbowing my "helpers" out of the way. There are three of them—fresh out of culinary school, white jackets starched like church clothes. Not one of them with enough common sense to put out the fire.

So I grab a garden hoe, rake away the coals, then reach for a bottle of Labatt's, which I shake to spray a stream of beer onto the fire. The flames extinguished, I show my acolytes how to arrange the coals next to the hog, not under it. While I'm at it, I toss some sweet potatoes on the embers. "Roast them until the skins are black as charcoal and the flesh soft enough to pierce with a toothpick," I say. That should give them something to burn and keep them out of trouble.

The hotel manager meant well enough when he introduced me to the kitchen staff. I could supervise if I wanted to—after all, it was my food they were making. Of course the restaurant would prepare and serve the actual dinner. "Why don't you relax and enjoy the hotel and Vieux Montréal," the manager said. "Just show up in time for the reception."

You've probably gathered by now, I'm a hands-on kind of guy and I don't like relying on others. Which is a good thing, because I slept late the next morning (must have been that big bed) and I didn't get to the kitchen until seven. My helpers were standing

around drinking coffee out of cups as tiny as thimbles, like they had seven days to Sunday to prepare dinner. "It takes a whole day to roast a hog that size," I said. "Where's the pig? Where's the stuffing? Why haven't you started the fire? Coffee break over."

So I set them to work cleaning fiddleheads and frying ramps, stuffing smoked elk and wild mushrooms into hog casings. I asked the chef to pry up some paving stones and dig a hole in the courtyard for the bean pot. He gave me a look that would have curdled milk, but the manager nodded for him to do it.

After Louise left, we waited a week, then another and another, hoping to receive a letter. Marie was so broken-hearted, I agreed to go to Montreal to search for our daughter. Now, I hate cities and crowds—why else would you live the woods a half hour's drive from nowhere? But there I was on a bus to Griffintown see an uncle who worked for the Mounties. If anyone could help me find the wayward girl, I figured it would be a policeman.

Uncle Georges and I searched Montreal from the Vieux Port to the Mont Royal. By the time we found that good-for-nothing foreman's son passed out in a bar near the waterfront, he had long since abandoned my daughter. She wasn't at the address we forced out of him. The neighbours barely noticed her absence and she left no way to reach her. I spent a few weeks looking for her at churches and soup kitchens, in bars and back alleys, in places I was ashamed to set foot in. I returned to Lac Saint-Jean alone.

Marie and I moped around for a couple months, but that didn't put bread on the table. One day she went to ask for work at the Rochambeau. Monsieur Rochambeau owned a big stone mansion on Lac Saint-Jean, and the paper mill in the north woods that paid for it. Madame Rochambeau hired Marie to do housework. Me, I provided like my Daddy did when times were tough—by hunting, fishing, and foraging. Like everyone up here, I ran a few tap buckets, which kept us in maple syrup, and I didn't worry too much about property lines.

One day Marie rushes home to tell me the Rochambeau need someone to roast a wild boar. Seems their chef had drunk himself into dismissal the previous evening. Marie and the other women

could handle the side dishes, but no one knew how to cook the 100-kilo beast Monsieur Rochambeau had bagged on a recent hunting trip. Seventy-five people were invited that evening. The Rochambeau were desperate.

Back when I was a timber man, we cooked boar, deer, elk, and any other meat the Good Lord sent our way over the cook fire at the edge of our encampment. I burned the food a little less badly than the other woodcutters, so I became the camp cook.

I get to the Rochambeau spread on the lake and you'd have thought I was the second coming. I skewered the boar from snout to tail on a spruce sapling as thick as my forearm. Mounted it on Y-shaped supports over a stone circle, which I filled with burning embers. From time to time, I tossed spruce branches on the coals to blast the boar with wood smoke. Marie snuck some of my smoked elk into the *tourtière*. Come time for dessert, we roasted apples with butter and sugar on stones next to the fire and served them with salty cheese and maple ice cream.

Monsieur Rochambeau pronounced the party a huge success and pumped my hand to thank me. Marie took over as head cook and they hired me as pit master. The Rochambeau threw parties every week. And all those simple ways we used to cook at the lumber camp came back to me. I'd nail fish from the lake to cedar boards and stand them in front of the fire. Buried onions and potatoes in the coals, then dusted off the ash and loaded them with curds, bacon, and gravy. Called 'em backwoods poutine.

One night Monsieur Rochambeau and his friends wanted steak, so I seasoned three-finger thick Spencers with pickling salt and crushed juniper berries. I scrubbed a big old steel shovel and greased the blade with bacon fat. I sizzled the meat right on the shovel blade over a blazing campfire. Monsieur Rochambeau declared it the best steak he had ever tasted, and that man has dined at the finest restaurants in Montreal, Quebec, and Toronto.

Well, I got pretty good at camp cooking, and Monsieur Rochambeau became pretty famous for his dinners. One Sunday toward the end of the summer, a journalist friend of his attended one of his cookouts. The next week I was famous. Seems the man wrote a big

story about Quebec's Backwoods Master of the Fire Pit. Made me and Marie feel proud to see our pictures in the newspaper. Monsieur Rochambeau moved us into an old fishing camp he owned near the mansion. We'd sit on the porch looking out over the lake for hours.

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, the Good Book says, but what He did next still defies my understanding. One day after work, Marie complained of a headache. "I'm going to lay down for a minute," she said. She collapsed on the way to the bedroom. By the time we got her to the hospital, her left side was completely paralyzed. Hemorrhagic stroke or some such thing, the doctor said. Monsieur Rochambeau helped me bring Marie back to the cabin in a wheelchair.

I cared for Marie best I could. Bathed her and dressed her. Cut up her food and fed her like a baby. But for a woman as independent as Marie, being an invalid was worse than being dead. She'd sit on the porch for hours, her eyes pooled with tears. She couldn't speak, but I knew what she was thinking. The same thing she had thought about every day since the day our daughter left us.

Marie lingered a few months and when she finally passed, it was less of a death than an act of mercy. I stayed on with the Rochambeau another summer, but my heart wasn't in cooking. When I asked to take my leave, Monsieur Rochambeau said he understood. He told me the cabin was mine to use rent-free for as long as I cared to. I hunted, fished, and foraged a little, but mostly I sat on that porch looking out over the lake.

I'd still be there now if it wasn't for the American. That's him just arrived in the courtyard. The reporters and cameramen drop me like a greased log to swarm him like bees around honey.

I had never heard of the "Master of Grill" or the "Wayne Gretzky of Barbecue" or any of the dozen other names they call the American. Apparently, I was the only one in Quebec Province who hadn't. Then again, I don't own a TV—never have—and I don't much read the newspapers. It seems the American speaks French and came to Montreal to make a television show about barbecue. His books became bestsellers and he became a celebrity.

One day, during an interview with a big Montreal newspaper, he issued a challenge.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “You all own grills—there isn’t a balcony so narrow or a terrace so small here in Montreal that it doesn’t have some sort of grill or smoker. You have fabulous meat, extraordinary seafood, and wild game we Americans can only dream about. You have all the ingredients for great barbecue sauce, from maple syrup to Canadian whisky. Why is there no such thing as Quebec barbecue?”

He went on to explain how each region in the United States has its own distinct style—barbecued beef in Texas, pulled pork in North Carolina, sweet smoky ribs in Kansas City. I don’t think he meant to embarrass us. He simply wanted to inspire us to come up with barbecue we could call our own.

Well, apparently that set a young lady reporter thinking and she spoke with some of the old-timers at the newspaper. Someone remembered the article about me they had published 30 years earlier.

The next thing I knew, the reporter and the American were standing on my front porch, looking for the “Backwoods Grill Master.”

“I’m sorry you drove all this way to find an old man who at this stage of life is pretty much good for nothing,” I said. Then, seeing as they looked so disappointed, I mentioned I had caught a few trout earlier that morning. “There’s more than I can eat myself. Why don’t you stay for lunch?”

So I went outside and lit some kindling in the fire pit. I cleaned the trout—two huge steelheads with skin that sparkled like Marie’s opal ring in the sunlight. I sliced up some morels and wild asparagus I had gathered earlier, and stuffed them in the fish bellies. I drizzled the trout with bacon fat and chopped some wild sorrel on top. I laid the fish on a split birch log and set it right in the middle of the fire. “Trout on a log,” I said. “That’s what my Daddy called it.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” the American said with a laugh. “You invented planked fish before we did.”

They left late in the afternoon, but not before the lady reporter took a bunch of photos with her pocket phone. The American pulled out one of his books and autographed it. I don’t understand a word of English, but the photographs sure made me hungry. They thanked me again and again for lunch, like I had just performed the miracle

of the loaves and fishes. I waved them off and figured that would be that. I went back to my rocking chair overlooking the water.

And there they were, back on my porch a month later, the lady holding up a newspaper. There was a big photo of me, with the American by my side at the fire pit. They invited me to a barbecue at some fancy hotel in Montreal. I figured it was to cook, and I told them I was too old—I'd retired my tongs a long time ago. No, they wanted me to appear as the guest of honour. The woman said the hotel staff would cook a menu of my "specialties"—under my supervision, of course. Said they'd send a limousine to pick me up and I could stay at the hotel for as long as I fancied. I tried to imagine the look on Marie's face if she had heard that one.

I declined—I'm a backwoods curmudgeon, after all. But they kept asking, and I could almost hear Marie say: "Do it."

"And that is why I'm here today," I tell the few reporters who are still listening. "But don't think for minute I wouldn't rather be back on the porch at my cabin looking out at the lake."

Then the American steps up on stage and everyone around me cheers. He shushes the crowd and in an accent as thick as *rillettes*, he starts speaking.

"*Mesdames et messieurs*, 10 years ago, I came to Montreal to teach you about barbecue. You welcomed me with open arms. You bought my books and watched my TV shows. You made me feel like a Quebecer."

"Six months ago, I issued a challenge—to find your own Quebec style of barbecue."

"Well, it turns out one of you already had, and he was a master of backwoods barbecue before I was out of diapers. He cooked over campfires and in underground pits. He grilled food on planks, logs, sticks, stones, and shovels. He hunted his own game, smoked his own bacon and sausage, and combined them with a wizardry that today we associate with the most celebrated chefs. I've had the pleasure to eat his food hot off the fire at his cabin on Lac St. Jean, and I can tell you this: I stand on the shoulders of a giant."

I look around like he's talking about someone else. Someone shouts "*Vive le Barbecue!*" and someone else shouts "*Vive le Québec!*" Cameras

are flashing. They ask me to say a few words, which is what I've dreaded most about the whole weekend. They lead me up to the podium. There must be a hundred people in the courtyard. I'm fumbling with my speech when I see her. I freeze like a moose caught in headlights.

In my wallet, I keep a picture of Marie taken the day I married her. It's an old black and white—creased and faded beyond recognition now—but I can still see her as she was then. Hair the color of hay gathered tight in a French braid. Eyes the blue of the sky after a rainstorm. The high cheekbones of a woman with a trace of Abanaki blood. Her spine as straight as the back of a hard wooden pew in the village church where we were married.

Well, the girl in front of me is the spitting image of Marie on our wedding day. Same hair. Same eyes. The same erect carriage. She walks toward me—uncertainly at first—and I notice two children following her. She stops in front of me and extends her hand.

"I'm Sylvie," she says. "I saw your photo in the newspaper. My mother was Louise. I believe I'm your granddaughter."

My heart darn near stops—then starts again, because one of the kids is waving a paper at me. It's a drawing of a man next to a barbecue grill with a spiral of smoke rising from the embers. The man has white hair and he's leaning on a cane. At the top of the paper, in block letters, the boy has written "Great-Grandpa."

It turns out my daughter had a daughter of her own. "Louise lived a good life," Sylvie says. "She died a few years ago, but before she did, she told me about you and Marie—how ashamed she was to have run away pregnant, how sorry she was she never reached out to you." The kids—eight and 10 years old—are my great-grandchildren. They started calling me *Papi* like they've known me all their lives. Then someone on stage says "*Bon appétit*," and the crowd stampedes the buffet table.

Sylvie and I don't eat. We're too busy talking. But the kids are hungry and when we look up, they're coming back to the table with the American. He sets down a platter heaped high with roast pork, *fèves au lard*, ember-grilled sweet potatoes, and other food I don't quite recognize. I sniff and taste: I guess those young helpers in their chef jackets learned something from me after all.

The American pulls a silver flask from his pocket and pours some whisky into my coffee cup, then Sylvie's. I look over my shoulder, but just for a second. Marie never did approve of liquor. I suppose she'd make an exception under the circumstances. With great ceremony the American clinks his flask against our cups.

"To the man who invented Quebec barbecue," he says.

Before I can look confused, one of the kids—the young artist—comes to my rescue with a translation:

"À l'homme qui a inventé le barbecue québécois."

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