

# *edible*

VANCOUVER & WINE COUNTRY

**EAT. DRINK. READ. THINK.**

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the taste of home  
pocketful of comfort  
the art of jam

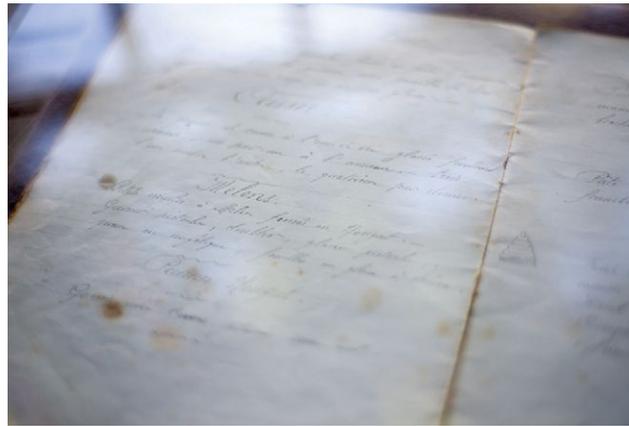
A MEMBER OF EDIBLE COMMUNITIES



THE ART OF  
jam  
IS BEING PRESERVED  
at the FRENCH TABLE

STORY BY  
SHONAGH MACRAE

PHOTOS BY  
MICHELLE PETERS



**B**LUEBERRIES FALL INTO THE BRIGHT-SILVER heavy-bottomed pot, pinging off the sides before settling into a half inch of water. Clang! The lid goes on. The pot is hoisted onto a burner. Steam rises. Heat and a vigorous wooden spoon begin to break through the tough skins, releasing a dark purple juice. The berries float.

This first step is essential with blueberries. Adding sugar before breaking them open will leave shrivelled berries suspended in jelly, and *we are making proper jam*, he tells me. I'm scribbling notes at the side of Hervé Martin, proprietor of **The French Table**, more aware now of the complexity in this seemingly simple preserve. Proportion, process, experience—all are necessary to create a glistening jam that drips perfectly off a spoon.

He remembers first learning about the art of jam, a child at his mother's side with an impulse to cook. Hervé soon took over some of her kitchen duties—eleven years old, balanced on a chair over a black pot of boiling oil to cook the *pomme frites* for his family's Thursday lunch. He preferred the hot stove to wrestling outside with his brothers.

This early passion for food led Hervé to leave school at fourteen for restaurant work—a two-month apprenticeship set up by his father, a disapproving engineer, at a truck stop. He later learned that his father had not only paid the truck stop owner, but also asked him to make the experience so



Photos: Michelle Peters - michellepeters.ca

miserable that Hervé would give up his cooking dreams. To his father's chagrin, the truck stop owner failed.

So began six years of intense training, starting with a chef's knife, moving on to a rolling pin, and then a butcher's knife before ending at a slaughterhouse. He was paid next to nothing, but those early experiences in French kitchens laid his foundation, both for kitchen life and for technical expertise. He remembers frequent beatings, being locked in the freezer until the head chef passed out drunk and the assistant chef was able to unlock the door. Despite everything, it never occurred to him to choose a different career path; he was meant for the kitchen.

By his early twenties, he was making his way up the ranks—staging with Paul Bocuse, working at the first three-star Michelin restaurant in Switzerland, and finally landing a position as head chef for King Leopold of Belgium. From his humble beginnings at the truck stop, Hervé had become a top chef.

After his move to Vancouver, he was hired to launch a restaurant, but six months later, the man who hired him decided to leave. Hervé absorbed the debt of unpaid bills, rebranded the space, took off his chef coat, polished his smile, and opened his first restaurant.

Hervé talks about *L'Hermitage* in its early days: having to change his management practices because of the vast cultural gap between a traditional restaurant in France and his new restaurant here. He realized how much he enjoyed connecting with customers in front of house, hearing their stories and sharing his own. There was just one problem: he missed the stove.

Discussing his life in restaurants, Hervé wonders at his passion for food. His grandfather was an *amazing* pastry chef but sold his shop the year Hervé was born. With no role model to direct him, his passion seems to have appeared from some genetic predisposition for food. Most compelling about his story is where this passion finally found its full expression: not in haughty foie gras or silky hollandaise but in humble jam. It is through jam that Hervé returns to the kitchen, and it is through jam that Hervé, in true French style, explores every aspect of our local food culture: foraging, cooking, hosting.

Forgotten fruit trees with heavy boughs languishing in backyards. Hervé rolls slowly through alleyways, watching for feasting birds and falling fruit. He cannot bear to see the fruit wasted, especially when he is lucky enough to spot a quince tree. He steps in, saying, let me pick your fruit, and care for your trees.

Quince is hard, with a thick skin and huge core. Picking sixty pounds of quince gives him twenty jars of jam—so much labour for those precious jars, but *oh ... the flavour.*



Hervé Martin is a master of jam

Pear perfumed with rose petals, a spoonful inevitably stolen from the jar. The colour, transformed by heat, time, and sugar, from light pink to deep ruby red.

Experience is knowing that the thick peel is full of pectin and can be used to firm up berries and apricots; cooking down the quince slowly, three days of not even a simmer, to make quince paste, a classic French sweet; understanding that to charge for this jam is unreasonably expensive, but that the gift of a jar of quince jam, a symbol of his passion, is where his process ends and begins.

Blueberries, thickened with the perfect amount of sugar and pectin from the skins, heat and time proportionately applied before spooning the jam into a jar and sealing it with a copper lid: a gift for loyal customers at the end of a decadent French meal, but best served at the kitchen table. Sweet, deep-purple jam against creamy, pale-yellow butter on a warm baguette.

The French Table, 3916 Main Street, Vancouver, 604-689-3237 [thefrenchtable.ca](http://thefrenchtable.ca)

*Shonagh is staying in from the cold to eat copious amounts of jam and butter and baguette, further developing her scholarship in the art of jam. She can be found at her kitchen table or by email: [sho.macrae@gmail.com](mailto:sho.macrae@gmail.com)*

*Photographer Michelle Peters can be found in the kitchen, spreading strawberry jam on absolutely everything. [michellepeters.ca](http://michellepeters.ca)*

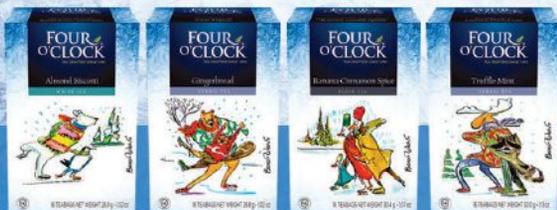
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