

Atlantic Promise

In Newfoundland, chefs, foragers, and entrepreneurs are nurturing the Canadian province's culinary roots—and planting new seeds while they're at it.

By Gina DeCaprio Vercesi



*The historic town
of Trinity, on
Newfoundland's
Bonaville Peninsula.*

ALIGHT MIST FELL as I followed fourth-generation Newfoundlander Lori McCarthy into the forest. It was mid-June in Canada's easternmost province, and I'd joined her on the Avalon Peninsula for a culinary workshop offered by her company **Food Culture Place** (from \$72), which preserves the rural traditions of her homeland.

"Newfoundlanders call this capelin weather," McCarthy said, leading me up the steps to her yurt. Inside, a fire crackled in the woodstove. Shelves held hand-labeled jars—pickled knotweed, spruce-tip salt, dried chanterelles. The term, she explained, refers to the drizzly, late-spring days that arrive right before capelin, a species of silvery forage fish, come ashore to spawn.

Life in Newfoundland is tied to the sea. For nearly 500 years, people here pulled a seemingly endless supply of Atlantic cod from the waters of the Grand Banks, then one of the world's richest



fishing grounds. But by the early 1990s, industrial bottom trawlers had decimated cod stocks, and in 1992, the Canadian government instituted a moratorium on cod fishing, devastating the industry and ending a long-standing way of life. The province lost 10 percent of its population. Young people—"moratorium kids"—were encouraged to seek opportunity elsewhere, often moving to Ontario or Alberta. But over the past decade or so, many have returned, creating new traditions rooted in the island's wild larder.



▲ Lori McCarthy, founder of Food Culture Place, harvesting kelp.

◀ Green salad with nasturtium and roasted-squash soup at the Twine Loft.

Over cups of fermented-fireweed tea, McCarthy told me how, following a stint in Ontario, she realized that visitors might better understand her home by tasting its traditional cuisine. She began showing up to restaurants in St. John's, Newfoundland's capital, carrying armfuls of bulrush and stinging nettle. Soon she was supplying chefs with a steady stream of foraged ingredients. In 2010, she started leading cultural workshops. "Everyone told us there was nothing here for us anymore," she said. "But this place has so much. It's time we started telling a new story."

On the beach, we picked creamy oyster leaf, delicate beach peas, and spicy sea rocket that tasted like a blend of arugula and wasabi. Lunch was a maritime feast: On top of savory cod stew served in scallop shells as big as soup bowls, McCarthy grated dehydrated diver-scallop roe, adding an umami depth. Smoked Arctic char from neighboring Labrador came next, layered on thick slices of brown bread and sprinkled with citrusy larch shoots. "When I started leading tours, I'd cook six or seven little courses over the fire—food that was all from right here," she said. "I wanted people to understand how we ate."

My base was **Cliffs Edge Retreat** (doubles from \$140), where I warmed up in the outdoor sauna before heading to



the property's restaurant, **Forager** (*entrées* \$26–\$29). A half-dozen Merasheen Bay oysters arrived with rhubarb mignonette and a scattering of oyster leaf, which I recognized immediately. Chef Jeremy Shaw was impressed by my identification skills, and I confessed that I'd spent the morning with McCarthy. "One of the blessings of the moratorium was that it forced people to discover things they'd never noticed because cod was so prominent," he said. "We have chanterelle mushrooms, we have beach peas, we have oysters, crab, scallops, and lobster. That's gold right there."

That said, you don't have to look far to find the province's signature marine resource, as cod fishing on a smaller scale has been cautiously reintroduced. I ate it at my next stop, **Fork** (*entrées* \$22–\$34), co-owned by husband-and-wife chefs Kyle Puddester and Kayla O'Brien. What began as a pop-up has evolved into a destination restaurant on their five-acre homestead in the tiny town of Mobile. I started with crispy tempura cod tongues—not actually a tongue, but a small throat muscle—followed by a delicate, butter-poached rendition of the fish, served in a creamy broth and garnished with tender beach greens.

The next day I headed north to the snug waterfront community of Port Rexton, on the Bonavista Peninsula, where I checked in to **Fishers' Loft Inn** (*doubles from \$108*). John and Peggy Fisher opened the inn in 1997 after moving from Ontario, becoming pioneers in the peninsula's

▲ *Kayla O'Brien and Kyle Puddester, chefs and owners of Fork.*

▶ *An ocean view from Cliffs Edge Retreat, on the Avalon Peninsula.*



post-moratorium tourism economy. In the nearly two decades since, John has watched new pathways emerge. "The island has become a place of the future, with the next generation of Newfoundlanders coming in on the ground floor," he said. "Our job is to protect the community by bringing the young people back."

I spent the next day relishing the culinary creativity of the entrepreneurs Fisher described. In the town of Bonavista, I tucked in to French toast topped with blueberry compote and crème fraîche at the **Lovely Grand Bakeshop** (*entrées* \$9–\$17), a café owned by Newfoundland native Valerie Ryan, who returned home after 25 years in Nova Scotia. I sipped a Firehouse Red Ale at the **Port Rexton Brewing Co.**, run by Nova Scotia expats Sonja Mills and Alicia MacDonald in the town's former schoolhouse. And at **Two Whales Coffee Shop** (*entrées* \$7–\$15), a seasonal cooperative café led by a group of five women, I grabbed a "happy hiker" sandwich. Loaded with homemade beet hummus, pickled vegetables, and herbed goat cheese, it was the perfect fuel for an afternoon trek along the dramatic cliffs of the Skerwink Trail.

That evening I drove to the town of Trinity. Houses painted in bright primary colors circled the harbor, framed by

Bright and untamed, the earthy greens tasted of the wild landscape.

Shawn Dawson gathers wild blueberries on the Southern Shore, outside St. John's.

The seafood tower at Rabble, in St. John's.



white and purple lupines. Dinner awaited at the **Twine Loft** (*prix fixe* \$54). Housed in a restored fishing captain's repair shed, the waterfront restaurant is run by Marieke Gow, who took the helm from her parents after training as a sommelier in Ottawa. Pouring me a glass of Okanagan Pinot Gris to accompany succulent lamb shank with couscous and roasted root vegetables, Gow smiled. "I hadn't really seen a future here. Then suddenly, rural Newfoundland became cool."

My trip ended in St. John's, where I met Todd Perrin, whose previous restaurant, Mallard Cottage, was among the first to bring international acclaim to the city. Dressed like an old salt in a flannel shirt and orange watch cap, he joined me at **Rabble** (*entrées* \$17–\$26), his chic new bistro on Water Street. "Eating in Newfoundland has always been about fueling your body so you could work," he said. "But about 15 or 20 years ago, folks came back after having all these experiences away and said, 'Hey, what if we do *this* with the ingredients we have here?'"



This fueled the creativity of Newfoundland's kitchens. "Cod tongues, cod cheeks, every kind of fish, wild game, all the things you can pick in the woods—people are very motivated by those ingredients," Perrin said. Case in point: Rabble's gorgeous seafood tower, an ode to that abundance, piled high with fresh oysters, potted trout, snow crab, and tangy scallop ceviche.

On my final morning, capelin weather gave way to sunshine, illuminating a foraging walk in nearby Portugal Cove–St. Philip's with Shawn Dawson, author of *The Forager's Dinner*. We gathered sheep sorrel, lamb's quarters, and chickweed before setting up a banquet at the **Grounds Café at Murray's Garden Centre** (*entrées* \$7–\$18). The centerpiece was what Dawson called "a big, weird salad," dressed with lemon, alder mustard, maple syrup, and the vinegar from homemade Japanese knotweed pickles.

Bright and untamed, the earthy greens tasted of the wild landscape. I felt a pang to be leaving—my visit barely scratched the surface of all that was growing on this beautiful island. Then I remembered something McCarthy had said on my first day: you'll always know a Newfoundlander in heaven, because they're the only ones trying to get back home. 🌿