The Tourtière and Its Link to One’s French Canadian Heritage

Unless one is unfortunate to be born without taste buds on one’s tongue, nearly every person has a favorite food that he/she enjoys. Sometimes this food is a very special cuisine with a unique recipe that has cultural significance. This is how it is with the tourtière. Tourtière is generally known as a French Canadian pork pie baked during the Christmas season and traditionally served during the Reveillons after midnight mass on Christmas Eve. There are many variations on the tourtière (in fact, as will be pointed out below, referring to the tourtière as a pork pie is a bit of a misnomer since pork has usually been mixed or substituted with some other meat through the ages), which either depends on the region in Quebec a person comes from and, more likely, whose mother or grandmother one had in life.

However, this manuscript is not going to be a collection of tourtière recipes (even if I wished to, editing requirements would not permit me to do so). Instead, it is about the tourtière serving as an important nostalgic link to one’s French Canadian heritage (referred to as one’s Franco-American heritage in New England). This nostalgia is one shared by many people, including myself, where memories of family, time and place are important. In order to show this, the paper will be divided into three parts. The first part will deal with the origins and evolution of the tourtière; the second part will concentrate on the importance of the tourtière; and the final part will deal directly with the theme of this article – the tourtière’s link with one’s French Canadian heritage.

Regarding the origins of the tourtière, there are two different views on this that depends on whether one sees the tourtière as a pie which originated

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from France or as a pie that owes its origins from Quebec. The justification for its French origins is that the word tourtière means the deep baking dish in which the pie was baked. In France, the tourtière pie-dish was a kitchen utensil for cooking pigeons and other birds. The contents of the dish were known as piece tourtière. As early as 1632, Acadians settlers (in present-day Nova Scotia) hunted partridges and used them in their pies. Therefore, this school of thought sees the tourtière as originally a pigeon pie from France which, in later times, would have the meat of other birds and farm animals used as a substitute.

However, if one sees the tourtière as being Quebecois in its origins, the link is with the now-extinct bird, the passenger pigeon, which in French means tourtes. At the beginning of the 19th century it is estimated that there might have been three to five billion passenger pigeons in North America – with Quebec being one of its nesting grounds, particularly on Île d’Orléans in the St. Lawrence River. Unfortunately, this beautiful bird was easy to hunt and market hunting was one of the main causes of the species’ extinction. The slaughter of passenger pigeons for marketing, combined with the species’ low reproductive rate, led to their disappearance in Quebec by the 1880s and the last passenger pigeon died at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914. This is the prevailing school of thought on the origin of the tourtière – possibly because of the tragic fate of the passenger pigeon, but, more likely, because it gives authenticity to French Canadian claims to this pie whose antecedents lay with their forefathers (who are we kidding, foremothers!) in baking this

All of the sources I used in this article have been taken from various websites. Regarding the debate on the origins of the tourtière, two websites give the best possible explanations: one website, http://www.ealdormere.sca.org/vestyorvik/tortiere.html, with an article entitled Exploring Tourtière, mysteriously written under the pseudonym Lady Elanor of Huntingdon, gives a pretty good analysis, adding some of the regional variations in Quebec on tourtière recipes; and a second website, http://www.quiltersmuse.com/Tourtiere2.html, with an article simply titled Tourtière, has a briefer explanation than the former, but adds information on the importance of the pig to previous generations of Quebec farmers.

This information is provided in an article written by Lynne Valeriote, The Great Canadian Feast, on the website http://www.foodtv.ca/feature/ontheburner/article11_4_2002_07_31.asp.

delicious treat. The most important point of the above sad saga is that French Canadian cooks had to find other animals and wildlife as a substitute for the passenger pigeon. The choice of animal often depended on where one lived in Quebec. For example, in the Lac St. Jean region, tourtières were often made with rabbit, while in Lac Brome in the Eastern Townships, duck was sometimes used. In the end, the meat most often used was ground pork because the pig was an important animal of subsistence on the Quebec farm. However, since many families used other meats in combination with pork, usually beef or veal, this has lead to the continuing lexical confusion in deciding whether the tourtière should be called a pork pie or a meat pie.

Confusion over tourtières are abound, though. One major reason why is that more often than not in Quebec history many families went through hard times, especially during The Great Depression. Therefore, tourtières were often packed with mashed potatoes in some families – since potatoes are a quick and cheap way to stretch the meat in a pie. There is also debate on how it should be spiced and even whether it is appropriate to eat it with ketchup.

The reason why so much importance is placed on the tourtière is because it is important since it is traditionally the highlight of the Reveillons which is the nocturnal meal served after Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. Nearly all French Canadians used to be church-going Roman Catholics reflecting the Church’s dominance in Quebec society between 1837 and 1960. The Roman Catholic Midnight Mass is considered a high mass that is formal with a lot of singing and music and, naturally, quite long. Also, prior to the Vatican II reforms in the early 1960s, one had to fast on both food and drink for five and three hours, respectively, before receiving Holy Communion during the mass. When everyone came home from Midnight Mass the Reveillons

5 The use of rabbit in tourtière is discussed in a recipe my mother received in a box of MONARCH Pie Crust Mix in the 1960s; and the use of duck in tourtière is found in an article written in French entitled Tourtière de canard du lac Brome found on the website, http://www.servicevie.com/01Alimentation/recette/RF_HTML/HTML_2500/2539b.html, 15.04.2004.

6 In the article on the Quiter’s Muse website (see endnote no. 2), one man reminiscing about eating tourtière with his family mentioned the fact that his brother used to eat this pie with ketchup. He then added (most likely, humorously) that his brother “was considered a philistine” for doing so!

7 I know this from the catechism classes I had at my old school, St. Kevin’s (the
Place and Memory in Canada: Global Perspectives
Lieu et Mémoire au Canada: Perspectives Globales

started with tourtière being the most important part of the lavish meal served. Everyone traditionally ate, drank and celebrated until sunrise and then slept into the afternoon on Christmas Day. The custom of giving gifts varied from family to family with gifts being exchanged after the meal or on New Year’s Day.

The important thing to remember is that because the Reveillons is traditionally important, mothers and grandmothers spend a lot of time preparing the meal, especially in baking the tourtière. I remember watching my late mother make the piecrust and prepare the meat (in her pies a combination of pork and veal was used, without mashed potatoes – tourtière heresy to my mother!) and being used as a taster as she spiced the meat in the way we liked it. Tourtière recipes were jealously guarded and secretly passed from generation to generation. In fact, recipes often went unwritten as it was with my mother’s. The sad thing is that in modern-day Quebec (and in New England too) many daughters (and sons too!) did not take the time to learn how to make their mother’s tourtières when they were alive, and as a result, many people today are left with the tourtière being only a nostalgic memory from childhood.

This nostalgic memory of tourtière leads to the theme of this paper: the tourtière’s link to one’s French Canadian heritage. Naturally, if one is a Canadian whose mother tongue is French, there is no need to think about one’s French Canadian roots. However, in both Canada and the United States, particularly in New England, there are many people of French Canadian descent, who for one reason or another, assimilated into English-speaking Canadian or American culture. In the United States the idea of the same name as the parish church), while preparing for Holy Communion during 2nd grade in 1966. Our teacher reminded us then that it was O.K. now to eat and drink one hour prior to receiving communion. I must say that at the age of 8, my fellow pupils and I took this seriously at first – and our teacher was a laywoman, not a nun. So one can only imagine how it felt at Catholic schools before the Quiet Revolution and Vatican II when the nun, who was one’s teacher, ordered everyone not to eat five hours before communion!

8 My mother, who did not follow the customs of the Reveillons to the letter, preferred to open the gifts first (either after Midnight Mass or after midnight, if we didn’t attend church services) because while we were enjoying our presents, she had peace and quiet preparing the table. On the other hand, my godparents and my mother’s stepmother always opened their gifts on New Year’s Day.
melting pot accelerated this assimilation. In the New England states there used to be the possibility of maintaining one’s Franco-American character through the many Roman Catholic parishes in this region, but by the latter part of the 20th century, many Franco-Americans intermarried or stopped attending Catholic services.

However, even in the United States, there is a greater stress today on the mosaic of multiculturalism where looking back at one’s heritage is more in vogue today. However, if someone does not speak French or attend Roman Catholic services – an aspect that is not even important to many Quebecois anymore – then one is limited in finding links to one’s French Canadian heritage. The link, as I was surprised to find out, is often the tourtière.

This discovery came about accidentally in reflecting back on my life after my mother died in July 2002. Born in Montreal and coming from a mixed family (my mother being French Canadian and my father German-Jewish), with my family assimilating into the English-speaking life that was possible there prior to the provincial language laws of the 1970s, my contact with French Canadian life was surprisingly limited9. I attended an English Catholic school since I was baptized Roman Catholic, but received my sacraments and attended church services in the then-Irish parish of St. Kevin’s, which meant, among other things, taking part in the annual St. Patrick’s Day parade in the city – though I didn’t have a drop of Irish blood in me!10 My French (to my regret) has never been better than intermediate, so French-Canadian life was often passed on to me in my early years mostly from my mother and her relatives.

What was ingrained in me from French Canadian life was a love of tourtière. The first tourtières I remember eating were those of my mother’s aunt in her home in St. Henri. I can still remember sitting on my mother’s knee there, enjoying eating tourtière with plenty of ketchup. I also ate a very good tourtière from my mother’s stepmother at her annual New Year’s Day dinner. I understood little of the French spoken around me, but I knew a

9 Since my mother received her education in a French Catholic school and my father received his in Germany, it would have been impossible for me to have an English-language education in Quebec after 1974, as a result of the language laws Bill 22, and later, Bill 101.

10 The Irish were definitely in the minority at St. Kevin’s by the 1960s, but the entire parish staff was still Irish at the time my family moved to Ottawa in 1970.
good tourtière. However, my mother started making her own tourtières after her aunt used potatoes in it – basically using the recipe of her aunt’s earlier tourtières, but spicing it more to our family’s liking. We ate the first ones after Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve or simply after midnight when my sister and I tired of regularly attending church, as we got older. We had moved to Ottawa by then and hardly anyone we spoke to in high school, and later at university, really knew what a tourtière was or what it tasted like; but our friends certainly liked it when they came to our home and tasted it for the first time during the Christmas season.

Anyway, I thought I was grasping at straws trying to find a link to my French Canadian heritage via the tourtière when I started surfing the Internet websites and discovered that there are many people of French Canadian descent, particularly in the New England states, who speak little or no French, but want to rediscover their French Canadian/Franco American heritage. Many of these people are in the Indian summer of their lives, and are also reflecting nostalgically on bygone days. And what is the one symbol that comes up nearly every time: the tourtière! A Franco-American woman, Juliana L’Heureux, wrote that “tourtière is an important symbol of Franco-American culture that it generates powerful nostalgic memories for many people”. Another Franco-American, Paul Marion, a poet from Massachusetts, wrote that of the three things that identify Franco-American culture – language, religion and food – “people lose contact with them in that order”. He went on to say that “you find people mentioning the totemic food, like pork pies. That’s the last identifier to go. Even when everything else goes, that stays”. The memories of eating tourtières were endless with many people writing how much they missed the tourtières of their mother, grandmother, aunt, etc. and regretting not having their recipes. Further proof of the importance of the tourtière in Franco-American life was the Soirée de la Franco-Amerique at the University of Southern Maine in Lewiston in March 2002 where the highlight of the occasion was the First

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11 There are two good sources on the web for nostalgic references towards tourtières. The first one is entitled “Ils se soviennent: The quiet presence of New England’s Franco-Americans”, which is a reprint of an article by Michael Kenney in the Boston Globe on October 21, 1999 and found on http://users.adelphia.net/~frenchex/Globearticle.html. The second excellent source is a June 2000 article by Juliana L’Heureux entitled “When Are You Going to Write About Tourtière?”: Tourtière is a Trademark of the Franco-American Culture and found on http://www.mainewriter.com/recipes/About-Tourtieres.rtf.
International Tourtière Bake-off. In concluding this paper, the link of the passenger pigeon with the tourtière may have a deeper meaning: the passenger pigeon like many a late mother’s tourtières were ephemeral – bountiful, beautiful and sumptuous, even taken for granted that they would always exist, then suddenly disappearing, never to return again. However, I would like to conclude on a merrier note, quoting a poem by Maureen “Mo” Perry, Tourtières: A Salute to Champions, in tribute to her mother who won the above bake-off in Lewiston, Maine.

Tourtière Champion;
Master of meat and spice,
Artist in onions and crust,
Merci pour la recette!
Merci pour les tourtières!
On te salue12.

Thank you too, Mama!

Works Cited


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12 The poem by Maureen “Mo” Perry can be found on the following website at http://www.fawi.net/ezine/vol3no3/mperrytortiere.html.