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Chef Marc-André Choquette of Tableau Bar Bistro, with girlfriend Andrea Polz, and his Braised Lamb Shank with Polenta dish.

Photograph by: Ian Smith, PNG



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The Sun's chef at home profile series continues with Marc-André Choquette of Tableau Bar Bistro.

After a week of cooking French bistro classics, chef Marc-André Choquette still seeks the comfort of his mother's spaghetti sauce.

Choquette, executive chef at the recently opened Tableau Bar Bistro in the Loden Hotel, always blocks out a little time on a day off to cook for himself and his girlfriend, Andrea Polz.

The two maintain a herb garden at home full of basil, oregano, thyme and rosemary.

"I like to make something that will last the week, so I make lasagna or my mom's spaghetti sauce, which I remember by taste," he said. "For something at the last minute, it could be garlic-tomato-chili pasta with fresh herbs, but this summer what I've really been into is fresh cherry tomatoes from our planters at home with basil and garlic."

When it comes to a fall comfort dish, he'll make something like a Braised Lamb Shank with Polenta. You can see video of Choquette cooking the dish [here](#).

Cooking was in Choquette's blood from an early age, but like any good kid from Laval on the outskirts of Montreal, his food was first and foremost fuel for hockey.

"We would run inside and eat spaghetti and it would fill you up and then run right back outside to continue playing," he recalled. "I was a goalie so I would eat in my pads."

Surrounded as it was by field crops during the growing season, Laval had a small-town feel.

"Where I grew up was really like a village and in the summer the truck would come up the street and they would knock on the door to sell you flats of strawberries or raspberries," he said.

Food at home was French influenced and fresh, which is reflected in the restraint that Tableau exercises, cautious to not "overwork" products.

"It was being invited to a friend's house for dinner that caused me to realize that what they were cooking was totally different from what my mom was cooking," he recalled. "I was tasting things that I had never tasted at home and it really drove my curiosity about food."

"I was always the kid who helped when my mom shopped, so I got to know the ingredients that my mom would buy, like blue cheese or cauliflower or fish," he said.

"At Easter or Christmas we would always gather at the house of my mom's sister, the whole family, aunts, cousins, uncles," he said. "I was always amazed by one person's ability to cook such a beautiful dinner and have people sit down at the same time."

While still in high school, Choquette was working as a dishwasher in a small Greek restaurant in Laval when a cook failed to show up for his shift. He was thrown into the fray as a line cook.

"Mother's Day one guy didn't show up so the boss asked me to call a buddy to come in and bus for me and I jumped in the kitchen," Choquette said. "I loved the adrenalin and being creative putting food on the plate; all that kind of sparked something in me."

Choquette enrolled in culinary school after high school, and landed his first serious cooking job in his old neighbourhood, earning an early but impactful introduction to the art of cooking at Laval's Le Mitoyen from the legendary Richard Bastien, father of rising star chef Jeremie Bastien.

From there Choquette did a tour at a Michelin-starred restaurant in Normandy before making the rounds at Lumiere, Sooke Harbour House and West, then opening the failed Voya in the same Loden Hotel space that Tableau Bar Bistro now occupies.

"With [the Food Network] people think that they can make it as a chef right away, but you have to realize that it takes time," said Choquette, who has been climbing the ladder in Vancouver for 15 years. "You might have to work longer than eight hours and you are going to have to work on Friday and Saturday night."

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5 Questions with Chef Choquette

1. Your favourite ingredient?

Garlic, because the aroma of garlic cooking always makes my mouth water.

2. Your favourite cookbook?

Becoming a Chef, by Andrew Dornenburg and Karen Page.

3. Your favourite cooking tool?

My offset spatula for tasting, flipping and plating.

4. Your favourite meal under \$15 in Vancouver?

No. 13 Pho (tendon, tripe and medium-rare beef) at Pho Thai Hoa on Kingsway.

5. Your favourite meal ever?

I've had a lot of great meals. In particular, I can remember my first-ever three-Michelin-star meal at chez Pierre Gagnaire in Paris 18 years ago. I finally ended going back again six years ago, and it was still spectacular.

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Braised Lamb Shanks

See video of chef Marc-André Choquette cooking this dish [here](#).

2 tablespoons (30 mL) extra virgin olive oil

1 medium onion, chopped

2 stalks celery, chopped

1 large carrot, chopped

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

8 whole cloves of garlic

1 sprig of rosemary

1 sprig of thyme

2 bay leaves

½ teaspoon (2 mL) of whole black peppercorns

2 tablespoons (30 mL) tomato paste

4 lamb shanks, about 6 pounds (2.7 kg) in total

About 10 cups (2.5 L) beef broth (homemade is best)

½ cup (125 mL) of Madeira

Preheat the oven to 350 F (170 C). Heat the oil in a large Dutch oven or deep ovenproof skillet over medium heat. Add the onion, celery, carrot and season with 2 teaspoons salt and pepper to taste. Cook stirring occasionally, until the vegetables are tender and just beginning to brown, about 20 minutes. Add the garlic and tomato paste, mix well and cook until the tomato paste darkens, about 3 minutes. Add the Madeira, black peppercorn, rosemary, thyme and bay leaves.

Salt and pepper the lamb shanks, sear over medium heat in a skillet until golden brown on all sides. Lay them in a single layer over the vegetables in the Dutch oven. Add enough stock to surround but not cover the shanks and bring to a simmer. Transfer to the oven. Braise the shanks, uncovered, until the meat is fork tender, about 2 hours. Remove from the oven and set aside to cool for about 15 minutes to allow the fat to rise to the surface of the sauce, delicately transfer the meat to a plate.

Skim the fat from the surface of the braising liquid. Strain the sauce through a fine mesh strainer into a bowl, pressing down on the vegetables with a spoon to extract as much liquid as possible. Discard the vegetables. Degrease the sauce again if necessary and return to the Dutch oven. Simmer the sauce until reduced by about half. Return the shanks to the sauce and warm gently over low heat. Taste the sauce and adjust the seasoning with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to a warm serving dish and serve with polenta and carrots (recipes below).

Makes 4 servings

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Creamy Polenta

1 1/2 cups (375 mL) chicken stock

1 1/2 cups (375 mL) whipping cream

1/2 teaspoon (2 mL) freshly grated nutmeg

3/4 teaspoon (4 mL) salt

Pinch fresh ground black peppercorns

10 tablespoons (150 mL) cornmeal/ polenta

1/4 cup (60 mL) freshly grated Padano cheese, plus extra for dusting

In a heavy saucepan, combine the stock and cream, bring to a boil. Add the nutmeg and salt. Whisk in the polenta and cook over low heat for about 20 to 30 minutes, stirring often, until the grains are soft. Fold in the cheese. Serve immediately or reserve.

To help the polenta to come cleanly out of the pan, cook over medium heat. Run a spatula or wooden spoon around the sides of the pan to clean off the polenta. Do not stir, but wait for a large bubble to begin to form and push the polenta upward. Pour immediately into a warm dish.

The polenta can be made ahead and reheated; add ¼ to ½ cup of stock, cover the dish and reheat in the microwave or over low heat. Whisk well and season with peppercorns to taste before serving. Grate a dusting of Parmesan over the top just before serving.

Makes 4 servings

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Cumin Roasted Baby Carrots

2 bunches of baby carrots

2 tablespoons (30 mL) extra virgin olive oil

1 ½ teaspoons (7 mL) cumin seeds

1 teaspoon (5 mL) of kosher salt

Combine carrots and all remaining ingredients in large bowl; toss to coat. Spread in single layer on a baking sheet. Roast carrots until tender and lightly caramelized, turning carrots over once, 30 to 35 minutes.

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