

The Life Saving Properties of Tourtière by Ernie Bies, Nov. 10. 2015

My friend Mary dropped by yesterday with a gift of a Tourtière, which we will enjoy at Christmas time. It brought back memories of another gift of a Tourtière 42 years ago.

I was working for Indian and Northern Affairs in Ottawa in December of 1973 and my wife was working in a hospital in Hull (now Gatineau) Quebec. She was the only Anglophone in an all French hospital and getting an on-the-job French immersion course to supplement what she remembered from High School in North Bay. Coincidentally her grade 13 French teacher was Emile Guy who I had terrorized through four years of French in Hearst before he gave up and moved South to North Bay.

We had an MGB and that December day the city was shut down by a blizzard that sent



government workers home early. I knew she would never get home by herself so I walked the four kilometers over to rescue her. My timing could not be better as I found her about a block from her hospital hopelessly stuck in the snow. It took about four hours of digging, pushing and holding our breath to travel the six kilometers back to our apartment on Fifth Ave in Ottawa. Exhausted, we dragged ourselves up three flights of stairs with no idea what we would have for supper, probably the old staple Kraft Dinner which had always bailed is out before. We were happily surprised to find a package leaning on the door from good friends

of ours in Yellowknife. Marie-Paul, who was originally from Northern Ontario, had strong French Canadian roots and she had sent us a Tourtière in the mail.

We didn't even stop for a minute to consider that maybe a meat pie that had spent a week in the Canadian postal system, travelling across the country, might not be the safest to eat. We popped it into the oven to heat it up, called Marie-Paul to thank her for the timely gift and wolfed it down.

There were no after effects so maybe Tourtière does have miracle properties, it sure saved our lives that day.

Email Responses from friends to my Tourtiere story

Hi Ernie,

What a delightful story! It reminds me of our days in Kapuskasing when I was little. We lived in one of the 2 flats above the Spacek's hardware store and the other family, the Doumolins', was Quebecois. They taught Mom the great Christmas Eve tradition of Tourtiere which Mom made faithfully every year forever after. She also learned to make Quebec sugar pie - alas that tradition didn't stick! Wishing you the best, Judi (Antonik) Bennett Victoria

Great story Ernie, it has actually inspired me to get back in and make some tourtières this year, something I haven't felt like doing for a long while. Thanks. My kids love them too. Henriette

Dear Ernie,

I enjoyed the story of the Tourtiere. Our French Canadian next door neighbours treated us in Ottawa several times to Tourtiere. I used to watch the CBC TV programmes in French and my pal would watch them at my house in English. Her Mom was a wonderful cook. It snowed more in Ottawa than it did in Toronto. We made snow forts and enjoyed the winters. Thanks, Ann

Too funny. We have a two French Canadian friends, both of whom make the best tourtieres, but who live farther away. The commercial ones aren't nearly as good. I've bought some of the ingredients to make one someday soon, just to see if I can come close to the other home made ones, but somehow I don't think I'll meet that standard! Marilyn (Chuck)

Lots of French Canadians down here in Mexico so have had discussions about the best recipe for tortiere. I make it often in Can. but it's probably not as good as Marie-Paul's well travelled version. Things are good here. It's quiet as the high

season doesn't start until around Xmas. It's been hot and rainy but that's typical for now. Hope you're both well and happy. Marion.

Ernie & friends -

Tortiere has played a part in our lives too. Our grandmother, Jessie McNee, created a recipe with her dear friend, Alice DeHaight, many years ago in Hearst & it has become a tradition to serve it Christmas Day at brunch before opening presents. Since we don't celebrate on Christmas Eve as do most of our French-Canadian friends, we have settled on this compromise.

Of course, some changes have been made to accommodate the taste buds of different generations, but the recipe is almost the same as it always was. It was based on a version printed in one of Mme. Benoit's many books - her meat filling & pastry - which is made with good stuff like lard & bacon grease. (It's probably a good thing that we make it only once a year.) We churn out a lot of pies so that we can give them as gifts to people unfortunate enough to have no supplier of homemade tortiere. People become quite cranky if they don't receive their annual tortiere.

Thanking you for your entertaining stories - The Spennato sisters - Sally (Chinn), Aida & Cathy