

Street Treat

The donair has become a staple of late-night dining, but what explains the allure of this tightly wound delicacy? The inside story of Calgary's favourite mystery meat.

by Omar Mouallem

photography by Marnie Persaud

In the summer of 2006 when I moved back to Alberta, an E. coli outbreak sent nine people to the hospital. It didn't take too long to nab the culprit: the donair—Canada's version of Turkey's *döner kebab*, Greece's gyro, the Middle East's shawarma, Mexico's tacos al pastor. The delicious and devious meat on a spit that only seems to beckon after midnight or on your most stressful days.

The Oilers had advanced to the Stanley Cup Final. Fans poured out of bars seeking that insidious food; vendors, unable to meet demand, began to shave the loaves too fast and served half-cooked slices of a contaminated batch.

This is how I knew I was home. It wasn't the ensuing hockey riots. It was the dish that somehow manages to be both ubiquitous and curiously regional. Even in Ottawa, "North America's shawarma capital" according to a 30-minute documentary on YouTube, the search for donairs feels like a scavenger hunt. You'll only find the donair in any great concentration in Atlantic Canada, where it was invented, and Alberta, where it arrived alongside Maritimers who moved west for work. (The only difference is that more veggies are used in the West, and lettuce is heresy out East.)

But in 2006, I wasn't returning for a lucrative oil job. After two years of college in Vancouver, plus another year spent drifting, I was coming for my parents' basement and the financial support of the man who gave me my first taste of a donair straight off his restaurant's grill when I was 10. Nobody in High Prairie, the lesser of the Lesser Slave Lake communities where I grew up, had tried "that Lebanese thing" before my dad put it on his menu. But today at least four restaurants serve donairs in a town with three traffic lights. My folks had since moved to Edmonton and, although I was bummed to have lost that spasm of independence, it was nice to be back with my old flame.

Mike Horwich also remembers the summer of 2006 well. He was sitting on Health Canada's implausibly named Federal-provincial-territorial Donair Working Group. That this group existed isn't proof of bloated bureaucracy. Nor did Horwich get a seat because he lives in Halifax, the kebab's home turf. The Dalhousie instructor is a food-safety expert, and this meat was a problem. Two years earlier, a Calgary contamination sickened 43 people, causing two liver failures. Not 12 months later another dozen Calgarians were hospitalized. In response to these outbreaks the group was charged with regulating the nation's thousands of independent



and mostly immigrant purveyors of donair (and its kebab cousins), and getting them to agree on practices guaranteed not to sicken.

The obvious start was figuring out what, exactly, a donair was. “They’re all variations of the same thing: slices of ground meat,” Horwich says. “But when you ask them, ‘What is it?’ the barriers go up. It’s a secret! And the sauce is as secret as the meat.”

It’s not a secret. Despite the many shops that claim to be the “World’s Best,” few have their own recipe; most buy the meat from a handful of distributors (hence the contaminated cones that showed up in multiple shops). Even manufacturers will tell you that both the meat and the tantalizing sweet sauce are unfailingly simple. And to prove it, by the end of this article, you’ll have a modified recipe requiring only 30 minutes of prep. The bigger mystery is how, a decade after the E. coli crises, this food that once seemed hell-bent on sickening, if not killing, is still adding converts to its cult.

Market research by Canada’s largest wholesale distributor, Bonté Foods, puts annual sales at \$147 million. Two-thirds of those 23 million wraps are consumed out West, largely in Edmonton and Calgary, where Bonté estimates 480 restaurants—96 of them with “donair” in their names—serve the product. In Vancouver, where a decade ago I remember a single donair shop, on Granville St., there are now 150 vendors spread across the city.

Retailers now offer donair sausages, burger patties, egg rolls and “home kits.” In New York and Toronto, chefs have used donair in high-low gimmick dishes. In the Maritimes, distributor Mr. Donair is closing in on approval that would take it to the U.S. of A. Meanwhile Halifax city council is considering declaring the donair the city’s official food.

If there were ever a dish that should have died on the spit, it’s this one. So why is it so damn irresistible?

It’s the bread, which must be baked daily to be chewy, consistent and sturdy. This is not a job for Greek flatbreads. It’s a job for the pita, the bread of my people, who leveraged their shawarma to become the de facto face of donairs. “The Lebanese culture has done an incredibly good job of selling this product,” says Mike Whittaker, president of Moncton-based Bonté Foods.

My father’s donairs weren’t perfect. He had no compunction about using frozen pre-cooked slices and slathering the meat with an unconventional yogurt sauce more appropriate for Greek food. But he was anal retentive about using quality pita from a trusted Lebanese baker, sometimes driving to “the city” to get it fresh. That was in the mid-’90s, when the dish seemed to have reached a tipping point in Alberta; you couldn’t walk 10 blocks without spotting a brown loaf spinning in a shop window.

That was a few years after Lebanese-Syrian immigrants Mohammad and Houda Elrafih sold their first donair in Capitol Hill at A&A Deli. The shop was the forerunner of Jimmy’s A&A, currently ranked No. 1 among Calgary kebab shops on

Zomato.com. Mohammad and Houda’s 38-year-old son, Jamal (a.k.a. Jimmy), now runs the business. Wearing a purple paisley dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, Jamal is the picture of a casual executive. Sitting with his mother in the storage room and office upstairs from the original deli, he attributes part of the family’s success to an expertise in bread—his maternal grandfather, who immigrated as an imam, was also a baker. “He bought the first pita machine in all of Western Canada,” says Houda.



Meat on a stick gets taken to new levels at Jimmy’s A&A, where the 20 spices used to flavour the donair meat are a closely guarded secret.



The claim is impossible to substantiate, but with 300 to 500 customers walking through their doors daily, the Elrafihis needn’t shy away from bold claims. And, anyway, the boast is less a statement of fact than a statement of their connection to the dish. When I ask Houda what selling donairs gave her family, she replies: “A life.” She points to a stack of cardboard boxes in the corner of the storage room. “Jamal slept right there, on a bunk bed with his brothers.”

When they moved in 22 years ago, it was for a place to live. The commercial building’s second floor was a mouldy, cramped apartment, and the family of six had arrived during the worst time in their lives. A market crash had forced Mohammad to declare bankruptcy and sell the house. Houda and her 13-year-old daughter had been hit by a drunk driver; Houda broke her back, her daughter was killed.

But when the commercial space below became available that year, the family rebuilt itself for the second time since immigrating in the 1960s with a Lebanese deli and a kebab that was becoming all the rage. “It kind of saved us in a sense,” Jamal says.

Although the Elrafihis’ story is especially touching, there are thousands of variations on it across Canada and the Western world, at every “rotating meat” (*döner kebab*) stand. Every time an immigrant gets into the business hoping it’ll bring success and fortune, it’s because he’s already watched a friend or relative make it work. But why does it work so well?

It’s the meat, spinning against a red-hot burner like something out of a hypnotist’s toolkit. The sight is raised to the power of 10 at Jimmy’s A&A in Capitol Hill (there’s also an outlet on 4th Street S.W.), where five donair loaves, three chicken shawarma and two lamb gyro captivate a queue of men in boot-cut jeans.

But, while Arabs can claim the bread, they cannot lay claim to the meat. Although its origins are contested, the best evidence credits

Peter Gamoulakos, a Greek immigrant who ran Velos Pizza in Bedford, N.S. In 1973, he modified the gyro kebab then taking over New York to make it more spicy than savoury and, when Gamoulakos mispronounced the “döner” label on the roaster, the dish had a new name. Three years later, Halifax’s King of Donair (which later bought Velos) copied and standardized the dish.

The donair spread throughout Nova Scotia, then came to Alberta, first to Edmonton before dripping down to Calgary. But even in the 1990s, the donair was as foreign to Houda as the customers to whom her family introduced it one sample slice at a time. She can’t even recall why they were selling it in the first place. “My husband and his connections” is all she’ll say.

Jamal, who took over and renamed the restaurant in 1998, hands me a sampling of shavings. Unlike the vast majority of Calgary kebabs, his are unique. Last February, a group of wonky BMO bankers made national news with a 21-page survey of 12 downtown donairs, ranked by quality, quantity and meatiness. Jimmy’s placed third behind Pita Express and Shem’s. The bronze finish prompted Jamal to fire his supplier and get tinkering. His creation, Premium Donair, which he plans to distribute in small batches, is razor thin, golden brown, lean, peppery, and flavour-engineered to linger in the back of the throat. Though he says his partner would “break my neck” if he revealed any of its 20 spices, he’s unguarded about the rest: grind beef, freeze it, regrind it, spice it, mix it, cone it, braise it.

That’s the easy part. But, for the Donair Working Group, settling on a method of cooking the meat that would kill food-borne bacteria required *two years* of consultation and research. The result is Health Canada’s guidelines for vendors, a 3,500-word document that can be reduced to nine: grill the meat or microwave it before wrapping it. (Or use a really good meat thermometer to ensure the meat temperature never falls below 160 F.)

When it was unveiled in 2008, some protested that double-cooking the meat dries it out, and microwaving turns it rubbery. “They said, ‘It tastes best fresh off the spit,’” Horwich says. “We had to explain, if you do that, and get someone sick, we’re not there to help you. We’re there to prosecute you and shut you down.” No Calgary shops were forced to close, but a local family-owned chain of three outlets was fined \$20,700, and an unlicensed butcher operating out of a northeast garage was shuttered and charged with 11 food violations.

“We took a hit,” recalls Jamal. “Till this day it bothers me—Wendy’s poisoned people, too!” The first and bigger outbreak of E. coli O157:H7 in 2004 spread from a major beef distributor that also provided the fast-food giant’s burger patties. But Dave Thomas has legions of loyal fans. There are few for the independent restaurateur, perhaps especially one whose accent might unlock an unconscious prejudice. The Elrafihis prepared for the worst, but it never came.

“The more publicity there was, the more sales went up,” says Horwich, speaking from observation. “A lot of people didn’t know what a donair was, and then it was all over the news, on the radio, in magazines, and people wanted to try it.” But why?

It's the lizard brain.

I was 15 the first time I saw a spinning, skewered meat cone. That was in Edmonton, where I was visiting my brother, who, along with his friends, treated me to my first “real donair,” the way one is supposed to eat it—at 3 a.m. in a shop hotter than a sauna and crowded with drunks. The huge kebab felt like it was staring back at me. I was dead sober, but I'd never felt so grown up, so manly.

Even today it feels downright primal to me, as if the glistening loaf has tapped my hardwired masculine urges to devour meat. After all, Bonté president Mike Whittaker's definition of a “heavy user” is a male aged 16–20, and Jamal Elrafih puts the ratio of male-to-female customers in his 4th Street S.W. location at 5:1. “Some guys order a large just for bravado,” he says. (A large, for the record, is nearly 700 grams and costs \$13.75 without sides.)

The primal-challenge theory sounds good, but it is shot down by Caroline McDonald-Harker, an anthropologist who teaches at Mount Royal University. “Men are not programmed to eat more meat than women,” she says. “It's a social construction. There's pressure on women to stay thin. And for men it's an emphasis on looking muscular and strong, and meat's got a lot of protein, so they can bulk up on it. That's the reason you see more men in a donair lineup than women.”

Or do you? Stalking downtown Calgary kebab shops at 1:30 a.m., like a food flâneur, I observe an almost equal proportion of men and women. Their social inhibitions suppressed, four dolled-up ladies at King of Shawarma chew silently, pausing occasionally to lick sauce off their knuckles. Two couples at Shawarma House order matching sandwiches to go with their matching Flames jerseys. There's little variance at Koob, Damascus, Tarboosh, and around the world, at every hour, as masses of drunks land face-first in their kebab of choice.

Because what is carnal is the hankering that overtakes us once the

Jamal Elrafih lays it on thick at Jimmy's A&A, where the large donair is made using 700 grams of meat.



bars have spat us out, regardless of our gender. In her 2014 essay, *Tiny Triumphs*, Kelli Korducki attributes this urge to galanin, “a neuropeptide that hangs out in our brains, bellies, and spines and makes us desperately want to eat fat.” In her treatise on drunk food, Korducki goes on to explain that alcohol stimulates galanin production, which, in turn, heightens cravings for alcohol and fat. Now you have an answer if anyone asks why you're standing in line for a donair at 3 a.m.

Donair, it would seem, is the preferred drunk food of Calgary. But kebabs, as a whole, are the drunk food of the world. And all those memories of greasy good sandwich wraps (or ice cream or chicken noodle soup) are stored in the brain, where they become associated with social attachment. Hence, comfort food, and, for many, the reason the donair is as much memory-waker as memory-maker.

I have sought refuge from a rainstorm in a *döner* in Kreuzberg, Berlin. In Istanbul, I've staggered through Istiklal Avenue's perpetual parade, remembering nothing else but the sandwich I cradled. I've tasted a gyro in the madness of Times Square. Shawarma on Beirut's 24-hour Hamra Street. But nothing has ever tasted as good as what I can get off any street in Calgary.

It's the sauce, that thickened condiment born of evaporated milk, garlic, sugar and vinegar. If there were ever a food deserving of a Heritage Minute, it's the white sauce.

As wise as the late Peter Gamoulakos was when he replaced the earthy lamb found in gyros with beef (to which Canadians were acclimatized), the food didn't take off until his ingenious addition of this sweet sauce. “It always comes down to the donair sauce,” says Whittaker. “People can't get their minds wrapped around that sweet garlic . . . that sweet, garlicky sauce.” It's simultaneously saccharin, spicy and savoury. The result is something otherwise lacking in the

Canadian diet, and it's what makes donairs unstoppable.

Declaring it Halifax's official dish isn't enough. This is Canada's food. Sure, there are other more popular national cuisines. There's nary a Canadian diner that doesn't serve some version of Quebec's grease-bomb, the poutine, nor a coffee shop without B.C.'s decadent sugar-bomb, the Nanaimo bar. But it's this meat-bomb derived from no fewer than five ethnic cuisines that wraps up the ultimate Canadian story of multiculturalism: Lebanese bread cradling kebab slices adapted from Greek, Turkish, German and American recipes, and slathered with a white sauce that's as Canadian as maple syrup—and nearly as sweet. Is there a food that better encapsulates multiculturalism, with its mixing of distant practices to create new traditions?

Anyway, just a thought. It's now time to make good on my promise and reveal how to make the mystery meat, with a simple recipe modified from a friend's home creation.

1. Preheat the oven to 300°F. Mix: 3 tsp of paprika, 2 tsp each of onion powder, black pepper, salt, seasoning and oregano, and 1 tsp each of garlic powder and cayenne.

2. Using your hands, gradually blend the spices with 1.5 lbs. lean ground beef and 1.5 lbs extra-lean ground beef. Pound, punch and slam the meat down on wax paper for 20 minutes, until there are no air pockets or clumps and the meat is pasty. Form it into a loaf.

3. On a baking sheet to collect drippings, bake for two and a half hours, turning the loaf every 30 minutes. Refrigerate overnight.

4. To make donair sauce, whisk together a 12 oz. can of evaporated milk, 1/4 cup white vinegar, 3/4 cups of sugar and 1 tbsp of garlic powder, until thick.

5. Add two centuries of cross-cultural pollination, the hopes and dreams of your huddled masses, and alcohol and stress-induced biological reactions.

Serves: Canada. ☺

The Donair Family Tree

Alexander Graham Bell, Nikola Tesla, Steve Jobs . . . Mehmetoglu Iskender Efendi. The latter name seems out of place in a list of notable inventors, but it is Efendi who is credited with inventing the vertical spit. This meant the ancient, horizontal meatloaf could be rotated 90 degrees, rendering the sweating roast self-basting, and turning dripping fat into fuel for the flames that singe the meat's outer layer to perfection. Even as the Ottoman Empire declined, the *döner* kebab (“rotating meat”) spread throughout Greece and modern-day Lebanon and Syria, adapting to local palates. The evolution continued as Levantines emigrated west and inspired more succulent street kebabs.

ISKENDER KEBAP c. 1867, Turkey
Meat: Lamb
Innovation: Vertical spit

GYRO c. 1922, Greece
Meat: Beef, lamb, pork
Innovation: Flatbread, tzatziki

Just as the Lebanese are erroneously credited with the invention of the donair, the Greeks are given too much credit for creating their beloved sandwich. Armenian refugees were the original gyro-masters, according to culinary expert Diane Kochilas. This held true until the 1970s, when a Greco-American invented a system to mass-produce the meat cones and forever changed New York.

DÖNER SANDWICH 1966–73, Western Europe
Meat: Lamb, veal
Innovation: Bread and fresh veggies

The Berlin-based Association of Turkish *Döner* Manufacturers honoured the late Kadir Nurman for having the wits, in 1973, to turn the plated Turkish dish into a sandwich and inventing Germany's €3.5 billion industry. But The Guardian reports a U.K. version predating his supposed invention by at least six years. Further, no country agrees on toppings—from England's curry to Spain's eggs and Italy's hot relish.

SHAWARMA Early 1900s, Arab Levant
Meat: Beef, chicken
Innovation: Pita, sesame sauce, pickled veggies

Shawarma (from *çevirme*, the Turkish word for “turning”) may be the world's most popular kebab, found on every continent except Antarctica. The nutty sauce, soured toppings and savoury meat is a flavour explosion.

DONAIR 1973, Nova Scotia
Meat: Beef
Innovation: Sweet sauce and spiciness

Peter Gamoulakos's legacy lives on through Halifax's King of Donair restaurants and Mr. Donair, a wholesale distributor that his family recently sold to a larger company that has plans for U.S. expansion.

TACOS AL PASTOR c. 1960s, Mexico
Meat: Pork
Innovation: Pineapple and tortilla

The 1930s wave of enterprising Lebanese immigrants didn't turn the shawarma into a pork and pineapple-ringed kebab; it was their assimilated children, according to Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food. Most purveyors today are Mexican nationals who themselves might not know the origins of this traditional cuisine.

