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## The sweet sauce makes this Turkish, or Greek - or Lebanese delight a Maritime mystery Donair love affair

BY CHUCK BROWN  
*Telegraph-Journal*

The donair - that wonderful messy package of warm, spicy meat and strangely sweet, garlicky sauce - remains a beloved Maritime treat despite getting the cold shoulder from the rest of the country.

It's served up to hungry crowds from "pizza corner" in downtown Halifax to tiny takeouts in small-town New Brunswick. It's found its way onto the menus of large chains and little pizzerias yet the donair, wildly popular in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, has been kept a regional secret, a treat all our own.

They are exclusive and elusive, enjoyed by those who live here, craved by those who've moved away.

Andy Csabai, a sales consultant in Toronto who spent his university years in Fredericton, hasn't had a real donair in nearly a decade and he'd love to sink his teeth into one.

"The way they prepare it and the way they serve it with a sweet sauce makes it very unique and rather addictive," said the University of New Brunswick alumnus. "It was one of those things where every Friday night we ordered pizza and donairs and that was my routine."

That routine fell apart when he finished school and moved to Ontario where donairs aren't part of the culinary landscape or even the vocabulary.

"I got hooked on it and when I moved back to Ontario, when I mentioned that



(NOEL CHENIER/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL)  
Andrew Albert enjoys a donair at Dimitri's in downtown Fredericton.



"I got nooked on it and when I moved back to Ontario, when I mentioned that word, people looked at me like I was talking Chinese or something," Mr. Csabai said.

"I looked around and asked the local pizza places if they have donairs and they looked at me like, what country are you from? It's obviously something that hasn't gone past the Maritime provinces, unfortunately."

Mr. Csabai, and anyone who has developed a fondness for the donair, is at a loss as to why it hasn't caught on everywhere. There is a donair demand out there, legions of transplanted Maritimers who gather on Internet message boards or on Web sites to share their longing and swap recipes.

Glen Petitpas, a Timberlea, Nova Scotia native who now works as a researcher at the University of Maryland, operates an Internet site dedicated to all things donair. He said he regularly gets e-mails from Maritimers suffering donair withdrawal.

"They'd tell me their story of how they grew up in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick or P.E.I. and they had to move for work reasons to other parts of the country and they just couldn't find them anywhere," Mr. Petitpas said.

He's tried, oh, he's tried, to find a donair or at least something close to it.

"It's basically impossible," he said. "I looked all over Hamilton and I found a place that sold something, it was a pita place that claimed to have a donair but the dressing was like ranch dressing and it had lettuce and pickles. I was quite shocked. It was really unpleasant."

But while he's not happy that donairs are scarce anywhere west of New Brunswick, Mr. Petitpas can understand why the quirky delicacy hasn't caught on elsewhere. Donairs, he said, are an acquired taste.

"They're really not that pleasant to eat the first time you have them," he admits. "They're sort of a chewy piece of flat bread with some sort of spiced meat, mostly ground beef, I think, with usually diced onions and tomatoes and a sweet-and-sour type sauce."

It's an unflattering description but as much as he loves them, Mr. Petitpas said it's difficult to explain the donair to people who have never tried it. When he tells them about the spicy meat - some use ground beef others mix beef, lamb and pork - and the sweet sauce made from milk, vinegar, garlic and sugar, he gets reactions of disbelief.

"When you describe the sauce they sort of don't believe you that you'd put something so sweet on a spiced meat. Most people, after their first try, think they're terrible," he said. "When you see it on paper, it doesn't look good."

Mr. Petitpas has a girlfriend from Toronto and he hasn't been able to sell her

on donairs. She won't even try them.

"The smell alone will make her leave the room."

Mr. Csabai said when he first came to New Brunswick he wasn't put off by descriptions of donairs and is glad he gave them a try.

"Being from a European background, I've been exposed to a lot of different foods from around the world and I'm pretty adventurous so I'll try anything once," he said.

"Being down in New Brunswick I thought I'd take advantage of some of the local New Brunswick-style foods that you can't normally get in Montreal or Ontario."

But the origin of the donair, while somewhat mysterious, goes far beyond New Brunswick where it's gained popularity for about 25 years.

While Turks, Greeks and Lebanese all lay claim to inventing the donair, it is recognized as having gained a foothold in Nova Scotia in the early 1970s. But the donair, known in other parts of the world as donners, kebabs or... donner kebabs, has been served in one variation or another for centuries.

Some people consider donairs to be the same as the Greek gyro - also a spiced meat on pita or flat bread but served with a less-sweet tzatziki sauce.

George Nicolas, owner of the Acropolis Deli in Saint John, said donairs and gyros are the same dish.

"They come from Greece. In many places they call them gyros, same thing."

He's been serving donairs for 24 years and he said he's always served them with his homemade yogurt, garlic and cucumber sauce.

"I make my own donair sauce, I don't make sweet donair sauce," Mr. Nicolas said. "I make original donair sauce - yogurt with garlic and cukes."

Despite its international, exotic flavour, Mr. Petitpas will always think of the Maritimes when he tastes donair. He left in 1995 and for him, donairs are as much a nostalgia trip as a taste treat.

"The reason I like them so much is for nostalgia," he said. "When I'm in the Maritimes I try to have them every second or third day but when I lived there me and my friend would rent a movie and get a couple donairs once a week."

Mr. Petitpas has gone to some extraordinary lengths to satisfy his donair addiction. While living in Toronto he turned to the gyro and its tzatziki sauce and tried to turn it into what he considers a donair - with sweet sauce. Mr.

Petitpas would buy gyros, plain, then add his own homemade donair sauce.

"I turned their gyros into a sort of tolerable donair replacement. It was pretty close," he said. "I think it's the sauce that makes them completely unique."

It all gets confusing and whatever the disparities and unanswered questions, Mr. Petitpas knows what he likes and now, between visits back home to the Maritimes, he makes his own donairs. Every few months he goes through the painstaking process of making a batch of the spiced meat and freezes it.

"It's a lot of work. It takes four hours to make a batch of meat," he said.

Despite donairs being a tough sell to non-Maritimers, Mr. Petitpas can't help but daydream about the millions of Canadians who have never heard of them, a vast potential market.

"I've always wondered if I could open up a shop in downtown Toronto and make a fortune," he said.

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