

Oh, Canada

Chez Ben mixes north-of-the-border cuisine with classic diner fare

CHEZ BEN DINER

ADDRESS: 927 Center St., Manchester.

HOURS: Tuesday through Sunday 6 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Closed on Monday.

PRICES: Breakfast dishes range from \$2.30 to \$7.95. Omelets range from \$3.95 to \$6.95. Pancakes or French toast start at \$2.10. Poutine starts at \$4.75 for a small. Meat or salmon pie slices are \$4.25. Creton is \$4.95. Homemade soup starts at \$2.50. Salad platters range from \$2.95 to \$7.25. Sandwiches range from \$1.65 to \$6.95. Burgers start at \$3.50.

RESERVATIONS: Taken only for large groups of 15 or more.

MISCELLANY: Cash only is accepted. Breakfast is served all day. Daily specials. Takeout. Seats about 65.

TELEPHONE: 860-649-4011.

By Doreen Guarino

Journal Inquirer

MANCHESTER — In Canada, poutine — a classic dish made where French fries are topped with fresh cheese curds and slathered in brown gravy — is all the rage, and one of the best places to sample it in the Hartford area is at Chez Ben Diner at 927 Center St.

At Chez Ben poutine is “huge,” says co-owner Anne Quirion. “Everybody just goes nuts over it.”

Poutine can be ordered with chicken and peas mixed in, and two other varieties have also gone over big at Chez Ben — Philly Poutine, which is steak, mushrooms, onions, cheese, and gravy served over French fries, and Poutine Italienne, or French fries smoth-

ered in red meat sauce and cheese.

Chez Ben is a place that specializes in Canadian cuisine and classic American diner fare. This charming little eatery has a big heart and readily welcomes regulars and newcomers alike, thanks to the new owners Joel and Anne Quirion of South Windsor, who are carrying on a family tradition at Chez Ben.

Joel’s parents, Benoit and Solange Quirion of South Windsor, opened Chez Ben in 1992 and ran it for 17 years before selling it last December to their son and his wife, Joel and Anne Quirion.

Anne is at the diner all the time, heading the waitstaff and even taking breakfast and lunch orders in French from her French-Canadian patrons. Joel, her husband of 17 years who works as a drywall subcontractor, is there helping with the cooking on the very busy weekends. All of the Quirions trace their roots to Quebec and are fluent in French.

Last year Benoit — who’s known as Ben and is the restaurant’s namesake — decided it was time to retire so he put the eatery up for sale at the start of the summer, just before he and Solange went on vacation, which resulted in the place being closed for three weeks.

But the publicity about Chez Ben being up for sale coupled with the for sale sign out front and the diner being closed while the Quirions were on vacation gave patrons the idea the eatery closed for good, which couldn’t be further from the truth.

When Benoit and Solange returned from vacation, they found that business drastically fell off because patrons thought the diner closed down.

But Chez Ben has remained open and only closed briefly for a few weeks beginning late



Jim Michaud / Journal Inquirer

Anne Quirion, co-owner of Chez Ben Diner in Manchester, shows off a Canadian dish of poutine — French fries mixed with cheese curds, chicken, and peas and smothered with brown gravy.

last December during the transition in ownership from the elder Quirions to their son and daughter-in-law so some renovations could be done.

Chez Ben happily reopened on Jan. 9 of this year, and business couldn’t be better, says Anne, who’s worked at the eatery as a waitress for about a year before she and her husband bought it.

The atmosphere at Chez Ben is so warm and welcoming it’s almost as if you’re dining in Joel and Anne’s own dining room. The colors are soft and muted, with a beige and mauve color scheme throughout accentuated by flowers. Seating is at booths, tables, and at the counter.

And the first thing you’ll see when you walk in the door is a beautiful mural of a farm scene like the ones you’d see in Quebec, hand painted by Manchester artist Nicole Maheux in 1994. Still a loyal patron, Maheux recently returned with her daughter, Julie, to paint scenes of spring on the diner’s front windows.

Breakfast is served all day at the diner, and lunch begins around 10:30 a.m. daily. You should know that Chez Ben only accepts cash as payment.

There are several popular Canadian dishes at Chez Ben besides poutine. There’s guedille, which is a grilled hot dog bun stuffed with egg salad, lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, and onions. There’s the homemade meat or salmon pies, which can be ordered by the slice or as a meal with a choice

of potato or fries, veggie, and bread. (You can also order a whole pie to take home.) And then there’s creton, which is a cold meat spread that is put on toast, like a paté.

Canadian entrees include the hot hamburger, chicken, turkey, or roast beef, all served between two slices of bread with a choice of mashed potatoes or fries, and brown gravy poured over everything.

But Chez Ben, which means “at Ben’s” or “Ben’s place” in French, is much more than an eatery where you can sample Canadian cuisine. It is chock full of classic American diner fare, such as burgers, hotdogs, grilled sandwiches, club sandwiches, wraps, homemade soup, patty melts, fish filets, salads, chicken tenders, fried chicken, fried clams or scallops, fish and chips, onion rings, French fries, and milkshakes.

And if you crave a hearty homemade breakfast, Chez Ben is the place to go. It has an extensive breakfast menu that includes an array of omelets, French toast, and pancakes that can be ordered plain or flavored — strawberry, blueberry, chocolate chip, and the recently introduced raspberry. It also offers maple syrup imported from Quebec.

One of Chez Ben’s longtime fans is Doug Smith, chairman of the Hockanum River Watershed Association. Smith, who recently celebrated his 82nd birthday at the restaurant, stops in a few days a week with his group when they’re working on trails nearby.

“I think it’s probably the most friendly neighborhood restaurant in town,” he says.



Chez Ben Diner is located at 927 Center St. in Manchester.

Leslloyd F. Alleyne
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