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[Welcome to Schwartz's](#)

Posted in [Montreal](#), [Food](#), [Film](#), [Society and Culture](#) by Christopher DeWolf



I was having coffee with a French immigrant recently and the conversation swung towards [Schwartz's](#). He recalled seeing a group of kids, on a class trip from somewhere else in Canada, lining up to eat there. "When I went on school trips in France it was always about going to castles or battlefields, 'Napoleon did this and that here,'" he said to me. "Here it's different. There aren't any castles; the culture here is a popular culture. People go to Schwartz's because of that. It's where you feel the history of Montreal and its immigrants."

With that in mind, it was about time that Schwartz's got its own movie. Last night, Garry Beitel's documentary, *Chez Schwartz*, premiered at the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma.

Chez Schwartz's premise is more ambitious than it sounds. Beitel set out to document a year in the life of Montreal's most iconic eatery, a classic and unpretentious place where generations of Montrealers and tourists alike have eaten some of the city's best smoked meat. This might sound straightforward enough, but any good portrait of Schwartz's must work its way through a heaping plateful of issues: the restaurant's daily routine, the staff, immigration and cultural diversity, the homeless guys who take shifts panhandling out front and, of course, Schwartz's worldwide fame. Beitel devours each and every one of these with skill and steady rhythm. It all fits together so well, like a good meal at Schwartz's.

That meal, of course, would consist of four things: a smoked meat sandwich (with lots of mustard), fries, a pickle and a cherry coke. [Smoked meat](#) is a type of cured beef, similar to pastrami: it is first seasoned with a secret mix of spices, then smoked for eight hours and finally steamed for three hours before serving. It was brought to Montreal by the Jewish immigrants who fled the Eastern European *shtetl* in the early twentieth century and settled in great numbers along St. Lawrence Boulevard, commonly known as the Main (and now officially known by its French name, St. Laurent). Schwartz's was one of the pioneers of smoked meat when it opened in 1928, but by the 1940s, it was one of many Jewish delicatessens around Montreal. Today, less than a dozen remain and none have retained their original conviviality — except for Schwartz's.

Wisely, *Chez Schwartz* doesn't try to impose itself on its subject — it steps back and lets Schwartz's fascinate and entertain us as it so naturally does. Beitel's film falls into the great tradition of movies and books that document the idiosyncrasies and eccentricities that give Montreal its cultural richness. More often than not, they somehow relate to food. Recently, Ezra Soiferman's *Man of Grease* profiled the odd Greek owner of Cosmos, an NDG greasy spoon. Michel Tremblay regaled us with tales of [steamie](#)-eating transsexuals on the Main. Don Bell's delightful 1971 book *Saturday Night at the Bagel Factory* spent a night with the bagel-makers on St. Viateur Street (like smoked meat, [Montreal-style bagels](#) are another specialty more delicious than their New York counterpart). Even before that, Mordecai Richler wrote about Wilensky's and its infamous, if-you-don't-want-mustard-get-the-hell-out Special.

Food, however, is only incidental to these works, and the same is true of *Chez Schwartz*. The real focus is on the people who make and consume it. Early on in the film, Beitel introduces us to characters with names like Frank, Johnny and Alex, names that wouldn't have sounded out of place in the 1940s but which belie the diverse origins of their owners: Italian, Portuguese, Greek, Indian, Pakistani, Bengali, Afro-Caribbean, Latino and French-Canadian. "Sometimes we speak Spanish, sometimes we speak English, sometimes we speak French — more or less," notes one Colombian kitchen worker before addressing some Latin American customers in Spanish. The staff's diversity is reflected by the people who eat at Schwartz's. In one particularly inspired moment, the film observes diners enjoying their food and each other's company. They are speaking English, French, Cantonese, Spanish; their faces speak of origins scattered all over the world. It is a serene moment and in many ways the peak of the film.

There are other memorable moments: a pair of women losing their smoked meat virginity; the pride with which a waiter displays the \$20 tip given to him by Halle Berry, which she autographed and he refuses to spend. Part of the film deals with, in its passive, detached way, the homeless men who take turns panhandling in front of Schwartz's. One of them is Ryan Larkin, an Oscar-winning animator whose career was sunk by drug and alcohol addiction. (Recently, his fame was revived when another animator made a film about him, *Ryan*, which also won an Oscar.) Ryan, like the film, hardly strays more than fifty feet from the deli. In some weird way, he is a symbol of Schwartz's role as the centre of the Montreal universe.

Towards the end of *Chez Schwartz*, Beitel asks Ryan why he thinks people flock from around the world to eat at such a humble restaurant. “Big mystery. I don’t know,” he replies. “But I got my suspicions. I suspect that it’s a Romanian-Jewish plot to take over the world, right here at Schwartz’s. And they succeeded.”

Chez Schwartz, 2006, Directed by Garry Beitel. General release is expected this winter.