

Search for the whispering Eros

Column by Kirk Finken / Photograph by Angelina McCormick

walk our metropolis to find Eros, the god of passionate, intimate love. I search out his indicators, his symbols, his address. Is he alive in the nation's capital? Are his ancestors here? Can we still witness his libidinal energy, his life force?

I sense Eros is here. But he is not easily evident. He is not in the phone book. Canada411 shows no trace of him in our region. Unlisted number? Perhaps. If I didn't know better I would think that the Eros lineage ended about two hours east of here in *la ville de joie*.

I search again. In the electronic neuralopolis we call the internet, I find his retarded cousin named Porn. In the fashion images that line the walls of our smoke and magazine shops, I find his sullen and confused teenage sisters, Neuroses and Narcissus. In the perfume section of the Bay Rideau Street, I smell his followers parading somewhere a few seconds in front of me.

Though Eros himself is most definitely evasive, he is here in Ottawa-Gatineau, in a range of places you would not suspect him to be. He is very cautiously revealed in our history, plant life, geography, and food.

In the story and manifestations of Miss Isabella Preston, I find Eros growing strong and in myriad hues of pink. Preston was the horticulturalist at the Central Experimental Farm between 1920 and 1946, the first female hybridist in Canada.

In the parlance of our day, Miss Isabella was a total nerd. Her every action, her every thought was consumed by a nerdy love of the flowers and plants—the very symbols of Eros. She was a veritable Cupid who worked long and diligently to forge couplings of plants that produced some of the most beautiful and hardy flowers in Canada. And are flowers nothing but the sexual organs of plants, open and wanting? Yes, Eros blooms glorious in Spring at the Arboretum in Miss Isabella's many hybrid roses, lilacs, irises, crabapples, and lilies.

Further afield, I find Eros in the Ottawa River; his powerful, dark and libidinal energy. West and northwest of our region, the precipitation and ground aquifers flow into this grand body of water from Ontario's rational and from Quebec's passion. It rolls down calm and powerful to the damming structures then pours like heady passion into the Chaudiere Falls.

Appropriately, the falls are mostly hidden behind crumbling industrial buildings, flanked by the indifferent government towers of Place du Portage. The chaotic power of it all is contained for economic purposes, except in Spring when the river swells up and crests just under the Chaudiere Bridge. Seen from the Portage Bridge, the floodwaters boil high and threaten to take out the old iron structure, just as deep, passionate love threatens to tear us from our limbs, our logic.

The whisper of Eros exists, too, in the many stone structures of our town, those built by the strong male arms and legs that were and are like catnip to so many women. Look at the old photos of Bytown and you will see the power in the men. Walk past the buildings and you can hear them laugh at the impossible.

Where else? I find Eros in the way that the French-Canadian women of our region move quickly from the formal and smooth *vous* to the more personal *tu*. He is there as their lips form the sound *tu*—when they move you toward a more intimate connection, towards a taste of them.

I find careful, sensual Eros in the foods of many restaurants and shops of this town. I have eaten in fine restaurants everywhere

from Alert Bay, British Columbian to Cupids, Newfoundland, and at all the peculiarly named places in between. Although it wasn't always so in the capital, I have found meals and foods that are delicate and surprising, authentic and buxom, modest and not in need of hyperbole.

At 3 Tarts in Westboro, sticky buns that make your eyes roll back into your head and fresh tartelettes exhibit a rare and undefinable beauty. Or savour the buttery lobster poutine at Petit Bill's and just try not to slip and fall in love with the person dining with you. The shiny, sweet coconut buns of Chinatown? The big, deliberate, and spicy sausages at Luciano's? Fig compote and clotted cream slathered into the hole of a scrumptious scone at Sconewitch? The sweet mango gelato

that drips down your arms on a hot summer night at La Cigale in Old Chelsea? These and other local purveyors of Eros feed our souls and fuel the connections between us. Food is love.

Still, the national capital Eros is delicate and subtle. Ours is a culture of civil service and high tech discretion. Sensitive information is shared on a need-to-know basis. And so we keep much of our data and emotions on a password-protected drive.

The numerous descendants of Eros who live in Montreal and who openly celebrate their Latin and lascivious lineage may laugh at our seeming reticent connection to Eros. That's okay. In an age where Dr. Phil exposes and nearly kills everything human with his self-righteousness, where pundits plunder and pillage, where cameras are pushed into the orifices of donkeys and women to be displayed on a website, where our every move is marked by a cookie and a survey and a tracking tool, I am comfortable that Eros remains discreet in our town.

He blooms magnificent in Spring. His bosom rises in the floodwaters of the Ottawa River. He sits coyly on our plates and seduces us over shared meals. He is in our bedrooms, too, alive and well, and hiding in the nation's capital. It almost goes without saying.



