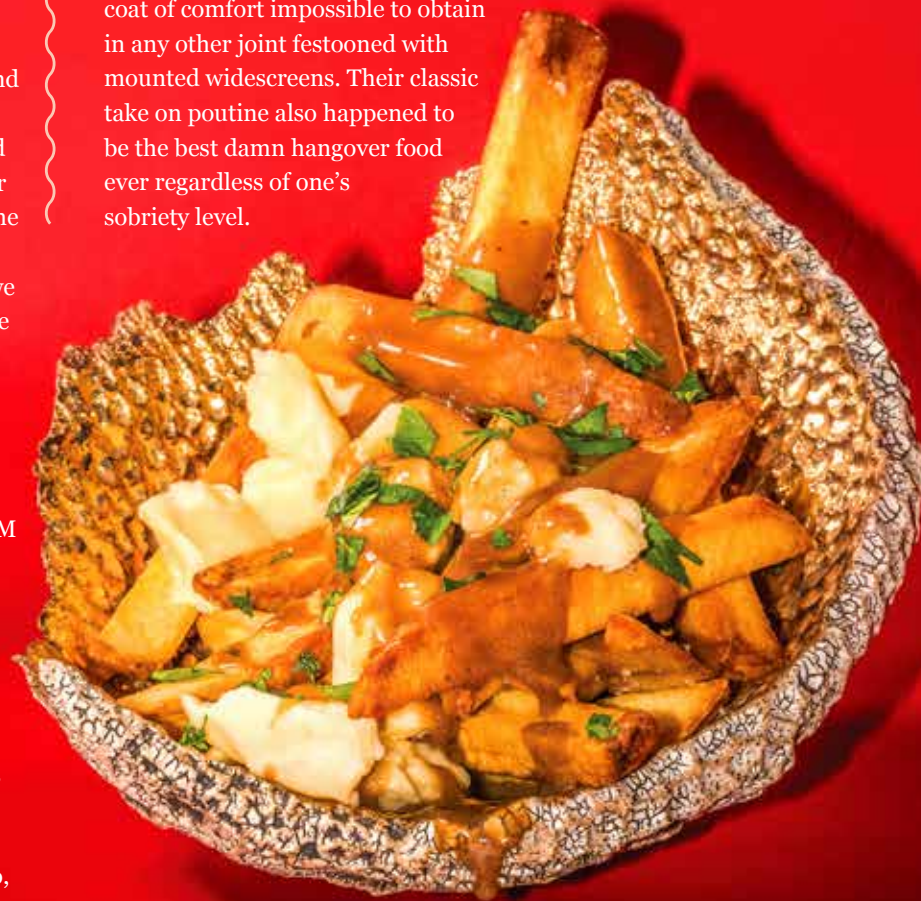


POUTINE, PUCKS, AND PEACE

It's 6:30 PM on a Saturday night, and I roll up to Redondo Beach Café with a couple friends. We're ready for poutine. Genuine, old-school poutine—a messy mélange of fries, brown gravy, and cheese curds, untouched by the gussied-up hipster intrusions of short rib or pork belly. We settle in and watch the dying moments of the first game of a hockey doubleheader blasting through the panorama of big-screen TVs. Boisterous French chatter from the two women in Montreal Canadiens sweaters wafts over from the adjacent booth. I don't know what they're saying, but they drop enough player names for me to understand their conversation. A slender, wispy-haired, bespectacled regular known only as Expo leaves his seat and wanders the floor, sharing stories about watching legends like Gordie Howe and Bobby Hull as a kid with each group of diners like he always does. Our server asks if we're ready. We are, but we aren't. The second game—the one we're here to see—doesn't start for another twenty minutes. We order, but we won't be ready to eat until after the 1st period. The server delivers on the delay—the poutine arrives piping hot right before the 2nd period puck drop. It's not much to look at: Gleaming white puffs of squeaky curds rest atop a gloopy sheet of mud brown liquid, French fry ends poking through its surface like compound fractures. It looks like 2 AM after a night of heavy drinking and bad decisions, and that's exactly why it's perfect. I haven't even taken a bite and yet my soul's nourished.

This gathering of poutine and hockey only delivers memories of wistful comfort now—the café shuttered in the spring of 2018, right before the playoffs started. Yet even when it was around, it existed in a state of near-surrealism due to its locale. Redondo Beach Café wasn't perched on a Quebec riverside, or on the banks of Lake Ontario,

or a coastal enclave just outside Vancouver. It was in Southern California, in the suburb of Redondo Beach, roughly 23 miles southwest of downtown Los Angeles. It was an anomaly by default, a place that didn't seem to make sense yet nonetheless provided a sense of place. Not just to Canadian expatriates—that's a given—but also to lifelong Southern California residents like me, a die-hard Kings fan hooked on hockey since childhood and fully aware of the sport's lowly place in the greater Los Angeles area's athletic hierarchy. Its presence covered me and other out-of-place hockey nuts in a coat of comfort impossible to obtain in any other joint festooned with mounted widescreens. Their classic take on poutine also happened to be the best damn hangover food ever regardless of one's sobriety level.



words by *Rich Manning* photograph by *Noah Fecks*

To fully understand Redondo Beach Café's magic requires some insight to the Southern California hockey fan. We're a small, passionate lot that exists in the shadows cast by the region's football, baseball, and basketball fandom. We usually only see our sport on a bar or restaurant TV if there's no other team sport to broadcast. We're jokingly told nobody cares about hockey by people that think they're being clever. We're misfits. Yet when two SoCal hockey fans find each other in the wild, it's not unlike two people discovering they're of the same religion. Suddenly, dialogue expands to include a wealth of terms, references, and history that would otherwise come across as esoteric babble. A unique connection forms, built around a gospel of athletic dogma non-hockey fans wouldn't understand despite our efforts to bring them into the fold. Redondo Beach Café wasn't a church—Wayne Gretzky's god-like scoring and playmaking abilities didn't technically make him a deity—but man if it wasn't sanctuary for this kind of hockey fellowship. It was the one place where we could gather, watch the sport we loved, and have long, spirited conversations about underrated defensive forwards or overrated goalies with liberating impunity. We belonged here, and we felt grateful.

All hockey aside, the place had character. The sign said café, but its red and black-checkered floors, reluctantly swiveling countertop stools, and the subtly lumpy periwinkle blue banquettes screamed diner. Co-owners and brothers Chris and Kosta Tsangaris were sports guys, figuratively and literally—a small photo of Chris from his decade-long career as a linebacker in the Canadian Football League coily hung by the restrooms' entryway, visible only to those that knew his backstory. More importantly, they were restaurant guys from Montreal that put their unique French Canadian-Greek heritage onto as many plates as they could. They brought in unctuous Montreal smoked meat from a trusted Quebec purveyor. They built moussaka upon crispy, fragile layers of pastry dough that cracked and crumbled at the rumor of a fork. Getting to know and talking hockey with them granted patrons access to their secret stash of Tim Horton's coffee, which paired incredibly well with their rich, luscious homemade carrot cake.

And then there was the poutine. Theirs was the first poutine I ever had, about a year before the dish invaded the then-emerging gastropub scene. It was visually hideous in the way that only comfort food stripped to its core can get away with, because there was sumptuous beauty embedded in its ugliness. Underneath its disheveled, murky-hued slop lay hearty, delicious layers of rich texture and earthy flavor that wrapped me in reassuring warmth, like the ratty blanket every kid holds onto for far too long as they grow towards adolescence. That dish informed so much. Perhaps too much. I tend to pronounce its name

as poo-TIN instead of poo-TEEN thanks to the café's Francophone waiters that always took my order. I've also struggled to enjoy any poutine with extra accoutrements beyond the holy trinity of its foundational ingredients. There's room in my consciousness to accept an occasional sprinkling of Montreal smoked meat, but that's about as fancy as I can go. Don't get me wrong—the add-ons may be delicious and often are, but they lack the comfort I crave. This may not be the dish's fault. Part of me wonders if this is because I know if I start talking about Mark Messier's leadership or Alex Ovechkin's shot as I dig in, the only thing I'll get in return will be a quizzical look. Regardless of the reason, I can't recall voluntarily ordering a poutine at a restaurant since Redondo Beach Café shuttered. I'm not quite ready to give up my blanket.

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I've thought about Redondo Beach Café a lot during the pandemic, especially as I struggled to adjust to the weirdness of COVID-caused playoff hockey in August. Memories of the place shuffle in my head like line changes: cheering on the Kings' two Stanley Cup runs with fellow long-suffering fans left wrecked by overtime anxiousness; hugging the Cup in the café's parking lot in a state of joyous disbelief the summer after the Kings' first championship; getting poked in the shoulder by a former NHL tough guy during a Kings watch party (Protip: don't ever let Marty McSorley hear you say Bob Probert was a better all-around enforcer than he was). Poutine connects these memories, but it wasn't the only glue. It wasn't even the most important adhesive. Whenever I'd drop by, Chris or Kosta was usually around to ask me the same question, even though they already knew the answer: “Are you here to watch the game?”

What I wouldn't give to answer yes one more time. At least I can reflect on the times I was able to answer in the affirmative, and smile at the unfettered joy inspired by the poutine, hockey, conversation, and kind comfort that always followed. These memories are like the image of an airborne Bobby Orr. They'll never fade, and I'm forever thankful they happened. **CB**