THE CHARACTER OF caraquet

In this small town with big faith, folks are known for their resiliency and grace, and for pulling off a few miracles, too

by Sandra Phinney
photography: Kate Barden and Bruce Cramer

Driving through Caraquet for the first time, you might think it's one jumbled-up town. Although situated on the Bay of Chaleur, in the northeast reaches of New Brunswick's Acadian Peninsula, it's not especially picturesque—the coastline gracing its borders seems worn around the edges. Yet stop awhile, and it doesn't take long to feel the heartbeat of the community, both vibrant and compelling. Hang around for a day and you'll want more. Stay longer, and you'll wish you had what the locals have: their culture, ingenuity, resourcefulness—and their faith.

First settled around 1730, Caraquet's name is derived from a Mi'kmaq term meaning "meeting of two rivers." Although the population is only about 4,200, the town feels larger than life. Residents consider it to be Acadia's capital; approximately 99 per cent are francophone; and the only francophone daily newspaper in New Brunswick, *L'Acadie Nouvelle*, is produced here. With a busy seaport, fishing continues to be the mainstay of the economy, although manufacturing and tourism also play a large role.

But back to faith: I'm not talking about a Sunday-go-to-church kind of faith, although that's also evident. Rather, it's the kind of faith where you put one foot in front of the other, trusting the path that is not always evident before you.

It's the kind of faith that Théophile Dugas had when he opened a general store back in 1923. The store grew and prospered, even during the Great Depression, when Théophile took a risk by adding

Gaétan Dugas cradles a batch of oysters from his farm. (In his spare time he makes handsome Mi'kmaq-inspired jewellery.) Right, from top: the sanctuary at Sainte-Anne-Du-Bocage; a bookstore and bakery under one roof; fishing boats bide their time at Caraquet's main wharf.

locally harvested oysters to his inventory.

In 1950, his son Alcide took over the business, but he also got involved in the oyster industry—in the mid 1960s, Alcide pioneered oyster farming, and in 1985, his son, Gaétan, started La Ferme Ostréicole Gaétan Dugas Ltée. Now, Gaétan's wife, Murielle, and their sons Sébastien, Emmanuel and Jonathan are all part of the operation. It's the largest oyster farm in the province that still uses the traditional bottom culture method.

Back in 1891, merchants offered $36 for 720 buckets of oysters. It took 18 buckets worth to buy a bottle of brandy, at 90 cents. Today, Gaétan gets a decent price for his harvest, but he faces other challenges such as depressed markets, and the problems associated with spawning and fertilization. An adult oyster lays up to 16 million eggs per season, yet less than one per cent get fertilized due to disagreeable water temperatures, storms and torrential rains, which can wipe out an entire oyster generation. Gaétan has had his share of losses.

In his spare moments, Gaétan loves to recount oyster trivia—like how women giving birth held onto oyster shells to lessen labour pains. A skilled oyster shucker, he'll also show you how to eat an oyster. "Be sure to chew the little muscle inside. The taste of the Caraquet oyster will stay in your mouth for 10 minutes!"

He makes a point of telling you that the old expression "as closed as an oyster" is true. "Oysters are very private and keep their secrets," he says, "so you have to discover them one by one. But they can play tricks. Sometimes it's as if they are laughing at us."

The seasoned oyster grower is also learning from his Mi'kmaq ancestry. "[Mi'kmaq] have a close relationship to nature and know things that I don't. But I do know that you can't control Mother Nature. And I also know that the accumulation of wealth is not important.

"The wealth that humans have is our spirit and our capacity to recover."

Raoul Pallot knows all about recovery, and the resilience of the human spirit. He remembers wanting to die. "The pain of living was unbearable, but I wasn't strong enough to commit suicide," says the 51-year old. An alcoholic and drug addict, he had bouts of rage that resulted in jail stints.

On October 19, 1995, Raoul had a car accident in Bathurst, NB. Doctors told him he would have difficulty walking, and his chances of working in construction again were slim. "When I left the hospital a couple of weeks later, I ended up with people who were drinking. I knew I couldn't live like that any more. I asked my mother that if she didn't want me 'up there' with her, to help me find a way out.

"On November 4th, I walked into an AA meeting and quit drinking."

The following summer, Raoul found himself at Sainte-Anne-Du-Bocage, a Catholic sanctuary on the outskirts of Caraquet, during the annual nine-day period of prayer, or novena, to Saint Anne, mother of Mary. Although he had received a pamphlet about the novena when he was in jail, he'd paid no heed.

Yet shortly after participating in the novena, his foot started to heal. Then he received a call asking if he wanted a job. "I hadn't worked for about five years, but I started with a chainsaw and worked in the bush. Many good things happened to me—my life changed," he says.

He now has a new partner, co-owns a restaurant, owns a car wash and has re-established relationships with his son and daughter. He occasionally works as a scaffolder on the oil rigs out west and carries on with AA meetings. And he still takes part in the novena annually, often buying upwards

Left, from top: Gaétan and Murielle Dugas' cottage at Anse-Blue, about 20 kilometres from Caraquet; Gaétan and son Sébastien check the oyster beds; Gaétan prepares a "Fancy Connoisseur"—one of the varieties he harvests. Right: Raoul Pallot, seemingly blessed after attending the annual nine-day period of prayer at Sainte-Anne-Du-Bocage in 1996.

of 20 St. Christopher medals to give away.

"You've got to believe. You've just got to believe."

Wondering why people are drawn to gather with the mosquitoes in July to celebrate Saint Anne, I sought out the local priest, Father Robert McGraw.

"It's difficult to explain," he says. "Religious practice may not be the same as it was 50 years ago, but the spiritual need in the heart of a person is the same."

Thousands of people make the pilgrimage to this nine-day event; many plan their entire vacation around it. Aside from a wee but stunning chapel, there's a fresh spring on the bank facing the Bay of Chaleur. Situated next to a statue of Saint Anne, this spring is the sweetest water in existence—and never goes dry.

David Whelton lives in Pokeshaw, just outside Caraquet. Although he doesn't take part in the novena, he's pulled off his own miracles. He lives on the land settled by his great-great-grandfather around 1825. After high school, David headed out west to work as a heavy equipment operator; later, he worked on the oil rigs in the Beaufort Sea, and in 1981, he returned home. Before long he was cutting logs to build a new barn and stepped into his father's shoes as head of the farm. He was 19.

He developed a large dairy business but in 2000, a spooked cow jumped and landed on his chest. David recovered, sold his herd and switched to producing beef. Things went well for three years; however in May 2003, mad cow disease (a fatal, neurodegenerative disease) hit. Borders closed to live beef sales; markets clamped shut; prices plummeted.

Believing that trade with the US would resume in a few months, David and his wife, Tilda, decided to tough it out cautiously, reducing the herd from 400 to 200. Tilda was working as a nurse at the hospital in Bathurst, helping to offset the fact that each animal cost roughly $2 a day to feed. Just when they thought the borders would reopen, mad cow reared its ugly head again—a few days before Christmas.

By now, the Wheltons were thousands of dollars in debt, and Tilda was pregnant. "If we don't do something different, we're finished," David thought. So they started selling beef directly to locals from a small building attached to their home. They couldn't afford the steroids, fertilizer and other additives that are traditionally used in raising beef, so the farm morphed into organic mode.

Eventually, "the shop" included two large refrigerators, six chest freezers, and a 450-foot walk-in freezer that could hold 10,000 pounds of meat. They expanded their products to include pork and chicken as well as homemade items such as smoked meat, sausage, pastrami, jerky, meat pies and preserves. David made some of these items, while local producers provided the rest. Son Ryan raised and sold organic vegetables. Word about what Whelton Farms had to offer got around; David picked up accounts at schools, senior citizens' homes, local arenas and restaurants.

In 2006, just as the Wheltons were making headway with their massive debt-load, the economy took a nosedive. Several businesses closed in the region including three fish plants. Instead of spending $50-100 a week on meat, families reduced their average spending to $15-20 a week. Commercial accounts shrivelled. David tried several times to negotiate a deal with the lending institutions to whom he owed money, but to no avail.

In June 2009, he had major knee surgery. Ten days later he was served notice from the lending institutions to pay up, or else. By December, bankruptcy was the only option; the following March he was dragged through a public auction.

But miraculously, he was able to stay in the same farmhouse, on the same homestead that's been in the family for 175 years. A friend raises beef for him,

Father Robert McGraw takes time out for ice cream. "Religious practice may not be the same as it was 50 years ago," he says, "but the spiritual need in the heart of a person is the same." Right, from top: David Whelton and his family; an artisan cheesemaker; flying the Acadian flag; La Homard Mobile, a common sight on the main street during summer.

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Karen Mersereau, Gérard Paulin and son Jules behind Hôtel Paulin. Jules, a free-spirited nine-year-old, takes advantage of having a beach for a backyard. Below: Jean Patenaude, similarly in his element.

and he's back in business pretty much as before—only he doesn't have a large herd or a massive debt load. This past winter he researched small-scale raspberry and blueberry production, and will start a modest operation this summer.

Ask David how he keeps going and he replies, "Just look around you. Yeah, we lost of lot of money, but I know of three people right now whose kids are in the hospital with cancer. We're not in a mansion or driving Ferraris, but we're here and we have our health."

He also relishes the fact that he's now able to spend more time with his kids. "I'm now a stay-at-home dad and trying to be best husband in the world. I tell people to keep focused on the things that matter; realize how lucky you are."

Karen Mersereau buys David's beef to cook for guests at Hôtel Paulin. Constructed in 1891, it was the first hotel in Caraquet and is now one of the oldest family-operated hotels in Canada. Her partner, Gérard Paulin, has fond memories of growing up there.

After a stint working as an airline steward with Air Canada, Gérard returned to Caraquet in 1971 to help his mother run the business. Fast forward to 1998, when he was part of a delegation of New Brunswick inn-keepers participating in a trade show in San Francisco. Little did the long-time bachelor know that he would fall in love with a vivacious chef (also a New Brunswick inn-keeper at the time), and invite her into his life. Just like that. Eventually, son Jules came into the picture.

Gérard, is a quiet, thoughtful man. Practical and methodical, he measures his responses. New-age technologies (like e-mail) confound him, although he's handy with tools and does most of the odd jobs around the hotel. He's also punctual. Karen, on the other hand, is imaginative and fiery, but rarely on time. Gérard once said that they never got married because he was afraid she'd miss the wedding. "We tried once in Toronto. I bought a suit and everything and picked the date; she changed it."

But he's fiercely proud of her prowess in the kitchen. As executive chef, she plans and prepares three- to seven-course meals fit for Pharaohs.

It's tough operating a boutique hotel with five-star luxury suites in northern New Brunswick. Hôtel Paulin's occupancy rate has hovered around 45 to 48 per cent (compared to 70 per cent for inns in more populated areas, like Fredericton or Saint John) and, as with any hotel, is affected by competition and other market forces. Karen's solution to a decline in reservations? Ignore what's going on and redecorate a room. She also keeps adding more plates to her juggling act: the latest is a series of culinary experiences such as a wild mushroom foraging expedition (see "The Mushroom Man," right.)

"When things go wrong you have to do what you do best," she says. "If you don't have challenges, you don't grow."

It's been said that faith is a bird that feels dawn breaking, and sings while it is still dark. The people of Caraquet do this with panache—and grace.

The mushroom man

Jean Patenaude has always been keen about the woods. Growing up in eastern Quebec, he worked his way through Boy Scouts and learned everything he could about nature, the outdoors and survival.

He also developed a passion for mushrooms, eventually becoming a mycologist, and has learned how to identify about 1,000 varieties.

When Jean moved to Caraquet a few years ago, he started a small company that sold mushrooms for export; he had no trouble finding—and selling—up to 5,000 pounds of chanterelles a month. However, to minimize the impact on the environment caused by the mushroom pickers, who were trampling the grounds, he stopped selling them in huge quantities. He now gathers mushrooms on a small scale for clients like Karen Mersereau at Hôtel Paulin, and leads mushroom foraging weekends for her.

His favourite mushrooms? Small garlic mushrooms top the list, along with oyster mushrooms found anywhere from five to 20 or 30 feet up in poplar trees. It's always good to look up.