



Taste-away in Toronto

By Melody Wren

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TORONTO — A weekend getaway to Toronto is always an enjoyable escape — and when it has a culinary focus it takes on a completely different (ahem) flavour.

Staying at the downtown Fairmont Royal York Hotel on Front Street is a treat at any time. When you add in its emphasis its restaurants place on serving local and seasonal foods, your visit can become a gastronomic extravaganza. It's also a hotel that appeals to people of all ages, to judge from the crowds I saw in the lobby during a recent stay. Young couples with small children, jet-lagged, Tilly-clad travellers, young clubbers in their spandex and elegant seniors. They all bring an energetic atmosphere to the place.

We began our own stay by taking the hotel's "Shop with the Chef" tour, which Chef Tom Phuong-Luu of the Royal York led through the nearby St. Lawrence Market at Front and Jarvis streets.

Dressed head to toe in his chef whites, complete with hat, Chef Tom introduced us to several vendors at the stands where he regularly buys Ontario produce for the hotel restaurants.

As Murray Graziano, owner of Golden Orchard Fine Foods for 35 years, said, "If we (shoppers) don't support local growers today, they won't be here tomorrow."

During the tour, we stopped for a market favourite, a peameal bacon sandwich from the market's Carousel



Chef Tom. Chef Tom Phuong-Luu of the Fairmont Royal York Hotel visits the St. Lawrence Market in Toronto. Melody Wren Source: Melody Wren

Bakery, adding some mustard around the corner at Kozlik's Mustard (choosing from 34 possible varieties), then grabbing a coffee at Pasta Mia.

We felt like we were getting an insider's look at the market and the tour let us see where many of the ingredients for our evening dinner originated.

By the time we returned to the hotel, I was gasping for a cup of tea, so we headed to the Library Bar and enjoyed a traditional afternoon tea on fine china, served with finger sandwiches, a divine assortment of pastries, scones and cream.

You don't have to be a hotel guest to enjoy this total tea experience, which included a tour of the rooftop terrace garden, again with Chef Tom, where we met six queens and their accompanying entourage of thousands of bees. Desserts served in the restaurant are flavoured with honey that's hand-harvested on the terrace.

Exploring the flourishing rooftop herb garden, installed 10 years ago, Chef Tom pointed out a variety of herbs and vegetables and encouraged us to take samples of anything we wanted. The herbs accent dishes served in the restaurant and he mentioned that the chocolate mint would be perfect in a chocolate mint Mojito. When I laughed and said I would love one with my dinner, he immediately plucked some leaves to take to the bartender so she would be prepared when I arrived.

For an early evening appetizer, we left the hotel headed to the highly recommended Starfish Oyster Bed and Grill, a short walk away in Toronto's downtown financial district. My dining companion enjoyed a dozen fresh oysters that were deftly prepared by Lawrence David, who shucks as many as 1,200 oysters a day at the restaurant. I savoured house smoked haddock fishcakes, along with a Bellini made with fresh Ontario peaches.

Back at the Royal York, we then enjoyed a veritable feast at the Epic restaurant, where the staff concentrates on serving seasonal dishes, 95 per cent of which are prepared using area foods. The menu identifies the name of location of the Ontario farm where the food was sourced. It is easy to toss around words such as "sustainable" and "local," but the Epic restaurant follows the seasonal harvests closely and its menu constantly changes.

After starting with chocolate mint mojitos, based on our rooftop harvest earlier in the day, we were served house-made bread, accompanied by a spread of pureed butternut squash — brilliance. Pickled watermelon accompanied the tiniest pieces of gold and red beets that were dabbed with local goat cheese — a light, scrumptious appetizer.

The main dish was speckled trout from Collingwood, served with miniature patty pan squash and roasted fingerling potatoes, all of it delicious. An impressive “lifestyle cuisine” menu is also available, catering to a variety of diets including HeartHealthy, vegan, diabetic, raw, macrobiotic, and gluten free.

On Sunday at noon, we met with Trina Hendry — she grew up in Guelph but now runs ChowBella Culinary Experiences & Concierge in Toronto — for a culinary tour of Queen Street West, a few blocks west of Bathurst Street in the Trinity Bellwoods Park area.

This is a walk that takes your tastebuds through one of the hippest areas of Toronto Sunday at brunch o'clock.

Our tour lasted about three hours (book ahead online), started at Queen Street West and Walnut Avenue (a few blocks west of Bathurst Street) and is totally suitable for the not-so-keen-on-walking set as it was only a kilometre of walking at the most. It's up to you to bring an appetite and good walking shoes.

As Hendry says: “It is a unique opportunity to discover the neighbourhood from a culinary point of view . . . participants take in authentic experiences not available to the general public and are treated like VIPS for the few hours.”

Our sampling began at The Spice Trader and The Olive Pit, both at 877 Queen St. W. and both popular stops for chefs and foodies.

With bread chunks dipped into oils and vinegars, we tasted our way through areas of Spain, France, Lebanon, Italy and Portugal. As happens at a wine tasting, comments were made regarding the smell, colour and taste of each product. It was fascinating to hear other people's descriptions of the tastes — “grassy, very light, fresh, herbaceous.”

The tour continued next to Nadège at 780 Queen St. W., a chic new patisserie with an interior that is stark and modern and a focus on unusual flavour combinations. We enjoyed a decadent sample of the macarons (make mine salted caramel, please). The Parisian pastries were unbelievably gorgeous.

Still licking our lips, we walked a few steps to TeaLish, an independent boutique at 728 Queen St. W., where we sipped tea samples while the manager educated us with basic information about tea and brewing instructions. We each chose a tea to take along and sipped from these as we ambled on to the next sweet stop, Dlish Cupcakes at 833 Queen St. W.

It features a daily menu with nine different cupcakes, each one handcrafted using fresh, local natural ingredients — no hydrogenated oils here, just pure sweet goodness. Red Velvet is their bestseller, so that is

what I went for and had to refrain from cramming the entire thing into my mouth all at once.

Delight Fair Trade Chocolate at 805 Queen St. W., was the next stop and here we tasted chocolate and organic ice cream, which was a personal favourite. Other seasonal choices including Honey Lavender, Spiced Plum, Niagara Apricot and Blue Cheese.

Downstairs in Le Caveau, we indulged in tasting Canadian artisanal cheeses.

The tour's grand finale came when we stopped for a tasting at Smoke's Poutinerie at 578 Queen St. W.

I had never tasted poutine, so I warily ordered the "Vegetarian Deluxe" — with fresh green peas and 'shrooms,' but hold the onions. As a newbie, I dug in with much trepidation and was surprised to discover how delicious it was.

Smoke's has just opened a Guelph location at 20 Wyndham St. N., and I believe I may become one of their regular customers.

Toronto is a lively, energetic city for anyone with a passion for food — so tune up your tastebuds this fall and head for the big city.

Melody Wren is a Guelph writer. Her Toronto visit was supported by the Fairmont Royal Hotel, Tourism Toronto, the Starfish Oyster Bar and Grill and ChowBell Culinary Experiences.

If you go . . .

- Fairmont Royal York Hotel, 100 Front St.W., Toronto. (416-860-4556 or 1-866-540-4489 or www.fairmont.com/royalyork).
- [Starfish Oyster Bed and Grill is at 100 Adelaide St. E., Toronto \(416-366-7827 or www.starfishoysterbed.com\)](http://www.starfishoysterbed.com).
- ChowBella Culinary Experience - For additional information or to book the Queen Street West tour, visit the web site at www.chowbellaconcierge.com/tours or 1-647-403-8030. All tours are subject to availability and limited to a maximum of eight people. The cost includes all food samples and is \$49 per person, plus applicable taxes and tip.

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