

# Victoria's cuisine scene is local and adventurous

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JANE MUNDY

It's hard to imagine that in the not-so-distant past, a posh meal in Victoria usually meant French or Italian — food and wine imported — from only a few decent restaurants. There was no such thing as West Coast cuisine. Now, seems like the city's most popular eateries are scrambling to outdo each other with farm- and forest-to-table cuisine, focusing on everything local.

For most of us, the concept of eating local and seasonal ingredients started in 2007 with the publication of the best-selling book 100-Mile Diet, written by two Canadians who ate foods for one year only grown within 100 miles of their residence.

Victoria's chefs in particular have embraced and finessed this concept to such an extent it's like they have primed our taste buds for only local and seasonal foods. Who is craving coconut?

Soon after the book became a bestseller, I was one of four food writers asked to cook a four-course meal within a 100-mile radius of Vancouver. It wasn't easy. Neither bread nor pasta were on the menu because wheat wasn't grown anywhere in B.C. Kelp powder was substituted for salt and I almost blew it with the local wine because it included an Okanagan blend.

If asked to create a menu now within 100 miles of Victoria, easy-peasy. I'd start with gin & tonic and a twist of lemon — gin and citrus from Sooke. On the table would be True Grain bread, made with Vancouver Island-farmed and milled Red Fife flour, and a bowl of olives from Pender

Island. I could serve pasta, either made with flour or kelp, even tea from the Cowichan Valley, all without cheating. As for wine, spoiled for choice.

And Victoria's diners are spoiled for choice. Many restaurants keep raising the bar in service and space, and of course the food — showcasing the finest island ingredients. Saveur, a narrow 30-seat restaurant on the edge of Chinatown, recently and deservedly won YAM magazine's Restaurant of the Year. Judged on passion and support for the local food industry, along with other details such as decor and culinary expertise, no wonder chef/owner Robert Cassels also won "Best Fine Dining" and "Best Brunch."

Just five years ago Chef Cassels had the vision to turn a former boot factory on Herald Street into Saveur. He built this gorgeous space from the floorboards up, with gilded heritage brick walls and a live green wall behind the slick bar. And there's the food. "How does he do that?" we pondered for about three hours, starting with tomatoes from Sun Wing Farm, the first of the 5-course tasting menu. Sea asparagus with compressed cucumber and oyster emulsion, paired with Rathjen Cellars Wine Bunker White tingled both my brain and palate, as did every course. If you're craving a country drive, stop by Rathjen Cellars in Saanich for a tasting; they blend grapes from mainly from Saanich vineyards (two from Duncan) and the Pinot Noir is terrific.

At Boom + Batten, the new "over-water" restaurant in Victoria's inner harbour, I sipped "Orca Song", a won-



Saveur, on the edge of Chinatown, won YAM magazine's Restaurant of the Year. — PHOTOS: JANE MUNDY

drous turquoise-coloured G&T made with award-winning Sheringham Distillery's gin, kombu and sake while deciding — with difficulty — on which small plates to share from the creative menu. Almost everything appealed.

We made brilliant choices: cabbage, potato and basil cake; TopSoil greens; roasted vegetable pizza; taglietti with meatballs and ended with an outrageous chilled rhubarb and strawberry consommé. And a DJ ramps up this vibrant room after sunset. Be sure to take home a box of macarons.

Next day I bought a box of salad greens at TopSoil, an urban farm on Harbour Road (just across the Johnson Street

Bridge and a stone's throw from Fol Epi, hands down the best bakery in town), where freshly picked can't be beat.

The lineup at Nourish starts around 8.30 a.m. Situated in an 1888 heritage house, guests say it's like coming to Grandma's home, and owner Haley Rosenberg attributes her grandmother's know-how to her success. It's a restaurant that makes people happy and healthy, Rosenberg's vision.

You can jump the line and dine at sister restaurant Charlotte & The Quail, situated in the beautiful Gardens at the Horticulture of the Pacific (HCP). And the Sleeping Beauty pancakes are heavenly. So too, is Victoria's food scene.



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