

A TASTE OF TORONTO

Move over London and New York. Toronto is tantalising the taste-buds in a stealthy bid to become the gastronomic capital of the world

“YOU’RE IN FOR A TREAT;” EXCLAIMS WAITER ADLEY, sounding like Kryten, the robot-servant from *Red Dwarf*. I’m at Nota Bene in Toronto — a stunning 8,000 square-foot restaurant that’s garnered much critical acclaim — on a quest to find Canada’s top flavours. From trendy street-food to the lofty heights of the CN Tower’s revolving restaurant, I’m taking bites out of Toronto’s happening cuisine scene.

It’s early but the room is buzzing. The opera crowd, all dressed in black bar a lone lady in a vermillion jacket as loud as her voice, is polishing off dessert, ready to stumble off for theatrical entertainment. There’s an elegance permeating the room, which is also reflected in the dishes; modern Italian with a leaning towards regional produce. The crisp duck salad, served with tangy sumac-dusted green papaya slaw and cashews, hints at fresh zest, leaving my taste buds tingling.

“The cod is sublime. The buttery opulent flavours can’t be understated,” Adley effuses. He’s right. The tartness of the pickled *hon shimeji* mushrooms counterbalances the sweet, wild BC cod, swimming in butter. Textures collide in every mouthful, crunchy sweet potato chips and creamy eggplant complementing melting flakes of fish. For dessert I inhale raspberry sorbet, scoops of maroon-coloured refreshment served with a sugar cookie; a cross between an ice-cream wafer and shortbread.

As I sip the last dregs of my refreshing Nota Bene blend tea, I notice new diners have replaced the theatre buffs and are tucking in to starters, their evening just beginning. Mine is ending as I stroll back to my comfortable abode just down the road at the Park Hyatt Hotel.

“THE RIGHT WAY TO SAMPLE CHOCOLATE IS BY PUTTING a piece in your mouth and letting it melt between your tongue and the roof of your mouth,” explains Ian Wylie handing me a square of deep-brown goodness. Ian’s leading me through Toronto’s sweet side on Tasty Tours’ Trinity Bellwoods Chocolate Tour. We’ve kicked off at Soma, an artisan chocolatier producing bean to bar. The cubes I’m attempting to savour — rather than gulp down greedily — are made on site.

At Sanko Trading Stephen Mizuno talks us through Japanese sweets, handing me a green tea Kit Kat. Having lived in Japan, I’m excited to find my favourites here, and I load up with armfuls of Pocky, hard fruit candies, and *ramune* [lemonade] drops before we move on to Nadège patisserie. Nadège Nourian, a fourth generation pastry chef, is a fan of bright colours — a rainbow of macaroons sits in rows, while chocolate tablets, conceptualised through the alphabet, offer 26 varieties of divine — from almond to zest. ▾

THERE’S AN ELEGANCE PERMEATING THE ROOM, REFLECTED IN THE DISHES; MODERN ITALIAN WITH A LEANING TOWARDS REGIONAL PRODUCE



"THE RIGHT WAY TO SAMPLE CHOCOLATE IS BY PUTTING A PIECE IN YOUR MOUTH AND LETTING IT MELT BETWEEN YOUR TONGUE AND THE ROOF OF YOUR MOUTH," EXPLAINS IAN WYLIE HANDING ME A SQUARE OF DEEP-BROWN GOODNESS



Prince Edward Island mussels, soaking in a deliciously flavoursome broth. "Toronto's food scene is really interesting," says general manager Zia Shaikh. "As well as places like this, there's a food scene going on around Ossington and places like that, where chefs are doing experimental things in hole-in-the-wall eateries. There's some great cuisine down that way," he comments, as I add Ossington to my dining list.

I need exercise, so I drag my burgeoning waistline down to the Park Hyatt gym before making my way to The Chase, Toronto's most recent culinary addition. The buzz is palpable in the downstairs Fish and Oyster bar and it doesn't stop at the fifth floor, with its outdoor terrace overlooking downtown Toronto. I'm lucky to get a table – in a few short months The Chase has become the hottest space in town, something Chase Hospitality Group president and founder, Steven Salm is rightfully proud of. "Toronto will always have a competitive dining scene. We probably would never open in a city that wasn't. We try to deliver experiences far more memorable than 'just a restaurant,'" he says. Whatever they're doing, they're doing it right. "The reception to The Chase has been extremely humbling," confesses Salm.

I sink into a window-side seat as a plate of apple quince focaccia appears. The buttery, salt-tinged, slightly-sweet hunk of bread is luscious. A few Prince Edward Island oysters slide down my gullet, before I dive into a plate of home-made mozzarella. The soft, creamy cheese elicits groans of delight, as does the lobster, poached with fazzoletti noodles, heaped with cow's milk curd, crushed tomato and asparagus.

Dessert is a flourless cake, layered with dark chocolate mousse, chocolate cream, white chocolate feuilletine, and hazelnut fudge. It's decadent – silky smooth and surprisingly light. I need to gym more. Instead, I swing by the Park Hyatt's roof lounge, the rich suede and leather décor inviting me to relax and take in the city skyline.

PEPPERS IN A CORNUCOPIA OF colour mingle with farm-picked fruit tumbled into multi-hued piles at St Lawrence Market. Cheese rubs shoulders with maple syrup and baked goods, a coffee purveyor lurking around a corner. Aromas waft as people jostle for treats. The market is foodie heaven, but I'm sated by the Park Hyatt's generous breakfast. I depart to while away the day admiring the street-art of Toronto's alleyways and window-shop on eclectic Queen Street West.

Yorkville, one of the most exclusive shopping districts in the country, **▶**



A RAINBOW OF MACAROONS SITS IN ROWS, WHILE CHOCOLATE TABLETS CONCEPTUALISED THROUGH THE ALPHABET OFFER 26 VARIETIES OF DIVINE – FROM ALMOND TO ZEST



A stroll across Trinity Bellwoods Park takes us to Le Dolci bakery and food studio where I try my first cronut. It's bafflingly good. It's a donut, but with flaky, almost crunchy, calorific pastry. Every treat here is mouth-watering, culminating in a magnificently-gooey chocolate tart. In the ensuing sugar rush, I promise to return for a baking class, my brain as glazed as the cronut.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Toronto is gaining a reputation for sensational cuisine.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Fresh produce at St Lawrence Market; intricately-decorated hand-made truffles at Odile Chocolat; Leslieville Pumps combines a barbecue restaurant with a gas station; macarons make a colourful addition to the patisserie scene; Jamie Kennedy's Gilead Café is down a nondescript alley, but it still draws foodies in to its welcoming ambience.

At Odile Chocolat, the charming Odile Chatelain walks me through the truffle-making process. Her bite-sized creations are works of art, featuring unusual flavour combinations and all-natural ingredients. From Canadian raspberry vinegar to an elaborately-decorated Chai Masala, each morsel evokes rich indulgence. It must be lunch time.

Craving something savoury, I drop in to La Soci t , which marries a French bistro with Toronto's cosmopolitan ambience. Modelled after 1920s Parisian design with intricate mosaic-tiled floors and over-sized leather banquettes, the highlight is the stunning stained-glass ceiling – and the superb steamed



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Cronuts are a delicious combination of donut and croissant; a kimchi dog from Kitchen Cargo makes an appearance on the Secret Menu and Side Streets tour by Foodies on Foot; Canada produces several varieties of oyster on both the east and west coasts.



is celebrity-central so my eyes are peeled at Sassafras, where the likes of David Beckham, Bono and Ellen DeGeneres have been known to chow down. The intimate eatery set in an array of Victorian row-houses is an A-lister staple.

As I savour a pair of hazelnut-crusting Digby scallops, I cast my eyes around the room, searching for fame. No doubt a hero of the silver screen will appear just as I inelegantly tuck into the perfectly-cooked Alberta venison striploin. I take dainty bites as a man enters wearing a baseball cap – a sure sign of someone incognito. No matter how much I squint, I can't turn him into anyone famous, so I return my gaze to the trio of crême brûlée. The star tonight is in these pots of happiness.

I MOVE INTO A GORGEOUS SUITE AT THE SHANGRI-LA

before joining the small group of food enthusiasts milling around Steven Hellmann, co-founder of Foodies on Foot, who waves off questions with a wry grin. We're on a mission, a Secret Menus and Side Streets tour, seeking insider knowledge on the city's food scene.

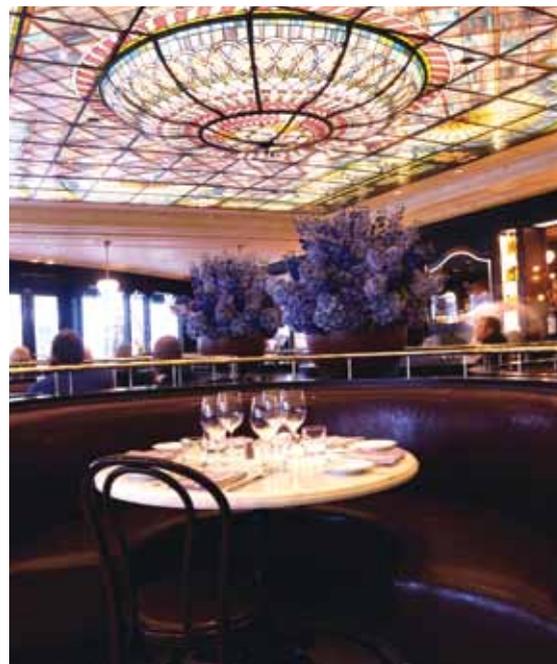
"No-one puts cheese at the centre of the table," says the owner at Cheesewerks. The extensive menu here is, unsurprisingly, all about cheese. But we're not ordering from the menu. We're scoffing an item available only to those in the know – a chunky, double cheese toastie which we dunk into thick tomato soup.

At every establishment, from chef Jamie Kennedy's Gilead café, brightening a nondescript alleyway, to The Happy Hooker fish bar across town, we sample off-menu items – from a barbecue sandwich at Leslieville Pumps, an unusual gas station cum restaurant, to a *kimchi* dog at Kitchen Cargo, set in a row of street-food eateries inside old shipping containers. Hellman seems to know every restaurant in Toronto – all 7,000 plus. He's passionate about feeding the masses, giving a running commentary on the restaurants we pass as he guides us through Toronto's food maze. You could eat for years in this city without visiting the same place twice.

The group has slowed to a crawl as I bid farewell and they waddle to Bakerbots for an ice-cream sandwich – I've foolishly booked onto another tour and I'm late.

I sprint to meet chef Scott Savoie, the Culinary Wizard of Oz, who's introducing me to the gastronomical delights of Ossington.

"Anyone can get you in the front door of a restaurant. I can get you in the back door," chef says in his booming gravelly voice, as we enter Samuel J Moore. The tavern-style restaurant features high, pressed-tin ceilings and black-and-white tiled floors. Alexandra Feswick, the talented chef, pops out to greet us, before sending out a charcuterie platter and a bowl of the best fries in the world, deliciously fried in butter and sugar.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: St Lawrence Market carries all kinds of local produce; the EdgeWalk experience at the iconic CN Tower takes nerves of steel; the spectacular stained-glass ceiling at La Socièté.

"GYM. I MUST GYM," I THINK IN THE MORNING, STARTING with a healthy bowl of berries at the Shangri-La's signature restaurant, Bosk, before hitting the treadmill. Laps of the hotel's chic swimming pool complete my workout and I sink into a cabana for respite, donning a plush robe.

Rejuvenated, I hole up in the lobby lounge, a blazing gas fire warming the urban living space as natural light streams through the two-storey windows. On a self-imposed fast, I virtuously decline offers of sustenance, instead perusing the tea library – all 68 flavours – as a piano tinkles in the

background. I finally select the Rooibos, a red tea from South Africa exuding hints of sweet vanilla.

There's no set itinerary for this ramble. Chef picks eateries on the fly and we dip in and out, sharing plates and creatively-concocted beverages ranging from Portuguese egg tarts to fresh oysters, coconut chili lime satay and tuna tartare at places like Salt and Hawker Bar. The conversation flows throughout, chef proving himself an entertaining story-teller with an infectious belly-laugh.

"Before you go, let me take you to one of my favourite spots," begs chef. We saunter into Trattoria Taverniti, a cosy, family-run establishment where a plate of figs wrapped in speck and stuffed with goat's cheese materialises. I'm far from hungry, but the flavour combination is phenomenal. As chef rolls me into a taxi, I collapse into a food coma, vowing never to eat again.

Hours later my appetite returns and the Shangri-La's courtesy-car driver drops me at the inconspicuous entrance to O.Noir, Canada's only dine-in-the-dark restaurant. I tentatively push the door open, entering a dimly-lit corridor. Couples murmur quietly in the bar as the waitress hands me a menu.

"Welcome. Are you ready?" asks the sight-impaired waiter, placing my hand on his shoulder as we push through double doors into a pitch-black room. My steps are hesitant and as I sit I pat the table, exploring my surroundings. There's no music, just chatter and bursts of raucous laughter as forkfuls of food elude their intended destinations.

I open a packet of butter and slather it onto a warm bread roll. Proud of my efforts I tear off pieces to pop into my mouth, only to find some loaded, others bare. Eating in inky-blackness is harder than it seems. Conversation swirls around me and it dawns that no-one knows I'm here. I'm invisible.

Carving steak in darkness is complicated, judging by the comments flying around the room. I'm feeling smug as I brush the stray lettuce leaves off my lap from the starter salad and work on my risotto. As I finish eating, the couple next to me departs so I stretch my arms out, exploring further afield. I discover we've been sitting unwittingly close, sharing an intimate table. As the waiter leads me into the light, with steps far steadier than my own, I feel humbled. Dining in the dark for many is a reality. This experience is not about food; it's about empathy.

With a final glance over the sprawling city, I realise how many food experiences remain unexplored. I'll be back to eat my way through more of Toronto – after a diet.

THE SUN IS BEAMING AS I HEAD TO THE LANDMARK CN

Tower, once the world's tallest. Whisked to 360, a revolving restaurant more than 351 metres up, I'm astounded by the



WHISKED TO 360, A REVOLVING RESTAURANT MORE THAN 351 METRES UP, I'M ASTOUNDED BY THE VIEWS OVER LAKE ONTARIO, REPLACED BY THE CITY AS WE ROTATE. THE MOTION IS DISCONCERTING, BUT THERE'S NO DENYING THE VIEWS ARE SPECTACULAR, AND THE FOOD EQUALLY IMPRESSIVE

views over Lake Ontario, replaced by the city as we rotate clockwise. The motion is disconcerting, but there's no denying the views are spectacular, and the food equally impressive.

After polishing off a three-course set menu, culminating in a maple pecan tart, I take my loaded belly to gear up for EdgeWalk, a meander around the outside of the building. There are five of us taking the stroll 356 metres above the ground. As we clamber into unflattering red jumpsuits and bright yellow harnesses, which are double, triple and quadruple safety-checked, my palms start sweating. I take deep breaths as we clip onto the rig and head out the door.

Eyes fixed firmly on the horizon I ignore the ground so far below. For our first challenge, Toes Over Toronto, we edge our feet hesitantly over the rim of the platform. It's terrifying. My calves spring into action, dragging my weight (and my lunch) to my heels, every instinct warning me of impending danger. After this introduction, leaning over the edge into the harness is a doddle. By the end of the circuit we're playing up to the cameras like experienced tightrope-walkers.

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