

TORONTO: The World Wrapped Up in a City

Toronto's ethnic neighborhoods deliver authentic cuisines

Story by Mary Welch



PHOTO BY GRADY MCGILL

Toronto is one of my all-time favorite cities and each trip back unveils another aspect to this international city that continues to delight, amaze and surprise. Yes, after visiting the CN Tower, Bata Shoe Museum (who doesn't love shoes?), seeing the Toronto Maple Leafs play hockey, experiencing the invigorating cultural scene and taking in a show at Second City, we decided to delve into the real Toronto – the neighborhoods and the foods that help define this truly international city.

Toronto is one of the most diverse cities in the world and still has a number of vibrant and authentic ethnic neighborhoods. There are four Chinatowns, a Little Italy

and neighborhoods or a couple of blocks that reflect the diverse cultures such as Indian, Italian, Greek, Asian, and increasingly, Latin America.

For our visit we anchored ourselves at two hotels. The Thompson, located in artsy King West Village, is surrounded by murals on walls, a lovely park, techy start-ups and a small restaurant that serves one of our favorite Canadian dishes – poutine. Poutine, of course, consists of french fries and cheese curds topped with a light brown gravy. While the hotel featured cutting-edge design and large rooms, the rooftop with an infinity pool offers a not-to-be-missed view of Toronto's skyline.

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Eating in the Great White North

While Toronto boasts a plethora of ethnic restaurants, Canadian cooking seems to have taken a back seat. Of course, Canada, much like the U.S., is so geographically vast that what one serves on the kitchen tables in Nova Scotia bears little relevance to the meat-heavy area of, say, Manitoba.

But Antler is giving Canadian cooking a starring role. Chef Michael Hunter aims to define Canadian cuisine using local produce and wild foods. Among his specialties are venison tartare, ricotta cavatelli with wild boar ragu, game burger, bison rib eye and a spice ash crusted prime cut of deer. Antler's vibe is young, energetic and hip – a perfect neighborhood feel.

A shortcut in cuisine – Canadian and otherwise – is a trip to the St. Lawrence Market, which since 1803 has been the community's "beating heart" and culinary focal point of Toronto. Don't miss the Carousel Bakery's award-winning "World Famous Peameal Bacon Sandwich." The market is just that – a market that sells every sort of food imaginable – from fresh breads to oysters, to sausages, meats to ice wine. Downstairs is a massive food court and shops. We could spend a whole day just eating our way through the market.

A Tour Around the World

Before we hit Chinatown – the main one – we ventured to Luckee Restaurant and Bar, an upscale Chinese restaurant balanced with the classical techniques of French cuisine. Chef Susur Lee's Nouvelle Chinoise cuisine features classic dishes and dim sum from the culinary traditions of Guangzhou,



Hunan, Shanghai and Szechuan regions. Be sure to try the lobster cheung fun with poached medallions and the Dim Sum Basket.

While Luckee is an upscale delight, we wanted to go to the original Chinatown and that means going to the Kensington Market and Chinatown. If you're like us, neighborhoods like this can be a little intimidating. Which restaurants are good? Is this one tourist friendly? Luckily we had a guide, John Lee, who told delightful tales of the history of this 1920's neighborhood and how it has merged cultures and languages. In fact, in this couple of blocks more than 60 languages are spoken – and everyone seems to understand each other.

Chinatown is located on the corner of Spadina and Dundas Street West and it bustles with people, open air markets , and restaurants – lots of restaurants. John, whose family is Korean, first took us to Casa Coffee and to a small backyard patio for a cup of coffee and a few yarns about the neighborhood before heading out. We stopped at Patty King, which serves up Jamaican beef, chicken and vegetable pastry patties. One of the benefits of John leading us is that we would never had entered – or even noticed – this tiny shop/ restaurant.

But the real joy of the tour was going to Roi San, a large corner restaurant with chickens and ducks hanging in the windows. This large restaurant is clearly a neighborhood



hangout and it is hard for John and others to walk to their tables without stopping to greet other diners. Try the shrimp shiu mai , har gow, beef ribs, turnip cake, curry squid, chicken and chive dumpling soup.

We moved over to the Ritz-Carlton and had a chef's table special with selections from their "cheese cave" and homemade pastas. Of course, we must admit that we really loved the jelly bean jar in the Executive Level Lounge. Once in a while, one must give in to simpler pleasures.

To get more on-the-street experiences, we heartily recommend Kevin Durkee and the Culinary Adventure Co., Canada's largest culinary tourism and experience operator. CAC offers neighborhood food tours, culinary adventures, cooking classes and tours of culinary neighborhoods such as Greektown, Little India and Little Italy. We took in the Little India tour and enjoyed strolling through one of the city's most colorful neighborhoods. From dosas to desserts, visitors can indulge in street foods such as grilled corn to samosas, kebabs, Tandoor cooked naan bread and melt-in-your-mouth butter chicken.

To India and Back

At Udoppi Palace an authentic regional vegetarian Indian restaurant that offers such delectable as soft spongy idlies, idlies, uthappams, samosas and dosas that are complimented with authentic home made sambhar. The best butter chicken

award goes to New Haandi 2000, a restaurant that blends exotic spices into mouth-watering dishes, including garlic naan, stewed okra, Punjabi kadhi pakora and saag paneer. Don't forget to wash it down with Cheetah craft beer. Another must-stop is Lahore TikkaHous that specializes in kababs, butter naan and mango lassi.

And while it's truly a delight to visit and get a feel for Toronto's international neighborhoods, we also like going back to a real working-class neighborhood that is experiencing a re-growth. For that we ventured out to the Maple Leaf Tavern, which was built in 1910 and converted into the Hotel Maple Leaf in 1935. Located in Leslieville in east Toronto, the tavern earned quite a reputation as a down-and-out-drinking hall. A team, led by managing partner Todd Morgan, bought the building and re-opened it in 2016 as a North American-cuisine restaurant and bar. Try the pickled pepperoni, grilled trout, wild boar shoulder, and grilled mackerel.

There is an old saying (thankfully buried) that said the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. However, we will say that a way to truly know, appreciate and experience a city is through its restaurants and neighborhoods. And, that's why each and every visit to Toronto is a true joy because this diverse international city embraces all cultures and has the restaurants that bring a little bit of (everyone's) home to Toronto.