

VICTORIA: EATING

Foodie walking tour reveals city's tasty side

LISA MONFORTON
THE CALGARY HERALD

"It was a small breakfast" read the simple directive on my itinerary. Though I was starving and bedding down at a B & B, where hearty all-day breakfasts are de rigueur, I complied by asking for a half-order, leaving my host to wonder. I explained that normally I would have dug into the shrimp and goat cheese omelette and all the sides, but I was going on a half-day culinary walking tour in downtown Victoria — which has grown to become one of Canada's dining meccas.

Several years ago, Kathy McAree, who moved from the mainland, seized upon the idea that Victoria — once derided as a place for the newly wed and nearly dead — was fast becoming populated with hip and home-grown restaurants that served a lot more than fish and chips. Now, Victoria has more than 700 dining establishments.

"I really wanted to promote our area. People don't realize what a culinary destination it is," says McAree. She started by conducting regional culinary tours and farther afield in Tucson, before concocting Urban Forage by Foot in Victoria.

"Our tour began at 11 a.m. where myself and a dozen others met at the tea-lovers nirvana — Silk Road Tea Co. (silkroadtea.com) just outside the red gates of the city's storied Chinatown.

There was no food in sight, but there were plenty of teas in silver canisters, each labelled in detail with tasting notes and exotic names, such as Alchemist Brew and Angelwater. As our group stood at the long narrow tea bar, four small cups each with a different tea were placed in front of us. "It's more complicated than a wine tasting," said McAree, before introducing one of the shop's tea sellers.

The Silk Road Tea Co. was started more than 15 years ago by two women passionate about the history of tea and the traditions surrounding it. They opened the business after learning the art of tea blending and serving by Chinese tea masters and herbalists.

Besides the tasting of new foods and flavours, McAree wants to tell stories about the proprietors and chefs behind the restaurants she's hand-picked for the tour. "It's the story about the people," she says, such as the family behind Victoria's iconic Dutch Bakery, where four generations have worked since 1926.

But before getting into the sweet stuff, we needed some savoury samples. It was on Cafe Vieux Montreal on Government Street for our first real food tasting. Walking into the cafe, it



Kathy McAree, owner of Travel With Taste, sips tea at the Silk Road Tea Co. on one of the tours she conducts in Victoria, called Urban Forage by Foot.

If You Go

■ To book a Travel With Taste culinary walking tour, go to travelwithtaste.com/tours.php
■ Cost is \$79 per person, not including GST.

bert). It's standing room only at a couple of tables where you order from a chalk-board menu; pulled pork sandwiches, smoked chicken, beef brisket and delicious sides, such as coldslaw (not the creamy kind), tangy barbecued beans and fresh cornbread — and a good selection of barbecue sauces.

Walking is a good thing as we head to one of several sweet stops. At the Dutch Bakery & Coffee Shop the smell of syrupy sweeteners hangs in the air. Glass counters are lined with cookies, candies, cakes, rolls, cupcakes and chocolates, marzipan, Danish and sausage rolls. Before sampling the vanilla slices and dollar rolls, we get a taste of the bakery's popular croquettes, a concoction of beef and gravy mounds breaded and deep fried.

What better but to have a chocolate chaser for the sugary confections. Rogers Chocolate, another Victoria in-

stitution, is situated in a two-year-old heritage building. Chocolate creams are what made Rogers famous, named for the eccentric American entrepreneur Charles Rogers. In the late 1900s, he began making chocolate and soon people were lining up for his dark chocolate lemon creams. It remains a hopping business and a tourist attraction. With a sizzling sugar buzz, we ambled over to the Artisan Wine Market, owned by the well-known winery — Mission Hill — which grows grapes on five vineyards in B.C.'s Okanagan Valley. A taste of some of the winery's lineup, from Reisinger Merlot, put us in the frame of mind to believe it or not — a sweet ending.

Cafe Mela marked our last stop of the day where we were served a welcome cup of coffee and a perfect, not-too-sweet slice of Sacher Torte. The Austrian dessert is a favourite at the cafe, run by two sisters, and named after their grandmothers who they never met.

Had I not already eaten my way around Victoria, I would have sampled the freshly made sandwiches — maybe even the apple streusel. But the best ending for this day was a brisk walk back to the B&B followed by a nap.

walked a few blocks over to one of Victoria's newer establishments where no vegetarians worth their salt would belly up. The Fig BBQ joint lives up to its name, going through 850 kilograms of pork a week (also imported from Al-

felt a little like we were in Old Montreal. The smell of smoked meat wafted in the air. Made on the premises, the delectable meat (Alberta beef) melted in our mouths on warm homemade rye bread. Also on our sampling plate was the cafe's own smoked salmon and a zesty French goat cheese with pears on flax bread.

But what the diminutive cafe is really known for is its handmade croissants made with imported butter from New Zealand. With our stomachs a little full, we

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