

Belly up to Bellingham

ROAD-TRIPPING TO THE WEST COAST THIS SUMMER? DON'T MISS THIS CHARMING BURG.

by Kate Zimmerman

Once upon a time, Bellingham, Washington, was more of a shopaholic's pit stop than a real destination for Canadian travelers. A mere 70 km. south of Vancouver, it offered highway-side factory outlet stores that gave Canucks their quick fix of discount "merch." A few hours later, they snuck back over the border with an undeclared Coach wallet replacing the old and a few bottles of cheap American booze squirreled away under the rumpled newspapers.



photo by Sommer Cronck

Few bothered to venture past the bland strip malls and investigate Bellingham itself (pop. 80,000), or the surrounding county of Whatcom, and that's likely still the case. Pity, that, for Whatcom County (which encompasses the area from Blaine to Bellingham and points east) is well worth exploration, especially for food nuts, the next time you're Wet Coast road tripping. This area has lovely historic neighbourhoods, nifty shopping, superb museums, and friendly locals known as "Bellinghamsters."

The verdant county's food scene glorifies local, sustainable eating. Watch out for the **Whatcom Food & Farm Finder**, a free local publication that points you in the right direction for "Farms, Fishers, Eateries, Markets and more!" Every year on April 1, Bellingham's mayor tosses a cabbage to launch the market that runs until Christmas. The district of Fairhaven, on the city's south side, holds a farmers' market on its Village Green every Wednesday from noon to 5 p.m.; downtown Bellingham plays host on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at **Depot Market Square**. All summer long, there's a series called Eat Local, where every Thursday one city restaurant uses only local ingredients.

Bellingham was incorporated in 1903, uniting the towns of Bellingham, Whatcom, Sehome and Fairhaven. The six-square-block district of Fairhaven was a boomtown in the 1890s and was briefly considered as a railway terminus before Seattle won out. Fairhaven Historic District remains a treasure trove of Victorian brick architecture, contributing to Bellingham's classic small-town look.

It's a boutique shopper's delight, with numerous independent clothing stores, antique vendors and art galleries. **Village Books** (1200, 1206-11th St.) is rambling, wooden-floored and multi-storied, loaded with new books and old, its lefty leanings evident from sly, Republican-mocking novelties. It also houses the great, independently run **Book Fare Café**, whose Northwest Salad features salmon, roasted beets, apples, hazelnuts, blue cheese, and mixed greens in a roasted garlic vinaigrette.

Thankfully, Bellingham – designated "Trail Town USA" by the American



photo by Caroline Kinsman

Hiking Society and the National Park Service – is renowned for its copious green space, so places to walk, jog or bike off anything you consume are ubiquitous. Be sure to explore Boulevard Park and its South Bay Trail (a.k.a. the "trail to trestle walk"), which stretches four miles between Fairhaven and downtown Bellingham, largely along Bellingham Bay. While you're at it, pick up a latte in the park from **Woods Coffee**, whose 10 locations, county-wide, use 100 percent recyclable and compostable cups, lids and straws, and whose coffee gets kudos from critics.

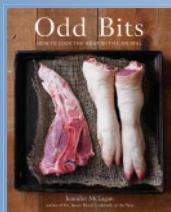
Bellingham also boasts that bit of American splendour known as **Trader Joe's** (2410 James St.), the relatively inexpensive supermarket packed with Trader Joe's label goodies, a cult hit with chowhounds. You can spend a cheerful half hour trolling its aisles for well-priced wine, hotel room snacks, like peanut-butter stuffed pretzels, and gold, like Corn & Chili Tomato-less Salsa.

Look who's cooking in September!



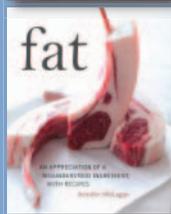
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When you're once again a tad peckish, **Anthony's** (25 Bellwether Way) at Squalicum Harbor has one of those jaw-dropping vistas that people who rarely see the ocean appreciate most. Its high, sloped roof and floor-to-ceiling windows allow for a spectacular marina view. Fish and seafood are the order of the day here, and the salad with Dungeness crab and pink grapefruit is outstanding.

When in Bellingham, you'd be remiss not to patronize **Boundary Bay Brewery & Bistro** (1107 Railroad Ave.), whose 17-barrel brewery's products can only be found in Washington and Northern Idaho. Located in a restored warehouse built in 1922, across from the Saturday farmers' market, BB's kitchen favours area farmers and producers, with items like Hempler's bacon, Guilemette honey, Cloud Mountain Farm apples, and Twin Sisters mushrooms appearing on its menu. This being the naughty United States, your kids are welcome here despite all the demon alcohol.

Walk off your brewskis before heading to the **Whatcom Museum** (250 Flora St.), whose campus consists of three distinct buildings in Bellingham's downtown, two of them open to casual visitors. The campus's Old City Hall (121 Prospect St.) dates back to 1892 and focuses on local history. Nearby, the museum's Lightcatcher Building is quintessentially West Coast. This stunning modern structure boasts a translucent wall 11 m. high and 55 m. long that's intended to capture and hold that elusive Pacific Northwest commodity, sunlight. The stylish museum focuses on the region's rich bounty of arts and crafts.

In terms of places to stay, there are B&Bs a-plenty here. But if you're up for a bit of a splurge, the **Hotel Bellwether** is beautifully located on the waterfront of Bellingham Bay, with views of the Cascade mountain range, Mount Baker and the San Juan islands. Old-fashioned European furnishings give the 65 guest-rooms a luxurious vibe. The hotel has its own private dock, and you can gaze at whale-watching and sea kayaking expeditions as they push off, or even embark on one yourself.



Absorb the waterfront action from the windows wrapping around the hotel's **Harborside Bistro**, whose elegant dishes are overseen by executive chef Julius Kaiser. Hail, Kaiser, the sort of dedicated leader who likes to spend his precious free time hunting for wild mushrooms with his equally keen underlings. The restaurant gets its charcuterie supplies from Salumi, the Seattle shop run by the dad of famous chef Mario Batali, but Kaiser isn't one to exclude products from outta state. Though it's ever-changing, the restaurant's charcuterie and fromage plate, for instance, might contain house-cured lox, a traditional Spanish chorizo called Salametto Piccante, a whiskey cheddar, a Dutch sheep's milk gouda, and the French double-cream *bleu*, Saint Agur. Top that starter off with pan-seared halibut and red quinoa and chard tabbouleh, and you can toddle contentedly upstairs to bed.

When morning comes, ask yourself when was the last time you encountered live music at breakfast. The casual ambience at **Old Town Café** (316 W. Holly St) – staff tattoos seem to be strictly enforced – is lent quirky charm by the musical stylings of locals who come in and play in exchange for a meal. The Number Nine, the most popular item on the menu, is two poached eggs on a biscuit, topped with cheese sauce and tomatoes, served with home fries and black beans. This is more food as ballast than as artwork, but sheesh, what do you want for \$6.75, .30 extra for each organic egg?

Your final stop before you blow town might as well be **Mallard Ice Cream** (1323 Railroad Ave.). Its amicable relations with area farmers result in quality ingredients and some pretty wacky flavours amongst its 500 seasonally rotated varieties – like lavender, vanilla malt, and honey assam tea. In one ice cream called The Notorious F.I.G. (get it, hiphop fans?), the grainy quality of figs comes through intensely – yet another of the countless culinary belles of Bellingham. □

Kate Zimmerman likes to hop over the border from Vancouver and stroll around Bellingham whenever she can.



for all things culinary...

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