

# A Culinary Tour of Toronto the Tasty

Toronto's hopping food scene puts the lie to its lacklustre nickname.

by Kate Zimmerman



The label “The Big Smoke” does Toronto an injustice. The brand is neither inviting nor accurate – it only conjures up a repellent, carcinogenic haze lurking northwest of New York’s shinier “Big Apple.” A week spent succumbing to the city’s culinary wiles convinced this new enthusiast that Toronto needs to re-name itself. “The Big Cheese” is too limiting. “The Whole Enchilada” is accurate, but ethnically confusing. So, I dunno – Feast Central?

Dominating that feast is a startling supply of outrageously good cheese. Where in this country but in Toronto would you find a gourmet store so savvy that it ages wheels to order for celebrities? In the vault at the west end’s 30-year-old **Cheese Boutique**, you can spot the names of The Barenaked Ladies’ Tyler Stewart and several hockey honchos attached to fragrant discs, as well as a hanging provolone so enormous it could double as a tugboat bumper.

This foodie destination off the south Kingsway is crammed with delicacies of every description – there’s an entire Little Italy room whose shelves, floor to ceiling, are jammed with pastas and other Italian ingredients – but its vast cheese collection is sufficiently cosmopolitan that two members of its staff belong to the *Confrerie des Chevaliers du Taste Fromage de France*.

Cheese Boutique also supplies the beech-wood shelves of the cheese cave at **TOCA** (an acronym for Toronto, Ontario, Canada), the swank restaurant on the mezzanine level of the city’s elegant new Ritz-Carlton Hotel. There, in a refrigerated glass room, the in-house *affineur* (or “cheese lady”) presides over TOCA’s curated selection of 60-plus types. “There are only four real ingredients in cheese, but a million possibilities,” she points out, resisting the urge to genuflect.

With locals so reverent, it’s no wonder that the *Globe and Mail*’s bi-weekly cheese columnist, Torontonian Sue Reidl, never seems to lack for material. Naturally, there are countless European offerings at any self-respecting deli, but Ontario’s cheddars and Quebec’s goat cheeses abound. Make sure to try the ash-rinded Grey Owl pasteurized goat’s milk cheese from Fromagerie Le Détour. Ready access to the United States’ finest helps diversify the offerings – in the trendy east end neighbourhood of Leslieville in the fall, staff members at **Leslieville Cheese Market & Fine Foods** were handing out samples of a swoon-worthy Wisconsin beauty called Merlot BellaVitano, a fandango of cheddar and parmesan flavours soaked in wine.

All this to say that visitors to Toronto ought to put cheese tasting at the top of their to-do lists.

With cheese, of course, one must have bread. The glorious organic loaves at **St. John’s Bakery** would have eluded yours truly if I hadn’t taken a food and cultural walking tour of Riverside/Leslieville with Chef Scott Savoie. This “bakery with a cause” is a social enterprise that’s run by St. John the Compassionate Mission. Its three-tiered Italian stone oven turns out sourdough baguettes, loaves of Red Fife and country rye, and Celtic multigrain sourdough, as well as cranberry-pumpkin seed and wild Quebec blueberry scones. Linda Karounou, who calls herself “head of sweets” at St. John’s, says its executive director spent a year at a French monastery learning to bake bread. Grab some early in your visit to go with any cheese you sample while in town.

Chef Savoie, who also offers tours of Little Italy and picnic paddles in heritage freighter canoes to the Toronto Islands through his **Culinary Adventure Company**, calls this excursion a “mile-long taste’n’s stroll.” He loves the Riverside/Leslieville section of the Riverdale neighbourhood – part of the late NDP leader Jack Layton’s Toronto-Danforth riding – and liberally salts his jaunts with local and regional history. Wandering past a bar called the **Avro**, for instance, he sums up the tale of Canada’s famous delta-winged interceptor aircraft, the Avro Arrow, permanently grounded by Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker in 1959.

Savoie and the merchants on his tour offer many taste sensations along the way, including samples of Ontario wine at a store called **Wine Rack**. There are numerous art galleries, funky clothing stores and vintage furniture shops along Queen Street East, but Savoie focuses on the foodie high points. (You can always double back to shop later.) At **Olive & Olives**, for example, you’ll taste olive oils and vinegars, learning the differences between early and later harvests, types of olives, and vinegar flavour profiles.

Other stops include **Hooked**, a fish market promoting sustainable species, and the chic **Bobette & Belle Artisanal Pastries** for salted caramel macarons. Don’t miss **Ed’s Real Scoop**, which makes almost every aspect of its ice cream flavourings in-house, ranging from sponge toffee, peanut butter fudge and apple pie to bacon bits for its Maple Bacon Crunch. Try Burnt Marshmallow for shades of campfires past.

Guided tours like Savoie’s are the way to go in this complex, bustling city. Hitch your star to historian Bruce Bell for a whirl through the **St. Lawrence Market**, established in 1803. Bell calls this two-building complex bisected by Front Street “the birthplace of the city of Toronto.” The north building now hosts a Saturday farmers’ market and, on Sundays, sells antiques. The south building, from 1845 to 1899 the site of Toronto’s first permanent city hall (and a jail that was, for a time, crammed with suffragettes), houses the current market.

Start your St. Lawrence Market day with a local favourite, the peameal bacon sandwich from 30-year-old **Carousel Bakery**. Once upon a time, boneless loins of pork were cut horizontally into ribs, cured in brine in oak barrels, then rolled in crushed yellow peas to preserve them, but the peas would eventually go rancid. One clever butcher substituted yellow cornmeal, and – bada-bing! – that’s the way it’s been ever since. Carousel sears its bacon on a griddle, loads thick slices of it into a tender Portuguese sourdough bun, and offers you a choice of condiments from nearby vendor **Anton Kozlik’s Canadian Mustard**. Choose the Amazing Maple Mustard (with horseradish) and you’ll be hooked, its silky, spicy sweetness perfectly elevating the salty, grainy heft of the pork. (Other flavours at Kozlik’s, established in 1948, include Lime & Honey and Triple Crunch.)

Close by, check out the many-splendoured snacks at **Olympic Food & Cheese Mart** (est. 1962), and, if you’ve got a kitchen where you’re staying, consider picking up some frozen kangaroo and wild boar sliders at **White House Meats**, which sells musk ox rib eyes along with its Sunday roasts. Take a terrific cooking class in an unfamiliar cuisine like Filipino in the three-year-old **Market Kitchen** on the mezzanine level. Saturdays at 9 a.m. the kitchen presents a Food Tasting and History Show where chefs cook recipes using seasonal ingredients available downstairs.

Tourists can’t dine out forever on tales of what they ate. Luckily, friendly characters also populate the market. Our guide ushered my group downstairs to the stall named **A Bisket, A Basket** for a chat with owner Urs Aeby. In 2002, the late Pope John Paul II visited Toronto and happened to taste Aeby’s “home-made style” strawberry, lavender and merlot jam, one example of his creative flavour combinations. When the pope’s henchman phoned to order more, Aeby suspected the fellow was one of his wisenheimer friends.

“I don’t have any,” he told the caller. “I sold it all to the Dalai Lama.”

Eventually, the pope won out, and A Bisket, A Basket got boasting rights. Being located on the edge of Toronto’s Financial District has clearly rubbed off on Aeby, who, at the very least, pretends to be shrewd. “I can assure you that the moment he gets canonized, the price goes up.”

The Big Smoke’s reputation with Albertans for stodginess and arrogance clearly deserves to be deep-sixed. All hail Feast Central for its chatty merchants, intriguing neighbourhoods and stellar food scene.

## TORONTO HIGH

Revel in the understated opulence of a guestroom in the **Ritz Carlton**. Then book the Chef's Table in the hotel's restaurant, **TOCA**, meet Chef Tom Brodi, and demolish seven or eight courses of dishes like BC crab stuffed into half a marrow bone with marrow foam.

Book into **The Thompson**, a modern hotel with a superb Italian restaurant, **Scarpetta**, featuring mind-boggling dishes like duck and foie gras ravioli.

Take "the world's highest full-circle hands-free walk," around the outside of the **CN Tower**, 356 metres above the ground. Edgewalk's witty guide escorts your group and gets you dangling over Toronto on a tether. Your entry fee includes photos and video. Afterward, or while your braver friends are outdoors, give in to the artistry of Executive Chef Peter George and drink in the view while dining at **360**, the tower's elegant revolving restaurant.



## TORONTO LOWER

Dive into a few bivalve mollusks at charming **Starfish Oyster Bed & Grill**, whose loquacious owner, Patrick McMurray, is a World Oyster Opening Champion.

Tour **Steam Whistle Brewing**, enjoying a pilsner at tour's end.

Experience **Evergreen Brick Works**, a community environmental centre that keeps urbanites in touch with their roots. The site of a former brick factory located on the edge of a quarry, it includes a café in one of its 10 restored buildings, and offers guided walking tours and bicycle rentals for exploring the trails in the adjacent ravine. Brick Works also hosts Toronto's biggest farmers' market on Saturdays, 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

A Bisket, A Basket; Anton Kozlik's Canadian Mustard; Carousel Bakery; Olympic Food & Cheese Mart; Market Kitchen; White House Meats; [stlawrencemarket.com](http://stlawrencemarket.com)

Bobette & Belle Artisanal Pastries, [bobetteandbelle.com](http://bobetteandbelle.com)

Bruce Bell Tours, [brucebelltours.ca](http://brucebelltours.ca)

Cheese Boutique, [cheeseboutique.com](http://cheeseboutique.com)

Edgewalk, [edgewalkcntower.ca](http://edgewalkcntower.ca)

Ed's Real Scoop, [edsrealscoop.com](http://edsrealscoop.com)

Evergreen Brick Works, [ebw.evergreen.ca](http://ebw.evergreen.ca)

Hooked, [hookedinc.ca](http://hookedinc.ca)

Leslieville Cheese Market & Fine Foods, [leslievillecheese.com](http://leslievillecheese.com)

Olive & Olives, [oliveolives.com](http://oliveolives.com)

Starfish Oyster Bed & Grill, [starfishoysterbed.com](http://starfishoysterbed.com)

Steam Whistle Brewing, [steamwhistle.ca](http://steamwhistle.ca)

St. John's Bakery, [stjohnsbakery.com](http://stjohnsbakery.com)

The Culinary Adventure Company (Chef Scott Savoie), [culinaryadventures.com](http://culinaryadventures.com)

TOCA by Tom Brodi, Ritz-Carlton, [tocarestaurant.com](http://tocarestaurant.com)

The Thompson, [thompsonhotels.com](http://thompsonhotels.com)

Wine Rack, [winerack.com](http://winerack.com) ❖

*Kate Zimmerman lives in Vancouver but now plans to visit Toronto a lot more often.*

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