

ROASTED WINTER BEET SALAD AT EDIBLE CANADA BISTRO



GLUTEN-FREE RED ALE AT EDIBLE CANADA BISTRO

Hip to Homey

GF EATS & ADVENTURE FROM
VANCOUVER TO VICTORIA

Story and photos by Andrea Kitay

I can count on one hand the times I've shushed down a blissfully powdery slope in the morning only to end the day wriggling my toes in the ocean.

On a recent trip to Vancouver, British Columbia, home of the 2010 Winter Olympics and playground of a new breed of wholesome foodies, I manage the effort with time to spare.

With a dynamic downtown scene akin to a more genteel and certainly smaller version of New York City, this little metropolis is Canada's "it" place for a new generation of urbanites. Located on the Pacific Ocean just west of the Coast Mountains, Vancouver is wet in the winter, giving in to a spring exploding with 40,000 blooming cherry trees. No wonder nearly half of British Columbia's population call it home.

It's also a melting pot with a strong Chinese influence whose history of immigration closely parallels the United States'. Add to the mix cheeky Mayor Gregor Robertson, co-founder of Happy Planet Juices whose brainchild is the growing number of bike lanes throughout the city, and comparisons with Seattle can't be denied.



VEGAN PALEO BALLS AT SANTÉ GLUTEN FREE CAFE



BLOOD ORANGE OIL CAKE AT 2GF KITCHEN

VEGAN, VEGETARIAN, GLUTEN-FREE: WHAT'S NOT TO LOVE?

What surprises me is the depth of the city's commitment to vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free lifestyles with an emphasis on sustainable local farming. The latter isn't necessarily original, and advocates have been accused of being trendy, but in Vancouver's case there is a palpable intensity around the subject. In this town with a big-city feel and small perimeter, the lifestyle feels ubiquitous rather than just a tired fringe concept.

Better still, this thriving community has wrapped its proverbial arms around the gluten-free world, making locating something to nosh on less of a chore than many I've visited. Toss in hip eateries, yoga studios and soothing spas on just about every corner and what's not to love?

It looks like I'll be doing lots of eating on this trip, so armed with a list of restaurants and bakeries to check out I map them, delighted to see they are scattered throughout Vancouver's eclectic neighborhoods. In fact, I'm so excited to begin my culinary exploration, the minute my bags hit the hotel floor I'm out the door and on the way

to Lemonade Bakery in Cambie Village. The little gluten-free shop with cafe tables is running low on honey & 5 seed bread and demi baguettes at this hour. But the pastry display case is where it's at.

Lemon Meringue Tarts, profiteroles and tiramisu with traditional lady fingers are so artfully designed it feels downright Parisian. Why the name Lemonade? According to pastry chef and owner Tracey Kadanoff, whose wheat allergy appeared after working 22 years as a pastry chef, "When life hands you lemons ..."

I indulge my senses with a decadent vanilla chiffon cupcake loaded with raspberry Italian meringue, then buy a boxful of cranberry almond biscotti to go with my morning coffee.

Since I'm here to assess the gluten-free scene it seems silly not to stop in at Vancouver's second annual Gluten Free Expo. It's my first, and it's only sheer serendipity that I'm here during the event. I head over to the Convention Centre only to find the expo is a madhouse. It turns out the number of attendees was four times the amount anticipated. Fortunately, I'm here early and get a chance to run through the aisles, trying both new and familiar products, some of them available only in Canada.

THE QUEEN—AND A LITTLE POUTINE

Still, on arrival I've worked up a mental lather about skiing and sunning on the same day, so on a cloudy morning I toss on a coat and trudge over the Granville Street Bridge linking downtown Vancouver to the sandbar-come-island better known as Granville Island. The public market is culinary central, and the shops are a big draw for visitors. It'll give me a chance to check out a gluten-free meal and also stop in at a sporting goods store to get the skinny on the local mountains.

I've arranged a market tour with Edible Canada, a full-service bistro with a spiffy open-kitchen layout whose menu is more than 50 percent gluten free. Scrawled in pink on a chalk board, a message boasts "We love local food" with lists of producers from nearby Fraser Valley.

Famished—the walk to Edible Canada took longer than I thought—I settle in for a meal at the bistro before my tour. Contemplating the menu I linger with La Messagere Rousse, a red ale hailing from Quebec. I think of ales as strong and unapproachable, but this is light, one I'd happily serve guests at an informal party. Since it's still chilly outside, the Quebec split pea soup seems spot on. Filled with respectable-sized lengths of smoked ham hock, tarragon crème fraîche and chives, it has a spicy finish and a yellow tint that can only mean yellow peas.

It doesn't take long to devour and I'm on to the roasted winter Beet Salad. True to my server's word, the salad is loaded with red and yellow beets, local Okanagan pears, hazelnuts from the Fraser Valley, and goat cheese, tossed in an orange, shallot and thyme vinaigrette. It's magical and abundant.

Just before leaving, I overhear the table behind me inquiring about the gluten-free duck poutine, that notorious Quebecois dish whose origins are hotly debated. I've never seen it gluten free and dilly dally long enough to hear the report; it's a smashing success. I grab a quick picture, my heart sinking a little that I didn't try it instead.

As guides go, Bob Sung is a master. My culinary guide on my market tour, he leads me from stall to stall, explaining that not only is the market visited by 12 million people a year, but it's also where local chefs come to source meats, produce, cheese and chocolates. Sung has carefully pre-identified gluten-free stands for me, like The Market Shop, where soups and sauces are available fresh daily. The kitchen keeps noodles in the back for those who don't have celiac disease, a rare twist on priorities.

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There is a homey yet artisan feeling to the market. A French butcher, Asian produce sellers and Belgian chocolatier all have a home here. We chat it up at ChocolaTas, where vegan and gluten-free chocolates are lined just so. The Granville Island Tea Company, whose walls of small, bitter brown cubby holes are filled with black tins of loose tea, gets my vote as the coolest 200 square feet since Harry Potter's Ollivander's Wand Shop in Diagon Alley. Fancy a cup of Queen Elizabeth's favorite tea? That'd be Lapsang Souchong, which Sung explains she favors for its smoky aroma and peaty flavor.

View from Granville Island



BREAKFAST ON THE SLOPES, TEA BY THE SEA

Tuckered out from everything food, I pop into a sporting goods store and chat it up with an athletic-looking kid. "For sure, there's snow on all three mountains, sometimes into May," he says. He's referring to Grouse, Seymour and Cypress, three mountains that take under an hour to get to. It seems that skiing and beach combining in the same day is attainable, so I save a day. When I slide from the cold heights of a mountain and finish the same day on a warmer beach, it's as extraordinary as expected.

But adventures in Vancouver are hardly limited to skiing. Because the weather is mild most of the year, there are soft adventures open just about year-round: kayak English Bay, clamber along North Vancouver's mini suspension bridges, or hike the rainforest. On a warm day, grab some grub to go at The Noodle Box and head out for a bike ride and picnic on one of Stanley Park's sandy beaches.

Or bag the outdoors and go for a wellness visit. Grab a drop-in facial at one of the city's Skoah spas or join a Pilates class at one of eight Yyoga studios around town. Both are slickly designed with a welcoming staff. For locations and times, download Yyoga's app or check Facebook for Skoah. Prices are reasonable and their drop-in policy is flexible.

I have another first in Vancouver, dinner at the city's first vegetarian restaurant. I find The Parker in up-and-coming Chinatown, where it's packed when I visit on a weeknight. Other than Indian food, I don't normally eat vegetarian so I'm initially a bit baffled by both the menu, which co-owner Steve Da Cruz tells me is largely gluten free, and the portions. As dishes are whipped on and off the table, though, it quickly becomes clear that variety will easily provide both taste and quantity. I try the chickpea fries, kim chi, kohlrabi, barbecue mushrooms and pear William sabayon. They are all foreign-tasting to me, yet entirely delicious. Who'd have thought?

Opened in late 2012 by Da Cruz and co-owner Jason Leizert, the restaurant features an ever-changing menu based on the season and their sources, one of which is an urban farm down the street. "In Vancouver, we're food snobs," says Da Cruz. "We're not a fast food place. We want our food well-prepared and affordable." Sounds good to me, and I make a mental note to check out some vegetarian restaurants when I return home.

WESTWARD HO!

The weather is relatively calm when my floatplane takes off from Harbour Air's terminal outside the Convention Centre in Vancouver, making the 30-minute trip to Victoria a snappy affair. It turns out Victoria, capital of British Columbia, enjoys the mildest climate in Canada.

No surprise, then, that it's also been nicknamed the country's fittest city. With an annual average snowfall of just under 10 inches and 45 inches of rainfall, it's also the driest, which makes whale watching, biking and hiking doable most of the year.

I'm staying at the Oswego Hotel, a relative newcomer to the Inner Harbour area whose service ethics and stylish décor keeps occupancy stable. Lucky for me, it also turns out to be ideal for walking the downtown area. I spend a little time in the lobby bar before dining at the hotel's restaurant, O Bistro. General Manager Suzanne Gatrell tells me she and Executive Chef Jeff Muzzin worked together to modify the menus so that nearly half of the items can be made gluten free. I tuck into a rib eye and half a glass of red wine, the steak so light I could have used a butter knife.

BRITISH COLUMBIA'S GLUTEN-FREE AMBASSADOR

I've heard that Victoria is Canada's hot spot for gluten-free dining so I've arranged a tour of the city's gluten-free highlights with the founder of Celiac Scene, Ellen Bayens. This is the first city I've been in with a bona fide gluten-free ambassador bee-bopping around

RESOURCES

To plan a trip to BC, start by visiting HelloBC.com

Vancouver

Hiking

→ vancouvertrails.com

Kayaking

→ ecomarine.com

Market tour of Granville Island

→ ediblecanada.com

Blog about local dining

→ glutenfree-vancouver.com

Skoah spa

→ skoah.com

Yoga classes

→ yyoga.ca

Lemonade Bakery

→ lemonadebakery.ca

The Parker

→ theparkervancouver.com

Tourism Vancouver

→ tourismvancouver.com

Victoria

The Celiac Scene

Guides for the Gluten-Free

→ theceliacscene.com

Tourism Victoria

→ tourismvictoria.com

Oswego Hotel and O Restaurant

→ oswegovictoria.com

Silk Road Tea

→ silkroadtea.com

Santé Gluten Free Café

→ SanteGlutenFreeCafe.com

2GF Kitchen

→ info@2gfkitchen.com or find on Facebook

The Fish Store

→ floatingfishstore.com

Getting there Between cities

→ harbour-air.com

Air Canada

→ aircanada.com

town. She has parlayed her immense energy and social media talents into providing a comprehensive website listing celiac-trusted restaurants across Canada and fast food chains in both Canada and the United States.

In Canada, her website lists restaurants "test-driven by members of Canada's Celiac Association." The Celiac Scene has also been involved in Canada's growing gluten-free expos, which are exploding in attendance across the country. A renegade for the gluten-free cause, Bayens has been instrumental in encouraging, mentoring and even occasionally cajoling restaurants to offer safe, wholesome and delicious meals to their gluten-free guests.

She's waiting in the lobby, dressed in a bright green jacket, with an enormous smile on her face. "Hi, I'm Ellen. I hope you're hungry," she greets me. As we step into her white Smart Car, I see the entire back window has the imprint "Celiac Scene" and "Free maps to restaurants celiacs trust" across it. I've hit the mother lode!

Our first visit is a quick stop by the future home of 2GF Kitchen, a deli that Chef Leslie Davies and husband Miles Davies are busily working to open this spring. Purveyors of gluten-free goodies at the local farmers' markets, the Davies, who "live the (gluten-free) life 100 percent," have a sort of cult following. Miles Davies presents us with a sample dish of rigatoni with tomatoes, broccoli, mixed peppers and spinach—grown all year in Victoria, Leslie Davies explains. It's thickened with sorghum flour and it's out of this world. So good I have a second helping despite it being just 10 in the morning.

With its designation as a deli, 2GF Kitchen will be able to offer both dine-in at its 10 seats and to-go ordering. The menu expands on their current mainstay of breads and sweet treats, adding pasta, pierogies and pizza. If the rigatoni is an indication of what's to come, I'm tempted to head back for the grand opening. I'm well stuffed, but Leslie Davies produces a gorgeous blood orange, olive oil cake with a blackberry ginger balsamic glaze, the oil sourced from local



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store Olive The Senses. Dense and delicious, the cake is devoured as I inquire about Leslie Davies' training.
 "I'm a Red Seal Chef, trained in Italy," she tells me. Turns out the Italian training

It's been a long day of chatter and consumption, and I take Bayens up on her offer of a short tour of Victoria. We end the day with a drive along the coastline just as the sun begins to peek out before finally dipping

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made her a pasta expert, which explains why the rigatoni tastes, well, like rigatoni. I've had lesser pasta at fancier places. "This is our way of bringing our customers back to the table," she explains.

It's time to move on for what turns into a very prolonged stop at Santé Gluten Free Cafe where owner Hanna Kofman offers an intriguing variety of vegetarian, gluten-free soups, salads, wraps and sweets. The café is staffed with knowledgeable young servers Kofman mentors, and it bustles with energy. She's serious about allergen contamination, and outside food is strictly prohibited, even for staff. Bayens and I start with lattes. Then we are treated to homemade, dairy-free kale-coconut and salmon soups, delicious and satisfying. We chat through three waves of customers, giving us a chance for yet another course, the Paleo Bowl. With roasted vegetables, grilled chicken and spinach, the dish makes it clear why the caveman diet is appealing. Kofman plies us with Nanaimo Bars, a Canadian specialty, before we bounce out the door.

behind the horizon.

The next day the good people at the Oswego grab a "Walk & Run" map for me. Routes start from the Fairmont Empress area and splinter off in different directions. With names like Secret Passages, Juan de Fuca, and City of Trees and Gardens, they could keep you busy for weeks. But do take advantage of the city's endless gluten-free eats when planning your route by checking out the Celiac Scene's website before you begin.

TAKING TIME FOR TEA

Since I've forgone anything registered "high" on the thrill meter in Victoria—the city is more of a soft adventure kind of place — walking is my mental health replacement, and the cool air reduces my sluggishness. Shopping in Victoria is tempting, but swing by the Parliament Buildings, spend a few hours in the Royal BC Museum or head up Government Street to Canada's oldest Chinatown. Only a block long, Chinatown offers the real treat next door at Silk Road Tea, where you can indulge in aromatherapy or take a tea flight—a sampling of teas.



Preparing for a tasting at Silk Road Tea in Victoria.

I sidle up to the Tea Bar, where Tea Master and owner Daniela Cubelic instructs me in a tea and chocolate pairing. “Take a sip, then a small bite of chocolate,” she pronounces in serious tones. “And repeat.” Indeed, each time I am more focused on the combination of flavors, which seem to deepen. In this pairing we’re tasting the Mast Brothers’ gluten-free Papua New Guinea chocolate with a smoky flavor.

Silk Road is visually intriguing, its “Great Wall of Tea” stocked with more than 100 locally made, organic loose teas. An homage to Chinese culture, the space above our heads is filled with purple, green and yellow lanterns and umbrellas. But most importantly, the teas are 100 percent natural, with no artificial flavors that Cubelic tells me can contain gluten, usually in the form of barley malt.

Another way to spend a few hours between walks along the shore and kayaking is to don your best and experience a gluten-free British high tea at the Fairmont Empress. Sister to the Quebec Fairmont and other hotels throughout Canada originally owned and operated by the Canadian Pacific Railway, Fairmont Empress cannot be missed. The hotels were built as a way to encourage tourism and house passengers along CPR’s railways and are now operated by Fairmont. With its massive granite walls and high-pitched copper roofs, it’s an imposing sight at the end of the Inner Harbour.

Though my experience at the Fairmont in Quebec, which I wrote about in a story about Eastern Canada in the Jan/Feb issue, was less than remarkable, this sounds too good to be true. I’m a sucker for scones with clotted cream and jam, but I’m also fussy. Good is good.

Tea is held in the Empress room with its wide windows overlooking the entire harbor scene, so try and grab a seat by the window if you go. I’m impressed with the effort, and the sandwiches are okay. But the scones are more like hard biscuits and the clotted

cream is more like cream cheese in texture. If Fairmont wants to raise the bar—who wouldn’t in this city—collaborating with one of the dynamite local pastry chefs who bake gluten-free all day might help them bring up their game. To my way of thinking, excellent gluten-free scones with clotted cream are entirely doable.

On my short list is Fisherman’s Wharf, so on my last afternoon in Victoria I walk the few blocks to check out The Fish Store’s gluten-free fish and chips, made with fresh-caught halibut, of course. At one of many cheerful little metal-sided restaurants painted in vivid blues, reds and greens on the piers, owner Peter Gregg is cooking when I arrive. “Ah, she told me you might stop by. Let me get you something whipped up,” he says. The “she” is Bayens, who was instrumental in helping Gregg when he decided to add gluten-free tacos, fish and chips, and deep-fried Fanny Bay Oysters to his menu.

This welcoming attitude has been one of the highlights of my time in the city. Where Vancouver is hip and vibrant, Victoria feels more like home. As he cooks, Gregg tells me he’s not only developed a sorghum-based batter but has also reorganized the little kitchen to create space for a dedicated fryer.

As I hunker down on a bench with my red fish-and-chip-filled plastic basket, homemade tartar sauce and coleslaw perched on my lap, I watch passersby feed sea lions who apparently are only interested in fresh fish. French fries won’t do. No surprise, I think, as I take another bite of delectable battered halibut. After all, we’re in British Columbia. **GF**

Andrea Kitay, a former Los Angeles Times columnist, is travel editor of Gluten-Free Living.

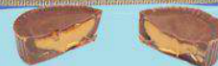


Ellen Bayens of the Celiac Scene

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**Creamy peanut butter in a
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