



Gourmet Toronto

Deluxe hotel packages give guests a rare look at the city’s culinary hot spots.

by Ingrid Sapon

A weekend in Toronto can take many shapes. But for a foodie like me, planning the culinary parts take center stage. Fortunately, two of Toronto’s top hotels run weekend packages specifically for guests interested in gourmet meals, unique culinary experiences and luxurious accommodations.

The SoHo Metropolitan’s “Insider Gourmet Tours” and the Fairmont Royal York’s “Shop with Chef” weekends promise the chance to go behind the scenes with some of Toronto’s finest chefs, eat at the best restaurants and get acquainted with the St. Lawrence Market—one of the 25 best food markets in the world, according to *Food & Wine* magazine.

On two different weekends in January, I tagged along to get a taste—actually many tastes—of these gourmet gatherings.



OPPOSITE PAGE. The packages included dim sum at Lai Toh Heen and a stay at the Fairmont Royal York. In the “Shop with Chef” package, chef Jean Charles Dupoire of EPIC restaurant prepared barramundi the guests shopped for that morning.

THIS PAGE. Dupoire’s artistic finished product.

PHOTO BY DOUG BENZ

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PHOTO COURTESY OF SOHO METROPOLITAN

THIS PAGE. The boutique chic of the SoHo Metropolitan was part of the draw of its "Insider Gourmet Tour," as were dishes such as the truffle chicken at Lai Toh Heen restaurant.

OPPOSITE PAGE. Both packages brought guests to the world-class St. Lawrence Market.

Three couples had signed up for the weekend-long SoHo package, including Ellen Lewis and Jay Golden of Rochester, celebrating their 30th anniversary. I met up with the group for dinner at Susur, the signature restaurant of chef Susur Lee. Lee is one of the biggest names on the Toronto culinary scene, not to mention the international scene. Originally from Hong Kong, Lee was the first Canadian chef to appear on the TV show *Iron Chef America*.

To whet our appetites, we first got to meet Lee. Then we settled in for a seven-course meal, which felt more like a 14-course meal: Each course featured two completely different plates meant to be shared by two people. Another interesting twist was the order of the meal. Instead of starting with the appetizers, we ate the main course first. Lee's rationale was simple: You get fuller as the meal progresses, so the courses should get smaller.

With each course, the waiter explained every element on our plates.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LAI TOH HEEN

Tony Aspler, one of Canada's foremost wine writers, had selected the wine for each course. Even better, Aspler himself was part of the package. He joined the group to describe his choices, including an Ontario ice wine from his own cellar. Aspler explained that sweet wines often pair well with fish.

The variety and presentation of the courses were wonderful and surprising. The simplest course—a mid-meal palate-cleansing kiwi sorbet—created the most magical effect of the night. Cleverly hidden bits



PHOTO BY DOUG BENZ

of dry ice made the sorbet look as if it were nestled in a swirling cloud.

The next day, the group headed to brunch at Mildred Pierce restaurant. It was billed as a "working" brunch in conjunction with the cooking school run by the restaurant, but a mix-up in the scheduling kept it an eating brunch only. The SoHo's Patrick Burroughs was apologetic and made sure the bubbly flowed freely; apology accepted. Indeed, the couples told me that Burroughs' personal interest in ensuring everyone had a good time had made them feel

pampered the entire weekend. SoHo had driven them by stretch limo to the St. Lawrence Market, Rahier Bakery and Lai Toh Heen for dim sum lunch the previous day. They also received signed copies of Aspler's new book, *The Wine Atlas of Canada*, and the Mildred Pierce cookbook, *Out To Brunch*.

At each gastronomic stop, the conversation had flowed as freely as the food and wine. By the end of the weekend, the couples were exchanging phone numbers and promising to stay in touch.

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-Margaret Fuller

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PHOTO BY DOUG BENZ

NOT FISHY. Chef David Garcelon teaches Judy Hammond and Glenn Cameron how to buy fresh fish.

The Fairmont Royal York package, not as over-the-top as the SoHo weekend, is billed as a “culinary shopping package.” Guests accompany the hotel’s executive chef, David Garcelon, on his Saturday

morning trip to the St. Lawrence Market. The chance to shop one of the world’s best markets with a well-known chef was a chance I couldn’t pass up.

But before hitting the market, I

begged a peak into the kitchen. Garcelon graciously obliged, and we got a look at a true culinary phenomenon: The Royal York’s kitchen spans the length of an entire city block. It was early morning, yet huge pots of sauces and soup stock already were simmering away. Garcelon says it makes all of its own sauce and soup stocks from scratch.

Some chefs feel more comfortable behind the scenes, but Garcelon was friendly and approachable. He said he enjoys taking guests to the market because people who take this package typically love to talk about and learn about food.

Garcelon goes to the market most Saturdays to get a sense of what is freshest and popular that week. As he led us through, Garcelon answered any and all questions. He also talked about which vendors he prefers and why. Garcelon’s secret is to get to know the vendors personally. He asks them questions and learns which ones he can trust.

Our mission was to purchase items we would be eating that night

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at EPIC, the hotel's Four Diamond restaurant. But it wasn't all business: First we breakfasted on a traditional peameal sandwich (non-cured Canadian bacon rolled in corn meal before being cooked) from Carousel Bakery.

At Mike's Seafood, Garcelon eyed some good-looking striped bass and asked Rick Blackwood about it. Blackwood said it was fresh but warned that, because it was farmed, it was not as tasty as sea bass.

Garcelon offered us some buying tips. Fish should be glistening, with fresh blood in the gills. And it shouldn't smell. The bass met these criteria, but based on Blackwood's explanation, Garcelon bought fresh barramundi instead. It was Garcelon's lesson on trusted vendors in action.

At Golden Orchard Fine Foods, we received an introduction to Mayer lemons, a cross between a mandarin orange and a lemon. Garcelon bought some, along with organic Swiss char, to go with the fish.

Our last stop was Rowe Farm Meats, a name any serious foodie in



PHOTO BY DOUG BENZ

EAT AND WALK. Bruce Bell leads the "Shop with Chef" guests, food in hand, on a tour in Toronto.

Toronto would recognize. Rowe Farm specializes in meats raised without the use of sub-therapeutic antibiotics and growth-promoting hormones. Proprietor John Rowe enthusiastically explained the science, economics and politics of sustainable farming.

His bottom line was memorable: "Think globally, but eat locally!"

After that, Garcelon left us with Bruce Bell, a well-known Toronto historian, for a nearly two-hour tour of the market and surrounding area. Bell showed us where ships once docked at

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PHOTO BY DOUG BENZ

MEALS IN MOTION: Jean Charles Dupoire, chef de cuisine at EPIC restaurant in the Fairmont Royal York, prepares a dish.

the back of the market and even walked us to the basement area that was used for a time as a prison.

We had the afternoon to ourselves then reconvened at EPIC for dinner. Typically, guests on this package eat what they shopped for at the market. But the barramundi had to be prepared earlier for the photos in this article. So EPIC's chef de cuisine Jean Charles Dupoire created two special courses for us instead. The meal, which featured mainly locally sourced food (Think globally, but eat locally), was exquisitely prepared and served.

Honestly, before taking part in these gourmet weekends, I had always preferred my independence to package deals. But now I realize they're a great way to go. The hotels can arrange experiences you would never be able to organize for yourself. And getting there in a stretch limo isn't too shabby, either.

For more information, visit the Web sites: www.fairmont.com/royalyork and www.metropolitan.com/toronto.

For information on Bruce Bell's tour, visit the Web site at www.brucebelltours.ca.

For information about wine events hosted by Tony Aspler, visit www.grapesforhumanity.com.

Ingrid Sapona is a Toronto-based writer and former Buffalo resident.

Other Toronto happenings

In between meals, you might want to check out these special events scheduled for the spring:

Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival—April 19-29.

Hot Docs is North America's largest documentary festival. More than 100 documentaries from 20 countries are screened at theaters throughout the Annex and Bloor-Yorkville neighborhoods — many of them world premieres. The directors usually introduce their films and participate in post-screening Q&A sessions with the audience. Tickets are available in advance and can be purchased online or over the phone. A limited number of tickets usually are available on the day of screenings. The program listing is available beginning March 20 at www.hotdocs.ca.

Doors Open Toronto—May 26 and 27.

During the Doors Open weekend, architecturally and culturally significant buildings throughout the city are open to the public for free. The buildings, many not normally open to the public, range from War of 1812-era structures to a modern mosque. More than 140 buildings will be open this year, including more than 30 "green" buildings. For information, visit the Web site at www.doorsopen.org.

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