



A NURTURING ISLAND

AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES AWAIT YOU ON PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

BY SANDRA PHINNEY



LUCIANO PAVAROTTI ONCE SAID, “ONE OF THE VERY NICEST THINGS ABOUT LIFE IS THE WAY WE MUST REGULARLY STOP WHATEVER IT IS WE ARE DOING AND DEVOTE OUR ATTENTION TO EATING.”

If the great tenor had visited Prince Edward Island, I’m sure he would have commissioned an opera in praise of food here.

For 33 years I’ve made a summer trek to this “gentle island” but I’ve yet to see everything I want to see and do everything I want to do. It’s quite simple: every year, there’s something new, and for a “foodie” like me, the culinary scene in particular has mushroomed like mad.

FALL FLAVOURS

For starters, in 2008, Tourism Charlottetown created Fall Flavours. It was a six-day program and featured scores of culinary and cultural events. Previously, after Labour Day, the island emptied like the outgoing tide and most seasonal attractions closed. Yet for the six days of Fall Flavours, off-island visitation spiked 40 per cent and thousands of people poured into PEI.



Folks signed up to go on a lobster boat and haul lobsters or to dig potatoes followed by dinner with field hands on the farm. The success of the program took the locals by surprise. After all, if you're slogging around a muddy potato field or freezing your butt on a lobster boat, it's hard to picture what's so exotic about potatoes and lobsters. Yet the penny dropped: visitors, including yours truly, love to eat. We especially love to eat good, local food. Toss in some fun learning experiences and *voilà!* A recipe for success.

Chef Calvin Burt was involved from the get-go. That first year he taught people how to make breads, apple pies and flavoured oils from herbs in his garden. "It turned this time of year on the island into July. It was just amazing," says the owner of Shipwright's Cafe in Margate. "It's a natural fit. We are a million-acre garden

here in PEI. Why not celebrate potatoes? People crave authentic experiences in this un-authentic world."

The following year, Fall Flavours gobbled up 10 days and has since expanded to fill the entire month of September. The word is out: Canada's smallest and greenest province is a culinary mecca. To wit: Fall Flavours now boasts of more than 75 main culinary, cultural and signature events, along with approximately 200 hands-on experiences and participatory events.

FAVOURITE EXPERIENCES

One of my favourite experiences was Tong and Shuck where we set out just offshore in an oyster dory and tried our hand at tonging (harvesting oysters). I was hopeless, but managed to look pitiful enough for the harvester to give me

opposite, top left: There is nothing quite like fresh lobster plucked from the ocean.

opposite, top centre: Chef Calvin Burt, owner of the Shipwright's Cafe, guides patrons through his beautiful organic vegetable, fruit, herb and flower gardens.

opposite, bottom: Malpeque oysters from Prince Edward Island have an unequalled taste and superior appearance.

top: Thousands of foodies congregate at the annual Prince Edward Island Shellfish Festival, which takes place in Charlottetown every September.

Tourism PEI/John Sylvester



left: A fun excursion involves a session with Goldie and Gilbert of Seaweed Secrets who inform foodies on the many edible seaweeds that exist in Atlantic Canada. Sandra Phinney

bottom: Chocolatier Emma Gilbert loves sharing her passion for making chocolates at the Island Chocolates shop in Victoria-by-the-Sea. Tourism PEI/John Sylvester

several oysters to taste, along with an oyster-shucking lesson. Bonus: after the excursion we were invited inside to enjoy more oysters, local wine and the company’s newest product, “Oysters Rocky Fellas.” I was so impressed I toyed with the idea of applying for a job on the production line but came to my senses when it dawned on me that having unlimited access to these delicacies wouldn’t be part of the deal.

Another enjoyable excursion was joining a session called Seaweed Secrets with Goldie and Gilbert Gillis. I’m a big fan of dulce and always have a stash in my kitchen however, I had no idea how many edible seaweeds exist here in Atlantic Canada. After getting an overview of all the “seaweed vegetables” that grow in the region and their health benefits, we headed to the shore with Gilbert. I was especially fascinated by the taste and texture of very small nodules on the end of bladderwrack. I’ve grown up with this seaweed and as kids we popped the thick pods but I never realized the tiny tips were edible—and delicious. (Great in sandwiches and salads.)

Eventually we found our way back where Goldie taught us how to make seaweed pie. (Imagine a luscious custard filling laced with sliced strawberries.) After the lesson, we hunkered down for a big bowl of fresh vegetable soup with kelp, biscuits made with dried seaweed flakes and a huge slice of seaweed pie. I’ve since made this pie for friends; they think I attended a gourmet school.

For 2011 and 2012, Fall Flavours spans the full month of September (fallflavors.ca). Some events are hands-on

food-related experiences while others are culinary events ranging from a feast of bar clams on the beach to a brewmasters dinner with PEI-produced handcrafted beers. You can even arrange to have a fine-dining experience with a celebrity chef. There are also unique events such as the PEI International Shellfish Festival and the Island Chocolates Company Chocolate Festival.

MORE EXPERIENCES ON TAP

Of course, the restaurant scene on the island rates 10 out of 10. I’ll spare you the superlatives but when it comes to local foods in PEI, it’s all about quality and taste, preparation and presentation. Matters not if it’s a modest mom-and-pop operation or a five-star restaurant, you’re sure to receive good value for money.

Are culinary experiences limited to the month of September? No! In fact, many of these experiences are on tap from May until October. For a complete listing, visit tourismpei.com/pei-culinary-trail where you’ll also find farmers, fishers, farmers’ markets and artisan producers. If you are pressed for time, sign up for “Taste the Town.” It’s a three-hour culinary walking tour in downtown Charlottetown during which you taste everything from oysters to chocolate-dipped potato chips, COWS ice cream, craft beer, mussels and artisan liquors.

So there you have it: a veritable smorgasbord—worthy of an Aria. ■



TRAVEL PLANNER

Air Canada (aircanada.com) provides service to Charlottetown, PEI, from several Canadian gateways. From September 2–25, the PEI Fall Flavours Festival is showcasing a variety of events across the province. For full details, visit fallflavors.ca or call 1-877-445-4849. For more information on Prince Edward Island, visit tourismpei.com.