Edible Canada

The Growth of Culinary Tourism

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Culinary tourism allows people to learn about and appreciate a region while consuming food and drink that is somehow related to that area. Its aim is to connect people to regional cultures through their cuisines. In Canada, this can mean learning about how maple syrup is made in Québec or enjoying a British Columbia meal of Dungeness crab paired with local wines. The diversity of cuisines across Canada offers ample opportunity for the culinary tourism industry to expand.

As a leading chef and president and founder of Edible Canada, Canada’s largest culinary tourism company, I have watched the country’s food scene change rapidly.† From high-end restaurants to food carts in back alleys, Canada’s cuisine is diversifying and gaining a global reputation. Culinary tourism is on the rise around the world, but Canada, I suggest, is a leader in the field. So why are food tours, casual dining, and other culinary adventures on the rise, and how do these food-related activities work to communicate about food?

† The “I” in this chapter is Eric Pateman. I write in the first person because the views presented in the chapter reflect my experience as president of Canada’s largest culinary tourism company. Shannon King, my coauthor, interned at Edible Canada in the summer of 2013, while she was earning a degree in applied human nutrition.
The Growth of an Industry

Edible Canada, a Vancouver-based culinary tourism company, was founded in 2005 as Edible Vancouver—a culinary concierge service that gave tourists personalized itineraries of where to eat and shop in Vancouver during their stay. During people’s visits to Vancouver, I would tour them around Granville Island Public Market to enrich their experience of the market and to ensure they were able to enjoy the products that the vendors had to offer.

I expanded this service to include other culinary adventures, such as gourmet kayaking trips, before entering the retail sector in 2006 with a store in the Granville Island Public Market called Edible British Columbia, which offered BC artisans a year-round outlet for their products. In 2011, Edible BC moved to a new larger building on Granville Island and was rebranded as Edible Canada: our facility now includes a bistro and a demonstration kitchen (to complement the retail store, cooking classes, and tours) and carries items from across Canada.

With Edible Canada, I have tried to create a place where tourists and locals alike can enjoy and celebrate all that Canada has to offer from a culinary point of view. Edible Canada’s activities include gourmet kayaking weekends through the Gulf Islands (where a chef prepares all the meals and pairs them with regional wines and spirits), daily Granville Island Market tours (where a chef guides visitors through the market), whisky dinners (where a local whisky expert teaches guests about whisky and pairs it with local cuisine), and a “new Canadian cuisine” bistro on Granville Island (where Canadian cuisine is interpreted for visitors, and local farmers, fishmongers, and artisans are showcased).

As a culinary tourism company, Edible Canada is part of an industry that is still in its infancy but that has grown rapidly over the past decade. A few vital organizations—such as Lonely Planet, through its culinary guidebooks, and the International Culinary Tourism Association—have helped the industry develop both in Canada and abroad. Québec is probably where the industry originated in Canada. The direct influence of the French heritage on the province is evident in its cuisine, and for a long time, Québec was a leader in bringing European culinary traditions to Canada. In fact, in the mid-1900s, Québec was the destination where North Americans came to connect with what was happening in Europe.
Since then, Nova Scotia has emerged as a Canadian leader in culinary tourism. For instance, it was the first province to develop an association to set quality standards in order to ensure that culinary tourism provides the best Nova Scotia has to offer. Most other provinces have since followed suit, developing associations to promote provincial culinary tourism activities. Ontario also stands out as an industry leader: the province offers the largest variety of culinary tourism experiences in the country and was named one of three worldwide leaders in culinary tourism in *The State of the Culinary Tourism Industry Readiness Index (ICTD 2010)*.

Promoters of tourism in Canada are beginning to embrace in earnest what the country has to offer from a culinary perspective. For instance, Destination Canada (previously the Canadian Tourism Commission) has now identified “award-winning local Canadian cuisine” as one of the “five Unique Selling Propositions that set Canada apart as a travel destination” (Canadian Tourism Commission 2015), and the commission has been essential in promoting not only culinary tourism companies like Edible Canada but also Canada’s culinary tourism brand. The support of similar national, provincial, and local groups will play a key role in developing the industry in Canada in the future.

One reason for Canada’s emergence as a leader in culinary tourism stems from the diversity of food-related opportunities and experiences available across the country. For instance, wine tourism has become popular in both British Columbia and Ontario: in the Okanagan valley, on Vancouver Island, and throughout the Niagara area, tourists visit wineries to learn about and sample wines first-hand. Even southwestern Saskatchewan now offers a wine-tasting experience on the edge of the Cypress Hills. On the East Coast, with its fresh lobster, and the West Coast, with its Dungeness crab, tourists can try to catch their own supper. And tourists who prefer red meat can savour Alberta beef and lamb, touted as the best in the country, while taking advantage of the food tours now on offer in Alberta’s two largest cities. The Canadian industry simply offers tourists a wide breadth of unique and unforgettable culinary experiences.

Locals and tourists are no longer content to just eat food; they crave culinary experiences that broaden and deepen their understanding of food. Whether inspired by food activists—like Jamie Oliver, who claims to be at the forefront of a “food revolution”—or by environmental concerns and calls for more local consumption, people are seeking opportunities not
just to eat something new but to experience food in ways that help them think more deeply about what, how, and why we eat.

**WHY IS CULINARY TOURISM ON THE RISE?**

Although several factors have contributed to the growth of culinary tourism around the globe, one key contributor is consumers’ growing appetite for stories about where and how food is produced. Terms like “farm to fork” and “locavore” are increasingly commonplace, as is consumers’ desire to connect with food producers. Tourists seek venues like Pike Place Market in Seattle or the Granville Island Public Market in Vancouver, where they can interact directly with producers—the people who can best explain and educate consumers on their culinary choices. Increasingly, Canadians are buying meat from the butcher and bread from the baker, taking the time to reconnect with the people who are knowledgeable about the food products they sell.

Another driver behind the increasing fascination with food and food stories is the growing prestige surrounding celebrity chefs. Food Network has certainly been a major contributor to this phenomenon and has also significantly increased the popularity of culinary tourism. In 2012, Food Network had a nightly audience of over 1.1 million, which allowed it to remain in the top ten cable networks for the fourth year in a row (Scripps Networks Interactive 2012).

Whether it is watching Anthony Bourdain eat beating cobra hearts in Vietnam or watching Jamie Oliver travelling across Italy in his camper van as he learns to cook traditional dishes from local grandmothers and grandfathers, the sense of adventure depicted in these shows rubs off on viewers, encouraging them to seek out their own culinary adventures. The sheer number of food-related attractions in the top “must do” lists on TripAdvisor is testament to this growing interest: almost every major city in Canada features two or more culinary tourism activities in its “top 10” attractions listed on TripAdvisor.

The development of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook and of social review sites such as Yelp, TripAdvisor, and Urban Spoon has had a huge influence on the culinary tourism industry. Before the advent of consumer review websites, diners relied on word of mouth and professional critics for restaurant reviews. Using consumer-review platforms, though, people can now read multiple reviews from casual diners like themselves
before choosing a restaurant, and good reviews can prompt others to visit in droves: one survey concluded that a one-star increase in a company’s Yelp review could increase their business by 9 percent (Luca 2011).

Social media have also been an interesting factor in the farm-to-fork movement. Since people are now able to interact directly, via social networking sites like Facebook, with food producers and preparers. Twitter offers chefs a platform to give customers sneak previews of what they will be preparing for dinner that night, allowing diners to begin their culinary experience before setting foot in the restaurant. At Edible Canada, we use social media to share information about offerings such as new products at the store, upcoming events, and special menu items.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the development of the culinary tourism industry around the world has increased the number of experiential learning opportunities related to food. Canada’s diversity of products—both cultivated and created—and consumers’ growing interest in the stories of food (and food celebrities) have fostered the rapid growth of culinary tourism across the country and have yielded a unique culinary tourism industry whose expression is dramatically different from region to region, and even from city to city. Although the industry is still young, in the years to come the world may very well begin to see that the Canadian food scene has far more to offer than smoked salmon and maple syrup.

REFERENCES

