



URBAN.FOOD *Experiences*

FOOD TOURS OFFER A UNIQUE AND TASTY WAY TO GET TO KNOW A NEW NEIGHBOURHOOD—NO MATTER WHERE YOU TRAVEL

BY DIANA BALLON

Shop Like a Chef, Cook Like a Pro, The Ritz-Carlton, Toronto

Food is a bit like weather.
We are all affected by
it and it has the power to
swing the pendulum
between a good day
and a bad one.

When my now-husband Rick first met my mother, the first question he asked her was what meals she used to cook for us when we were kids. Mum seemed momentarily taken aback before launching into some of her classics, from chicken liver casserole to shepherd's pie and chocolate tapioca for dessert.

I now know what Rick was getting at. He wasn't just interested in food but also the stories she had around her childhood, and what her cooking expressed about her cultural background. Food tours are a lot like that. They allow you to roam through a neighbourhood, learn about the community that lived and lives there and sample the food and drink produced by some key people that make up the community.

Food tours are my favourite way to get to know a neighbourhood, which is lucky, because most major cities now offer them. And there are some amazing ones to choose from—from food tours by bike, to tours of food trucks and tours that involve sitting down to a progressive meal.

The Ritz-Carlton Toronto's Shop Like a Chef, Cook Like a Pro takes a culinary tour as a mere starting point for a more elaborate gastronomic experience. This experience involves accompanying one of their chefs to a local market, where you shop for ingredients for the evening's meal, and then return to the hotel for a cooking class and multi-course dinner.



Little Havana Food Tour, Miami

Whether you are a foodie or simply someone who loves to eat, food experiences may well be for you.

Little Havana Food & Cultural Tour: Miami

One of my most memorable experiences of Miami was taking the Little Havana Food & Cultural Tour through Miami Culinary Tours. Our tour guide Juan Janzen, or JJ, turned out to be a master storyteller. Once a Jewish community named Shenandoah in the 1930s, this area just west of downtown became home to Cuban immigrants in the

sixties. JJ leads us through the neighbourhood, which included Domino Park where older men slap down dominos with conviction; to a cigar factory where Roberto still handrolls cigars; and to Ball & Chain, the nightclub where African Americans like Billie Holiday once performed. And we tasted a whole lot of great Cuban fare along the way. We drank sugar cane juice from Señora Guillermina, considered the grandmother of Little Havana. We had a guava pastry at Yisell Bakery. We ate Cuban sandwiches at Ball & Chain and delicious ice cream at Helados la Abuela. And we had a shot of colada, or strong Cuban coffee from walk-up windows or ventanitas. No wonder this got rated the fifth best food experience in the world through TripAdvisor Travelers' Choice awards.

Shop Like a Chef, Cook like a Pro, Ritz-Carlton: Toronto

The Ritz-Carlton in Toronto takes food experience to a whole new level with its Shop Like a Chef, Cook Like a Pro program. The experience starts in the lobby of the hotel. There we met up with banquet chef Marcos Sierra and were whisked away in the hotel's house car, an Audi A8 with back massager seats, no less—to the St. Lawrence Market. There, chef led us through the food stalls, finding inspiration from the ingredients that he will later incorporate into our dinner.

Of the evening's menu, he says, "let's play." And we do, finding ingredients for that night's dinner—Jerusalem artichokes for the soup, quince to accompany the pan-seared foie gras, fresh scallops, black garlic in an aioli for the lamb and tiny lady apples to go in the dessert. Then we get back in the car, and head into the kitchen where sous chef Jobin Thomas is on hand for our pasta-making class. He has several balls of dough, including egg yolk and semolina doughs, which we form into thin sheets in a pasta maker and then mold into different shapes—ravioli stuffed with ricotta and

citrus, orecchiette and hand-rolled cavatelli, which is surprisingly tricky to make.

Then it's dinnertime, and I have worked up an appetite! We head into the main kitchen and to their Chef's Table, its walls adorned with signatures of all the people who

breweries. Its wide main artery, Randolph St., was at one time a central market with warehouses and cold storage facilities.

Our West Loop food tour with Chicago Food Planet started with us seated at mahogany banquettes at Formento's, where we ate a juicy meatball in a sumptuous red sauce: the restaurant combines traditional Italian with a modern twist. We then moved on to the popular Cemitas Pueblas for a Mexican-style chipotle chicken cemita or sandwich, served on a sesame bun. After that we had the Led Zeppelin slider at Kuma's Corner, a gourmet burger bar where most of its 17 burgers are named after heavy metal bands. Then there was delicious Roman-style pizza at Bonci, where the thin crust, made with their signature heirloom wheat flour, has taken a loving three days to make. The tour ends at Do-Rite Donuts & Chicken for their artisanal buttermilk old-fashioned doughnut and coffee. Don't let the low price of the doughnuts deceive you—they are delicious.

Avital's Williamsburg Food Tour: Brooklyn

Avital understands what social eating is all about, and—as its owner Avital Ungar remarks—how to “deepen human connection through storytelling and food.” Set up as a four-course progressive meal, guests sit around tables at four restaurants in the hip district of Williamsburg in Brooklyn, where they are participants rather than spectators to the meal. Over the course of several hours, guests start with oysters Rockefeller, their

first appetizer, paired with absinthe colada at Maison Premier. Then they move to the modern Sichuan restaurant, Birds of a Feature, for their second appetizer, Dan Dan Noodles paired with short ribs and a local beer. After that is the main course—a hot ham sandwich with homemade pimento cheese on baguette at the popular Egg restaurant. The meal then ends with ice cream at Odd Fellows, with unique flavours like cornbread and toasted sesame Nutella.

Places visited on tours and food items may vary. Most experiences can be combined with alcoholic drink pairings. Inquire before booking.



MAX FLATOW FOR AVITAL TOURS

Williamsburg Food Tour, NYC



PHOTO BY DIANA BALION

West Loop Food Tour, Chicago

have eaten here before. A pink orchid sits in front of us at the table, and we have a clear view of the chefs in their black pillbox chef's hats and white jackets, quiet and focused. And us—we are the happy recipients of their creations.

Gateway to the West Loop Food Tour: Chicago

The Chicago culinary scene is about a whole lot more than deep-dish pizza, barbecue and hot dogs. Arguably Chicago's most foodie neighbourhood, the West Loop is where you'll find many James Beard award-winning chefs running kitchens at some of the city's top restaurants, alongside dive bars, old school diners and