

Worldly Delights: Vancouver Island

On the wild side: Vancouver Island's gastronomy is inspired by nature
Stephanie Ortenzi



From the air, **Vancouver Island** appears like a giant bird in full flight. It seems to hover over the ocean, approaching the mainland but stopping short. The island is rugged, rich and lush, and its cuisine is inspired by the wild foods of the First Nations inhabitants.

Pacific waters provide most of the island's dominant fare, namely **wild salmon, halibut, oysters, spot shrimp, mussels, clams, crayfish**

and **Dungeness crab**. Inland, **Cowichan Valley** is the island's fertile heart. Farmers, vintners and culinary artisans tend the mainland but stopping short. The island is rugged, rich and lush, and its cuisine is inspired by the wild foods of the First Nations inhabitants.

Cooking natural exotica, like stinging nettles and grand fir, gives island chefs

a proud sense of place. In the fall of 2009, *Slow Food International* gave Cowichan Valley the status of **Cittaslow** (Italian for 'slow city'), a certified designation recognizing the area's quality of food, environmental integrity and its distinct social identity.

Sinclair Philip is a champion of Canada's **Slow Food movement**. He owns **Sooke Harbour House** with his wife, Frédérique. Over the past 30 years, their inn and

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SOOKE HARBOUR HOUSE

restaurant have become a benchmark for Canadian regional cuisine. The food is fresh, fiercely local, organic and executed with deft imagination. *Gourmet* magazine called it the best restaurant in the world for authentic local cuisine. More than once, *Wine Spectator* lauded Philip's international cellar, which specializes in British Columbia wines. The inn has earned *Audubon's Four Green Leaf* status, the highest eco-rating for a hotel.

On the grounds, overflowing botanical beds furnish the rooms with fresh flowers daily, but they do kitchen duty, too. **Anise hyssop** flavours a sauce for **black cod**. Chrysanthemum leaves give citrus notes to a **crab broth**. The shoots of hops are cooked like asparagus. **Sweet cicely** accents a **ginger sabayon** for **white peaches**. **Day lilies** become **sorbet** and **sweet woodruff** flavours **ice cream**.

Northeast of Sooke Harbour is **Duncan**, where Mara Jernigan runs **Fairburn Farm**, a culinary retreat and guest house. She is also active in the island's Slow Food scene and loves to cook wild foods like the edible **Nootka rose**, as well as her own **Jerusalem artichokes, heritage Anjou pears** and **white radicchio**.

Jernigan is a master of Slow Food's **Italian Regional Cuisine Program**. She leads culinary tours to Italy and teaches farm-to-table cooking at the farmhouse. Her meals always begin with a walk through her garden to see what's best and ready to eat. With accomplished skill, she turns simple ingredients into elegant food that she serves on her porch that overlooks meadows and the pear orchard, where her rare San Clemente goats and Navajo Churro sheep graze.

The farm was first homesteaded in 1884 and has a storied past, including the tale of Mary Reid, an Englishwoman who owned and worked the farm in the

1930s. While hosting a society party, she was called by a farmhand to help with the difficult birth of a calf, which she did, in her evening gown.

In the 1950s, the Archer family took over the farm. They did conservation work, offered farm stays and ran a B&B. Their offspring imported Canada's first water buffalo and established a dairy whose milk is used in artisanal cheesemaking.

Despite the fervency of Slow Food mavericks like Philip and Jernigan, Vancouver Island gastronomy is not purely locavore. On the island's western shore, the town of **Tofino** draws eco-travellers and surfers. Behind a surf shop, Artie and Lisa Ahier opened a 'restaurant' in 2003 in a purple 1971 Chevy truck with a functional kitchen and picnic-table seating. They called it SoBo, a combo of 'sophisticated' and 'bohemian,' with signature offerings like 'killer' **fish tacos** and **potenta fries**. Within months of opening, *enRoute* magazine included it in the top 10 new restaurants in Canada. *Savour* magazine said SoBo was probably the most exciting lunch stand in North America. Four years later, SoBo went off-wheels and into a beautiful space with slate floors, a wall of ocean-view windows and an outdoor wood-burning pizza oven.

SoBo is strong on **wild fish** and **seafood**, and is shaped by a global, hipster sensibility. **Tacos, rotis, burritos** and **enchiladas** are garnished with tropical **salsas** and **slaws**, using ingredients like **green papaya, pineapple, avocado** and **jicama**. Fillings range from **island chicken** to **woodland mushrooms** with local artisanal **cheeses**. A breakfast sandwich features **tuna bacon** on a **homemade biscuit**. With a nod to Lisa's Culinary Institute of America training, SoBo also plays a Mediterranean hand: **pizzas, pastas, a bouillabaisse** and a **duck dish** of seared breast, roasted leg, **potato gnocchi** and a **citrus-cranberry jus**. Back on the mainland, Vancouver remains a national culinary leader, but Vancouver Island's unique wild gastronomy is quickly catching up. ☑

