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Spotlight: Today's Victoria: Re-discovering British Columbia's Hidden Foodie Destination

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In the late 90s, when I last visited Victoria it looked like a sleepy town that closed down by 5 pm after the last cup of tea was served at the **Fairmont Empress Hotel**. However, on a recent visit, I was impressed by a new, vibrant Victoria. Today's Victoria. Art, food, and entertainment all come to life in the downtown core. Food lovers can take a stroll in the city and be amazed by a culinary scene as far East as Asian noodles and as far West as steak-frites. Built around its historic **Victoria Harbour**, the city is surrounded by an abundance of resources allowing for a fresh, eclectic take on food with locally-grown, natural ingredients.

A Delightful Dinner at Cafe Brio



The Occhi di Lupo Pasta and Sauteed beef at Cafe Brio.

On our first evening out in late May, after unpacking at our hotel and watching the sun glisten on the water, we went out in search of finding a fine dining restaurant listed on various food sites named **Cafe Brio**. As we entered **Cafe Brio**, on **Fort Street**, we passed through a quaint courtyard surrounded by vines and 19th century lamps. The aroma of West coast's contemporary seafood meeting East coast's Italian cuisine immediately aroused my appetite.

The menu offers a diverse selection, from tasting plates to full courses for each item. Brio's mixed green salad had the perfect combination of fresh sheep milk feta with shaved radishes. Their braised clams tasted as if the restaurant had the sea right out their back door. We ordered small plates of **Grilled Marinated Brio Steak** and the **Occhi di Lupo Pasta** and **Sauteed Beef**, both extremely flavourful and served with crispy vegetables straight from local growers.

For the grand finale, we ordered their dessert tasting plate, which consisted of **crème brûlée**, **chocolate truffle**, **biscotti**, and **fresh orange sorbet**. The crumbly accent of the **biscotti** was a perfect complement to the cool creaminess of the **crème brûlée**. We returned to the hotel well satiated and full. No wonder it is almost impossible to get a reservation at this place--the ambience alone can stimulate your senses.

Two Options for Breakfast, Both Delicious

The smell of the sea greeted me early in the morning, as I ventured down to **Douglas Street** for breakfast at **Liberty Café**. Don't let the name fool you. This is no ordinary East Coast American coffee joint. It is famous with the locals for its fresh, daily baked muffins and the ingredients are locally picked from **Vancouver Island**. The coffee offers a soothing blend that is not too harsh on the senses, but has the kick to get you started.



A hearty breakfast at The Blue Fox Cafe.

If you are not a fan of the traditional breakfast, the **The Blue Fox Café** opens early and closes at around 4pm. On the weekends, the ever so popular place sees patrons waiting in long line-ups for a coveted table. Located on **Fort Street**, the place is colourful, with art adorning the walls and over the mantle a great painting of a blue fox graces the room. The food is delicious, fresh, and organic. Their spinach and feta cheese omelet or **Blue Fox** full breakfast of eggs, local sausages, mushrooms and **Kennebec** potatoes will keep you filled till dinner.

Making a Stop for Seafood



The fish and chips at Red Fish Blue Fish.

After a bit of shopping and checking out the **British British Columbia Museum**, I was craving some fresh seafood from **Red Fish Blue Fish**. Set up in a trailer parked on

the wharf, this highly popular place offers a sophisticated menu for a very reasonable price. One bite into a **seafood Tacone**--wraps filled with coleslaw, a blend of unique spices, and fried fish--makes it obvious why the queue is so long during their lunch hour. The tempura battered **Haddock Fish and Chips**, also very popular on the menu, was simply mouth-watering. The only down side to this wonderful seafood place, is that they are only open until they run out of the day's catch--so get there in the early afternoon.



An order of fish and chips and seafood tacones.

Afternoon Tea in the Butchart Gardens

A quick 15-minute drive north of Victoria brings you to one of the most beautiful historic gardens on this planet: **Butchart Gardens**. Who could ask for a more beautiful setting to enjoy a fine **Afternoon Tea** while surrounded by majestically arranged flower gardens? The Dining Room where tea is served, requires reservations especially on the weekends. Lucky to score a seating on the veranda, I ordered a **Backyard Flight** of local wines--**Sea Cider Pomona**, **Zanatta Glenora Fantasia BRUT**, **Rocky Creek Blackberry**--to complement each course. I chose the **100th Anniversary Black Tea** blend of **Darjeeling**, **black Hunan**, and **gunpowder** as my tea to start the tastings.



Delectable treats at Afternoon Tea.

Everything served is made in the kitchens at **Butchart Gardens**. The first course consisted of a delicious **Berry Trifle**, traditional delicacies including a savoury house-made sausage roll with imported mustard, and roasted vegetable and cheese quiche. Savoury tea sandwiches included locally smoked wild BC salmon with maple, and whole-grain mustard cream cheese. House-made sweets included **lemon tartlet** with fresh fruit, plus a souvenir chocolate **Grand Marnier truffle**. I ended the meal with a house signature **candied ginger scone** with jam and cream.



Beautiful Butchart Gardens.

Taking the Ferry to Salt Spring Market

When in Victoria, you have to experience a ferry ride over to **Salt Spring Island**, about 30 minutes north of Victoria. The **Salt Spring Island Market** in **Centennial Park** is a must see in the heart of **Ganges Village**, the island capital. A series of white tents house an array of potters, jewelers, fiber artists, woodworkers, bakery chefs, cheese artisans, and organic gardeners, catering to every taste bud and sensibility. Vendors must "make it, bake it, or grow it" on the island in order to sell in the open-air market.



A collection of Salt Spring Island cheeses.

The market offers some great cheese tastings from **Salt Spring Island cheese** (handmade goat cheeses) and **Moonshark Organic Cheese Co.** **Foxglove Farms** offers organic produce at its stall and tours at their farm as well. For lunch, you need to try one of **Hotties Hot dogs**, all-natural organic hot dogs served with homemade condiments. For a light dessert, French traditional **Patisserie** baker, **Berigite**, sells some great macarons and various assortments of French tarts, quiches and other treats at **Rendezvous**. I scooped up a few macarons and they were some of the best I have ever tasted.

Other Foodie Destinations to Try

Before you decide to head to the airport or ferry to go back home, was simply mouth-watering. I ended the meal with a house signature candied ginger scone with jam and cream.

- **Rogers Chocolates** - The first Rogers' chocolates were made in 1885 by Charles "Candy" Rogers. They are celebrating their 125th Anniversary and are famous for their dark chocolate-covered creams that are available in coconut, lemon chiffon, marzipan and many other flavours.
- **Brasserie L'Ecole** - French cuisine at its best, casual small dining room which doesn't take reservations but must be on your to visit list.
- **Rebar Modern Food** - located in Bastion Square offers inventive vegetarian and vegan food, fresh juices and desserts. Incredibly popular with locals and tourists alike.
- **Canoe Brewpub, Marinas & Restaurant** - located on Victoria's famous Inner Harbour, has one of the nicest waterfront patios to have drink, but food is overpriced and somewhat mediocre in taste.
- **Pagliacci's** - local institution, highly popular Italian fare in an intimate setting.
- **Barb's Fish & Chips** - Fisherman's Wharf, great selection of foods prepared and then eaten on benches right by floating houseboats and gorgeous settings.

Today's Victoria is a bustling and vibrant city; a local gateway for foodies to enjoy pretty much anything and everything their heart could desire!

Parmjit Parmar is a foodie-at-large, and a Toronto-based publicist at Montana Ridge. She travels every opportunity she gets.

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