

# Taste of the Island

*Island Gourmet Trails leads culinary enthusiasts to amazing local discoveries...*

By Jane E. Burton

This summer Island Gourmet Trails launched the Comox Valley's first culinary tour operation. Designed to "immerse the participant in the local culture and reveal the Island's true spirit," the custom-made tours will take you to visit a wide variety of local food and beverage producers. The business is the creation of Gaetane Palardy, a Montreal-born chef and educator who moved to the Comox Valley in June, 2008.

According to Palardy, your tour might start with a stroll through a bustling farmer's market, then visit a world-renowned cheese factory. Maybe you will roll up your sleeves to create traditional artisan pasta.

You might wander over to an oyster or scallop farm, head down to the docks to meet the fishermen coming in with the day's catch or have a gourmet picnic. Later, you might choose to meander through an organic berry or vegetable patch. One thing's for sure, you will experience the taste of Vancouver Island.

"This project is combining my experience in food and tourism and education. It is kind of a mix of all my previous experience and my love for discovering things, including discovering back roads," says Palardy, noting that the roots of her interest in food began at home.

"I have always been interested in food," she says. "Going back to my earliest memories, I remember watching my mother cook, bake, preserve and entertain. These experiences, along with helping my family grow and harvest our own food, inspired me."

Her formal entry into the food world began with her professional cooking certificate from Institut de Tourisme et d'Hôtellerie du Québec (Quebec Tourism and Hotel Institute), one of Canada's leading chef training facilities. Her resume includes work in the kitchens of many fine hotels, including the ultra-luxurious Mandarin Hotel in Vancouver.

Palardy moved to Vancouver to work as part of the team being assembled for the Hotel Vancouver's Roof Restaurant during Expo '86. This contract, which she expected to last six months and help her to improve her English, turned out to be a permanent move to British Columbia and a pivotal point that would later lead her to the Comox Valley.



*"This project is combining my experience in food and tourism and education," says Gaetane Palardy, leading her group for a tour of Beaufort Vineyard and Estate Winery. "I have always been interested in food." Photo by Boomer Ferris.*

At the Roof Restaurant Palardy worked with chef Ronald St. Pierre and became friends with him and his then new girlfriend, Tricia. Once Tricia and Ronald settled in the Comox Valley, Palardy visited often, sowing the seeds for her eventual decision to move here. The three long-time friends have worked together to develop the business idea of a Comox Valley culinary tour operation. The St. Pierres' restaurant, Locals, is a certified BC Culinary Tourism Association destination. The Courtenay restaurant opened in 2008 and specializes in providing a unique dining experience utilizing "Food from the Heart of the Valley".

In addition to the restaurant industry, Palardy has also spent a number of years working in education. She had returned to work at the Hotel Vancouver in 1989 but, as she explains, over the next 10 years she found her focus was shifting. "I wanted to go into teaching because in my job as a sous chef at the hotel I was doing a lot of work with the apprentices and training. So I took some education courses and got my provincial adult education instructor diploma." That diploma led her to move to Prince George, where she taught culinary arts at the College of New Caledonia for eight years.

Combined with her work

skills Palardy adds her own experience as a traveller to her creation of a tourism product on Vancouver Island. "When I travel, I enjoy visiting local food markets, from going to the fish auction in Sydney, Australia, visiting the spice souk of Dubai, the date market in Abu Dhabi or taking a Cajun cooking class in New Orleans. Food always gives the tone to my trips."

Palardy elaborates on one particular experience that made her think about providing a similar tour back home: "When I went to Australia, there is the Victoria Market in Melbourne and there was a guided tour of the market. And I thought 'Gee, that's a neat idea. We should have that in BC.' I lived in Vancouver at the time and I was thinking of Granville Island and thinking maybe one day I'll do that."

Thus it is no surprise that the Comox Valley Farmers' Market is featured in Island Gourmet Trails' tours. The Saturday morning market is the launching point for the half day Taste of the Comox Valley tour. After breakfast, coffee and a guided tour of the market, where you'll meet the vendors, the tour takes you to the Beaufort Vineyard and Estate Winery and the Blue Moon Estate Winery to meet the owners and sample their products.

Custom-made tours running on Wednesday are very likely to

stop at the afternoon Farmers' Market. The range of options for the custom tours is extensive as the Valley has hundreds of farms and a growing list of interesting food and beverage producers. In addition to land-based farms, tours can include oyster and scallop producers, bakeries, cheese and chocolate makers, coffee roasters, cafes and restaurants.

Culinary tourism is a new but growing concept and thus, in mid-July, Island Gourmet Trails, in collaboration with Locals Restaurant, provided an opportunity for local media and tourism operators to experience a day-long culinary tour. From the moment I read the itinerary my curiosity and taste buds were stimulated.

Our day began at Rhodus Coffee Roasting Company in Courtenay; we then boarded a van to visit Surgenor Brewing and Aquatec Seafood in Comox, then were on to Nature's Way Farm north of Courtenay, which also encompasses Blue Moon Estate Fruit Winery and Triz Culinary Studio. After a lovely picnic lunch of local foods we travelled south to Island View Lavender in Union Bay and Royston's Innisfree Farm and Royston Roasting Company. We concluded our excursion with an exquisite dinner at Locals Restaurant in Courtenay.

It was a superb introduction to culinary touring that included

interesting conversations with the various company's owners and staff and generous samplings of their products. Palardy was a knowledgeable and entertaining guide who thoughtfully provided us with everything we needed—from background information, to water, sun screen and an umbrella for shade. Tricia St. Pierre took care of the driving so Palardy could concentrate on providing commentary.

We learned a tremendous amount about each place; the following are simply some of my highlights: Discovering that Rhodos Coffee Roasting Company not only serves great organic Fair Trade coffee but also makes their own gelato. One popular flavor is created using Island View Lavender. Bob Surgenor's sense of humor made for a wonderful visit filled with laughter. Surgenor Brewery makes great beer and their newest, In Seine Pale Ale, is delicious. Aquatec Seafood is a 35-year old family-run business that provides visitors and locals with a custom fish processing and shipping service. We happily sampled their various award-winning smoked salmon products at the Hooked on Seafood retail store.

Marla Limousin describes their combined operations as 'food, farm and wine under one roof.' Limousin runs Natures Way Farm, her husband George Ehrler takes care of operations at the Blue Moon Estate Winery, and chef Kathy Jerritt offers cooking classes, catering and private dinners in the Tria Culinary Studio. The studio is a very inviting kitchen and dining area adjacent to the wine shop/farm gate store. It was with great sadness that we learned that the monthly Full Moon Feasts are already sold out for 2010. Our sadness was soon turned to joy as we toured the fields and Marla invited us to eat as many tay berries—a cross between raspberry and a blackberry—as we liked.

I think it is safe to say that this free Farm dispelled any stereotypes that we may have had about farms. Thierry Vrain and his partner Chanchal Cabrera bought the property about five years ago and they are well on their way to transforming it into a must see culinary/agri-tourism destination. They are combining vegetable, fruit, nut and Christmas tree cultivation with horticultural therapy, medicinal herb production, apprenticeship and seed saving programs, and one of BC's largestabyrinths planted in Blue Fescue grasses.

The afternoon got even more relaxing when we stopped at Island View Lavender in Union Bay. Owner Kathleen Kinasewich began by telling us about her house, the oldest home in Union Bay. She then walked us through the A to

Z of lavender species, 22 of which she grows. Kathleen also offers a unique living mandala workshop, where participants create succulent wreaths. We all left happy with a lovely bouquet of fresh picked lavender.

Gary and Dyan Spink were wrapping up a very busy day greeting people partaking in the 30 Day Food Challenge, but they happily put on a new pot of coffee and gave us a tour of their facilities. The Royston Roasting Company makes four types of coffee and specializes in custom labeling orders for businesses or personal gift giving. Their elegant Ozturk roaster imported from Turkey gives the small facility an aura of serious coffee buzz.

Chef Ronald St. Pierre has been working in the Comox Valley for 20 years but Locals Restaurant is his first solo venture. In two short years it has gained a reputation for excellence that is now being discovered across the country—they were recently featured in Where to Eat in Canada. This notoriety comes as no surprise to our group, who was treated to a fantastic three course meal featuring local fish, produce, pasta and fruit.

Palardy explains why Locals is a natural fit with her tours: "I like to take my visitors to their restaurant because they commit themselves to showcase local producers, the same ones where I take my visitors," she says. "There's nothing better than trying a scallop dish when we visited the Island Scallops in the afternoon, or finishing the meal with a lavender gelato using the lavender of Island View Lavender Farm."

One thing stood out for all of us—the Island Gourmet Trails culinary tours would suit both visitors and locals wishing to be tourists in their own region.

"It's opened my eyes," says Sarah Nicholson from Tourism Mount Washington. "I think we are all very blasé at times and living in an area and not experiencing it, but we have some incredible hidden gems in the Valley. I would strongly recommend anybody doing this tour. It's ideal for all ages, there is something for everybody, and the really great aspect is they can be custom designed."

Al Morton, a volunteer with the Comox Valley Visitor Centre, particularly enjoyed hearing people's stories. "I guess the biggest thing is the interesting people that I met. I mean we've really run into a lot of very interesting people, in many cases it seems to be a secondary career or third thing they've done. They all have these interesting backgrounds."

Linda Oprica, a business and executive coach, was on the tour representing the Comox Valley Airport Commission. She was enthusiastic about the contribu-

tion Island Gourmet Trails could make to the Comox Valley: "The concept that she has put together is really phenomenal," she says. "It is a wonderful event for two people to a bus full of people; it's great for locals. I think it will actually revitalize tourism in the Valley because it really is all about tourism in the Valley—agriculture and culture and different communities in the Valley, so I think it will revitalize it. I think it is outstanding."

Palardy is constantly enlarging her network of destinations. She has also partnered with three other companies to offer a package that includes a vacation rental on Comox Bay, sailing trips and training, a guided nature walk and a culinary tour. This package, as with all her tours, is provided in either English or French. ☞

For more information visit:  
[www.islandgourmettrails.ca](http://www.islandgourmettrails.ca)