

TRAVEL WITH TASTE



By Victoria Stevens

Kathy McAree
Queen of Culinary Culture

Driving around south Vancouver Island with Kathy McAree is a delicious experience.

photo by Seven Bohrer

Whether it's a stop at the Marley Winery on the Saanich Peninsula for a tasting of their pinot noir and a chat with its genial owner Mike Marley, or nibbling a piece of Belle Ann at Hilary's Fine Cheese farm in the Cowichan Valley, Kathy's enthusiasm for Vancouver Island's culinary and wine culture is infectious.



Enjoy the scenery at the award winning Cherry Point Vineyard

"Not enough people know what a treasure we've got here," she enthuses. "Our food and wine and scenery is every bit as wonderful as Provence or Tuscany."

She knows just about everyone involved, from the organic farmers who grow the produce served in the restaurants, to the chefs who cook it and the vintners whose cool climate vintages are beginning to be recognized at national and international competitions.

As the first and so far only culinary tour company on the island, called Travel with Taste, she can tell you a story about each establishment and the people involved.

"That's Shady Creek Ice Cream, she says, pointing out a nondescript house on the Saanich Peninsula. "It's the best ice cream on the island. They use all natural products."

photo by Andrei Fedorov

Driving by a poky little store not far from there, she points out a blue bus parked outside. It's part of a restaurant called The Roost, she says.

"They serve the best pie on the island and their quiche is made with ostrich eggs. They grow their own flock."

Having travelled extensively herself and gone on a number of culinary tours, even been a culinary tour guide in Tuscany, she developed the philosophy that the best way to see a place is through its food and wine.



"I've always found that the best way to learn about and experience a destination is through the culture of cuisine," she says. "You learn so much about people and their surroundings over a good meal or a glass of wine."

Now 37, Kathy looks back at her early life and sees that what she's doing is the perfect marriage of experience and natural inclination.

Her love affair with food began at an early age, starting in her grandparents' Polish/Ukrainian restaurant in Winnipeg. "I still remember it, even at the age of four," she says. "My grandmother used to decorate wedding cakes and she was an excellent cook, as was my mother.

"When I was in grade two, I asked to take out the Winnie the Pooh cookbook and made ginger cake with applesauce."

It was a talent that served her well when her mother died and she became the cook of the house at the tender age of 12.

"I loved to bake - I used to cook all the time, but I never wanted to go into cooking professionally. It was my therapy - still is."

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Even at the University of Saskatchewan, where she studied commerce, she pursued her infatuation with grocery stores and gourmet shops, browsing them for new and exciting products.

So it wasn't a surprise when she graduated and went into the hotel business and from there into the packaged foods business working for Kellogg's,

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moving first to Vancouver and then the island.

It was on a month-long trip to Spain, France and Italy in September, 2001, that she had her epiphany.

Arriving on Italy's Adriatic coast just after the terrorist attacks on the U.S. had virtually stopped all air traffic, she was supposed to be taking a cooking course, but everyone but her had cancelled the trip.

"So this wonderful family did the entire course just for me and I was absorbed into the family. They live in a beautiful castle on an olive farm and I had a lot of time to think and that's when I decided to start my own culinary tour company."

Now in her third season, she says the thing she loves the most about her work is the people she meets and introducing them to the joys of island wines and cuisine.

You don't have to be a gourmet or a wine snob to appreciate them and it's a great way to see parts of the island you wouldn't otherwise discover, she says.

"I realized very early on that we need to educate the locals and the world about what we have here."

To that end, she's very involved with the International Culinary Tourism Association, helping to bring their first international conference to Victoria last year and is a board member of the British Columbia Culinary Tourism Society as well.

She's also very involved with a new venture, the Wine Islands Project, which hopes to bring diverse sectors of the local tourism economy together to promote the island as a wine, culinary and agricultural tourism destination with a map-based website and brochure and to encourage a sustainable agricultural industry.

"The local area is rich in natural wonders and businesses that offer truly unique and inspiring experiences. Our parallel aim is to



photo by Diana Nethercott

Travel with Taste offers custom-designed, one-, three- or seven-day tours including Cowichan Valley Cuisine and Wine Tours, Gastronomic Salt Spring Island, A Taste of the Saanich Peninsula, Feast and Forage and "If you can't stand the heat..." offering cooking classes and kitchen chef demonstrations.



photo by Steven Bohrer

Kathy McAree - Queen of Culinary Culture

promote the farming community of the region in a bid to reverse the erosion of our local agricultural economy. We believe that the shorter the distance from field to plate, the less environmental impact our food carries," its mission statement declares.

So, between her tours, her volunteer work promoting culinary, wine and agricultural tourism to the island and gigs like handling the World Feast Stage at this year's 10-day FolkFest, organizing chefs and wineries to present samples of their wares, Kathy is a very busy person.



But she's a happy one.

"I feel very lucky because I'm doing what I love to do."

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She is also teaming up with local food writer Elizabeth Levinson on an Edible Journey July 25 to July 28. The package includes three nights accommodation at Levinson's casually elegant bed and breakfast, the historic John Lewis House, and guided wine and culinary tours in the Cowichan Valley, including visits to the kitchens of a couple of local chefs.

For details, visit www.travelwithtaste.com or call 250-385-1527.



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