

# Will Work for Food

Tired of visiting restaurants on vacation? Forage for your feast instead.

BY ALYSSA SCHWARTZ

I always thought oysters tasted like the sea – that salt-licked, briny goodness that, for a landlocked Toronto girl, conjures frothy waves and windswept beaches in just one slurp. What I realize, standing on a float dock in tranquil Clayoquot Sound, near Tofino, British Columbia, is that the molluscs actually taste just like the air here. They start and finish with salt and algae, yes, but there are notes of green and other almost imperceptible subtleties that make the flavour nearly indistinguishable from the cool air I'm gulping down as greedily as I am the bivalves.

It's a Saturday morning in November, and this is breakfast. Normally, there would be at least one extra degree of separation between those oysters and my mouth, but this weekend also happens to be the Clayoquot Oyster Festival, and as part of the annual festivities comes the rare opportunity to take a tiny boat up into Lemmens Inlet for a lesson in oyster farming and a chance to eat them right off the line. No need for ice – the oysters are still cold from their marine nests, dripping with sea water.

There's only about a dozen of us out here slurping oysters, but the interest was so high that I had to talk my way into a seat on the tour. It's no surprise that these types of culinary adventures are in such high demand: According to the Canadian Tourism Commission's Global Tourism Watch, interest in hands-on foodie activities is on the rise. While it's still niche compared to the millions of people who'd rather spend their travel days ordering off a menu, it's also hard to deny the appeal of foraging for your dinner.

Oyster farmer Michael Mullin wouldn't have it any other way. "If that's not nature's perfect food, I don't know what

is," he says as he pops the shells open with a knife. He uses an old barrel as a table, explaining as he shucks why the waters off Tofino are such a "magical" place to do what he does.

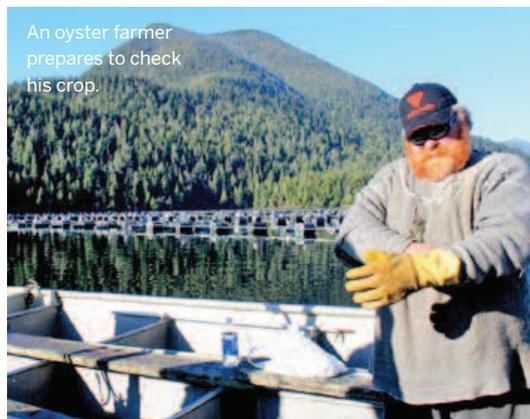
There's an intimate understanding of the connection between the oysters' pure flavour and this place, which comes while standing on a dock accessible only by boat, surrounded by pristine waters (oyster lines hang down some 20 metres deep, and yet we can easily see the inlet's floor) and flanked by rainforest. Oysters feast on microscopic plankton that live in the water, which means they're really only as pure as their environment – and though they can

certainly be enjoyed anywhere, there's a unique appreciation that comes from eating them here.

Visits to farmers' markets, farm-to-table dinners and the like do offer a chance to become better acquainted with the relationship between food and its origins, but experiences such as the one I had harvesting oysters, or learning to make cheese on a dairy farm in New Zealand, or dragging a crust of bread through the Tuscan olive oil you helped press, can impart special

insight into how inextricably flavour can be tied to place, history and culture.

"There's only so much you can take of observing sites and eating in restaurants," said Heidi Fink, a Victoria-based chef and cooking instructor who recently led a culinary tour through Spain and Morocco. "At some point you don't want to be a tourist anymore. You want to be a traveller. You want to be someone who's experiencing a country." A highlight of that trip, says Fink, was wandering among roaming chickens and piles of exotic spices in a souk in Marrakesh and then going back to the kitchen of the chic Riad El Fenn



An oyster farmer prepares to check his crop.



Gisele Martin, owner of Tla-ook Cultural Adventures, searches for the perfect berry.



Colourful spices – great for making tajine – brighten up a shop in Morocco.

## Travelling to Tofino

**Getting there:** Tofino is accessible by daily float-plane service from downtown Vancouver and Vancouver International Airport, operated by Tofino Air ([tofinoair.ca](http://tofinoair.ca)). By car or bus, Tofino is about a three-hour drive (200 km) from Nanaimo.

**Where to stay:** Long Beach Lodge is a laid-back West Coast-type property with hotel-style rooms in the main lodge and cottages featuring outdoor hot tubs and full kitchens.

1441 Pacific Rim Hwy., Tofino,  
1-877-844-7873, [longbeachlodgeresort.com](http://longbeachlodgeresort.com)

**Remote Passages:** Though oyster-farm visits are only available during the Clayoquot Oyster Festival every November, Remote Passages, which operates the tour, offers a host of whale-watching and sea kayaking trips and other excursions.

51 Wharf St., Tofino, 1-800-666-9833,  
[remotepassages.com](http://remotepassages.com)

**Tla-ook Cultural Adventures:** Together with her father and sister, Gisele Martin offers forest walks and trips in hand-carved traditional canoes, focusing on the history and tradition of the Nuu-chah-nulth first nations tribe in and around Tofino.  
1-877-94-CANOE, [tlaook.com](http://tlaook.com)

restaurant to learn how to prepare tajine – a dish named after the pot it’s cooked in – and other traditional foods. The best part, she says, was getting to eat everything they cooked.

But this type of culinary travel isn’t always about gourmet feasts. For Lisa Niver Rajna, preparing a customary meal inside a ger – a traditional Mongolian yurt-style dwelling – was memorable not for its gastronomic excellence but because of the window it afforded into her hosts’ lives. The visit was a spontaneous stop at the home of friends of her hired driver, and shortly after arriving, Rajna found herself crouched on the floor, being shown by a local woman how to mix and roll out dough for old-style Mongolian noodles, which she then baked and ate with a dish she describes as “goat gruel.” Later, she and her husband herded goats and sheep with the family patriarch and learned how to turn their milk into cheese and yogurt. A self-described picky eater, Rajna said she was so hungry from travelling in the Gobi Desert with meagre food options that it didn’t matter how the goat stew was made. Her host was hacking off pieces of dried-out goat on the kitchen floor – she polished off two bowls while her normally less finicky husband ended up eating peanuts for dinner.

“It wasn’t a trip of luxury,” Rajna said, “but we saw how people really live.”

The morning after my oyster farm visit, I take a forest walk with Gisele Martin, who runs Tla-ook Cultural Adventures. We’re supposed to be foraging – among the delicacies that grow naturally here are all manner of mushrooms, including chicken of the woods and chanterelles – but we’re past the first snowfall of the season and much of the bounty has already either been collected or started to rot. Martin’s people – she’s of the local Nuu-chah-nulth tribe – don’t believe in farming (“We wouldn’t impose a plant on a place,” she says), but in helping indigenous vegetation along within its natural growing periods. And while there may not be mushrooms left to eat, there’s still plenty to taste.

As we hike, she picks tart berries – they’re called cinnimoka, which translates to “berries that get sweeter as it gets colder.” They’re mouth-puckering now, but later in the season they’re dried into cakes for snacking and baking. We also pick needles off a hemlock tree (not the poisonous kind). The sprigs have a sour, citrusy pine flavour, and while I imagine they would taste amazing in place of rosemary baked in focaccia bread, Martin describes the ancient method of using hemlock branches to catch roe herring.

As on the oyster farm the day before, it’s impossible to not be struck by the links between the place and its bounty, or to be unimpressed by all the food Martin is able to scavenge based on knowledge handed down over literally thousands of years.

“Hishuk ish tsawalk,” she says, wisely summing up what has emerged as the theme of what I’d initially thought would be purely a food-focused journey. “Everything is one.” ■