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Ditching the Guidebook – Toronto Unfettered

by Michael J. Solender



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Three weeks in Toronto sans guidebook allows for sensory decision making uncomplicated by over-planning.

It's taken the better part of three decades, but I've finally come around to my wife's preferred style of vacationing: Slow, deep dive single city explorations where the daily agenda is most heavily influenced by mood, weather, and ambition.

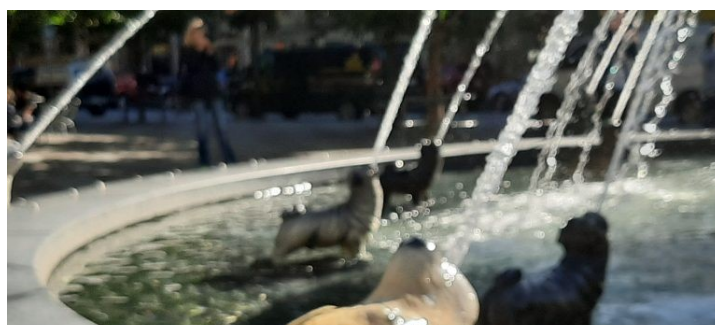
In years past I'd become notorious for over-researching, over-planning, and over-scheduling every waking moment of our time away from home. Vacations were my time to prepare comprehensive daily itineraries to rival Rick Steves, scorning deviations lest we miss a top-rated attraction or Michelin-starred restaurant.

Of course, lost in all this minutia madness was my primary reason to go on holiday at all – the wonder of discovery, the opportunity to explore and relax, and find our own favorite things. When pure exhaustion and lack of time for advance planning led to one of our most delightful vacations to Vancouver a couple years back, I was forever sold on the slow-cation concept and have since become a fierce advocate.

Guidebooks be damned.

Toronto, Ontario was this year's destination. Why Toronto? Canada is a huge bargain for Americans currently with dollar trading at almost a 35 percent premium to the "loonie." Toronto is the fourth largest city in North America (behind only Mexico City, NYC, and Los Angeles), has great cultural offerings from museums and theater to comedy (Second City's home base is here) and music clubs, offers world class shopping and a wonderful culinary scene.

Sure we had an idea of some attractions we wanted to take in – a day trip to Niagara Falls (we chose the warmest and sunniest day for that sojourn), a special birthday treat to the Canadian Opera Company's performance of Rusalka at the stunning Four Seasons Center, and visits to Chinatown and the fabled St.



Lawrence Market – rode on the unofficial “to do list,” but for the most part we let the day determine our schedule.

And while most everyone who knew we were coming

to Toronto offered several restaurant

recommendations, we chose to take the “no planning” approach to our daily dining choices. Yes, we made a couple of exceptions, yet with a dense urban core of offerings (more than 3000 restaurants are listed on Toronto’s YELP pages) our choices were made based on what was proximate to where we were and what we were in the mood for.

Toronto’s incredibly diverse food scene seemingly has every ethnicity on the planet offered – a testament to the fact that more than 50 percent of the city’s burgeoning population is foreign born.

What a delight to walk down a main drag like Spadina, Bathurst, University, Front Street, Queen St. or Dundas, peer inside the window, peruse an outdoor special board or pop in for a drink and first impression and then make a final decision. For three weeks this was our M.O. – Were there clinkers? Yes, but surprisingly few. Mostly we were thrilled to find a vibrant, creative and expressive culinary scene paired with fantastic urban attractions – Here’s the best of what we found:

Chinatown



The epicenter of Toronto’s Chinatown is at the intersection of Spadina and Dundas and that’s where we head off for on our first October morning in the city. Intuitively I know authentic Dim Sum is in our future. The buzzy neighborhood is filled with young and old residents moving in and out of the rickety store fronts. There are real and fake jade trees, Chinese herbs and acupuncture offered. Chinese bakeries are ubiquitous (even with simple “Chinese Bakery” name),

markets, herbalists and dozens of restaurants to explore. We wander through several markets marveling at the strange fruits and vegetables marked only in Chinese. The fresh fish, crab and lobsters are swimming in tanks just waiting for a chef’s decision of what to have for dinner tonight.

The mid-morning walk alongside an hour or so of exploring has me thinking of sustenance. I lift my eyes off the street level restaurants to those on the second and third stories of the boxy buildings – the Chinese often locate restaurants off the street for luck I’m told by a friend from Hong Kong. Three floors up off the corner of Huron and Dundas I spy the sign – **Dim Sum King**.

(<https://www.dimsumkingrestaurant.com/>) Game on.



The non-descript sign leads to the stairway where the third-floor landing brings us to a vast banquet hall that accommodates several hundred.

Welcome to one of Toronto’s most beloved Dim Sum houses. Though barely 11:30, the place is packed with Chinese families, couples,

businessmen and very few Westerners – We take this as a very good sign and am not disappointed.



Soon pushcart ladies are whizzing by, carts teetering with bamboo steamers filled with Cheung Fun (rice noodle wrapped



shrimp) Har Gow (steamed shrimp dumpling), Siu Mai (pork dumpling), Loh Mai Gai (sticky rice with lotus), and any number of delicacies that remained unnamed – yet delicious for me. One dim sum palace trick I learned from a friend is to order off menu – soup is a great choice for this – and the steaming bowl of specialty won ton soup was a great prelude to the tasty dumplings that made it to our table.

Just a three-minute walk from the fabulous **Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO)**

(<https://ago.ca/>), DSK is a perfect spot for a casual weekend brunch or lunch any day of the week.

St. Lawrence Market



St. Lawrence Market (<http://www.stlawrencemarket.com/>) has more than 250 vendors and is recognized as one of the finest Food Halls in the world. We're surprised at how quiet it is upon early 10:00 am arrival and it's not long before the locals, followed by the tourists begin to stream in. Green grocers, butchers, bakers (Greek, Persian, bagels!), chocolatiers, specialty sausage makers, fishmongers, cheese mongers, – Did I mention bagels? All overflow into the aisles with vendors eagerly encouraging passers-by to sample their wares.

We are having lots of fun, and the market is colorful and easy to navigate both upstairs and



downstairs. Harriet stops at Tibetan crafts shop to chat with owner and admire the singing bowls and cashmere wraps. We spend about an hour and take a slow stroll along Front Street to do some people watching. We note the Flat Iron Building and the Dog Fountain containing 27 ceramic dogs and one very frightened cat.



Le Papillon on Front St (<http://www.papillononfront.com/>), catches our eye and we wander in for a late lunch. Toronto's first creperie when it opened in 1974, it's now one of the city's favorite casual French bistros. It's easy to see why as the handsome space conjures the Parisian vibe, though the French you'll hear here is distinctly Quebecois. Moules Marinières with perfectly crisp frites is my bistro go-to with the sweet and briny mussels in a white wine garlic butter sauce perfectly foiled by the starchy fries. Harriet's Saumon Vierge, another bistro staple, shines with a seared crisp fillet of salmon topped with an astringent salsa vert. Frosty drafts are the perfect accompaniment and we linger, stretching lunch into two hours before heading out. We are on vacation after all.

Hotel X & Petros82

This evening we deviate from the unplanned and head to the western edge of downtown to visit the much-heralded **Hotel X** (<https://hotelxtoronto.com/>) (a Library Hotel Collection property) and the recently opened **Petros82**



(<https://www.petros82.to/>). A friend insisted we visit the property to enjoy a cocktail at their SkyBar and enjoy the creations of executive chef Richard Andinos.

The only four-star property in the Exhibition Place corner of downtown, the 30-story lakefront Hotel X made an immediate statement upon opening in spring of 2018 with 404 rooms, exquisite



public space, a green roof, a 250-seat cinema, and more than 90,000 square feet athletic facility featuring tennis, squash, Pilates, rooftop pool, spin studio and a full-service spa. It's four minutes from the Toronto's Billy Bishop City Airport and directly across the street from "the Ex" – the Canadian National Exhibition, a 192-acre complex for soccer, hockey & equestrian events, concerts and festivals.

Cocktails in the three-story **Falcon SkyBar** are a treat with breathtaking views of both Lake Ontario and Toronto's skyline.

Our appetite whetted, we're led downstairs to the gorgeous light and airy space that is Petros82. The room's extra high ceilings, clean lines, azure and clam-shell white accents and wall of windows bathe the dining room and lounge with a Mediterranean warmth that set the mood for what's in store.

Two signature cocktails start the show, the Medusa (Domaine De Canton, apple, turmeric & honey) and the Santorini (Elderflower, Creme de Myrtille were starts among a long list ingredients). Chef Richard explains Petros82 has a predominant Greek influence though emphasizes his goal is to incorporate the freshest seasonal ingredients and delight diners with a contemporary twist on classic Mediterranean dishes.



Even the bread service is baked to order as the chef sends over a hot-from-the oven Potato Pugliese – a pizza-like creation of fresh bread, mizithra (fresh sheep's milk) cheese, sweet onion, mascarpone and olive oil. We could have stopped with this – but of course we didn't.

Chef Richard's "Pringles" – crispy paper-thin slices of lightly breaded zucchini and eggplant chips were delightful with a dusting of kefalograviera cheese. The mains that

followed dazzled. Chef Richard's Halibut preparation was classic with a halibut fillet "scaled" with a crispy potato crust and accompanied by butter poached crab, sweet-as-candy melted leeks and a tangy lemon basil fregula. The Atsago Makaoranda featured homemade spaghettini with fat chunks of lobster, tomato sugo, Calabrian chili and fresh basil. We ended our extravaganza with chef's specialty Loukoumades – impossibly light and airy honey doughnuts that positively sang.



Service here is top drawer and our "planned in advance" decision to dine at Petros82 was handsomely rewarded.

Aga Khan Museum/Diwan, AGO/AGO Bistro, MoCA/Drake Commissary

If we'd been told that some of our most memorable meals would be found inside the confines of Toronto's heavily attended museums, we likely wouldn't have believed it. We'd have been wrong.



No more was this the case than at the **Aga Khan Museum**

(https://agakhanmuseum.org/exhibitions/caravans-of-gold?gclid=CjwKCAiA8K7uBRBBEiwACOM4d83i2icbVSQfObWmFe_S-WeK9ASBUMJuesph5G73ZOiwZZK0ytMuBhoCucsQAvD_BwE) and the middle

eastern and global cuisine of their **Diwan Restaurant**

(<https://diwan.agakhanmuseum.org/>). Visitors find the 30-minute trip just north of downtown well worth the journey as the Aga Khan Museum is both an architectural marvel and the first museum in the western hemisphere dedicated

to the art of Islam. Housed here are thousands of rare objects from private collections of His Highness the Aga Khan, the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, and Prince and Princess Sadruddin Aga Khan.

Diwan is a welcoming oasis that while a bit of necessity, the museum is in a suburban office park with not many dining options, is an inspiring access point into the Islamic culture through the stews, pilafs, salads, and grains of the middle east and beyond.

Ornate wooden panels, hand carved in the early 19th century for a private home in Syria, ring the walls of the contemporary dining room setting the tone that make meals here anything but ordinary. The menu is often influenced by the museum collection and

features the likes of Beef Manakeesh with pickled onions, arugula, garlic toum, and akkawi cheese, Lamb Suya a West African style lamb kebab, with spiced peanuts and green chili relish, and vegetarian dishes such as Pani-Puri, whole wheat puff pockets filled with charred eggplant relish, citrus kale, and tamarind mint yogurt.



The **AGO Bistro** (<https://ago.ca/dine/ago-bistro>) at the **Art Gallery of Ontario** is a welcome respite to savor in between touring the must see collection here. Like the building it's housed in, AGO Bistro is designed by Toronto native Frank Gehry and serves up stylish bistro fare that's artfully prepared and presented. On our visit I enjoyed the fish stew with Fogo Island mussels, cockles, freshly caught halibut in a savory herb infused and emulsified fish stock that was comforting and delicious. A light Canadian Sauvignon Blanc was just right as was the crusty sourdough prepared by local artisanal baker, Blackbird Baking Co. Harriet's Giguere Chicken came with toasted cous cous "risotto", radicchio, walnut, chicken jus and was amply portioned.

While **Drake Commissary** (<https://www.thedrake.ca/drakecommissary/>) is not technically attached to or affiliated with

Toronto's **Museum of Contemporary Art** (<https://museumofcontemporaryart.ca/>) it's located just a half a block away and museum goers get a discount with their ticket stub.

Canadian fare is the style here though I have a clearly Italian influenced lamb ragout on homemade pappardelle that knocks me back with bold flavors of garlic, carrot and tomato and tender lamb that is buttery and oh-so delicious. Drake makes all their own pasta, bread, pastries and is a culinary lab of sorts offering training, classes, and takeaway for the neighbors.

CN Tower – 360

Ok we did one touristy splurge restaurant, on Canadian Thanksgiving no less, and while pricy it was worth every penny.

Harriet and I enjoy late lunch at **360** (<https://www.cntower.ca/en-ca/360-restaurant/reservations-and-menus.html>), the revolving restaurant that crowns the soaring **CN Tower** (<https://www.cntower.ca/en-ca/home.html?ref=MainBarEN>). We woosh up from the ground in an elevator that rises to the top in 62 seconds and find ourselves soon seated on the outermost wall, Toronto at our feet. The restaurant makes a full revolution every 72 minutes and while the views are indeed spectacular, the movement is very clear and somewhat disconcerting. We have been in Toronto sufficient time to pick out various landmarks and neighborhoods already visited.



We choose the “indigenous menu” with its emphasis on local produce and wild game. I have Fogo Island Chowder with smoked sturgeon, baby shrimp and bay scallops in velvety bisque. Harriet has local greens with homemade croutons, dried tomatoes and flakey Parmesan cheese. The second course is Late Summer Cassoulet (smoked pork chop, duck confit, octopus, venison sausage over white bean ragout) for me and Fogo Island cod, ricotta gnudi over ribbons of zucchini spaghetti for Harriet. The special coffee – dessert in a glass – features Grand Marnier, Kahlua, coffee and whipped cream in a sugar rimmed glass cup. We laze

away for one-and-one-half revolutions – Happy Thanksgiving!

Best of the Rest



Three weeks allows for spontaneity and checking out curious neighborhoods. The cheese monger at **Global Cheese** (<https://www.facebook.com/GlobalCheese/>) in **Kensington Market** turned me on to several unpasteurized local favorites, I went back several times to St. Lawrence for bagels and crazy good horseradish and beet cured smoked salmon. We had DIY Japanese BBQ at **Gyubeee**



(<https://www.gyubeejapanesegrill.com/>) downtown and a mean Pho at **Pho Vistro** (<https://www.facebook.com/phovistro/>). **Susur Lee** – Toronto's culinary rock star wowed us at his namesake eatery (<https://www.leerestaurant.com/>) that we stumbled upon. Here the menu is made for sharing though the food is so good you might not want to – Singapore Slaw is an absolutely amazing dish prepared table-side.



Toronto is the type of culinary Mecca where no advance planning is required – let the day be your guide – surprises and undoubtedly delightful food finds await you.

No plan can be the best plan of all.



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Michael J. Solender travels the road less taken sharing wondrous cultural, culinary, and historical discoveries with his readers. Solender's writing has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Ocean Home Magazine*, *Southern Living*, *Travel Connect*, *SouthPark Magazine*, *Lake Norman Magazine*, and others.

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