

travelinggourmet

FOUR GREAT WEST COAST FOOD TOURS IN THE USA

by Rich Rubin

If you love touring, and you love food, what could be a better way to explore a new destination than a food tour? These guided gourmet expeditions are attracting a devoted core of fans (when one of my groups was asked whether it was their first food tour, not one person in the six-member group responded “yes”). I’ve chosen four food tours in the Western US because I love the inventiveness and diversity that seem to be hallmarks of this region, but you can find great culinary excursions in just about any city you visit. Most tours rotate a variety of establishments, so the places I’ve visited might be slightly different from the ones you actually encounter, but these people know their stuff, and I guarantee a great (and filling) afternoon or evening!

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON CHOCOLATE INDULGENCE TOUR by Savor Seattle

You can pretend that you’re on the Chocolate Indulgence Tour to learn chocolate facts and history, but we all know why we’re really there: to eat some great chocolate. Of course, as it turns out, you do learn quite a few chocolate facts, and it just makes the tasting experiences that much more appealing.

We meet in **Cupcake Royale** as our guide Will introduces us to the world of chocolate: with a chocolate cupcake, chocolate ice cream, and some words to live by: “There’s no better way to get to know chocolate than to get to that point where you think you can’t do any more. Then you take the hand of your trusty guide, and go over the cliff...” Okay, I think, we’re going to eat a lot of chocolate on this tour (no argument here)! As we head toward **Dahlia Bakery**, one of several establishments of well-known Seattle chef Tom Douglas, Will tells us that the Mayans, who drank chocolate as a spicy beverage, considered the cacao tree “the bridge between heaven and earth.” No argument there either! At Dahlia, we sam-



ple the coconut cream pie, arguably Seattle’s most famous dessert, appropriate for our tour because it’s covered in white chocolate shavings.

In historic Pike Place Market, we stop in **Indi Chocolate**. Will tells us about the work they’re doing with chocolates of various origins as we watch through the window as the staff is busy refining and conching the chocolate. We sample a roasted bean, which is deep and rich without the sweetness of the finished product, then a bite-sized bit of Nicaraguan chocolate, full-bodied and just sweet enough, and a chocolate-covered cherry, made with a dried Washington State cherry, that’s pure heaven. Also in the market: Confectional, where the chocolate cheesecake has chunks of chocolate spread throughout, and the little cup of Colombian drinking chocolate is pure heaven (remember those Mayans?). Our final treat here, two pieces of Holy Crack, made from pistachios, crushed Oreos, peanuts, fleur de sel, and chocolate, is a crunchy delight.

We still have one stop to make, at Fran’s, the pioneer of the Seattle chocolate scene.

We walk past cases full of the most amazing truffles in flavors like espresso, oolong, raspberry, and whiskey. Will brings us squares of 64% chocolate, elegant in their simplicity, then a truffle where the ganache is made from the same 64% chocolate, swathed in Peruvian chocolate. Finally, one of Fran’s salted caramels, a favorite of President Obama. Back outside, we take a deep breath. We haven’t gone, in Will’s words, completely over the cliff, but we have gone right up to the edge and perhaps dangled a foot into the void. I can’t think of a (pardon the pun) sweeter way to spend a couple of hours. www.savorseattle.com

LAS VEGAS, NEVADA DOWNTOWN LAS VEGAS VEGAN FOOD TOUR by Vegans, Baby

Las Vegas, The world capital of overindulgence, might be the last place you’d expect to find a vegan tour, but this one, under the guidance of the incomparable Diana Edelman of Vegans, Baby teaches you that the words “vegan” and “indulgence” are not mutually exclusive. We concentrate on the Fremont East area of the city, which is a great discovery if you’ve been mainly on the Strip.

Photo: Spice & Ink Photography courtesy of Savor Seattle Food Tours

(Note: Diana is now also doing a vegan tour downtown that's specifically based around pizza, and is hoping to initiate one later this year that takes place on the Strip.)

We meet outside Donut Bar (more on that later), and after a brief stop to say hello to the proprietor, we begin our feast at nearby **Boom Tacos**, whose vegan selection includes a wonderful taco with crimini and button mushrooms spiced up with garlic, cilantro, chilis, and toasted cumin, and another with battered cauliflower and ground sesame seeds that's rich, complex, and delicious. From here it's on to **Turmeric Flavors of India**, where among several samples (they have many choices for vegans), my favorite is the Beet Bomba, an amazing little patty with beets, potatoes, ginger, and herbs. Well, maybe my favorite is Gobi Manchurian—battered cauliflower florets in a soy/garlic sauce. Or maybe the grilled eggplant with a sesame-peanut crust?

Simply Pure, our next stop, is a totally vegan café, and chef/owner Stacey Dougan is doing amazing things like the Mama Mia Lasagna, so rich and flavorful you'd never dream there's no meat or dairy involved in it. Doubtful? Take a bite: it's some of the best lasagna I've ever had. When they add the plate of nachos grande, I begin to think about

just how much food we've eaten, and how much is still to come. There's a lot more waiting for us as we head into **PublicUs**, a coffeehouse that as much as any venue has heralded this up-and-coming neighborhood. It's a beautiful place, hip but comfy and satisfying: a good description of Fremont East as a whole. And such food they give us! Hummus, tabouli, a "lentil sloppy Joe"...there's much here on offer for the non-carnivores, from hearty soup to filling baked goods, and it seems like we sample all of it! It's a good thing we are doing some walking, because we are definitely doing some serious eating!

There's one more stop, and it's a fitting end to this vegan tour: **Vegetation**, a great vegan restaurant, totally packed in the late afternoon when we visit. Here, we enjoy a beet carpaccio followed by a mushroom risotto, my favorite dish I've had on this tour full of favorite dishes. To end it off, we hark back to the beginning—remember that brief visit to Donut Bar? Well, at the end of the tour Vegetation has taken one of their vegan donuts, scooped ice cream into it, and mounded whipped cream on top (both vegan, of course), and the whole thing slathered in chocolate sauce. Who said vegans can't indulge with the best of them? www.vegansbaby.com

SCOTTSDALE, ARIZONA
A TASTE OF OLD TOWN
SCOTTSDALE LUNCH TOUR
by Arizona Food Tours

Our little group meets with Zach Egedy, tour guide par excellence, outside the Old Adobe Mission Church, a harbinger of things to come as we combine Scottsdale history with some amazing eats. We introduce ourselves and head into **The Mission**—not the historic building but a fabulous Modern Latin restaurant that's our first stop on the tour. Here, we start the afternoon in style beneath the beamed ceilings and adobe-style walls (and all but me supplement their samplings with the restaurant's famous margaritas). Throughout the tour, local history is thrown in with gourmet pleasures, from a stop in front of a statue of Scottsdale's founder Winfield Scott to such establishments as Sterling Drug Store (1921). Down a wooden passageway, we find **Nonna Urban Eatery**, a place I must have passed a million times, but my sampling of pasta with salmon, asparagus, and lemon cream makes me determined to go back!

From modern Latin to an Italian chef raised in Venezuela with a work background in Monaco, Scottsdale's food scene is in many ways the very definition of "global." This is reinforced at our next stop, **Malee's Thai Bistro** that has been open for over 30 years. Here we combine their specialty, a rich and tangy tom ka ga soup and some spring rolls, both are hearty and pleasing, but light enough that we can continue pampering ourselves guilt-free. They also offer a couple of locally brewed beers that offset the Thai food nicely and give us a taste of what's going on in the area with microbrewing. Even less expected than a great Thai place in Scottsdale is the **Brathaüs**, open since 2012 in a beautiful courtyard, with tables under large canvas umbrellas. Here, we enjoy a custom presentation from housemade fries, pretzels with Bavarian-style cheese sauce, and traditional bratwurst (with wonderful housemade falafel for vegetarians), served up with an assortment of mustards by a server whose T-shirt proclaims "Pork-a-tarian."

Our final stop is at **Shakes and Cones**, a wonderful soft-serve ice cream place where everything is organic, small batch, and made with love at this family operation. It's the perfect end to a tour that's



Dessert at Vegetation

Photo: Courtesy of Vegans, Baby



Photo: Courtesy of Arizona Food Tours

A Taste of Old Town Scottsdale Tour

been relaxed but enlightening, just a small sampling of Scottsdale’s 600-plus restaurants. Want to experience more? Arizona Food Tours does not only a progressive dinner tour, but happy hour tours of Scottsdale and nearby Tempe that I guarantee will fulfill the promise of the word “happy.” www.arizonafoodtours.com

**HEALDSBURG, CALIFORNIA
GOURMET HEALDSBURG
by Savor Healdsburg Food Tours**

Healdsburg is all about food and wine (not surprising given its location in Sonoma County’s wine country), so naturally both of these things are going to make an appearance in our Gourmet Healdsburg Tour—along with a few other surprises. As we walk past the galleries of this tony town, our guide Tammy tells us some of the local history, from the town’s founding by Harmon Heald to the construction of such edifices as the Sam Meyer building (1884). First and foremost, however, is the great food here, which doesn’t get any better than the tapas we sample in **Bravas**, from a cold salmorejo soup that’s stunningly garlicky to patatas bravas with a smoky tomato sauce, and these incredible eggplant chips, redolent with truffle honey and rosemary, and possibly the best tapa on earth. Around the corner, we experience a food and wine pairing at **Portalupi**. Their wines, from a crisp and beautiful Sauvignon Blanc/Chardonnay/Vermentino blend to a bold 2016 Barbera to their popular Vaso di

Marina, are offset beautifully by such small bites as apricot-ginger crackers with chevre, house-made smoked salmon, and Italian sausage with caramelized onion: Healdsburg’s food and wine delights in a nutshell!

Not all Healdsburg establishments are devoted to the alcoholic variety of beverages, though, and next door, we sample the wares (and get a fascinating lesson in the art) at **The Taste of Tea**, moving from a Japanese green tea to a perfect oolong to herbal brew. To finish it off, we sample one of their “Mar-Tea-Nis” called a Tiger’s Eye, made of a honeybush tisane with ginger syrup and a rose-sugar rim. We end our tour in great style at **Moustache Baked Goods**, one of my favorite Healdsburg destinations, where the cupcakes feature lots of local products and come in such offbeat varieties as The Outlaw (chocolate/caramel/sea salt), Pioneer Jane (vanilla/strawberry/ rhubarb), The Southern Miss (brown butter/local peaches), and The Beekeeper (meyer lemon/honey/lavender).

When I finish the tour, I vow to sign-up for one of their Tastemakers Tours, an in-town gourmet excursion or a farm-based expedition to the producers around the area, both designed to introduce you not only to the culinary riches but the culinary geniuses behind these riches. After the samplings of Gourmet Healdsburg, I want to know more! www.savorhealdsburg.com

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