

## Chowing Down with ChowBella

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Culinary tourism. It's a funny phrase but anyone who has ever planned a trip based around where and what they'll be eating is, in fact, a culinary tourist. And as our palates become more sophisticated, culinary tourism is actually a growing industry.

But how to find the best places to eat on your trip? Sure, it's easy enough to turn to forums like ChowHound or a restaurant rating site, but there's no real way of telling whether the people offering advice or reviews a) share your tastes and interests or sense of value for money, or b) know what the heck they're talking about in terms of quality and authenticity. So it makes sense to turn to someone with expertise in the local food community; someone who knows all about local food and wine, where to shop and where to eat.

A culinary concierge can offer a variety of services, to both travelers and locals, that make eating in a particular city a delight rather than a nightmare. Here in Toronto, Trina Hendry of [ChowBella Culinary Experiences & Concierge](#) is an expert on the local dining scene and can advise both visitors and locals on everything to do with food, from the best places to dine to food festivals and events.

Hendry first came up with the idea when she was working at a local hotel chain and noticed how interested people were in the local dining scene. She saw that culinary tourism was on the rise, and when a company in Vancouver started offering food-oriented concierge services, she figured the same services would go over well in Toronto.

Like standard concierge companies, ChowBella offers a variety of services to its clients. Hendry says, "presently, ChowBella offers services like restaurant recommendations and reservations, culinary travel itineraries, personal gourmet shopping and culinary tours and experiences, for both leisure travelers and corporate clientele. I, of course, hope to expand on the offerings but am waiting to see how things go."

So why would people use a personalized concierge service in the first place? As noted above, while doing your own research online can be done for free, you can't always trust the advice of amateur

foodies, and it takes a lot of time to search sites for reviews. Hotels offer a concierge service for guests, but in many Toronto hotels, the concierge service is contracted out to a company that is known for requesting kickbacks from restaurants in return for reservations, so many establishments might never be recommended.

“People are time-starved these days,” says Hendry, “and a service like ChowBella eliminates the need to take the time to do all of the research that is required when visiting a new city. Someone could very easily ask the hotel concierge for recommendations on what to do and see in the city but ChowBella is not tied to any particular restaurant or destination and can provide recommendations that are personalized to suit each client's needs and tastes.”

But ChowBella isn't just for visitors. With a selection of tours, including both walking tours in the city and bus tours to destinations like Stratford (which includes a visit to a farm where guests can feed the Tamworth pigs), locals might also be keen to check out the culinary tours on offer, which include the guidance of a local expert and concentrate very much on the food. Hendry has brought on local chef and food writer [Signe Langford](#) to provide tours of Kensington Market, and [The Stop's](#) Joshna Maharaj to do tours of Little India. Hendry herself will be guiding the tours of West Queen West.

Hendry explains what makes ChowBella's tours stand out from other food-related tours offered around the city. “I think the thing that differentiates ChowBella's experiences from the others is that they are led by chefs. Attendees get access to a culinary professional who can provide interesting facts about the neighbourhoods that only insiders might know, highlight different and unusual ingredients, as well as offer tips on how to prepare ethnic dishes.”

The chef tour guides can also use their connections to garner special perks for their guests that other tours might not be able to offer. “Where appropriate, we try to offer a bit of behind-the-scenes access,” Hendry explains. “With the Little India tour, for instance, attendees get to go into the kitchen of an Indian restaurant and get a cooking demonstration on how to make dosa. Afterwards, they get to enjoy a light Indian lunch, which includes a variation of the dosa they just saw in the kitchen. The tours are pretty short (two hours) so they are really about the food, with just enough history thrown in that people can understand how the cuisine has influenced and evolved the neighbourhood.”

Hendry tells me that each tour was created as a collaboration between herself and the guides, but the guides also have the opportunity to be spontaneous and encourage guests to take part in whatever else might be happening along the tour route. “In these neighbourhoods, events and activities are constantly changing and it's important that the guides have the freedom to take advantage of these unique opportunities. For example, in Little India, street food is a huge part of the culture and guests should get the chance to experience whatever is happening on the street at any given time.”

Not content with just booking reservations and planning tours, Hendry has plans in the works for ChowBella to also offer a service called Shop, Saute and Savour, in which guests will get to shadow a chef for a day; shopping at a local market then returning to the restaurant to prepare the planned dishes and then dine together over lunch. This service is still in the works as she searches for the right chef, but is likely to have as much appeal to locals as it does for travelers.

In a recession, using the services of a culinary concierge might seem like a true luxury, but the time and frustration saved can be a boon to many travelers who want to spend their vacations enjoying themselves, not scrambling to get dinner reservations or following leads found online that end in disappointment. And for locals who want to further discover the culinary offerings of their own city, the chef-led tours offered by ChowBella could be the perfect ticket to learning about new cuisines without

ever having to pack a suitcase.

ChowBella's chef-escorted walking tours run on weekends throughout the summer and range in price from \$55 to \$65 per person. The next culinary trails tour to Stratford takes place on July 11th and costs \$130 per person. To book a tour or for more information on ChowBella's culinary concierge services, [please visit the website](#).