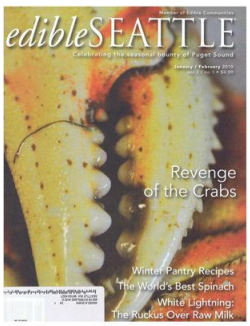

MEET YOUR MARKET

Savor Seattle Food Tours and the benefits of tourism on your home turf

BY ASHLEY GARTLAND
PHOTOS BY BARBIE HULL

After years spent visiting the Pike Place Market and its surrounding blocks, I thought I'd unearthed every gem in the city's culinary hub. And yet, before I trusted this neighborhood with Savor Seattle Food Tours, the closest I'd come to eating at Tom Douglas's Serious Pie was reading about it in magazines. I had not indulged in a fanned Trati's Chocolates salted caramel, or given a passing glance to the charming Il Bistro. And I'd always been too busy making a beeline for the donut stall to notice the impressive artisan charcuterie vendor tucked just down the hall.

With all the market has to offer, Savor Seattle's founder Angela Shen knows we tend to overlook some of the community's best stops and hidden shops, and she's designed her culinary walking tours to introduce guests to the people and places we might miss on our own. She's knit together an impressive itinerary of restaurants, market vendors, gourmet boutiques and mom and pop shops, and collected woody facts, culinary trivia and city secrets to share during the tours to make each one as educational as it is inspiring. In a city telling tour experiences so familiar they've become cliché, Shen offers something new: the chance to experience downtown through the eyes of a tour company CEO ... a Chief Epicurean Officer.

Shen is a Seattle transplant who followed her husband to the city when he landed a tech job with Microsoft. When they arrived, she put aside thoughts of continuing her former career in brand management in favor of pursuing her passion for food. "I have always had an obsession with food. Eating it, cooking it, shopping for it, talking about it—did I mention eating it?" she says. "I wanted to find a job that would enable me to stoke my passion for food with others in a way that would bridge the gap between the people behind the food with the people enjoying it. I just didn't know what that would be."

That first fall in town, she found herself visiting Pike Place Market with alarming frequency and naturally enough given her food obsessions, she started chatting with the market purveyors, sampling their products and studying the ebb and flow of the scene. "The market was awe inspiring, even in October. I couldn't believe how much beautiful, vibrant food and produce was coming in," she says. "I hadn't seen that before at that time of year anywhere else I lived. So I began to think, what if, for people like me that are brand new to Seattle, I led tours to give them a lay of the land? And what if I started those tours at the heart and soul [of Seattle] at Pike Place Market?"

In July 2007, Shen launched her dream company and began leading walking tours through the market that encouraged locals and tourists to make connections with the purveyors who shape Seattle's culinary scene. That Classic Tour is still the company's hallmark offering, but over the past three years, Shen has grown her company such that she and her team of six guides now run four focused tours, including the Gourmet Seattle Tour, Off the Beaten Path, and the Coffee & Chocolate Indulgence Tour.

Though each tour differs in its geography, duration and focus, they all keep guests full with multiple tastes from each of seven to ten stops. However, the tours are about more than indulging in good food and drink. "To be honest, I hate to call what we do tours," says Shen. "When we bring people to these restaurants and food purveyors I want it to feel like a good friend introducing you to a chef or an artisan they know."

The relationships Shen has developed as a result of her business are its lifeline, and core to which each side impacts what the other is trying to accomplish. Shen refers to them as "partners" rather than simply stops on a tour. Since launching her company, she has become fast friends with the Pike Place fish boys (she calls them her "older brothers") and even made one of them a pot of clam chowder to celebrate his birthday last fall. Watching her interact with these partners during the tour, it's obvious that they adore her and truly appreciate the attention she's brought their businesses as well.

Pike Place Brewing Company's Charles Finkel say Shen has helped customers become better educated and more excited about the company's beer. "After the tour, their consciousness of the history, manufacture and taste of this noble beverage is raised, and hopefully they will look at beer in a different light," says Finkel. Indeed, the combination of a brewery tour and a beer tasting, a spent grain roll and two local cheeses (including a cheese rind seafood with the brewery's beer) provides a series of sensory experiences and a lesson in the brewery's sustainable ways.

Sustainability is a deciding factor when Shen selects partners and is also part of the company's focus on E.L.O.S.S., or fresh, local, organic, seasonal and sustainable foods and beverages. "We've made it part of the business because it is such a huge part of what makes eating in Seattle unique," she says. "We pick partners that epitomize or uphold those philosophies in one way or another."

This overriding standard translates into stops such as Andalaus, where Chef Wayne Johnson discusses the restaurant's partnership with a local farm, and Serious Pie, where the kitchen sources local clams, foraged mushrooms and other seasonal ingredients to pile atop its pizzas.

This focused criteria also delivers an authentic-to-Seattle experience for tour guests and plentiful tastes of stunningly good, local food. At the end of the Gourmet Seattle Tour, I had sipped a splash of tangela at Andalaus, nibbled on salami at Caseinello Meats and tried two of Shen's personal favorites, the roasted mushroom and truffle cheese pizza at Serious Pie. I watched an out-of-towner celebrate her anniversary by extolling a fish at the market, finally explored the cavernous dining room at Il Bistro and experienced pure bliss while spooning authentic Italian gelato from Celestino into my mouth. My stomach was full but more importantly Shen had introduced me to a world of artisans I didn't know existed.

A former Seattleite, Ashley Gartland now lives in Portland where she works as a freelance writer. She writes about food, drink and lifestyle of the Pacific Northwest and has previously been published in Northwest Palate, Edible Portland, and Seattle Metropolitan.

Tour prices include all food and beverage tastings. 10-15% merchant discount coupons, audio equipment rental and seasonal recipes. Prices range between $17 and $65 per person, and include 18-28 bite-size samples.

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