

DESTINATION

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FINDING ITALY IN VICTORIA



All things Italian can be found at Victoria's popular Butchart Gardens.

Victoria seems warmer these days—and it has nothing to do with climate. Call it a Renaissance. Until recently, most Canadians thought of this British Columbia city in terms of English gardens and tea time at the Empress Hotel. And so did I, until I returned from a long absence to find that one of my favourite places had shifted significantly south, from the British Isles to the Mediterranean.

Victoria has always had Italian undertones, dating back to when Captain Alexandro Malaspina, an Italian from a noble family, explored Vancouver Island under the Spanish flag in 1791. A college, a strait and a peninsula now bear his name.

But in terms of what Victoria considers most important—food—these Italian roots were largely obscured by a stronger British tradition. Things are changing, however. There are now

Photo: Tourism Victoria / Butchart Gardens Ltd.

more places for espresso coffee, Tuscan bread and gelato than for Devonshire cream, crumpets and proper English tea. Tuscan-inspired villages are replacing the staid mock Elizabethan and Victorian homes. You are now just as likely to be eating off Tuscany pottery plates as fine bone English china in many restaurants.

Suddenly, the Italian influence is everywhere. You can eat a gelato within eyeshot of The Blethering Place, The Penny Farthing Pub and Winchester Art Gallery in the staunch Oak Bay Village. A concrete Italian fountain separates Winchester Art Gallery from Ottavio, a combination Italian bakery, delicatessen, and gelato and espresso bar.

Gelato is the perfect treat for hot summer days, as well as those dreary winter ones when you need something sweet to remind you of warmer days. I love the amaretto at Ottavio and the non-traditional (for Italy, that is) mango. It's lighter than ice cream, less filling, but just as sweet. They also serve breakfast and lunch entrees and Italian cookies and pastries. It's always an adventure to explore their delicatessen, with 11 shelves of imported olive oil and cheeses (Asiago, Piave and others) from Italy, France and a wide selection from Quebec. I like their panfiore, bread shaped like a flower, with each petal torn off and dipped in balsamic vinegar.

It's not the only Italian bakery or deli in town, either. Victoria boasts four La Collina bakeries—fine European dining, for breakfast and lunch. The one in Saanich on McKenzie is strictly takeout; another one, just 3 km away in town on Cedar Hill Road, is sit-down. Both have fresh baked breads, including contadino, paesano, focaccia and panini. They're also stocked with scrumptious French foods like baguettes and croissants. A personal favourite is their Italian breakfast, a tomato sauce and onions on top of scrambled eggs set on a bruschetta bun. Along with espresso, it's the perfect way to start the morning. Just about all bakeries in Victoria, including English and Swedish ones, offer Tuscan bread.

Victoria is a city obsessed with eating, with 959 sit-down restaurants for the 325,000 residents of the Greater Victoria Regional District. Everyone here discusses food almost as often as they do the weather. I have had conversations with grandfathers on sports day concerning the proper way to barbecue a rack of lamb, as well as a passionate dialogue on the right coconut milk for a Thai curry in a hardware store. Walking down the aisles of Thrifty's Supermarket, you can find all kinds of cheeses and fresh antipasti along with locally made store-brand Italian-style sausages.

It is significant, then, that almost every decent restaurant in town now serves panini, an Italian sandwich. My favourite breakfast and lunch place is Pure Vanilla at Cadboro Bay. Although it isn't Italian per se, it serves frittatas, pizzette and always panini with just the right amount of olive oil and a variety of vegetarian fillings. Sit outside in the back on their large concrete tables and benches—locally made and designed—in a sheltered area away from the street.

On Government Street, near the Empress Hotel and government buildings (built in part by Italian stonemasons in 1893) and Rogers Chocolates, souvenir and Native craft shops is Oh Gelato with its 66 flavours and Torrefazione Italia Café with espresso, cappuccino and gelatos. Yes, Murchie's Tea Room still serves tea but now it also boasts a cappuccino bar. Bastion Square has Paradiso de Stelle, a hit with both the office lunch crowd and tourists.

If you aren't too stuffed to sample more of the local offerings, two other popular Italian eateries are Pagliacci's, with

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a relaxed atmosphere and reasonably priced food, and Il Terrazzo, a fusion of Mediterranean and West Coast fare voted the best Italian restaurant in town. Reservations are suggested, as these places are usually packed.

Anyone in search of Italian tableware, utensils and kitchen gadgets can pick some up at The Tuscan Kitchen, with Deruta, traditional dinner settings with rooster and citrus designs.

A love of cooking and food directed me to continuing education classes at Camosun College, where I learned to make risotto balls and polenta. When I asked my instructor, Terry Seed, about his favourite Italian restaurant, he mentioned Zambri's, right downtown on Yates slightly outside the tourist area. According to him, it has real Italian pasta and polenta—all local and in season—and is part of the slow food movement. There are no reservations for lunch, so arrive early.

So why has this sunny Italian culture emerged from the clouds to warm Victoria in the 21st century? It turns out that this is more an evolution than a revolution, because the Italians have always been here. In the 19th century, they began arriving on the island to work in the mines and on the railways. Many successful Italian miners then started businesses in the harbour town of Nanaimo. The Felice Cavalotti Lodge was founded by 54 men in 1900 for the benefit of the Italian labourers, mostly coal



Sip cappuccino at one of the many outdoor sidewalk cafes.

miners. This lodge still exists today and has 330 members who raise money for charitable organizations, teach Italian and hold socials, including wine-, pastry- and sausage-making events.

Giovanna Greco, a lively, reddish-haired woman, is the first female president of the Victoria Italian Assistance Centre at the Leonardo Da Vinci Centre. She came to Canada in 1964 from the Lazio region in Italy and worked in a bank in the Italian district of Montreal. After marriage and two children, she moved to Victoria in 1977, where her husband started a wrought-iron company and she earned her degree in linguistics at the University of Victoria. At that time, she says, there were no “good” coffee places or bakeries; she had to bake her own. She’s just as amazed as anyone at how much it all has changed.

Today, this love of all things Italian can also be seen at Victoria’s most popular tourist attraction, Butchart Gardens. Originally called Benvenuto—“Welcome” in Italian—when it opened in 1915, the 55 acres of stunning floral yards are available to the public, offering visitors gorgeous horticultural displays from many paths that meander through the four main gardens. The Italian Garden is an excellent sunny spot to relax in after climbing from the Sunken Garden. Unlike the Rose Garden, which only blooms for a few months, the Italian garden blooms throughout the year, starting with tulip plantings in November and chrysanthemums in September. Any time is a good time to visit here.

The Italian Garden was initially conceived of as a tennis court, explains David Clark, a public relations officer at the Butchart. In 1924, the Butchart family, frequent visitors to Italy, removed the tennis courts and replaced them with the garden. The gardens now boast several statues, but only one actually sculpted in Italy—the Mercury Statue from Florence. The Italian Garden, completed in 1926, was an inspiration rather than a literal interpretation.

As popular as the Italian Garden is at Butchart Gardens, however, it isn’t the only one. Victoria is a city of gardens, and has the best weather in Canada, according to the locals (daffodils in February, if not January). On the other side of town, in Colwood, are the estate gardens at Royal Roads University, in many ways a more authentic Italian garden than Butchart. It’s

wide open, flatter and closer to the sea. If possible, try to visit both gardens for contrast in style, due both to the personalities of their originators and the ecology. The Royal Roads are right on an estuary; the Butchart Gardens were chiselled out of a quarry.

The Honourable Lieutenant Governor James Dunsmuir purchased the 650-acre Hatley Park estate at the turn of the 20th century. It was later sold to the Royal Roads Naval University, but the gardens are open to the public. The main large Italian garden, next to Loggia, a small summer house, is gated and feels every inch like Italy.

Dave Rutherford, the grounds and garden manager, says the Italian gardens were based on a traditional Italian Cathedral plan, complete with authentic boxwood hedging and marble vases. Started in 1912 and finished two years later, they were designed by a gardening firm from Boston. Completing the gardens are four statues imported from Italy—Pomona, Ceres, Flora and Hebe, symbolizing the four seasons.

The Italian theme continues today in the Gordon Head area, 10 minutes from downtown Victoria, where Tuscany-style condominiums are under construction, complete with a courtyard with fountains, cobblestones, archways and seating with umbrellas. Doug Foord, its developer, was tired of the old mock Elizabethan and West Coast styles and wanted to build a residential and commercial complex that was different. He had been to Italy and was interested in adapting centuries-old architecture to North America, using modern material and ideas. Similar developments in Scottsdale and Miami showed him how.

And one hour from Victoria near Duncan, the Zanata family has owned a farm for more than 40 years, where they now have a winery and a fine dining restaurant with Italian food from local produce and their own homegrown herbs. Today, Loritta Zanata and her husband, Jim Moody, run the winery, bottling their own grapes and selling wine on their property and from many outlets in town.

In Victoria on warm summer days, if you look out over McNeal Bay at the houses on the side of Gonzales Hill, you might be pleasantly mistaken, and think you’re looking at coastal Italy. What a treat.



Enjoy the sunset and pretend you're in coastal Italy.

Photo: Tourism Victoria