

Street Food Passport

Want Some, Toronto?

Inspiration from Street Food Culture Abroad

By Jennifer Foden Wilson

Food is an integral part of any travel experience; wherever you visit, immersing yourself in the local food and drink is how you learn about the culture. One of the best ways to explore this cuisine is to eat side-by-side with the locals from a cart smaller than most home kitchens. Yes, I'm talking about street food.

In Canada, improving and diversifying street food has become a topic of recent discussion. There has been a street food boom in Vancouver and Calgary, and Montreal and Toronto are currently discussing amending their vendor bylaws to follow suit.

"Toronto is very multicultural, yet our street food is not multicultural at all," says Hassel Aviles, a devoted street food supporter, who launched Toronto Underground Market (TUM) last fall. TUM is a monthly event that allows home cooks and small businesses to showcase their food in a public venue. "I love street food. It's so sad to me that you

can't get stuff like that here. I know of vendors [in Toronto] who have applied for a more diverse menu and have been denied."

In 2009, the City of Toronto attempted to implement a street food program called AÀ La Cart, steering away from the typical hot dog selection and introducing the likes of falafel, samosas and jerk chicken to Toronto's streets. The program ultimately folded due to bureaucratic red tape. There are very few gourmet street food vendors left in the city, but Torontonians keep on fighting for a strong, diverse street food culture. "Toronto really, really wants it," Aviles says. One of these supporters is Toronto

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waitress Caileigh Harvey, who appreciates the value of street food locally and abroad.

Toronto may have another opportunity to showcase its diversity and energy through street food: city hall has employed a consulting firm and working groups to inform discussions on how to recover from A La Cart and move forward with a new, sustainable street food culture. As Toronto begins to conceptualize its forthcoming street food scene, let's explore what other cities have on the menu.



Gyros (Athens, Greece):

This favourite is available all across Greece. The delicious meat, herbs, bread, and tomatoes in this dish are common ingredients in Greek cuisine. However, without the proper equipment it can be difficult to prepare gyros at home, so this dish is one that Greeks look for in street vendors. Enjoyed by locals and travellers, gyros are popular worldwide. Order it with ap' ola (the works).



Fruit drinks (Jericoacoara, Brazil):

On the main, sand-covered street in the small windsurfing village of Jeri, locals roll out their drink carts at dusk and compete to prepare hand-crushed fruit drinks, with any alcohol of choice, for locals and travellers alike. When you combine Brazil's most exotic fruits with rum, flawless beaches and this village's laid-back vibe, you've got classic Jeri paradise.



Vada pav (Mumbai, India):

Mumbai's "hamburger"—a.k.a. a deep fried potato mix served with chutney on a soft bun—is a cheap, delicious street food option in India's biggest city. Costing a grand total of five Canadian cents, it is served to the masses across the city. Vada pav was initially produced as a cost-effective meal for low-income residents, but it has since become one of Mumbai's most popular dishes.



Crêpes (Nice, France):

You can't help but be impressed that such a small cart has the ability to create several variations of this delicious dessert right in front of you. Crêpes are popular across France, and are also served on Candlemas in February. On this day it is believed that you will become rich if you can catch a crêpe in a frying pan after tossing it in the air, while holding a coin in your right hand.



Pad Thai (Chiang Mai, Thailand):

We've all tasted pad Thai in Canada, but there's nothing like the real thing. Served in homes, restaurants and on the streets, pad Thai is one of Thailand's national dishes. The meal has been around for centuries but became popular in the 1930s when the Thai economy was dependent on rice exports and needed to increase rice noodle consumption.



These cities are testaments to how wildly successful street food can be. "I've eaten my way through a lot of countries," Harvey says, "yet street food remains to be some of the most inexpensive, delicious food I've tried." With cooperation from the Ford administration, street vendors will be able to showcase the cuisine and culture of Toronto. Although restaurants do this too, eating curbside provides a different kind of experience. "With street food, you get more authentic dishes because it's not such an established business," says Aviles. "It's also cheaper . . . it's faster to get something on the go. Don't get me wrong, I love the idea of going out to eat at a restaurant, but with street food, there is a lot less commitment." Hopefully we'll soon be lining up, side-by-side, for a taste of Toronto's street food culture.