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# TRAVELLER

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# BEST OF THE WORLD

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CULTURE IN JAPAN

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EAT

# TORONTO

Canada's biggest city has long been known for its diverse food scene. But a new batch of skilful chefs have been blending ingredients and techniques from disparate cultures to create a new gourmet language

WORDS: ZOEY GOTO

"Over half the population of Toronto has come from elsewhere and brought their cuisine with them. Which is great news for those who like to eat!" My culinary tour guide, William Jordan, beams, as we sip cups of Tibetan-style butter coffee, brought from a hole-in-the-wall cafe in the Kensington Market neighbourhood.

As we walk, the heady smell of spiced curry goat escapes through the door of a nearby roti joint, instantly rousing my hunger. Too much choice can have a paralysing effect, which is certainly true for me as I glance around the market. This historic neighbourhood on the edge of Chinatown is where people come to eat their way around the world, all within just a few blocks of mural-splashed alleyways, bustling food stalls and independent restaurants.

In a city shaped by waves of immigration, Kensington Market has long been the place to try the tastiest patties outside of the Caribbean or to pick up a fistful of flaming hot scorpion peppers from a spice emporium. In more recent years, the children of first-generation immigrant restaurateurs have put their own spin on things as they've taken the helm at family businesses, creating an inventive and exciting fusion food scene with surprisingly delicious outcomes.

So, where to start? Thankfully, actor-turned-guide William from the Chopsticks & Forks food tour company is helping me navigate Toronto's rapidly shifting foodscape, with a tour focused on cultural crossover cuisine. Our first stop is Leaf Doner, a laid-back shawarma grill next to a specialist fromagerie and two

doors down from a butcher's shop selling strings of garlicky sausages.

Across a Formica table, William slides the house speciality towards me: glistening kebab meat soaked in maple syrup, encased in a taco shell. On paper, this mashup of Turkey, Canada and Mexico really shouldn't work, but it's so tasty that I swiftly devour it, then lick the sticky, meaty jus from my fingers.

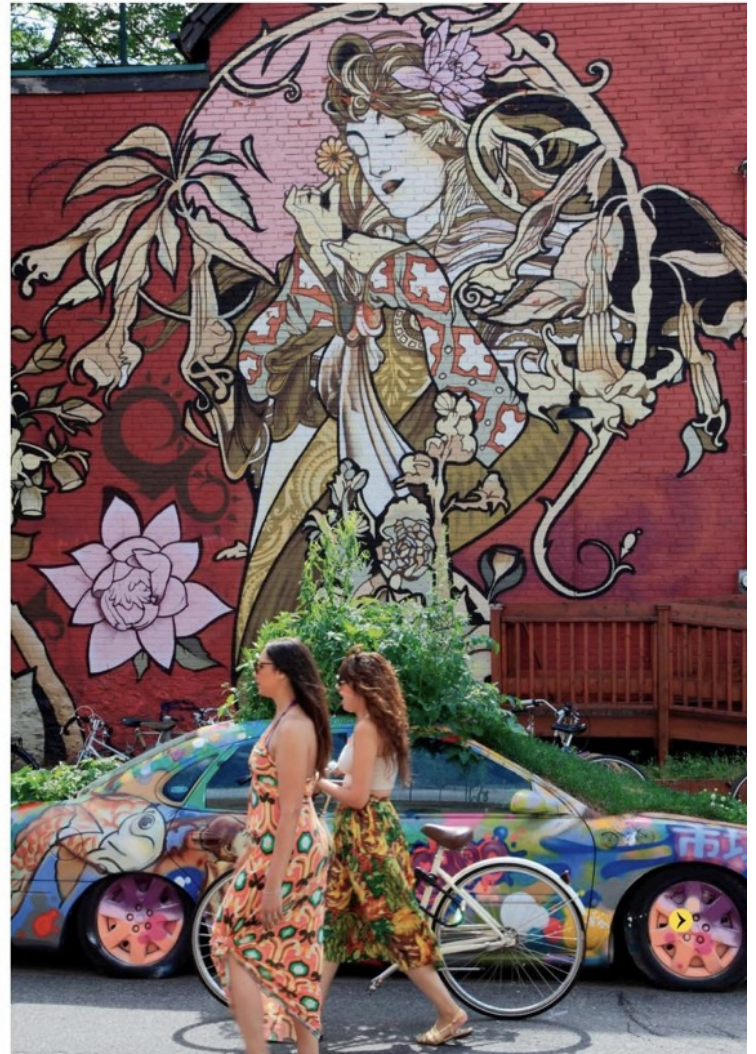
Canada's most populous city — home to 2.6 million in urban Toronto, 5.6 million in the larger metropolitan area — has long been acclaimed for its gourmet offerings. It was no surprise when, in 2022, Toronto was crowned the first destination in the country to warrant its own Michelin Guide.

More than 180 languages are spoken in the city. "Our strength," says William, "has always been our multiculturalism. But we're now seeing food coming together in these really weird and wonderful ways." We stroll onwards. One minute we pass Rasta Pasta, a Jamaican-Italian hybrid joint with a cult following. The next, a Chinese restaurant called New Ho King, which went viral after the Canadian rapper Drake filmed scenes for a music video here.

Red lanterns sway lazily in the doorway of Takoyaki6ix, a Japanese cafe where we stop to snack on crispy chicken katsu wrapped in fluffy bao buns. Taking a table on the street, William points out that we're tucking into yet another example of blended cuisine, with Katsu breaded meat cutlets heralding from Europe via Japan, and bao buns originating from northern China.

Clockwise from top: Tiki Taxi takes passengers to and from Spadina to several of Toronto's islands; the historic Kensington Market area; a plate of empanadas and *humitas* (a corn-based dish), enjoyed as part of a Chopsticks & Forks food tour

IMAGES: DESTINATION ONTARIO; ALAMY; CHOPSTICKS AND FORKS





The Gooderham Building  
in downtown Toronto  
Right: Caviar bites, Prime  
Seafood Palace

## A TASTE OF Toronto



### PRIME SEAFOOD PALACE

This seafood and steak joint is fine dining with its top button loosened, so expect friendly mixologists and a playlist of The Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix. Chef Matty Matheson, who also stars in *The Bear*, supplies the produce from his Ontario farm. Diners feast on tender steaks and pillows of Yorkshire pudding, soaked in gravy that's been simmering down all afternoon. Mains from C\$80 (£45). [primeseafoodpalace.ca](http://primeseafoodpalace.ca)

### GOLDEN PATTY BAKERY

This Kensington Market institution is known for its traditional Jamaican patties. They gain their golden colour from curry spice added to the flaky pastry and come with all sorts of fillings, including ackee and saltfish. Order a pastry parcel from the glass counter, with a homemade ginger beer. Patty with coco bread C\$4 (£2.25). [facebook.com/GoldenPattyBakery](https://facebook.com/GoldenPattyBakery)

### LA CUBANA

There are three outposts of this laid-back, retro canteen in Toronto, serving contemporary Cuban comfort food. House specialties are pressed Cubana sandwiches and plates of slow-cooked short ribs smothered in guava BBQ sauce and finished with a heap of fried plantains. Mains from C\$16 (£9). [lacubana.ca](http://lacubana.ca)

### MAHA'S EGYPTIAN BRUNCH

Inspired by the street food of Egypt, the weekend brunch menu at this local hotspot is so popular that the queue snakes around the block. They come for chef Maha Barsoom's updates on Cairo classics, including falafel with soft boiled eggs and juicy dates served with cheese on honey-drizzled bread. Mains from C\$18 (£10). [mahasbrunch.com](http://mahasbrunch.com)

Nearby, plastic beakers of sugar cane juice are for sale at a canary yellow Caribbean shack bar. "There's a big Jamaican population here and the area is particularly vibrant with people who follow the Rastafarian way of life," William tells me. This is also a neighbourhood that hippies flocked to in the late 1960s and today the spirit of bohemia still hangs in the air, evident in the boutiques selling incense and tie-dye clothing.

"There's just so much on offer here that I could do 100 of these tours and never visit the same place twice," William marvels as we grab a final bite at Koi Japan, a pocket sushi restaurant serving Mexican guacamole wrapped in a blanket of silky rice, topped with a bougie sprinkle of edible gold.

Later that afternoon, 12 miles northeast of downtown Toronto in the suburb of Scarborough, I discover a different kind of cultural cross-pollination happening. Under the shadow of a row of soaring electricity pylons, Malvern Urban Farm has transformed an abandoned corridor of wasteland into a two-acre patchwork of farming plots for the community.

There to show me around is Isaac Crosby, a Black and Anishinaabe First Nations agricultural teacher, and self-described 'earth helper'. Since joining the non-profit scheme, Isaac has been using his hydrofield allotment

to educate others about the Indigenous food systems that were lost post-colonisation.

Isaac's African and indigenous farming methods — which include ceremonies involving cedar, sweetgrass, white sage and tobacco, and harvesting in the autumn and winter months — are often out of step with his neighbouring small-scale producers. But that's the beauty of working the land at Malvern Urban Farm, a place where each individual grower creates their own ethnically appropriate food system and knowledge flows freely between the gardens.

"We have farmers from all over — Trinidad, Pakistan, India, South America. We all meet here to talk, laugh and learn from each other," he says, bending down to pluck and then hand me a tiny white strawberry, which bursts with mellow hints of vanilla when I pop it into my mouth.

"Just over here," Isaac says, pointing through stalks of his white corn to some nearby beds. "I helped the farmer to create traditional mounds, which help produce grow in the heavy, clay soil," he says, adding that companion crops — beans and squash — will also grow from the mounds. As part of this ancient growing technique, which is called the Three Sisters, different crops are planted in close proximity to each other to confuse and deter pests from damaging them.

## EAT

From below: Sushi pizza, which is said to have originated in Toronto; The dining room at Miss Likklemore's, where dishes are inspired by the co-owner's Jamaican roots



### FIVE FOOD FINDS

1

#### PEAMEAL BACON

Made from wet-cured pork loin rolled in cornmeal, peameal bacon is standard bacon's juicier, leaner cousin. Carousel Bakery in Toronto serves it in a legendary sandwich.

2

#### BUTTER TART

These little cups of crumbly pastry contain a gooey mixture of butter, corn syrup, brown sugar and egg.

3

#### SUSHI PIZZA

Said to have originated in Toronto, this has a fried rice base topped with salmon, avocado and spicy mayo, served with soy sauce and ginger.

4

#### BEAVER TAIL

This sweet pastry treat is made from fried dough and covered with cinnamon sugar and toppings such as lemon, maple syrup or melted chocolate.

5

#### MAPLE SYRUP

There's far more than just the bottled kind — sample maple syrup in just about everything, from homemade cookies to herbal tea infusions, at St Lawrence Market.



Having tended to this land for a couple of years, Isaac now reaps the benefits. "This is the first year that I've been able to sell my harvest at markets. And I can also make succotash, an indigenous dish from North America's east coast made from corn, onions, collard greens, green beans, black-eyed peas and garlic, from ingredients grown here," Isaac says, with a smile of satisfaction.

There's just time for one last supper, so I head back to downtown Toronto to pull up a chair at the city's latest hotspot, Miss Likklemore's. Taking shade under a fringed parasol, I find co-owner Lonie Murdock; a former wellness trainer who also happens to be a personal chef to the American actor Will Smith. When she's not rustling up health-conscious dishes on a film set, Lonie can be found at her chic restaurant decked out with teak furnishings and whirling rattan ceiling fans. It feels like a slice of island life hidden in the throng of the city.

"My mother is Jamaican so this concept speaks to my roots," Lonie says of her haute Caribbean menu. Family favourites, including her grandma's beloved jerk chicken recipe, have been modernised "to make them a little cleaner", Lonie tells me, over a soundtrack of lovers rock reggae playing in the background. I order a plate of jerk chicken and the meat arrives chargrilled to smoky perfection,

luxuriating in a sauce rich with the punchy heat of scotch bonnet chilli and allspice seasoning made from warming cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg — all ingredients bought at nearby Kensington Market.

As the dining room buzzes with an after-work crowd, it's clear that Miss Likklemore's elevated Caribbean cuisine is a hit with Torontonians. But Lonie stresses that her success stands on the shoulders of others in this city. "The people who arrived from the islands and brought their mom-and-pop restaurants to neighbourhoods such as Toronto's Little Jamaica — they're the ones who set the frontier. Thanks to that generation of immigrants, I've been able to push the boundaries," Lonie concludes, as over her shoulder a painting of her grandma looks down, proudly watching as diners tuck into new interpretations of her old-school recipes. □

**HOW TO DO IT:** Flights from the UK to Toronto take around eight hours. Several airlines fly between the UK and Toronto, including Air Transat from Gatwick, Heathrow, Manchester and Glasgow nonstop to Toronto year-round, and from Dublin from May to October. [airtransat.com](http://airtransat.com)  
The Drake hotel in Toronto's Queen West neighbourhood has doubles from C\$329 (£183) per night. [thedrake.ca](http://thedrake.ca)  
**MORE INFO:** [destinationontario.com](http://destinationontario.com)