



I left **MY HEART** and my **WAISTLINE** in **SAN FRANCISCO**

 By Sharon Stephenson

It was Mark Twain who famously said, “The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco.” It turns out he wasn’t kidding.

I arrive in June, a refugee from a brutal Wellington winter, with a suitcase full of shorts and t-shirts. I spend two weeks in this otherwise glorious city and only twice does it get anywhere close to t-shirt weather.

But I am oddly thankful, because sweatshirts and jackets help to hide the extra kilos I’m piling on. Because say what you like about the weather in San Fran (tip: you won’t endear yourself to the locals if you call it that; use the word ‘Frisco’ and you’ll be met with an even icier stare), one area in which it truly excels is

food. San Francisco is a city that understands, and loves, good food. Wander around any neighbourhood, and it’s as though a *Cuisine* magazine has exploded all over the street.

It’s estimated that around 6,000 eateries jostle for space in this hilly city, many run by immigrants from Mexico, Cambodia, Vietnam and El Salvador. More recent arrivals from Peru and India have swelled the ranks and they, in turn, have been joined by former start-up geeks who’ve parlayed their pots of gold into businesses such as gourmet ice-

cream/delivered meals/cupcakes, trendy food trucks and any number of hip bars and cafes.

Having previously spent time in this city, I'm not unfamiliar with places where I can add to my ever-expanding belly. But if you're not a local, how do you sniff out those tiny, hole-in-the-wall eateries, often with no signage, where the best food often lurks? Enter the food walking tour, where punters get the chance to eat like locals and hear the stories behind the food and those responsible for it.



I'm reliably informed by a Kiwi expat that North Beach, a tangle of Italian delis, cafes and Tony Soprano lookalikes, features some of the city's best food. It's one of those rare t-shirt days when I meet Tom Medlin, whose Local Tastes of the City Tours company runs a three-hour culinary ramble through Little Italy.

We know we're off for a belt-loosening good time at our first stop, Caffe Roma, where the owner Tony proudly shows us the New Zealand wine he stocks. As any Antipodean who's ever visited the United States will tell you, the Americans haven't quite surfed the decent coffee wave the way we have. However, Tony seems to be onto it, roasting his own beans and producing possibly the best caffeine hit I've ever had on US shores.

I gate-crash calorific heaven at our next stop, XOX Truffles, where French import Jean-Marc Gorce coaxes thick, dark and incredibly fattening ganache into the 35 flavoured truffles he sells from his tiny store. I cram cognac, amaretto and Earl Grey truffles into my mouth as though in the shadow of a famine, and leave with an overflowing goody bag.

The next few hours pass in a somewhat calorific blur as we sample Californian olive oil and cheese from the nearby Napa Valley, followed by fattening delights at the Victorian Pastry Company, which has been a feature of North Beach since 1914. What better way to chase carbs than with more carbs? At the 130-year-old Italian French Bakery, we watch the staff baking hundreds of loaves of sourdough and find spots in our stomachs for hunks of the thick, crusty bread.

But it's not all about stuffing our faces (pleasant though that may be) – Tom also provides a lively historical commentary and we visit places such as Saints Peter and Paul Church, a towering neo-Gothic cathedral where Marilyn Monroe and Joe Di Maggio once worshipped, and the Purple Onion, a suitably down-at-heel comedy club where I stand on the very spot where comedians such as Robin Williams, Bill Cosby and Ben Stiller got their starts.

Two days and several antacid tablets later, we're ready to eat and drink our way through another of San Francisco's eclectic 'hoods', this time the city's oldest and possibly most interesting, the Mission District. Settled by Spanish missionaries in the late 18th century, the Mission's faded charm is like catnip for dotcom millionaires, panhandlers, tattooed hipsters and migrants. They also come for the food: thanks to waves of Irish, German, Mexican and Latin American settlers, the Mission is a United Nations of immigrants cooking up a taste of home.

It's not quite t-shirt weather, but at least the God of Sun is smiling on the 11 of us who've signed up for the Edible Excursions *Taste the Mission* tour. We've been warned to bring an empty stomach, which turns out to be good advice at our first stop, Mission Minis,



where small versions of gourmet cupcakes cost a dollar each and come in flavours such as Meyer lemon crème, peanut butter kiss and vegan banana maple. In a tribute to the neighbourhood, I choose a cinnamon horcharta, a Mexican rice milk cake slathered in cream cheese frosting and freshly ground cinnamon that literally melts in my mouth.

The Mission is perhaps best known for its burrito – which doesn't (as I'd mistakenly assumed) hail from Mexico, but was invented in California. Our culinary stroll down 24th Street takes us to El Farolito, where the Mission burrito was born. This taqueria isn't the classiest eatery I've ever been in but when the tacos, quesadillas and burritos taste this good, who cares? Somehow we find room in our bellies for the enormous soft wheat

Celebrating 75 years of the Golden Gate Bridge

We flew into America's 13th-largest city 75 years to the day after the Golden Gate Bridge was opened to the public. Thankfully, the city's infamous fog stayed away and the whole city celebrated the birthday of the bridge that attracts 10 million tourists a year.

Connecting San Francisco with Marin County, the distinctive hunk of orange steel is the second-most-recognised structure in the world (after the Eiffel Tower) and festivities to celebrate the bridge run all year, including guided tours which, surprisingly, are only a recent introduction, given that bridge officials have always viewed the structure as a means of transportation rather than a tourist attraction.

But whether you choose to walk the 2.74-kilometre span, hire a bike to ride over it and down into pretty-as-a-postcard Sausalito, jog it or take a guided tour, there's very little to rival the experience of visiting one of the world's greatest man-made attractions.

www.localtastesofthecitytours.com

www.edibleexcursions.net

www.goldengatebridge75.org

Photos courtesy of Martin Haughey





tortilla that comes heaped with rice, pinto beans, fiery pico de gallo (tomato salsa) and its green equivalent, tomatillo.

Our next stop is Mr. Pollo, a literal hole-in-the-wall that specialises in Colombian food. Opened by Venezuelan chef Manny Torres Gimenez three years ago, the 12-seater restaurant offers a four-course tasting menu for US\$20, which could explain why it's so hard to get in here. It's a well known fact that there are few things in life that aren't improved by deep frying, and that's proven by the arepa, a mashup of a taco and a pupusa, a traditional Salvadoran dish made of a thick corn tortilla filled with cheeses and cooked meat. These corn discs filled with meat or cheese are golden and crunchy on the outside and creamy on the inside, and are so moreish it's hard to stop at one.

At La Palma Mexicatessen, a corner deli that's been around for 60 years, we watch staff work their magic on some of the 10,000 kilos of masa (corn dough) that's transformed weekly into tortillas, tamales and gorditas. And we scoff delicious huraches, masa stuffed with black beans, cabbage, salsa and queso fresco, a saltier, drier version of feta.

Perhaps to cleanse the palate, but equally to celebrate the sunshine, we detour to boutique ice-creamery Humphry Slocombe (named after the 1970s' British TV series, *Are You Being Served?*) where I hold up the queue because I'm bamboozled by too many choices. But you would be too, given such intoxicating flavours as Boccalone prosciutto, bourbon and cornflake and salt and pepper. I can't say I'm convinced by the last one, but I'm instantly smitten by the oddly named but delicious Jesus Juice, which is pretty much the love child of red wine and Coke.



You can't visit the Mission and not check out its murals, which illustrate this neighbourhood's stories. Our guide Jorge Morell leads us through Balmy Alley, whose colourful murals depict everything from the golden age of Mexican cinema to the El Salvadoran civil war, AIDS and Hurricane Katrina. Jorge says even the city's rival gangs, who regularly tag the walls, respect the neighbourhood's 500 or so murals, which first started to appear in the 1970s.

It's easy to find our final destination, La Victoria Mexican Bakery, by following the sweet smell of baking that wafts in the air. The owner Jamie downs tools to share pan dulce, concha and elote (Latin breads) as well as offerings that, to my Kiwi tastebuds, lie on the exotic end of the carbohydrate spectrum, such as apple and custard empanadas and prickly pear beignets (deep-fried choux pastry). But, as my mother likes to say, we travel to experience the different – and I end up eating my bodyweight in all manner of yeast-based products that a few hours ago I'd never even heard of! 🍷

