

EATING

top picks

- Raincity Grill (p133)
- Judas Goat (p137)
- Chambar (p130)
- Bao Bei (p137)
- Habit Lounge (p139)
- Bishop's (p144)
- Vij's (p143)
- Deacon's Corner (p137)
- Guu with Garlic (p134)
- Maenam (p144)

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Dining out in Vancouver used to mean little more than a visit to national fast-food chain Tim Hortons for a chili bread bowl and a box of donut Timbits. Now arguably surpassing Montréal and Toronto for the title of best Canadian restaurant city, a seismic epicurean shift in recent years has delivered a rich and satisfying menu of options, with diversity and regional sourcing high on the list of ingredients.

Many of Vancouver's neighborhoods are heaped with a vast smorgasbord of authentic and highly welcoming ethnic cuisines, originally developed to sustain immigrants salivating for a taste of home. Locals now happily taste-trip through France, Mexico, Africa, India and Italy, surrender to Southeast Asia, gorge on Malaysian curries and Chinese dim sum, and frequent the best array of sushi and *izakaya* (Japanese pub) restaurants outside Japan.

Alongside this, the seasonal West Coast approach – also called Pacific Northwest cuisine – is enjoying a golden age. The tag was formerly just a fancy way of labeling a menu's salmon special, but the movement has been fueled by recent sustainability demands and increasing calls for locally sourced ingredients. Restaurants throughout the city are now foraging for suppliers who can bring them delectable taste-of-the-region flavors like Tofino swimming scallops, Fraser Valley duck and Salt Spring Island lamb – not to mention sweet heirloom tomatoes, juicy local blueberries and piquant regional cheeses.

Most exciting of all, these two dining movements have been rubbing fondly against each other in recent years. Vancouver has one of North America's best fusion dining scenes, meaning that top-notch eateries such as the East Indian Vij's (p143) stir contemporary West Coast flavors into their mix, while high-end West Coast favorites like Raincity Grill (p133) and West (p142) sprinkle their menus with knowing nods to the foodie approaches of other cultures.

For visitors, choosing where to park their taste buds can be bewildering – like stopping for lunch at a small cafe and being presented with a 50-page menu in small print – but the best way to approach what's on offer is to follow your nose around the neighborhoods. Top dining streets, where you can't throw a *kapamaki* (cucumber sushi roll) without hitting a good eatery, include downtown's Robson St, where the Stanley Park end is studded with North America's best Japanese *izakaya* scene; Yaletown's Hamilton and Mainland Sts, where swanky restaurants offer many romantic dining options; Gastown, where some of the city's most exciting resto-bars reside in heritage brick-built settings; Commercial Dr, where funky ethnic-flavored joints and great patios lure hungry locals and hipsters alike; and the West End's Denman and Davie Sts, where a huge and diverse array of well-priced midrange dining options await.

If the weather's fine, don't hesitate to eat alfresco. Vancouverites love to nosh outdoors amid their stunning environs, so patios and decks are widespread – some are heated and stay open throughout the year. Keep in mind that smoking isn't allowed in restaurants, even on patios. You can also pack your food for an impromptu picnic, with Stanley Park, Vanier Park and Kits Beach among the most popular spots – consider a sunset beach buffet and it will likely be one of your trip highlights.

You can easily pick up some takeout (or just keep your dining budget down) at some of Vancouver's best homegrown fast-food minichains. Check out the ubiquitous branches of Flying Wedge for heaping gourmet pizza slices; Steamrollers for ultra-bulging burritos; Vera's Burger Shack for great burgers; and Japadog, the city's beloved fusion tube steak stands. And keep your taste buds on high alert: at the time of writing, Vancouver was about to relax its stringent street food rules, allowing an array of additional vendors to tempt you (see the boxed text, p134).

Finally, it might be a good idea to do some homework before you hungrily hit the streets here. Tap into the latest restaurant openings and reviews in the *Georgia Straight* and *Westender* or pick up a free copy of either *Eat Magazine* or *City Food*. Alternatively, go online and salivate over some great local foodie blogs (see the boxed text, p140).