

Water streams out of the wire baskets as I bring my haul onto the boat. Oysters! Wild oysters straight from the rocky bottom of Malpeque Bay, PEI. I scoop shellfish from the seafloor using the rake-like tips of six-foot-long oyster tongs.

My 'work' done, I start to devour the oysters shucked by our guide, John Martin of PEI Coastal Tours and Experiences. Sitting in a dory in the sun on a quiet bay while eating oysters straight from the salt water—what a treat! And just one of many culinary experiences my partner and I enjoy on the island.

Food from fields and sea is at the heart of PEI. On the island, rural life is the norm. The rolling hills with their green fields and red soil are working farms. Amid the beaches, the wharves are used by more fishing boats than sailboats. The culture, laidback and friendly, reflects the farming and fishing heritage of the Island.

Greg and I came to PEI with food in mind. We want to go beyond the restaurant experience. We want to harvest, cook, and learn about food, and meet the passionate people behind the ingredients. We do all this and savour every minute of it.

Celebrating local

To explore the Island through food, we delve into the PEI Flavours Culinary Trail guide. We map out a journey by connecting the dots between farms, markets, restaurants and culinary adventures.

Our expectations are surpassed at the first stop. In the heart of PEI, we visit Glasgow Glen Farm with the goal of picking up Gouda.

As soon as we walk into the shop, the aroma of freshly baked bread stops us in our tracks. When I see pizza being pulled from a wood-fired oven, I'm hooked. We're eating here.

After a delicious Mediterranean pizza with the 'ewesual' (sheep milk Gouda), we meet chef Jeff McCourt, the cheesemaker.

"We're not making the type of Gouda you'll get in Holland," says McCourt. "And that's great—we want a PEI Gouda made with PEI milk." Ingredients for his pizzas come from local farms and, likewise, his cheese is on the menus of Island restaurants.

On PEI, people celebrate local food, he explains. "We know everyone and want to help our neighbours. We're geographically challenged but we have a lot of great things to shout about."

Happy feasting

One of the 'great things' McCourt mentions is Scapes, a take-out restaurant near the Confederation Bridge. If 'take-out' brings up images of greasy, fried food, think again. Chef Sarah Bennetto O'Brien creates healthy and delicious dishes with local, mostly organic, ingredients.

"Served with a smile" is an understatement when it comes to O'Brien. The vivacious young chef beams as she describes her food and the farmers who provide the ingredients. Her offerings range from traditional baked beans to hand pies with braised beef and cumin Gouda (from Glasgow Glen). We leave with fish cakes, smiles and glowing descriptions of other food producers.

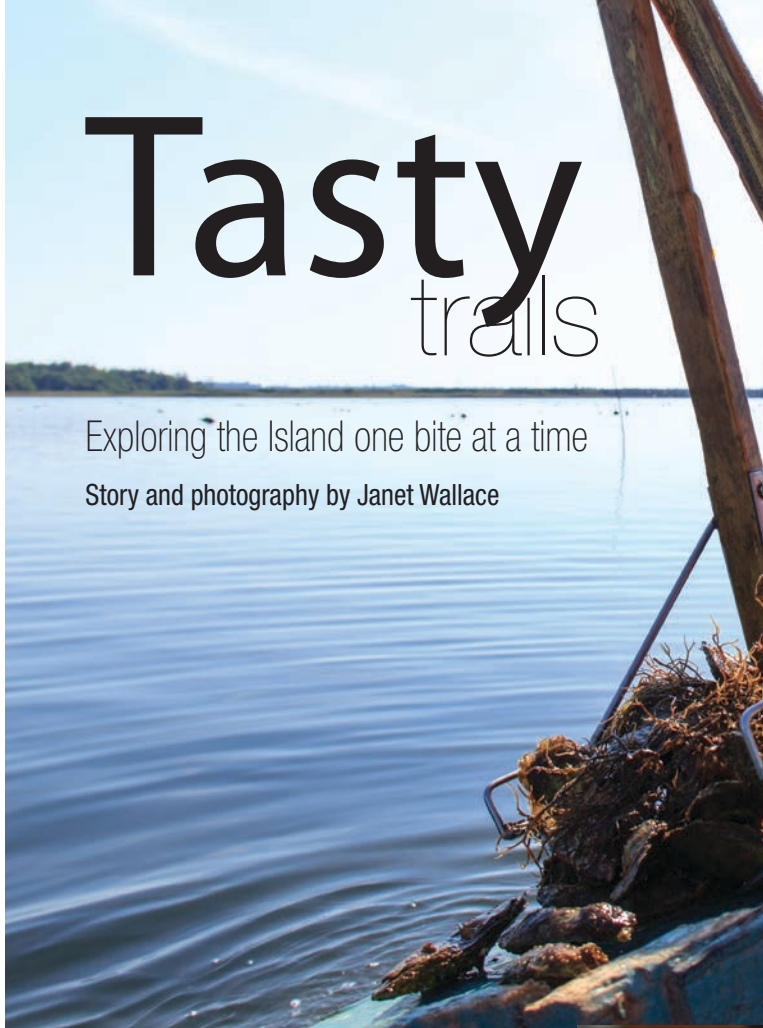
At our cottage, Greg prepares a delicious meal of PEI food, including corn on the cob we picked up at a roadside farmstand. While we eat on the deck overlooking the Northumberland Strait, gulls swoop and dive over the water and a heron stands motionless in the shallows.

On Saturday morning, we head to the Charlottetown Farmers Market. At the Heart Beet Organics stand, Amy Smith and Verena Varga stand proudly behind the fruits (and vegetables) of their labour. The

Tasty trails

Exploring the Island one bite at a time

Story and photography by Janet Wallace



From top: Food from fields and sea is at the heart of PEI; harvesting oysters straight from the rocky bottom of Malpeque Bay.





Scapes Curried Couscous Salad

Recipe from chef Sarah Bennetto O'Brien of Scapes in Borden, PEI

- 2 cups (500 mL) uncooked couscous
- 2 ½ cups (625 mL) vegetable stock (for cooking couscous)
- 1 cup (250 mL) shredded carrot
- ½ cup (125 mL) finely diced celery
- ½ cup (125 mL) halved cherry tomatoes
- ½ cup (125 mL) raisins
- ½ cup (125 mL) chopped fresh parsley
- 1 cup (250 mL) cooked chickpeas



Dressing:

- ¼ cup (50 mL) apple cider vinegar
- ¼ cup (50 mL) olive or grapeseed oil
- 3 tbsp (45 mL) maple syrup
- 2 tbsp (30 mL) good curry powder
- 2 tsp (10 mL) salt
- ½ tsp (2 mL) black pepper

In a medium pot, bring stock to a boil and add couscous, turn off the heat and cover. Let couscous sit for 10 minutes and then fluff it up with a fork.

Meanwhile, in a large bowl, mix remaining salad vegetables, along with raisins, chickpeas and parsley.

In a small bowl, combining dressing ingredients and mix well.

Add fluffed couscous into vegetable mix and pour dressing over top. Stir well and let sit for at least an hour before serving.

couple moved to the Island in 2010 after, Verena says, they “fell in love with East Coast people.” They appreciate the slower pace of life where people still have time to talk.

All around me, I hear chatter and laughing. People hug as they meet. Shoppers carry cloth bags filled with vegetables.

Art meets food in the simple beauty of heirloom tomatoes next to a shiny black eggplant. Orange mushrooms stand out against a backdrop of deep green lettuce. We gather the makings for another feast or two.

The next day, it's time to eat out. We get a taste of Acadian food and culture at the Big Clam Brunch in Abram-Village, part of September's Fall Flavours Culinary Festival. While a trio of women play traditional tunes on stage, people gather at the long line of serving dishes. As I lift my camera, three women with plates heaped with food ask me, while laughing, not to take their picture. “We love our food but we don't want people to know how much we eat,” one says.

On long tables in the community hall at the Village Musical Acadien, we eat heartily. At one point, Greg notes how many dishes feature potatoes—*râpüre* (potato and chicken pie), meat pie, *fricot* (stew) and hash browns. They're all delicious but slightly different. Seafood is also on the menu with steamed softshell clams and razor clams in a delicious pie with, you guessed it, potatoes.

Island cuisine extends beyond potatoes and shellfish. We learn this message with gusto at the Fall Flavours' Lamb Luau. A feast of lamb dishes is provided by the Rodd Crowbush chef along with chefs and students from the Culinary Institute of Canada (based in Charlottetown).

We cross the Confederation Bridge the next morning with a stash of culinary treasures. Along with oysters, Gouda and chanterelles, we bring home black garlic from Eureka Garlic. Al Pickett, who seems to relish the role of gruff but talkative curmudgeon, processes fresh garlic in a secret process similar to fermentation. The result is sweetish garlic with a look and texture like soft licorice.

At home, the holiday lingers as we dine on Island food for days to come. With each meal that features a PEI ingredient, we recall the experience of harvesting the food or meeting the food producer. The memories of a great vacation remain long after the food is gone. But we look forward to the next course.... Another culinary tour of PEI to discover more delicious food, fun experiences and interesting characters.



Clockwise from above, centre: Scapes' chef Sarah Bennetto O'Brien serves healthy, local and mostly organic food; Gouda at Glasgow Glen Farm; Al Pickett of Eureka Garlic; bread for sale at the Charlottetown Farmers Market.