

California Travel: San Francisco a heaven for foodies

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Debra Fieguth

“Have you seen Buddha’s hand?” my friend asked when we met at San Francisco’s [Ferry Building](#).

She steered me outside, where a colourful assortment of stalls offered every kind of fresh produce imaginable — from the ordinary (red and green grapes) to the exotic (Buddha’s hand, a type of citron about the size of a grapefruit but with numerous tentacles).

“Here, smell it,” my friend instructed. The lemony scent was divine. Tourists crowded around asking about it. “Here, smell it,” my friend repeated.

And that was the beginning of my informal culinary tour of San Francisco. My friend and guide that day was food writer Dianne Jacob, author of *Will Write for Food*. Together we worked our way around the farmers market that skirts the periphery of the building, sampling bites of delectable things along the way: wedges of persimmon, pomegranate, pomelo. A sip of walnut oil, a bit of blue cheese. Apples, pears.



The San Francisco Ferry Building is home to a farmers market where you can sample an array of delectable items.

David Wakely

San Francisco is a gastronomic heaven — and it’s not just sourdough and seafood. Everything that’s worth growing seems to do so within a stone’s throw of the city. With an emphasis on organic, sustainable farming, the market products are the purest and finest. There are some 50 farmers markets in the San Francisco Bay area. “Because of the California climate, farmers markets are open year round,” Jacob pointed out.

It also helps that the Napa Valley and its wineries are close by, along with the St. Helena campus of the Culinary Institute of America, one of the premier schools of its kind in the world. And Alice Waters of Berkeley’s [Chez Panisse](#) restaurant and author of *The Art of Simple Food* “has had a tremendous impact on local people and where their food comes from,” said Jacob.

As a result, “dozens of non-profits plant vegetable gardens in schools and neighbourhoods. Many local farms are open for tours, and restaurants list their ingredients’ provenance on menus.”

Inside the Ferry Building, the nibbling continued: a tiny spoonful of burnt caramel sauce (like over-toasted marshmallows in a jar), chased by kale chips (“I just made some of those last night,” Jacob informed me). A crumb of sourdough bread dipped in expensive olive oil. Scharffen Berger chocolate with more than a hint of chili.

After circumnavigating the Ferry Building, both inside and out, we sat down to lunch at the [Slanted Door](#). An upscale Vietnamese restaurant, it’s busy, noisy and expensive, but it features local, organic and beautifully prepared dishes.

We dined on mesquite-grilled wild gulf shrimp with coconut milk, grilled organic chicken on a bed of rice noodles and my favourite, Vietnamese crepe — filled with shrimp, pork, bean sprouts and onions and enclosed in a thin, barely crispy crepe, that you tuck into a mitt full of lettuce and mint leaves and eat with your hands. Sumptuous.

You don’t have to break your budget to eat well in the City by the Bay. One day I lunched on half a dozen pot stickers (\$5.95), perfectly pan-fried and plump, at a Chinatown restaurant called — surprise! — [The Pot Sticker](#). Another day I followed my nose into [Za](#), a tiny pizza shop that sells the biggest and most delicious pizza slices with the thinnest crust I’ve ever had for \$4.60 each. I chose Olive Oyl, which featured

spinach, tomatoes, feta and mozzarella, but the specials change from day to day.

Great burritos in the Mission district, sushi bars, underground chef dinners, pop-up stores — all are part of the landscape of what Jacob, originally from Vancouver, describes as “a food-obsessed city.”

(Consumption of all this food can be mitigated if your explorations are by foot. San Francisco is a very hilly city, and walking it can burn a lot of calories. At least that’s one way to reduce the guilt, if nothing else)

If you’re a chocolate lover you can’t visit San Francisco without having a chocolate experience; several companies here make chocolate products, from plain, dark bars to finely sculpted and lusciously filled artisanal chocolates. The most famous is [Ghirardelli](#), which has been dishing out the chocolate goods since 1852. Every day, tourists mob the main store at Ghirardelli Square.

But if you’re really serious about your chocolate, head to [Tcho](#), at the foot of Green on the Embarcadero, which makes not only chocolates, but chocolate “from bean to bar,” as the website explains. The organic, fair-trade factory has been operating since 2005 and offers tours twice a day, showing visitors every step of the process. I indulged in a cup of hot chocolate, a rich, delicately frothy mixture. Every sip was like drinking velvet.

Back in Chinatown, I visited another factory about as far away from the high-end, sophisticated and spacious Tcho as you can get. Tucked away on a narrow pedestrian alley off Washington Street is the Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Factory, where an elderly woman sits folding hot, freshly pressed disks into curls enclosing paper fortunes. You can take a picture for 50 cents.

Of course, you can also buy fresh fortune cookies right there. They come in three flavours. I chose chocolate.

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JUST THE FACTS

ARRIVING Air Canada has five direct flights daily from Toronto Pearson. Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) will take you right into the city for about \$8.

SLEEPING The Serrano (405 Taylor, www.serranohotel.com) is a Kimpton boutique hotel with rates from \$130 Canadian for two. Some rooms are small, but guests enjoy hanging out in the lobby, where staff serve complimentary California wines with sourdough bread and olive tapenade every day from 5 to 6 p.m. For luxury, try the Fairmont (www.fairmont.com) at 950 Mason (from \$200 for a double), or the Palomar (www.hotelpalomar-sf.com) at 12 Fourth Street, with rooms ranging from \$230 to \$420 Canadian.

WEBSURFING The Ferry Building is located at the foot of Market Street on the Embarcadero. www.ferrybuildingmarketplace.com.