



Stratford Culinary Week from September 18-26

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The Garlic Festival

[Kicking things off on September 18](#)



One of my favourite destinations



The tea tasting session with certified Tea Sommelier [Karen Hartwick](#) at her [Tea Leaves](#) Tasting Bar

2010 Survivor's Guide to Stratford

Michael Vaughan's theatre update will be posted Monday, September 20th

[See clips from the Stratford Theatre Festival](#)

Thanks to Jamie Drumond for this excellent recent report.

Getting out of the city for a few days can be so very therapeutic for both the body and soul... particularly when one chooses to visit one of the most exciting culinary destinations in the country. This week we look at the choicest places to eat, drink, and be merry in the wonderful town of Stratford, Perth County, Ontario.

Although many are familiar with Stratford's superb theatre programming, there is also a wealth of gastronomic experiences to satiate the gourmand in all of us. A couple of weeks ago Good Food Revolution took a relaxing train ride to see a couple of locals who gave

us an insider's look at the very best of culinary Stratford. The must-visit Monforte Dairy

Getting There (By Train): There is something so very relaxing and civilised about traveling by rail, and the train journey to Stratford from Toronto's Union Station is no exception. Moving south westwards out of the city one is gradually taken out of Toronto's concrete confines and eased into the pastoral paradise of rural Ontario. With a little luck the sun will decide to shine and make one's journey all that more special. Three **Via Rail** trains leave Toronto almost every day (there's no late night train on Saturday) at **10.50, 17.40, and 22.15**, with scheduled return journeys at **05.45, 08.48, and 21.17** (Saturday **08.48** and **21.17**, Sunday just **21.17**) Check the **Via Rail** site for current train times.

Insider Tips: *We suggest that one packs a small picnic for the (just over) two-hour journey as the food on offer while on board is pretty grim. For a epicurean tour we highly recommend taking the early morning train from Toronto, staying over for a night or two, and then coming back on the late night train, grabbing some excellent wings and a pint or two at a little spot close to Stratford station just before your train home arrives... but more about that later*

Where To Stay: [The Lofts at 99](#) are right above and behind Stratford's famous Bentley's Bar and Restaurant, meaning that one is right downtown and perfectly positioned so as one can explore Stratford upon foot. The contemporary rooms are spacious, split-level and equipped with all modern amenities including free wireless internet, and a small kitchen... albeit with a microwave. If one is need of refreshments all that is required is a quick call to the lively bar downstairs. Prices start at **\$125** a night off-season and **\$195** high-season. Another great centrally located option would be [Foster's Inn](#) at 111 Downie Street. Housed within a lovely Victorian commercial building that was built in 1906, the property was entirely renovated in 1997. Each room is uniquely decorated, with beautiful maple hardwood floors, 14 feet high ceilings, and some seriously comfortable beds... it was incredibly effortless to sleep in! Again one has free wireless internet and one of the best bars in Stratford is located directly below, but don't let that put you off as all of the rooms are wonderfully quiet. Prices start at **\$159** a night off-season and **\$199** a night high-season. Stratford also has a plethora of delightful bed and breakfasts, each with their own distinctive character.

Meeting The Cheesemaker and The Farmer: No trip to Stratford would be complete without a visit to [Monforte Dairy](#). Cheesemaker/Owner Ruth Klahsen has been making cheese under the Monforte Banner since 2004 and now makes over 30 different cheeses from water buffalo, sheep, goat, and cow. Monforte recently moved into a new facility a little closer to downtown Stratford that is a great place to visit for a gander at some interesting artwork as well as a chance to find out a bit more about Ruth's delicious cheeses (through a number of viewing windows one can observe the entire cheesemaking process)

Insider Tip: *We recommend that you ask the lovely folks at Monforte about their move into using mare's milk... perhaps you'll get a sneak preview.*

Watching The Girls Working The Fields at Soiled Reputation [Soiled Reputation](#) is a Certified Organic farm and green house offering farm tours specifically designed to introduce people to the world of sustainable food. Antony John and his wife Tina VandenHeuvel have been tilling the soils of their Soiled Reputation farm since 1995, and today their 80 acre property has 40 acres that are Certified Organic. Soiled Reputation harvest a glorious bounty of gourmet greens and heirloom vegetables that take pride of place on many a menu card in Ontario's very best restaurants.

Insider Tip: *Ask Antony "Manic Organic" John if there is a possibility you could meet Jesus... his rather cantankerous donkey... and then ask him about his paintings... Antony is also an extremely talented artist... annnnd then ask him about his new band "Rake and Tillage"... Oh, he's going to despise me for this...*

As well as the above there are a number of other farms surrounding Stratford which also warmly welcome visitors. [Click here](#) to download the **Epicurean Trek** map for a concise listing of other farms to visit. [Click here](#) to download the **Buy Local Buy Fresh** map for a guide to farmgate shopping opportunities in the area. Oh... and let's not forget the **Farmer's Markets!** The [Stratford Fairground Market](#) is one of the oldest markets in Ontario and runs year round, every Saturday from **7am to Noon**. There is also a Wednesday market during the theatre season (June 16 to October 6) The [Slow Food Farmers Market](#) takes place behind the aforementioned Monforte Dairy every Sunday (June to October) from **10am to 2pm**.

Where To Drink: Why is there only the one brewery in Stratford, especially when one considers the region having such a rich brewing history? The one truly local beer is the [Stratford Brewing Company's Pilsner](#), and you will find this served on draught in most establishments in town. I have always enjoyed a cool, crisp, fresh Stratford Pilsner, but it really does taste all that much better when one drinks it in a bar in Stratford itself.

As well as having the most cosy of accommodations, **Foster's Inn** at 111 Downie Street is one of the best places to watch the world go by. If you are an avid people-watcher like myself this bar and restaurant will provide hours of entertainment. Take a seat on the patio and watch the theatre crowd rush their dinners before a show, or snuggle up in the dark side bar and quietly observe the mating rituals of the local wildlife. The Discovery Channel seems quite tame by comparison...

Insider Tip: *The bar menu punches well above its weight. We absolutely adore the Pork Burger with Smoked Gouda, Lemon, and Aioli. We were informed that the pork comes from Ken Mogk, who is located just south of Tavistock. It was certainly one of the best pork burgers we have ever tasted!*

Where To Dine: For many, Stratford is immediately associated with gastronomic excellence. Much of this acclaim stems from the founding of the Stratford Chefs School in 1983 by Eleanor Kane and James Morris. For many a year both Kane and Morris have been running their own establishments with the panache, flair, and attention to detail that they demand from each of their students: As soon as one mentions "dining in Stratford" during a dinner party, conversation invariably turns to **Rundles**.

Having been synonymous with Stratford fine dining since its inception in 1977, Rundles more than lives up to its well-deserved reputation. Both the front room of Rundles and their Sophisto Bistro are delightfully furnished; both contemporary and classical at the same moment. The ambiance is one of epicurean serenity, without being too serious (playful installations can be found throughout the building.) Service is informed, friendly, and obviously passionate (a rare thing these days!), with the requisite poise that the room demands. Did I mention that the staff are dressed by Toronto's Hoax Couture, and that James Morris plays the most charming of hosts clad in Tokyo's Yohji Yamamoto? There's a sartorial elegance on display here that would put most big city restaurants to shame... Chef Neil Baxter's cuisine certainly has its roots in Classical French, but there is an innovative edge that adds that all important twist to each of his perfectly executed dishes. The plates are intelligently and thoughtfully composed, exhibiting a level of restraint that can only come from a deep respect for each ingredient that lies within, and a Chef with a meticulously-honed dedication to his art.

Rundles: \$79.50 per person - Includes one selection from the appetizer section, the main dish, dessert, and coffee or tea. **Sophisto Bistro:** \$39.50 per person - Includes one appetizer, one main dish. **\$49.50** per person - Includes one appetizer, one main dish, and one dessert, coffee or tea.

Insider Tips: *I have always known James Morris to have quite the palate when it comes to wine and this is certainly evident in his carefully chosen list at Rundles. As well as the grander bottlings on offer, Rundles also serves a couple of great own label bistro-style wines from Rosehall Run in Prince Edward County. For a **very** special occasion with that **very** special person I would suggest that you look into renting the Morris House, an architecturally fascinating building, furnished/appointed with the same style and care as the restaurant, situated alongside Rundles with views over the lake. Tariff is \$595 per night.*

Where To Go For Hush-Hush Afterparties: Stratford may not be the first place that springs to mind when one thinks of underground nightlife, so we were quite surprised when, after a few drinks at the aforementioned watering holes, it was suggested we attend a covert little party... on a Monday night! Yes, that's right, on a Monday night. As the theatres are dark on Mondays, the assembly of young actors in town for the season see this as the day of the week when they have a chance to let their hair down, and so they organise some of the most unique parties that we have ever experienced. Located up a hidden stairwell, with a pay-what-you-can, bring-your-own-bottle door policy it is certainly the place to be. On the night we were there we witnessed an old-school magician, a prestigiously talented Montreal-based musical troupe performing numbers from their Haunted Hillbilly production, and some great roots music from some fellow and his guitar. The crowd was young, extremely gregarious, and full of energy.

Insider Tip: *In order to gain entry to this cloak-and-dagger bacchanal our suggestion would be to hang about on the patio at Fosters around nine pm on a Monday night. Try to spot theatrical types carrying bags of beer and wine and then approach them in a friendly manner... although in recommending this course of action we take no responsibility for how your night turns out*

Where To Satisfy Your Sweet Tooth/Get Out Of The Doghouse For Consuming Too Much Stratford Pilsner The Night Before: I'm not really one for sweet things myself, but if you have a lover/partner/grandparent who enjoys a fair bit of chocolate or fudge then there is nothing better than the new **Stratford Chocolate Trail**. There's a lot of chocolate in Stratford, a fact that didn't go unnoticed the previous time I visited Stratford to shoot the show Chef School a few years back. I distinctly remember asking of Chef Tobey Nemeth "Who actually eats all of this stuff?" Well, apparently many visitors to Stratford claim that they come for the chocolate! The Chocolate Trail allows one to purchase a "Chocopass" (online or in person at the **Stratford Tourism Alliance**) which entitles you to choose eight of the twenty stops you would like to visit on a self-guided chocolate tour... So it's kind of like a pub crawl... but with chocolate.

Insiders Tips: *The chocolates that I really enjoy are the more savoury examples... so if you ask very nicely at **Chocolate Barr's Candies Inc.** they may let you try one of their amazing experimental goat cheese truffles. Divine! They also occasionally produce an excellent balsamic vinegar truffle. Yes... this is a Biiiiiiiiiiiiig Slice of Chocolate Cake And if chocolate fudge is your kind of thing...*

Where To Learn Just How Little You Know About Tea: Having weaned myself from the coffee nipple a couple of years ago, I now drink almost as much tea as my much missed, late grandmother, and hailing from the United Kingdom, I have always enjoyed a nice cup of tea. Up until around seven years ago I was more than happy to add boiling water to a bag of generic Tetley, but then I met Shabnam and Frank Weber of Toronto's Tea Emporium. The Webers changed the way I viewed tea, showing me that it could easily be as complex and terroir-driven as my beloved wine.

I find myself in Stratford sitting in upon a tea tasting session with certified Tea Sommelier Karen Hartwick at her [Tea Leaves](#) Tasting Bar. I sat there in awe as Karen led us through a fascinating olfactory journey, taking in Green, White, Black, Oolong, and Herbal teas alongside a tasting of local honeys. Karen has a very particular way about her, a sophistication, a certain delicate and graceful charm that simply eludes description. She certainly knows her stuff, and is a superb educator, pushing her students to seek out their own vocabulary for their aromatic and taste experiences. Tea Leaves is open Wednesday to Saturday, 11am to 5pm, year-round.

Insider Tip: *Ask Karen about her selection of local and organic herbs. As well as tea, Karen regularly carries a selection of the most fragrant cooking herbs I have ever experienced. I just wish that I had remembered to purchase some at the end of our tasting!* Karen Our Tea Sommelier

Where To Get The Best Homemade Pies: [Shakespeare Pies](#) is nestled in the hamlet of Shakespeare, just outside of Stratford. The hamlet of Shakespeare was originally known as Bell's Corner, after its founder David Bell. The name was changed to Shakespeare in 1852 at the suggestion of First Postmaster Alexander Mitchell, after his favourite playwright. Now that sounds like a great job doesn't it? If I was First Postmaster I would suggest renaming my hamlet Mamet. While it may not look like much from the outside (it used to be a drive-through doughnut shop), Shakespeare Pies makes the very best homemade pies I have tasted outwith the United Kingdom. When I walked in and saw their selection of frozen five and nine inch savoury pies I'll admit that I became rather excitable. Steak, Steak and Kidney (Yes!!!), Chicken, Tortiere, Turkey, Steak and Mushroom, Beef and Pork... Ahhhhhhhh... I was in heaven (*nobody could mistake Jamie's roots*).

I was informed by my companions that the fruit pies (apple, peach, blueberry, rhubarb, etc.) were also utterly delicious. All of the pies are made from scratch and the ingredients (eggs, vegetables, meats, fruits) are purchased from local farmers whenever possible. Shakespeare Pies also carries an excellent selection of naturally raised meats from a number of nearby farms. One can step into the kitchen and watch the girls making the pies, but a word of warning... don't get in their way! These are girls with a mission... and their mission is making tasty pies.

Insider Tip: *For me it is all about their Steak and Kidney pie... I haven't tasted anything like that for nigh on 16 years. Also, we would heartily recommend you pick up some of the local Summer Sausage that can be often be found there .*

Where To Get The Best Wings And A Pint Before Getting On The Train Back To Toronto: There appears to be a dearth of decent railway pubs in this country (There appears to be a dearth of decent pubs in general, but that's a different story), but I was happily surprised by my Stratford hosts when they took me to [The Dominion House Bar and Grill](#), a modest wing shack/bar with a roadhouse demeanour, (literally) on the wrong side of the tracks. The Dominion House's proximity to Stratford's picturesque railway station makes it the perfect spot for a couple of pints and some killer wings before bundling yourself upon the train back to Toronto. I was informed that the Chef makes all of the sauces for his wings in-house, and despite the fact I am no wing afficiando, I could certainly taste the difference. You won't find too many tourists here, but what you will find is a whole lot of locals enjoying the beer, wings, live music/karaoke, and magnificent hospitality. I honestly feel that the Dominion House Tavern may be one of Stratford's best kept secrets.

Insider Tips: *Locals refer to The Dominion House as the "DH" PLEASE remember that the train gets to the station at 21.17... that's SEVENTEEN MINUTES PAST NINE in the evening. Although Google will tell you that it is approximately two minutes to walk from The Dominion Tavern to Stratford Station, give yourself a good ten minutes just to be sure. Saying that, if you do miss the train, there are certainly worse places to be stuck than the delightful town of Stratford.*