



## NEWS

### Trendy T.O.: Find the cool spots in Toronto



Canada's largest city as seen from the main observation deck of the CN Tower. (Donaldson photo)

This 50-plus gal loves trying new things and keeping up with what's in, though my adult daughters would tell you I'm far from hip. In fact, they would probably cringe that I just used the word 'hip'.

To work on upping my cool factor, I recently travelled to Canada's largest city—Toronto. What follows, dear reader, is a synopsis of that journey, using select lingo explained in italics to help you, too, become less cheugy (completely and utterly out of date).

My older daughter, who has lived in T.O. for most of the past decade, had generously agreed to help her father and me be more on point (awesome, relevant). OK, so she didn't exactly agree to that, but she did offer to lead us on a tour of The 6, particularly all things bumpin' (crowded/popular).

After an easy and on-time flight via Porter Airlines from Moncton to Toronto's Billy Bishop Airport, hubby and I grabbed a gucci (fancy) Uber to The Drake Hotel, a 51-room property on Queen Street West.

I was excited to reach our destination since The Drake has a reputation for being on fleek (excellent), a real hub for visual and performance art as well as outstanding dining and hospitality. To be clear, Canadian rapper Drake is not involved with the hotel nor is he its namesake. I discovered this a few days before our arrival, which was lucky since it prevented an embarrassing front-desk request for an interview with the G.O.A.T. (greatest of all time).

While my hopes for a superstar quote (or 'Hotline Bling' duet?) may have been dashed, I remained keen to explore the renowned hotel. I'd read lots about the property, which first opened in 1890. Fast forward to 2001 when current owner Jeff Stober bought it, opening it as The Drake in 2004 after extensive renovations. Since then, there have been many updates, most recently in December, when a five-storey contemporary building opened adjoining the hotel's original structure. This new Modern Wing brought many new features to The Drake, including the addition of 32 guest rooms to the existing 19. It sure sounded like a place where I should be vibin' (hanging out).

As hubby and I entered the hotel's new lobby through a fairly typical revolving door, it seemed we left tradition at the curb and time travelled to Funkytown. Yaaas (strong expression of approval)!

We roamed the space like astronauts on a new planet, our heads swivelling to take it all in. There were recognizable elements like furnishings with vintage green-and-gold upholstery, a groovy fireplace wall and an intimate bar area straight out of the '70s. But the overall look was beyond retro. It was lit (totally cool)! The designers seemed to turn history on its head in crafting a playground of imaginative fun, juxtaposing classic pieces against a plush carpet in a rainbow of vibrant hues, shimmering wall coverings and stop-you-in-your-tracks abstract art.

Once checked in, we headed to our guest room in the Modern Wing and opened the doors to a contemporary art gallery. Yes, there was a bed and other customary bits, but they took a backseat to the visuals: whimsical wallpaper on one wall complementing original photography and sculpture; custom millwork in warm tones co-existing happily with bright accessories; bougee (luxurious) amenities - like Malin + Goetz bath products - adding to the charm.

The next morning, we dragged ourselves from our cozy, quirky room to The Drake Café, rejuvenating streetside with the 'Drake Breakfast', a full bacon-and-eggs affair done right. On a subsequent day, we sampled brunch in the Drake Lounge and were wowed by bueno blueberry scones, holy-heavenly huevos rancheros and impeccable service. No cap (seriously).

When the search for what's hot in Toronto took us outside The Drake, food and drink continued to be a theme as did the refrain, "I think I need some looser fitting pants. Periodt (period with added emphasis)."

One of the challenges to checking out the most chichi (trendy) eateries was getting in the door, with some places requiring reservations weeks in advance. With limited time, we opted to visit both the sought-after venues when we could nab a seat and the less busy locales that still had solid reviews.

In no particular order, our favourite stops included:

- **The Good Son Restaurant:** Unable to nab a reservation at a few recommended establishments, we took a stroll down Queen Street West and popped into The Good Son after noticing a sign flogging their wood-fired margherita pizza. I was high-key (really) starving! The pie was delish, the price reasonable and the beer perfectly chilled.

- **Bellwoods Brewery:** Based on the crowd inside and trying to get inside this Ossington Avenue brewpub on a Friday afternoon, I knew the place was fire (cool). I was happy when our friendly server, Laska, eventually delivered my Jelly King Slushy, a frozen sour beer that was life changing. (Why should margaritas and daiquiris have all the slushy fun?) Bellwoods is a great, central location to see and be seen, certainly a terrific name to drop if one is trying to become hipper. Mind you, one must take care not to choose too many of the yummy beer and complimentary menu selections if one wants to avoid becoming hipper.

- **Bang Bang Ice Cream and Bakery:** My daughter insisted we brave a long sidewalk queue for a taste of Bang Bang, a tiny shop on Ossington. My burnt toffee pick, complete with melt-in-your-mouth chunks of sponge toffee, made for a bussin' (tasty) nightcap. Hubby's ice cream sandwich with WTF (what the fudge, really) looked divine and had a few folks in the growing line visibly drooling.

• **Sugo, Burdock:** I wasn't sure it would be worth the hour wait to get a table at Sugo, a casual Italian spot at Bloor and Lansdowne that's apparently all the rage. But wait we did, opting to cool our heels nearby at Burdock, a cute microbrewery, music venue and restaurant. (We happened to hit a half-price wine deal, making the delay speed by.) When we got the text that our seats were finally ready back at Sugo, we wasted no time making the trek and placing an order at our sidewalk table. When my chicken parmesan arrived, it was a steaming heap of gorgeous flavour, especially the house-made 'sugo' — Italian for sauce. If you want no-frills, superb Italian fare, add Sugo to your list. It sure hits different (stands out from the rest).

• **Paradise Grapevine:** Next, we headed to Geary Avenue. I'm told this west-end industrial street has had an image flip in recent years, with area auto body shops and the like being converted into a cool strip of restaurants and breweries. We tried one of the more recent additions — Paradise Grapevine, a winery and bar, a second location to its Bloor Street site. After placing our food and drink orders at the rustic bar inside the building, we sat at a picnic table in the ample outdoor space. Soon, our sharing plates began to roll out: tasty olives and chewy sourdough bread, then chicken drumsticks marinated in peppery achote paste, a lovely tomato salad with melon, salsa verde and walnuts, and provoleta — a thick slice of provolone cheese, cooked until browned and bubbling, topped with charred salsa and chimichurri. "This place slaps (is amazing)," hubby remarked. I couldn't have said it better.

- **Gold Standard:** I was low-key (kind of) craving some eggs benny one morning but convinced by my daughter to check out Gold Standard, a little takeout place on Roncesvalles Ave. We saddled up to some nearby benches to devour our picks: Bacon or kale, cheesy eggs, aioli, pickles, and a splash of hot sauce on an English muffin. It was truly one of the best breakfast sandwiches I've ever had.

- **Kitten and The Bear:** If you like pretty little shops that offer delightful treats, don't miss this cute stop on Dundas Street West. The store offers artisan preserves and traditional buttermilk scones in small batches. We scooped up four warm biscuits and hurried home to enjoy their flaky goodness with fruit jam and rich clotted cream. No yeeting (throwing) those in the garbage!, or Yeet (Wow)! Those are incredible scones!

- **Le Gourmand Café:** When you're married to a chocoholic, you make it a priority to find the finest chocolate chip cookie wherever you travel. Our Toronto search was made easy thanks to earlier research by my daughter. As we approached the Spadina Avenue bakery, I was skeptical that the 'world famous' cookie would live up to its website hype as "simply the warmest, crispy yet gooey, liquid dark chocolate gushing, firm yet soft, decadent treat." Think a single bite into the enormous circle of Belgian chocolate pleasure had me convinced? Bet (definitely)!

• **Chen Chen's Nashville Hot Fried Chicken:** I'm not someone who can generally tolerate a lot of spice. As a result, it was with a bit of trepidation that I followed my daughter and her partner to this Queen Street West chicken joint. Not their first Chen Chen's rodeo, the duo quickly placed their regular order: the Nashville Hot Chicken Sandwich. Maritimers should not imagine a type of hot sandwich covered with gravy and/or peas. Instead, this beast involves brioche buns containing a large piece of fried chicken with, I'm told, a good kick of heat, crunchy pickles and slaw. Too nervous to go all in and face an awkward coughing fit, I opted to nibble on a trio of the fried chicken tenders with the lowest spice level. The heat was just right for this Goldilocks, and I ngl (not gonna lie) ate them all up.

• *Cathy Donaldson is a Moncton-based travel writer and struggling hipster. She was a guest of Destination Toronto, which neither reviewed nor approved this article.*



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Cathy Donaldson prepares to dig into some sharing plates at Paradise Grapevine on Geary Avenue, Toronto.  
Photo: Cathy Donaldson / For the Times & Telegraph

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Want to spice up your life? Try Chen Chen's Nashville Hot Chicken on Queen West for a kick of heat and flavour.  
Photo: Cathy Donaldson/For the Times & Transcript

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If craft beer or a vibey scene is your thing, check out Bellwoods Brewpub, a favourite among locals and visitors alike.

Photo: Cathy Donaldson/For the Times & Transcript

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Paradise Grapevine on Geary Avenue, an area where auto body shops and the like are being converted into restaurants and breweries.

Photo: Cathy Donaldson/For the Times & Transcript

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A customer, left, peruses an outdoor menu while waiting in a lengthy line at Bang Bang Ice Cream and Bakery, a tiny shop on Ossington Avenue.

Photo: Cathy Donaldson/For the Times & Transcript

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A customer, left, peruses an outdoor menu while waiting in a lengthy line at Bang Bang Ice Cream and Bakery, a tiny shop on Ossington Avenue.

Photo: Cathy Donaldson/For the Times & Transcript

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Cookie anyone? The sweet treats on this tray may look more like mini cakes but they're plump (and delicious!) chocolate chip cookies offered by Toronto's Le Gourmand Café.

Photo: Cathy Donaldson/For the Times & Transcript

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Chen Chen's is popular for its Nashville hot fried chicken sandwich, which is coated in spice and served in a warm brioche bun with coleslaw and pickles.

Photo: Cathy Donaldson/For the Times & Transcript

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A room in the Modern Wing of The Drake Hotel on Queen Street West featured graphic wallpaper, original photography, custom millwork, bright accessories and bougee amenities.

Photo: Cathy Donaldson/For the Times & Transcript

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This funky, welcoming bar in the main reception area greets guests of Toronto's Drake Hotel.  
Photo: Cathy Donaldson/For the Times & Transcript