



Royal Oak, Michigan, culinary tour a taste above

Posted by Kim Schneider | Grand Rapids Press News Service May 05, 2009 06:26AM

ROYAL OAK, Mich. -- I was a bit of a skeptic, at first, about the need for a walking tour -- to restaurants in Royal Oak, Mich., near Detroit Hip eateries in the Detroit suburb of Royal Oak are within close proximity to one another. And I've never had much problem finding food.

But then I met up with our guide on this tour by Culinary Escapes, a company founded last summer. Marq Blanks handed us tiny earpieces with receivers we clipped onto our jackets.

And we soon were trailing behind him around town, through farm market booths, past charming bakeries, striking (even scandalous) sculptures and tempting eateries, feeling like a cross between campus tour-goer and undercover culinary spy as he transmits historic, food and celebrity trivia en route to each stop.

"What do you two and Renee Zellweger have in common?" he asks my friend and I, who are pretty sure it isn't our glamour quotient but decide to pretend otherwise. It's not what he was thinking, either.

"In 15 minutes," he says, "both of you will have eaten at Memphis Smoke."

And in about that, a manager is approaching our cozy table under soaring beams, balancing heaping plates of ribs, garlic mashed potatoes and rice and beans flavored with a spicy andouille sausage.

The manager hangs around long enough to explain the miracle of rib smoking and toss in some insider gossip from the days when Zellweger would head in for ribs with then boyfriend, Jack White, lead singer of the Detroit-based White Stripes.

We pat the belly of a pig before going on our way -- a tradition -- and learn when the local "School of Rock" band will be playing, should we want to return. But no lingering now, for this is just an appetizer.

CULINARY ESCAPES

Details: Tours last three hours, with about 1.5 miles of walking. They start at 11 a.m. at the Royal Oak Farmer's Market.

Information: Reserve a spot at (248) 331-7296 or visit culinary-escapes.com.

Still on the agenda is Tilapia tacos at a Mexican restaurant noted for its fresh guacamole, local microbrews paired with locally famed Jambalaya, baked potato pizza, artful chocolates and more -- nine

cutting-edge stops in all, worth the \$35 price tag for the entertainment value alone. But better still, all the tempting tastes are included in the price.

The company's first year went so well that founder Ann Wilson and tour guide Marq are adding two new tour locations this summer. Starting July 18, food fans can follow them on multicultural eating adventures through Ferndale or an upscale progressive lunch among fashionable Birmingham boutiques.

After just one season in Royal Oak, Marq is greeted like a local, generally getting a hug or hearty handshake from proprietors as he leads us from surprise to surprise.

We feel like insiders, too, as brewer Tim Selewski joins us at our table at the family-friendly Royal Oak brewery and even shares insider secrets for achieving the intriguing hint of both apricot and grapefruit in the IPA and the chocolate malt effect in the stout.

Ever wonder where hockey fans get those octopi thrown on the ice? You see first-hand, sampling some (cooked) fish while learning the secrets of flash-boiling before the octopus toss.

And you won't perhaps anywhere in the country find the experience of Goldfish Tea, where Jim or Janice Girling, former auto executives who became fascinated with tea culture while working in China, will lead you through the ginseng oolongs and pu'ers in an authentic tea ceremony.

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