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Tasting Tours in metro Detroit

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Some regions are simply known for certain foods - the Chicago hot dog, New York style cheesecake or North Carolina barbecue. Now Farmington Hills' own Ann Wilson plans to put the tastes of the Motor City on the map.

She has founded Culinary Escapes, a company that organizes both public and customized private tasting tours focusing on local flavor. Wilson recently returned to the metro Detroit area from Illinois and was interested in starting her own business. She noticed the communities she knew had grown and changed for the better, she said. Add to that the onset of higher gas and airline prices, Wilson noted, the concept of "stay-cationing" has become increasingly popular.

So she's crafted culinary tours to increase visibility of walkable metro area neighborhoods and, in particular, to highlight independent businesses.

The concept came together rather quickly, thanks in part to her event planning and fund-raising experience with the American Heart Association. "I didn't know anyone had a food tour," said Wilson. With a little online detective work she found culinary tours in Chicago, New York and Philadelphia. The Chicago tour proved worthy of research and Wilson found she enjoyed the variety of eateries on the list, as well as the cultural and historical components.

She's combined both of those elements into her first walking and tasting tour in Royal Oak, which has run every other Saturday since July 5.

The city was an instant draw, said Wilson, because it hosts its own Farmer's Market featuring produce grown only in Michigan. Tours begin there and continue on to include Royal Oak staples like Holiday Market, Memphis Smoke, Superior Fish Company, and smaller hot spots like Zumba Mexican Grille and Goldfish Tea, where owners Jim and Janice Girling are on hand to teach patrons about the traditions of tea, and offer tastes of Chinese imported varieties.

"We were extremely pleased to be selected as one of the Royal Oak 'Cutting Edge Cuisine' tour stops," said Janice Girling. "The tours are a wonderful opportunity for us to provide a quick introduction of our tea shop to potential new customers who might not have otherwise discovered us.

"The tours will also benefit the Royal Oak community as a whole by drawing in consumers from outside the community and highlighting the city's many wonderful destination places."

Tim Castaneda, owner of Zumba Mexican Grille, said every tour-goer so far was new to his restaurant. He also said he was glad Zumba was chosen to represent the variety of food choices in the area. "It definitely reminds people that Royal Oak is the dining and entertainment spot in the Detroit area," he said.

Wilson will expand Culinary Escapes tours to focus on Ferndale, Birmingham, Eastern Market and Ann Arbor. She even has plans to offer a bus tour of various culinary communities in around the city of Detroit - from Mexican Town to Hamtramck to Dearborn.

In every case, Wilson said, "you'll have 10 food stops to sample varieties from independently-owned eateries and you'll get to know the personal history from the actual owners."

She hopes tour-goers learn something about the communities - whether they are residents of the city,

state or just visiting from out of town. Either way, they'll be likely to return, she said. Tour patrons are given maps of the area denoted with tour stops.

In addition to the twice-monthly tours which will run from April to September, Culinary Escapes offers private tours customized for patrons. Choose the eateries, the time and day, and the tour length. It's a great option for informal get-togethers, bridal parties, business, or senior outings, Wilson said.

As the tours grow or new businesses come into communities, Wilson may consider adding legs onto the already established tours. For now, the tasting tour includes about 10 to 15 minutes in each establishment. Because of the schedule, Wilson said, tour-goers are asked not to shop during the tour but they may return afterward to make purchases.

"This is a way to get people to find places where they'll love to eat," said Wilson. Due to the slumping economy, independently-owned businesses stand to benefit from being a stop on the Culinary Escapes tours.

There are only three more Royal Oak tours left this summer, though private tours may be scheduled year-round. Look for additional organized tasting tours in Wayne and Oakland county communities to rev up again beginning in April 2009. Tours are held rain or shine. "Come hungry," said Wilson. "Come prepared to walk. It's a two-mile walk. You eat a lot but you exercise too. That's a great benefit."

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