

Ottawa's Westboro district takes its leisure seriously

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE MAY 16, 2013



Montreal-born Jean-François Maranda and his wife Viktoriya Melenteva at their shop Chez François, Plaisirs de Provence, in the Westboro area of Ottawa.

Photograph by: Bruno Schlumberger, Ottawa Citizen

My visit to Westboro Village in Ottawa was more than a mini-vacation. It was an education.

Westboro is a vibrant district that has blossomed along Richmond Rd., an easy 10 minutes by car or bus west of Parliament Hill. It's an emerging urban district, but the twist is that it is not edgy, hip or relentlessly young. It's smooth, relaxed and all-embracing of children, parents and grandparents. When I visited recently, it evoked some familiar images: the friendliness of Montreal's Monkland Ave., the folksy charm of Pointe-Claire Village, plus a dash of upscale Greene Ave. in Westmount.

Artisan merchants have sprouted like mad to cater to the increasingly discerning tastes of the highrise villagers living in glassy new condos. There is a stylish vibe to Westboro Village, with sophisticated choices upon choices for food and merchandise, to the point where even downing a cup of joe or suiting up for a bike ride requires scholarship and study.

Let's just say that Westboro takes its leisure seriously.

For example, you can start your day with fair-trade, shade-grown, Andean dark roast French-pressed coffee, laced with steamed lactose-free skim milk, organic sugar and chocolate syrup at Bridgehead, the original café of the wildly successful Ottawa chain.

At Clocktower Ales, the latest of another smash-hit Ottawa resto-brewery, a beer is not simply a beer. There are cask-conditioned, all-natural lagers, ales and porters, and connoisseurs' choices like blueberry wheat, rambling raspberry, African amber and Hop Fury.

For takeout treats, Piggy Market escalates gourmet groceries to a lofty new level with home-baked buttermilk honey bread, sheep's milk cheeses and rarefied charcuterie like culatello, capicollo and soppressata from Dolce Lucano, an Ontario producer of Italian cured meats. And the sweets at the shop Truffle Treasures were so seductive that I bought tiny gift boxes of lychee-Cognac chocolates, ginger-cinnamon bark and sugar-free peanut butter cups.

Montreal-born Jean-François Maranda has introduced a soupçon of French country life to Westboro at Chez François, Plaisirs de Provence, a bakery-boutique that also stocks décor items. Here, Maranda and his wife, Viktoriya Melenteva, sell gourmandises such as tarte tatins and calissons, which are marzipan-style cookies of almond, honeydew, orange and Grand Marnier. Prêt-à-manger goodies include beef Bourguignon and braised boar with chestnuts and red wine. Maranda also sells his own vinaigrettes, jams, mustards, oils and pasta. The décor side of the shop pops with the sunny colours of Provençale fabrics; there is also copper cookware for crêpes, ragouts and potages. Maranda tried to suggest recipes for 12 kinds of peppercorns, but I was making reservations, not cassoulet, for dinner.

Gezellig is Westboro's newest dining darling. The baby sister of two other acclaimed Ottawa restaurants, Beckta and Play, Gezellig is cooking up what it calls "neighbourhood gastronomy" in a smart, minimalist space. Co-owner and sommelier Stephen Beckta poured artisanal Ontario wines — he called them "soulful" — and I worked on complexity, colour and bouquet. At the bar, we shared small plates of braised halibut cheeks and foie gras pâté and moved on to dinner dishes of smoked duck salad, risotto with truffled asparagus and lemon-dill crème fraîche; seared scallops with parsnip purée; and bacon-wrapped elk meat loaf with mushroom gravy and pear salsa. Gezellig has a fine pedigree. Beckta has worked with Michelin-starred chef Daniel Boulud — yes, he of Maison Boulud at Ritz-Carlton Montreal — and his partner and executive chef Michael Moffatt started out at the famed River Café in New York. And by the way, the name Gezellig is Dutch for cosy and convivial.

Westboro Village is home to one of the most intense concentrations of sports stores in Canada, with nearly 10 major retailers within a few square blocks, stocking abundant and complex inventories of equipment. Some of the big names are Lululemon Athletica, the Running Room and Mountain Equipment Co-op. But I experienced true athlete's immersion at independents like the Expedition Shoppe, which outfits hikers for treks in rugged Algonquin Park, or even Gatineau Park, which is only a half-hour drive north. Another indie, Tall Tree Cycles, sells flashy, high-end bikes for racing, long-distance touring, urban riding, cyclo-cross and mountain trails. Whew!

For a simple, leisurely ride, you can rent Bixis at 25 stations in the greater Ottawa area and cruise part of the 300-kilometre Capital Pathway system. I didn't find any Bixis in Westboro, but there is one station at Queen and Elgin Sts. outside of the National Arts Centre near the Rideau Canal Pathway, and another near the Canadian War Museum at Vimy and Booth Sts., adjacent to the scenic Ottawa

River Pathway.

I'm the last bare-headed cyclist on any path, so I headed for Bushtukah, a store the size of a football field and filled with bicycles, running gear and technical clothing. Two things that I learned from Bushtukah's owner, Bob Laughton, were that my cycling helmet should be the same colour as my bicycle (hey, looks count) and that the safety factor is the same for most helmets, regardless of price. It's primarily the ventilation that varies. I tried on a dozen helmets and settled on a white topper with a molded polycarbonate shell for lightness and durability, 25 air vents for "wind-tunnel" technology and a flexible retention system (a.k.a. straps). I'm a sucker for the right stuff, so I added a GPS navigation system with topographical maps that syncs with my smartphone and measures my heart rate.

I was pumped for cycling, but paddle-boarding is my true summer passion. Browsing through Trailhead Paddle Shack, another huge emporium in Westboro Village, was like getting a PhD in water sports.

Co-owner Jason Yarrington was my tutor, and he enlightened me on how to stay warm and dry for paddle-boarding, kayaking and canoeing. We examined 0-degree neoprene wetsuits and big, blousy waterproof drysuits that looked like astronaut ensembles, complete with latex gaskets.

Last, Yarrington suggested booties and a bonnet. But that's where I drew the line. I assured him that famous celebrity paddlers like Eva Longoria and Cameron Diaz would rather freeze underwater than be caught by the paparazzi in these unflattering get-ups, although they have the advantage of warm California weather.

Sports shopping done, it was time to dress for dinner. At Green Tree Eco Fashion, owner Sarah Barr showed me that style and sustainability coexist brilliantly.

A fashionista who has worked for Chanel, Escada and Holt Renfrew, Barr explained the comfort and conscience of wearing sweatshop-free synthetics and natural fabrics such as cotton, bamboo, wool, silk and recycled leather. The Yoga collection of jeans by Second Denim Co., of Montreal, available in sizes 0 to 20, is the talk of the local bridge tournaments and book clubs, and the shoes by Coclico are crafted with built-in arch supports.

After enjoying Westboro's lifestyle classroom, there will be time for unbridled fun at recess. The locals and about 100,000 of their friends will come together at the 10th annual Westfest, June 6-9, a four-day extravaganza of concerts, dance, poetry, street eats and a kids' zone, all happening in an outdoor block party, day and evening, rain or shine. Some of the music headliners will be singer-songwriter Jane Siberry, the progressive country trio Elliott Brood, the rock band Skydiggers and indie-rockers Fiftymen.

This Westboro Village venture is simple. You simply show up and it's free.

IF YOU GO

Westboro Village is about seven kilometres from Parliament Hill in Ottawa, and a two-hour drive from

Montreal.

The businesses mentioned are open daily and they are all on Richmond Road in the 200, 300 and 400 blocks between Island Park Drive and Golden Ave., except Trailhead Paddle Shack, which is at 1960 Scott St., and Piggy Market at 400 Winston Ave.

More info: Westboro Village (list of merchants), 613-729-8145, www.westborovillage.com; Westfest, 613-729-3565, www.westfest.ca; Ottawa Tourism, 800-363-4465, www.ottawatourism.ca; National Capital Commission: 800-465-1867, www.canadascapital.gc.ca.

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)



Montreal-born Jean-François Maranda and his wife Viktoriya Melenteva at their shop Chez François, Flaisirs de Provence, in the Westboro area of Ottawa.

Photograph by: Bruno Schlumberger, Ottawa Citizen

