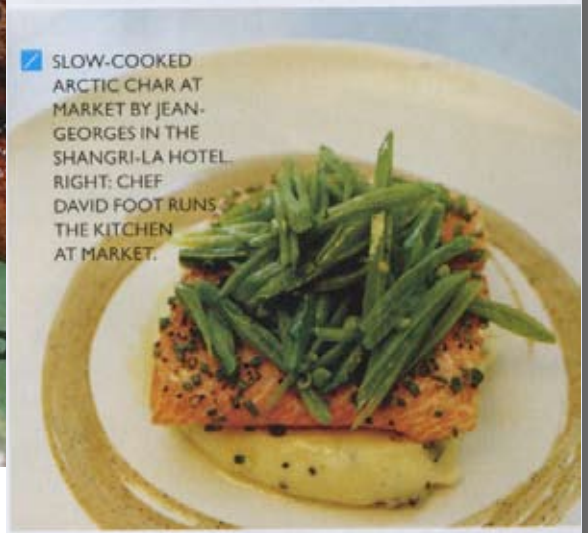




2. Market by Jean-Georges

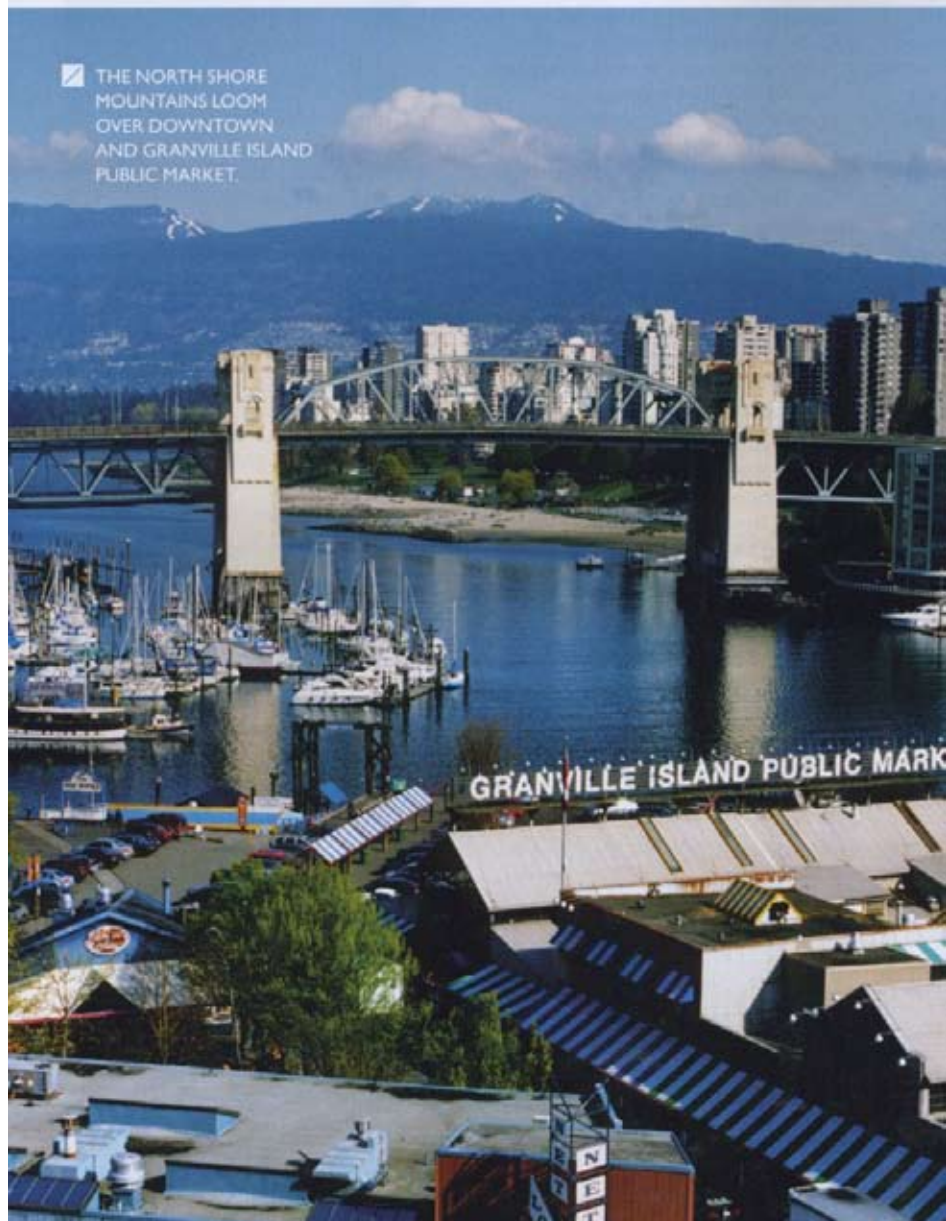
The greatest hits from Jean-Georges Vongerichten's post-epicurean menus (JoJo, Spice Market, etc.), adapted to local products. Moderately priced dishes, somewhat elevated from original recipes. ("A little shinier," explains the chef, David Foot.) Everything's good, but go for slow-cooked arctic char or short ribs with soy glaze. • *Shangri-La Hotel, Vancouver, Level 3, 1115 Alberni Street; 604-695-1115; shangri-la.com*

 SLOW-COOKED ARCTIC CHAR AT MARKET BY JEAN-GEORGES IN THE SHANGRI-LA HOTEL. RIGHT: CHEF DAVID FOOT RUNS THE KITCHEN AT MARKET.



vancouver vs. vancouver

THE NORTH SHORE MOUNTAINS LOOM OVER DOWNTOWN AND GRANVILLE ISLAND PUBLIC MARKET.



SYNDICATE

IN BRITISH COLUMBIA, ANIMAL LIFE LEADS A SWEET LIFE.

More than one Vancouver chef proudly tells me about the lambs and chickens that frolic happily in a field at Polderside Farms, about 65 miles inland. Dale MacKay, executive chef of Lumière, drove out for a visit just so that his son could see beasts and birds at play.

At the estimable C Restaurant, which promotes "ethical luxury," I find my albacore tuna entrée slightly mushy, not quite to my taste. I suggest to executive chef Robert Clark that this might be an atypical example of local seafood's not being as desirable as tuna shipped in from a faraway Japanese fishing fleet. Clark blames his kitchen for not preparing it well, not the fish for failing to be acceptably firm.

Nobody in this southwest Canadian metropolis ever speaks badly of ingredients, unless the stuff comes from somewhere else. Vancouver is the heartland of every admirable (and sometimes infuriating) food cause you've ever encountered—local, sustainable, organic, and eco-gastronomical among them. Fish is frozen at sea, residents are expected to frequent farmers' markets, tourists are advised to dine on homegrown products, and everybody is made aware of the 100-mile diet, a kind of imaginary line that harvesters are expected not to cross.

On the wilder side, you'll find the anti-foie gras lobby, energized by mild regional temperatures that allow year-round picketing. Allow me to add a warning: Suppress any urges for Chilean sea bass before coming to town. "If we served that, there would be so many protesters, our door would be closed," says David Foot, a local chef who runs the kitchen at Market by Jean-Georges, a high-profile new spot operated by Jean-Georges Vongerichten's restaurant group and located in the Shangri-La Hotel. Chef Foot confesses to one imperfection: using wasteful paper place mats on his tables, for which he is regarded as a reprobate. He explains, "It's a market!"—but he may be in trouble nonetheless.

VANCOUVER, HOME TO THE 2010 WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES, is a North American city unlike any other. It is only about 125 years old, is situated amid extraordinary natural beauty, and has initiated urban-planning practices that are both inspired and bizarre. In addition to a number of thoughtfully revitalized neighborhoods, it has an excess of slender glass high-rises that make it appear as though the city was invaded by aliens who constructed identical breeding towers. This style of architecture clashes violently with all that makes the city appealing, and I find myself wondering about the dining habits of the building residents, not certain if they eat Earth food at all.

For many years Vancouver was celebrated for its thriving Asian restaurant culture, possibly the most vibrant in North America. That trend now seems so 1990s. Today there's no dominant cooking trend—the top restaurants are a mélange of Asian fusion, Japanese, Indian, French, bistro, charcuterie, and seafood—but there is an unvarying obligation to serve products that do the region proud. Culinary masters are in the background. True believers—the proponents of sustainable dining practices—are the new stars.

In fact, highly principled dining dominates not just Vancouver but the entire restaurant culture of North America's Pacific Coast. The man most respected for

advocating local fish is Chef Clark over at C Restaurant, who says of sustainability, "It's my only goal—my life—to preserve the ability of myself and other chefs to do what we do, and make sure the products are still there tomorrow." He credits Chez Panisse in Berkeley for "advancing what is normal in restaurants today," the entire city of Portland for being at the leading edge of farmer-chef cooperation, and Napa Valley for creating a food- and wine-friendly lifestyle that British Columbia's Okanagan Valley wishes to duplicate. He believes that British Columbia's Chefs' Table Society, of which he is the vice president, is unsurpassed in North America at rallying behind the utilization of locally harvested seafood, making certain it isn't shipped far away.

WHILE VANCOUVER'S PRACTICES ARE OBVIOUSLY BENEFICIAL, not everyone is entirely pleased. At a restaurant where I dine anonymously, I engage one of the owners in casual conversation about the pressure that local restaurateurs are under to conform. He replies, in a gently mocking tone, "The 100-mile limit? What if the food is 108 miles away? Don't get me started. It's like a religion." Later, on the record, he is respectful, careful not to offend.

I hear anecdotes about the shunning of chefs who dared to source worldwide, rather than locally, but Clark insists that the pressure to conform does not come from chefs like him. "It's the media and the local consumers who demand this," he says. "The residents of Vancouver put down roots in alternative lifestyles before chefs and restaurants joined the green movement. We have a huge organic community. People in B.C. want healthy lifestyles—cycling, swimming, jogging, flax, and hemp. That was in place long before I came around."

At the Thomas Haas pastry shop on the North Shore (by now Haas might have a midtown branch in place, alleviating the need to endure bridge traffic to eat his unparalleled almond croissants), the candy boxes offer more information than any reasonable shopper requires: "Printed on paper with post-consumer recycled content, using vegetable-based inks. Please recycle."

Haas is a splendidly genial fellow, the sort who might be expected to throw confetti into the air at German sausage festivals, but when speaking of local food, he is cautious. He practically apologizes for having to import cocoa beans and almonds, which of course are not grown in Canada, before finally making a modest stand: "Sometimes the reality is that we can't do everything. We use chocolate that is not 100 percent organic, Valrhona, because it is the best in the world. I don't want to be out there on the bandwagon, pleasing all organizations, but we do want to do what's right. It is a natural habit."

Dale MacKay of Lumière, the Daniel Boulud restaurant, is a Vancouver native who prefers homegrown products, but he points out that at certain times of the year he might have access to only one fresh fish that fits his menu. Then he must buy what he needs wherever he finds it. When shopping locally, it is the available ingredients that decide a menu, not the cook's desires.

"We take B.C. seriously, but we also take our guests seriously," he says. "When we first opened in Vancouver, we were hassled a little for this, but it's not that we don't appreciate the products. B.C. has the best salmon in the world, hands down. Our West Coast halibut is better than

East Coast halibut. But sometimes we have to outsource.” (Should you want to shop while dining at Go Fish, the fish-and-chips shop on False Creek, MacKay’s oyster and scallop purveyor, Organic Ocean Seafood, is nearby.)

The Chefs’ Table Society seems, to an outsider, all-powerful but Clark says it unconditionally welcomed Vongerichten’s and Boulud’s restaurants—the first incursions into the city by international celebrity chefs. He says this was partly due to the graciousness of both men, partly because of the admiration that established chefs have for Vongerichten and Boulud as businessmen, and partly because the Chefs’ Table isn’t all that fearsome.

“We are sincere about our responsibility to improve the quality of food,” Clark says, “but when we get together, we have a lot of fun. You know the egos that chefs have. We try to lighten up. If we took ourselves too seriously, our egos would destroy the whole thing.” In fact, the Boulud and Vongerichten restaurants might be performing a secondary mission: introducing non-local methods of food preparation. Says Foot, whose kitchen at Market is packed with Vancouver cooks, “Everybody would give up an arm to work here. This has been the most anticipated restaurant opening in ten years.”

Relief from the relentless rectitude of Vancouver’s dining community is readily available. Granville Island, connected to the city by a diminutive causeway, is an oasis of individuality. In the markets there, amid the “Eat Local” signs, I notice Taiwanese tilapia, snapper from New Zealand, Norwegian mackerel, and even, God bless it, some terrible farm-raised salmon. There is more: smoked meat from Montréal, European links, Parisian

ham, and, I am pleased to see, doubly dubious previously frozen German wieners.

A friend of mine who lives near Vancouver tells me, “We’re a culturally diverse place, and people want food from where they’re from.” I am reassured, not because I want the opportunity to buy such products, but simply because I want to find out whether the merchants are comfortably able to sell them. (If you wish to walk around with such items, I suggest purchasing an Organic Acres Market cotton shopping bag: perfect camouflage.)

My investigation into freedom of eating continues in the city of Richmond, near the airport, where the Chinese community has shops and restaurants that appear unremittingly Chinese, which means the food is local only when such sourcing is convenient. Nevertheless, at the dim sum place Sun Sui Wah Seafood Restaurant, I notice bright chives in the shrimp dumplings, and an abundance of Chinese kale. If Vancouver’s zealotry has led to an improvement in the quality of dim sum, a food sadly standardized, I have newfound respect for righteousness.

When I suggest to Tom Doughty, co-owner of the restaurant Fuel, that keeping up with so many Vancouver imperatives must be exhaustingly difficult, he insists that it adds to the delights of owning a restaurant. “Virginia Jacobsen from Polderside Farms comes by herself every Thursday to bring us her chickens,” he says. “If a truck pulled up and just dropped off boxes of poultry, how boring would that be?”

Alan Richman has won 14 James Beard Awards for journalism.