

Travel and Adventure: Living history, fabulous seafood in a picturesque fishing village

by Sheila Sobell

In a tiny five-room reconstructed frame house built in 1885 in Steveston, British Columbia, then the world's salmon-canning capitol, is a 1925 photo of a pretty young Japanese woman named Assayo in her wedding dress with her bridegroom Otokichi Murakmai. After they married, Otokichi built the adjacent boat works and became adept at constructing fishing vessels. An exhibit at the Gulf of Georgia Cannery shows many of the labels that have gone on the products produced there. Photo by Sheila Sobell. Executive Chef Vicente Mabanta displays one of his seafood creations at the Blue Canoe restaurant in Steveston, British Columbia. Photo by Sheila Sobell. Like the awning says, Pajo's is famous for its fish and chips. It is one of the many restaurants that line the quay in Steveston, British Columbia. Photo by Sheila Sobell. Together, they raised 10 children in this house until the outbreak of World War II and their internment in rural Manitoba, Canada. Afterward, they relocated to southeastern Alberta, where they grew sugar beets, never returning to their old lives and the old skills that had once made them prosperous.

The Murakami Visitor Centre is a moving testimonial to the fate of Japanese immigrants drawn to Steveston during its "gold rush," when salmon canning made it the busiest fishing port in the world. Located on the Straight of Georgia 15 miles south of Vancouver, in its heyday at the turn of the 20th century, Steveston boasted 15 salmon canneries, six hotels, saloons, casinos and more than a dozen ships at a time loading canned salmon for worldwide distribution. Today, Steveston is a delightful picture-perfect fishing village lined with restaurants, historic treasures like the Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site, the Britannia Heritage Shipyard, and Steveston Museum, as well as the base for the Canada's commercial fishing fleet.

CENTURY-OLD SECRETS

The Murakami is a "living" museum that provides a riveting and sensitively told history of a family caught up in World War II. Open some of the dresser drawers in the children's rooms and you'll find toys and other belongings. An authentic Japanese bath called a "furo ba" stands in a corner, reconstructed from memory by

the eldest son for the opening of the house to the public in 1998.

You can also learn secrets that Assayo kept buried for a century, revealed finally on her 100th birthday - the existence of a prior husband and two little girls whom she abandoned in Japan because she "failed" to bear a son and couldn't get along with her mother-in-law. In 1923, Assayo arrived in Steveston as a "picture bride," her passage financed by an unsuspecting admirer. But the face-to-face meeting didn't go well. Assayo rejected her suitor as "too short and unattractive," opting to work off the cost of her ticket in a cannery instead of accepting his marriage proposal. Two years later, the talented violinist, gardener and former schoolteacher turned cannery worker met and married Otokichi. In 1998, the National Film Board of Canada made a movie about the family called "Obacham's Garden" filmed in the house.

LIFE OF THE SALMON WORKERS

What was it like for people such as Assayo to work in a salmon cannery before the invention of modern technology and workers' rights? When a big catch of fish was in, as many as 400 people worked a shift including more than 100 women processing the catch from raw to can. Women often worked as "slimers," cleaning the blood and guts from the butchered salmon on 12-hour shifts.

Secrecy was necessary to protect the location of a good salmon catch. "We had a two-man crew, and tried to position our boat with the bow toward other boats so they wouldn't see what we were catching and take over our spot," recalls Kariann Kiehl in a sound bite describing the lives of the fisherman. "I had no idea what I was

getting into. I had envisioned a fishing rod off the back of a boat for a couple of hours a day. Reality was 20 hours a day for 12 days straight."

In the late 1800s, there was an epidemic of typhoid and diphtheria as a result of the mounds of scrap fish left smoldering on the cannery floors in summer. The outbreak led to the formation of the first Japanese hospital built at the Phoenix Cannery.

LONDON FARM

Of course, not all Steveston residents worked in the canneries. At nearby London Heritage Farm, a remarkably intact 1890s farmhouse on four acres, exhibits of period clothes, photographs, letters, furnishings and extensive flower gardens tell the story of farm life through the recollections of the London family. Henrietta London immigrated to Canada from Scotland at age 17, marrying Charles, a Canadian, with whom she helped run the farm and had eight children.

Do not miss browsing in the shop for homemade teas, crafts and other goodies. The farm's baker puts on a splendid gastronomic show at afternoon tea for an exceptionally modest price. The house blend of London Lady Tea, fresh-baked scones with butter and London Farm jam, cookies and dessert tart is the most deliciously authentic afternoon tea I've sampled outside of England!

BE A NATURALIST

With luck, you could be in for quite a learning experience searching for orcas, porpoises, sea lions, and seals aboard a Vancouver Whale Watch. What makes this tour a standout is the quality of the naturalists onboard, who detail the habits and habitat of the marine life. To hedge your bets about spotting a whale, check with Seair Seaplanes, which because it does several daily flights to the Gulf Islands, has a good view of what marine life is around.

DELECTABLE FISH HEAVEN!

There's deliciously more to do in Steveston. The waterfront is lined with restaurants that bring seafood cuisine to a new haute! Start quayside with fish and chips at a veritable Steveston institution since 1985 – Pajo's. Here you'll find fish done in an incredibly light tempura-like batter and fried in 100 percent non-hydrogenated cholesterol-free oil. Sit on a bench and watch the boats go by and eat to your heart's content healthfully!

Onshore, fill up at the Blue Canoe restaurant, which according to locals has "injected new energy into the area thanks to the creativity of its bright young chef and its late hours!" Built in Cape Cod style, the 100-seat restaurant brings comfort food like crab cakes, lemon-lime pie and even macaroni and cheese to a new, charged-up level accompanied by innovations like lobster potato chip salad and finished with a Perfect Sunset, a killer cocktail of vodka, raspberry liqueur, and lemon juice topped with lemonade!

DRINK, EAT AND MAKE MERRY

It's hard not to be "into" wines at Mondo Vino, a chic spot where the daughter, Claudette Iaci, does very yummy, stylin' tapas, and her father, executive chef Ken Iaci, who also owns Papi's Ristorante Italiano next door, scours specialist vineyards for wines normally unavailable to the public. More substantial offerings are on at Papi's, plus cooking lessons.

With red walls accented in pink, mango and orange, the decor at the 6-year-old Tapenade Mediterranean Bistro is a suitably hip setting for French cuisine with a twist - think an organic banana squash soup made with mushrooms, cream and a Parmesan foam.

IF YOU GO

For more information on all things Steveston, visit www.steveston.bc.ca.

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