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Tasty times in Sydney

The sights, sounds and smells of Sydney's many communities are a feast for food lovers, writes **John Wright**



GOURMET diversity ... a Vietnamese butcher shop in Cabramatta; Haberfield's Frank Bonfante with zucchini flowers; and Steve Plangetis of The Yeeros Shop at Marrickville.



GOOD food territory ... a Cabramatta street; fresh fish at the market; Greek bakers Nicholas and Andra Theodoridis; and, below, the market at Cabramatta.

Pictures: John Wright

ON A GOOD day, Cabramatta is a 45-minute drive west of the Sydney CBD on the Hume Highway, but the way my cabbie was going on about it, it was the cheapest overseas trip in Australia.

"Welcome to Asia," he said, as he dropped me off by the Friendship Arch at Cabramatta's Freedom Plaza. "You won't see another white face, I promise you, and it only cost you \$63 to get here!"

He was right, though he might not have suspected that a day trip to Asia was the point of my journey rather than a consequence.

Beyond the arch's "The world is for us to share and to respect" sign, groups of men were chatting on benches in the sunshine.

There was a monk in robes, women carrying shopping bags, the smell of roasting pork.

And, waiting for me, Anushiya Selva Rajah, gourmet cook, tour guide and my passport, I hoped, to an extraordinary Sydney experience.

Food tourism is a big and growing market in Australia, with many travellers now wanting to know more about what they're eating, how it's prepared and the culture it comes from.

I wanted to learn a bit about ethnic food in Sydney. Someone told me that among other places, I had to go to Cabramatta to try something called fur soup.

Anushiya, who is a principal of Gourmet Asian Cuisine with her mother, Asian food authority and chef Carol Selva Rajah, stepped in to help.

The pair run what they like to call "day trips to Asia" — food and cultural tours in Cabramatta, a part of Sydney populated a long time ago by immigrant Greeks and Italians, but now a predominantly Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian community.

"It's pronounced 'fur soup', but it's spelt 'pho'," said Anushiya.

"Let's try some."

So we did, at a Vietnamese restaurant called Pho 54, an establishment noted for this specialty, which was a \$6.50 bowl of thin beef strips and rice noodles cooked in a broth. Vietnamese spring rolls completed the



meal, but I might have done without them. A walking tour with Gourmet Asian Cuisine involves a fair bit of food.

There was: roast pork and char siew from Tan Hong Phat BBQ; a taste of Queensland black tiger prawns from Dai Nguyen Seafood; pandan cake from Viet Hou Hot Bread Bakery; starchy Asian desserts bought off street stalls in the plaza; and, if I'd wanted them, exotic fruits such as sugar bananas, jackfruit and durian.

Combined with the wonderful colour and vibrancy of Cabramatta's maze of alleyways and arcades, alive as they were with the sounds and sights and smells of South-East Asia, it all added up to a feast in more than one sense of the word.

It would have been a hard act to follow, too, but over a few days I'd already had a taste of Sydney's ethnic food delights in Haberfield (Italian), Marrickville (Greek) and Petersham (Portuguese), as well as a memorable Scandinavian meal (Viking hotpot) in multicultural Newtown and a paella in the Spanish Quarter (Liverpool St).

Sydney is a big city and its ethnic food experiences are almost endless, as more and more of its adventurous Anglo-Celtic residents are discovering. Companies such as Gourmet Asian Cuisine and the popular Gourmet Safaris, founded by TV food presenter and author Maeva O'Meara, offer a range of food tours hosted by local guides who know the cultures intimately.

If you feel like getting started on this as a gourmet traveller the next time you're in Sydney, here are a few suggestions:

Italian

Leichhardt tends to be called "Little Italy", but the nearby suburb of Haberfield is the real thing, according to those who live there.

The streetscape won't win any prizes for aesthetics, but a five-hour walking tour with Gourmet Safaris Pty Ltd will give you an unforgettable insight into the Italian relationship with, and love for, food.

On a tour of almost a dozen shops, eateries and other businesses, you will discover: how to buy olives and cook pasta; where to buy the finest handmade chocolates and how to store them; why the cheeses you buy here are the best in Sydney; why Frank Bonfante is famous for his fruit; why Antonio Sulfaro has queues lined up outside his cake shop; and where to go to get Australia's best baked ricotta cheesecake.

You also will eat a fine, multi-course Italian lunch featuring superb pizzas at Ben Riccio's Napoli in Bocca Restaurant and come to understand why it is that this lovely Italian village in Sydney doesn't have a pub — or need one.

Cost of tour (five hours) \$90, including tastings and lunch. Fortnightly on Saturdays. Book well

ahead. Contact: Gourmet Safaris. Tel: 02 9960 5675 www.gourmetsafaris.com.au

Greek

You can't go past Marrickville for Sydney's best Greek food. Traditionally a working-class suburb, many successful Greek immigrants moved here from Newtown from the late 1960s and 1970s and established food and other businesses that are still family-run and at the heart of its culture.

Liz Kaydos, a guide with Gourmet Safaris, showed me around this combined walking/drive tour, and from the moment I tasted the spinach filo pies and glazed custards made by Nicholas Theodoridis and his wife Andra, at their long-established bakery Tim Products, I knew I was in seriously good food territory.

Other highlights which emphasised for me the Greek passion for fine food and coffee included: a fabulous delicatessen and cafe called Danas (it specialises in imported olives); an exquisite, hand-made passionfruit chocolate at Adora, in Earlwood; Steve Plangetis's The Yeeros Shop — going 30 years and still serving the best kebabs and souvlaki in Sydney; and the Hellenic Bakery, a Marrickville institution with breads — the best you will find anywhere.

Cost of tour \$90, including tastings and lunch. One Saturday a month. Contact: Gourmet Safaris.

Portuguese

You can discover a lot about this cuisine on a walking tour of Petersham, a Marrickville area community dubbed "Little Portugal" by the local council and heavily promoted as such.

The tour, also offered by Gourmet Safaris, focuses on New Canterbury Rd and a collection of long-established food businesses.

Cakes, smoked meats, chicken, cheeses, fish and delicatessen specialities go with the early 20th century streetscape on this tour, as well as a fascinating culture if you take the time to talk to the residents.

Highlights of this tour include the divine pasties de nata (egg custards) which you will find at La Patisserie — a 22-year-old business run by Fernando and Cristina Ramos, the smoked hams and chorizo sausages at the Portuguese Butchery and, at Petersham Charcoal Chicken restaurant and takeaway, Portuguese-cooked chicken for which customers queue down the street.

Cost of tour \$90 including tastings and lunch. One Saturday a month. Contact: Gourmet Safaris.

Some other tastes

Other ethnic food experiences and contacts:

Try Vietnamese in Cabramatta with Gourmet Asian Cuisine, telephone: 02 9427 5260 or visit the website (www.gourmetasiancuisine.com.au).

The company conducts group walking tours (minimum eight-10 people) on demand. Cost \$85 including tastings and lunch.

Try Newtown for a range of up to 20 ethnic cuisines including Thai, African, Italian, Asian and The Gourmet Viking Scandinavian Restaurant (tel: 02 9557 8999) for herrings and hotpots; try Auburn for Turkish and Punchbowl for Lebanese cuisine on Gourmet Safaris walking tours.

John Wright visited Sydney's ethnic food areas with the help of Tourism NSW, Gourmet Safaris and Gourmet Asian Cuisine.