



[Back to Steveston has a knack for doing one thing well](#)

Steveston has a knack for doing one thing well

August 23, 2008

richard ouzounian

STEVESTON, B.C. – This historic fishing village tucked away in the southwest corner of Richmond has a tranquility that will captivate you instantly.

But you won't figure out its source until you talk to the people who live here. Then you'll realize that everyone in Steveston seems to have mastered the art of doing one thing so well it creates an environment you simply can't resist.

Steveston was founded in 1880. Just 20 years later, it had 15 salmon canneries and had become "the most successful fishing port anywhere in the world," boasts Bob Baziuk of the Steveston Harbour Authority. Baziuk points to a long, thin sandbar across the south arm of the Fraser River. "Over there was Shady Island, which wasn't named for its lack of sunlight," he quips. "That's where all the brothels were back in the bad old days."

That's all gone now, of course, but the city's past is not forgotten. And even when it's not all sunshine, the locals are ready to tell you its story.

Luke Dickinson is our guide at the Gulf of Georgia Cannery, once the largest working cannery in B.C. and now a heritage museum, including a model of the same assembly line they used back in the 1930s.

Ask Dickinson when the once solid-gold industry started to erode and he's got the facts at his fingertips.

"1913," he says without a pause. "The Railway was trying to blast a route through the Fraser Canyon and caused a landslide at Hell's Gate. The sockeye couldn't swim upstream to spawn. By 1921, there were hardly any left."

You can also see the mark of history at the Murakami Visitor Centre near the Britannia Heritage Shipyard. Here, guide Angela Soon will show you around the house where the 12-member Murakami family lived and flourished in the 1930s.

"They say that Mrs. Murakami had the most beautiful flower garden in Steveston," Soon says during her tour, "and we have tried to keep it that way."

But then came World War II. Because of their Japanese heritage, the Murakamis were separated. Most went to a beet farm in Manitoba, where they spent years working for 50 cents an hour.

"After that," Soon says quietly, "most of the family did not want to come back here ever again."

A more tranquil part of Steveston's past is down the No. 2 Road at the London Heritage Farm, a lovely 1890s farmhouse which has been carefully restored and filled with artifacts from the period when the London family lived there. Best room of all? It might well be the dining room, where you can relax with a home-made tea, including lighter-than-air scones and other tempting treats made by the gifted Jennie Watson.

As fascinating as Steveston's past is, it's also interesting to see how the current residents live.

Seafood dominates the scene – with a farmers' market every Sunday that includes demonstrations from local chefs and a gala Wild B.C. Seafood Fest on Aug. 30– and residents show it the appropriate reverence.

Vicente Mabanta is the executive chef of Blue Canoe, an attractive new restaurant whose harbour location affords diners a view of ships sailing by as they feast on the local seafood Mabanta has prepared.

"What the sea brings you here is so wonderful that you don't have to do too much with it," he says. "But I just like to pay it some respect and



make it look attractive on the plate."

This sense of homage trickles down from one generation to the next. At Papi's Ristorante Italiano, Daniela Iaci does her famed chef father proud by going down to the harbour, purchasing a sablefish from a local merchant and then preparing the fish in three deliciously different styles to showcase its versatility.

And at Pajo's Fish and Chips, founded 23 years ago by Patricia Branch, Branch's daughter Tara Elston says they wouldn't think of using anything but locally grown Kennebec potatoes for their beloved chips. "It's all about consistency," she explains. And then you have places where it all comes together, such as Tapenade, one of the most elegant seafood bistros I have ever had the pleasure of dining in.

Chef Alex Tung and owner Vince Morlet have both had long and distinguished careers in the Canadian restaurant industry, but they decided to really make their mark in Steveston.

"It's a special place," says Morlet. "The people who live here understand great food."

Their menu is a tribute to the glory of the local farms and the sea, and their Mediterranean-styled bistro fits perfectly into its harbour setting. These are people at one with where they are working.

You could say the same of Dave Sandhu, president of the B.C. Blueberry Council. While searching for a more efficient commercial use of his blueberries, he came upon the notion of a fruit winery. He placed control of it in the hands of his wife, Neeta, and though it has been open just two years, Sanduz Estate Wines has already attracted a loyal clientele and won several Canadian awards. Their charming store, with its long tasting bar, is a welcome stop for Steveston visitors.

Then there's Ian Lai. This accomplished chef, educator and CBC broadcaster is the driving force behind the Terra Nova Schoolyard Society, where he "connects elementary and high school students with the earth, the community around them and agriculture at large."

He takes young people who have never seen a garden and, within a few months, has them raising vegetables, herbs and flowers. Then he teaches them to harvest what they've grown and prepare it for the table.

"It's a whole new generation of people who will know where their food comes from, what it means and how it should taste," Lai says. "It's the beginning of a whole new culinary world."

Lai's activities extend to the adult community, where he offers yoga breakfasts and other activities that combine inner peace with culinary excellence.

In a way, he's a symbol of Steveston, where the only thing more fascinating than its past is its present – and its future.

Richard Ouzounian is the Star's theatre critic.