



Canada



Fiona Harper

Following the trail of flavours on Prince Edward Island



The chilly North Atlantic Ocean worms its way through the gaps between skin and wetsuit. I'm chest deep in water that can't be much above 12 degrees Celsius. I can feel liquid ice oozing down my neck as I duck my head beneath the surface.

"At least the harbour is free of icebergs," laughs Captain Perry Gotell, a third generation lobster fisherman who's been on the sea all his life, wickedly. In mid-autumn the sea temperature is relatively balmy for locals who have been digging for clams on sandbars since the British claimed the island in the late 1700s. Armed with a long handled implement that looks suspiciously like a common garden rake, it doesn't take long before the large tub we're towing behind us is filled with juicy morsels. Canny critters that bury themselves deep when threatened, stubbornly refusing to yield to the prongs of my probing spikes, they easily grow to the size of a man's palm. Before we get too chilled on this Giant Bar Clam Dig we haul our catch onboard. Deckhand Lucais, a fourth generation lobsterman, cleans the clams before popping them into a huge pot to steam on the aft deck. Before long, we're tucking into juicy scallop-like delicacies. Known as the Garden Island of the Gulf for its lush agricultural pastures alongside seas teeming with seafood, PEI is just the spot for gourmands looking for superb food in an obscenely picturesque landscape. Think red cliffs tumbling into inky blue sea, salt spray hanging in the mist. Historic, vividly painted timber lighthouses perched above iridescent green grass (it can get pretty wet here). Rolling hills dotted with massive orange pumpkins, valleys tinkling to the sound of tumbling brooks. Deciduous forests that, come late September, tint the whole scene yellow, then orange before finally bursting into deep scarlet ahead of winter's onset, when glistening white snow drapes across outstretched limbs. It's easy to see why the 130,000 residents embrace their reputation for turning out fine produce, particularly during the annual Fall Flavours Festival.

The PEI International Shellfish Chowder Championship is hotly contested, with highly acclaimed chefs and cooks arriving from kitchens across the globe to stake their claim on the title. Tucking into sous chef Jesse MacDonald's divine lobster and roasted tomato chowder at Rodd Brudnell River Resort within hours of landing on PEI, my tastebuds were soon dancing to their own rapturous tune. Not one much inclined to order seafood chowder in the past, I soon realise chowder in these parts is a very serious business.

A few days later, donning chef whites in a commercial kitchen under the guidance of Jeff McCourt, I'm let in on a few seafood chowder secrets. Enrolling in Culinary Boot Camp at the Culinary Institute of Canada, the pre-eminent training ground for Canadian chefs, boot camp gives gourmands the inside running on preparing a delicious seafood banquet. Starting the day in a stark classroom takes me back to bewildering home economic classes in high school, before we're handed recipes for risotto, gnocchi, lobster perogies, and of course, chowder. Soon, Jeff has us dicing tomatoes, chopping herbs, coaxing rice grains into creamy risotto, tossing steamed mussels, all the while lobbing 'secret ingredients' into the chowder pot simmering on the stove. Wildly tempting aromas entice us to taste a little, then taste some more, just to be sure. Boot camp wraps up too soon, upstairs overlooking Lobster Point, starched white linen is draped across a table beside floor to ceiling windows in the Lucy Maud Dining Room. We tuck hungrily into the spoils of our labour.

A plump seal pops his head up briefly, whiskers dripping, peering out of ridiculously large brown eyes before submerging again. Blubber, it occurs to me, as I tuck into another bowl of rich, creamy, waist-expanding chowder, is the key to staying warm on a clam dig. I make a mental note to tear myself away from this island of plenty before my body shape resembles that of a rotund seal.

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