

Meet our Neighbours:

Canada Meets in the Byward Market

Once a remote colonial outpost, Ottawa's Byward Market has been transformed over the last two centuries into a vibrant, culturally diverse hub of shopping, dining and entertainment—and now serves as a favourite after-work haunt for many DFAIT-ers.

As one gazes over the four-block area of Ottawa's Byward Market today, it's hard to imagine a time when the district was nothing more than a 19th-century market building constructed of timber and surrounded by swampland. Yet it's just such an image that drives home how much the Market has evolved over the past 180 years—into a bustling centre of restaurants, pubs, nightclubs, boutiques, galleries and, most notably, Canada's oldest and largest outdoor farmers' market.

"It's the fresh smell that gets me every time," says Anne Pilon, an Ottawa artist who has lived in the Market area since 1995 and buys all her fruit and vegetables there, along with certain specialty foods like 100-percent pure maple syrup. "It gives me such a strong sense of season. You know—the smell of cut flowers in summer and harvest vegetables in the fall. It makes you feel alive to be out there with all the farm-fresh foods—and with the vendors, who are usually very eccentric and a lot of fun."

Enlivening the Market's many diverse offerings is its rich cultural diversity, strongly reflected in its 80-plus restaurants, which feature something for every palate: Indian, Thai, Greek, Italian, Cajun—the list goes on and on. One of the most exotic dinner experiences can be found at Navarra Restaurant, which specializes in modern Basque cuisine. Critically acclaimed chef René Rodriguez has created a varied menu infused with excitement and innovation. Guaranteed to expand your taste buds are dishes such as confit of crispy pig cheek, confit of octopus and salt roasted beet salad, to name just a few.

On the other side of the Market's culinary spectrum is the wholly Canadian BeaverTails, a now famous booth offering hand-stretched, freshly cooked pastries resembling—you guessed it—beaver tails. This taste sensation received international media attention in 2009 when U.S. president

Barack Obama visited the Byward Market specifically to buy a BeaverTail pastry. Co-owner Grant Hooker stresses that the Market's diversity extends to his customers as well.

"We meet different and fascinating people every day of the week. Locals and tourists of every age, background and profession come to our stand, share their stories and truly enrich our lives. It's like having a daily travel experience without ever having to leave the city."

Indeed, the opportunities for "global experience" in the Byward Market seem virtually endless: live international music, shops featuring custom-made furniture and jewellery from all over the world, original works of art and bars and nightclubs of every description.

"I've lived in the Market for almost 16 years and still feel like I've only scratched the surface of what's there," says Pilon. "It's like a big, ever-evolving treasure trove of exciting people and things to do. To me, it's Ottawa's heart and soul."



Snapshots of the Byward Market

photos: Michel Pixel/DFAIT