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# Spirit Culinary Excursions & Chef Shirley Lang



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## EXPLORATIONS:

One of the great benefits of being a travel writer is that you sometimes get, for free, experiences that others are willing to shell out serious money



that others are willing to shell out serious money to participate in. Such was the case at the recent TMAC conference in Victoria when I got to spend a day on a Pacific Ocean Dining Immersion put on by Spirit Culinary Excursions and hosted by company owner, Chef Shirley Lang. Now my job is to convince you, the reader, why you should follow suit. Fortunately, it really will not be a hard sell, because Shirley is offering just the type of experience that will appeal to foodies as well as tourists who want to better understand how the Indigenous people made a moveable feast of the bounteous offerings of the land and sea that are found on Vancouver Island.

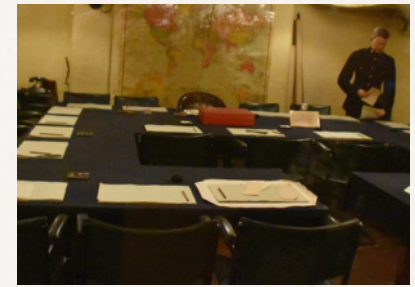
## **Spirit Culinary Excursions – Who They Are & What They Offer**

I can do no better in describing what the purpose and mission of Spirit Culinary Excursions is than to take this quote direct from [their website](#).

[Spirit Culinary Excursions was created in 2015 to showcase the extraordinary talents of multicultural culinary artisans on Vancouver Island. Our collaborative team is formed out of a collective of culinary artists and event experts with imaginative creative minds. It is within this collective that we found a group of peers that not only work well together to bring connoisseurs a respected and honourable service, but that our capabilities and passion for our art is magnified through one another.](#)

By following the link you can access the bios of the Spirit Culinary Excursions team, however, for the purposes of this post I will concentrate on

## **Warwick Castle- 1,000 Years of British History**



## **Churchill War Rooms – A Must Visit in London**



## **Bocas del Toro – Panama’s Caribbean Paradise**

Chef Lang who was our host for the day.

Shirley Lang is from the Cree nation and although she is an expert in Aboriginal culinary traditions, she has not limited herself to just the cuisine of her native heritage, but embraces all culinary backgrounds – as I think anyone who really calls themselves a chef, should do. Food and drink, like nothing else, transcends cultural boundaries.

The experience we enjoyed with Shirley was specifically designed for our small group of four travel writers and I will describe it, not necessarily in chronological order, but in terms of the places we visited followed by the feast we helped put together. Spirit Culinary Excursions has no set in stone itineraries, but rather can fashion them to meet the needs, time and tastes of any group, large or small.

## **Dakini Tidal Wilds**

We were picked up in a small bus at the Empress Hotel and, going against rush hour traffic such as it is in Victoria, were soon outside the city and winding our way past the town of Sooke on Highway 14. Crossing the bridge over Muir Creek, which is named for famed naturalist and founder of the Sierra Club **John Muir**, we pulled into a small dirt parking lot. There we met the first of a number of Vancouver Islanders who are making their living sustainably harvesting the products that grow abundantly in the area.

This is Amanda Swinimer, a graduate of my *alma mater* Dalhousie U. in Halifax. She took a degree in marine biology, became an expert in

phycology (aka seaweeds) and decided to try to make a living harvesting, processing and selling local kelps and other seaweeds that she has a license for in the Muir Creek area. I'm glad to report that she's doing very well at it with her company [Dakini Tidal Wilds](#).

## Amanda Swinimer

Amanda led us down a path to the mouth of Muir Creek, which is an important salmon spawning river. This is the scene that greeted us. Those are the Olympic Mountains of Washington state in the background.

## Muir Creek Estuary

Amanda then explained the various uses that can be made of seaweeds and the growing understanding of just how much promise these most abundant species could have in sustainably feeding our burgeoning world population.

## Amanda Talks Up Seaweed

There are literally dozens of types of seaweed right at our feet of which many are edible and others useful as medicines, salves or their other healing properties.

## Dozens of Types of Seaweed

Amanda is actually here not only to give us the lowdown on seaweeds, but to spend the rest of her time here foraging for kelp. With her wetsuit on she enters the freezing waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and goes to work. The kelp is cut in such a manner that the plant will regrow so it can be harvested a second time.

There's just something naturally clean and refreshingly different about how Amanda Swinimer is making a living (and teaching others as well) that it leaves me with a real good feeling as we head back to the bus and head for our next stop.

## Amanda Foraging For Kelp

## Salt West

### Salt West

This tiny building is **Salt West**, where a young couple, Jess and Jeff Abel, are not only producing, but competing very well in the newly competitive field of sea salts. Not so long ago about the only salt most of us used was common iodized table salt that came from industrial salt mines. Then master chefs starting touting the benefits of various types of other salts including kosher, Himalayan and many varieties of sea salts and the race to produce the best salt was on.

The Abels started this venture largely on spec as they had no real training in how to process salt

from seawater – Jeff was a fisherman by trade. But they discovered they had a natural inclination for teasing out really great tasting salts from the low salinity waters of the Sooke Harbour area.

This is Jess Abel explaining their three part desalination process that works so well that they also produce **Salish Pure**, Canada's first commercial desalinated bottled water.

## Jess Abel Explains How They Make Sea Salt at Salt West

They also are experimenting with producing sea salt through the much more time consuming method of solar evaporation, but believe the results are worth the effort.

We end our visit with a salt tasting (who knew?) and trust me each of these five salts tasted very different. They are designed to specifically pair well with particular types of cuisine and to enhance the taste of the foods in those cuisines.

## Salt Tasting at Salt West

Once again, I left Salt West glad to know that there are young risk takers out there trying cutting edge techniques to produce the best and most sustainable products on the market.

## **Snowdon House – From Tree Farmers to Vinegar Infusers**

## Snowdon House

Our final stop at an interesting place using local ingredients was at **Snowdon House** which has a lovely location in North Saanich where Laura Waters is creating any number of products using the freshly grown tips of Douglas Fir. These are harvested from her tree farm and among other things used to create a great tasting Douglas Fir infused vinegar.

## Douglas Fir Infused Vinegar, Snowdon House

Believe it or not you can take a bottle of this or one of Laura's other infused vinegars and put it into an ice cream maker without anything else and in 10 minutes or so you'll have a refreshing and very different tasting sorbet. Leave it in a little longer and you'll get ice cream.

All right we've got seaweed, salt and vinegar – maybe we could make salt & vinegar seaweed chips! Just kidding, but with the ingenuity these folks demonstrate it might just be possible.

## Duffy's Salmon Charters

Next it's off to Sooke again to find **Duffy's Salmon Charters** where Duff Johnston runs private fishing charters right out his beautiful backyard on Sooke Harbour. This is also where we meet Chef Shirley who is busy preparing a mound of fresh ingredients for our meal which will follow our fishing expedition. What we eat could very

well depend on how well we do with Duff.

This is the Reel Memories which tied up on a long dock just back of Duff's house which sits on a bluff overlooking the harbour.

## Reel Memories

While we're waiting to get on the boat I play with Duff's dog Cooper who was tireless in his efforts to get us to throw the ball for him, much as my poodle Mica did for years before she got too infirm.

## Cooper the Ball Poodle

Duff tells us that there is bad news and good news, in that order. The bad news is that it's blowing a gale outside Sooke Harbour so we won't be able to fish as the salmon grounds lie well away from shore. The good news is that it's a beautiful day in sheltered Sooke Harbour and we can go for a boat ride and check to see if there are any crabs in his trap. If there are ones large enough to keep then they'll become part of our feast. I'm keeping my fingers crossed when I hear that they will be Dungeness crabs which I first tasted in Oregon and never miss a chance to try them ever since.

We have a very pleasant cruise along Sooke Harbour as far as the mouth of the Sooke River and then head for Duff's crab pot. Apparently in British Columbia if you have a license to charter fish you can also catch crabs and the famous B.C



fish you can also catch crabs and the famous B.C. spotted prawns as well.

Duff snags the crab pot buoy and raises it by hand revealing a goodly number of crabs who've been suckered by whatever that mess is inside. For crabs these pots are like the Hotel California – they can check in, but they can never leave.

## Potful of Crabs

Duff pulls out the crabs and the largest is not a Dungeness, but the red rock crab he is holding his hand. It's a keeper as are two Dungeness' beauties. The rest are returned to be caught another day – they never learn.

## The Crab Catch

This harbour seal comes up to follow us back to the dock in the hopes of any easy windfall, but not today.

## Harbour Seal

In the meantime I inspect this Dungeness crab who wonders why he wasn't thrown back. If there's a crab heaven, you'll soon be in it buddy.

## Dungeness Crab

Back on shore Shirley is still toiling away.

## Chef Shirley Lang

And the table is set.

## The Table is Set

The guests sit around enjoying the sun, some smoked B.C. salmon and Shirley's venison and Unsworth Ovation Port paté garnished with a pickled spruce tip (unbelievably good), washed down with excellent wine from [Indigenous World Winery](#) in the Okanagan.

Duff brings out a beautiful looking chinook salmon he caught the day before (isn't that always the case?) and butterflies it before our eyes.

## Duff Butterflies the Salmon

He has already lit a fire and created a bed of spruce bark embers which he says makes for the best way to cook a salmon in the traditional way. Here it is laid out to take both the heat of the fire and the smoke from the spruce bark that will infuse it with a unique taste.

## Salmon Cooking

And at last, all is ready. Here is a plate with our freshly caught crabs, spotted prawns, local clams

freshly caught crabs, spotted prawns, local clams and corn. Tell me that doesn't look mouth-watering.

## The Feast is Ready

See that jar on the right? Those are Shirley's pickled sea asparagus and God are they good! Also served up is a delicious succotash, a salad flavoured with wild goose tongue grass pesto and wild wood sorrel oil and a mix of wild foraged greens and wild flowers with wild Oregon grape dressing.

Here's my first helping.

## My Plate

## The Feast

And of course, there is the salmon, more wine and dessert and by this time I've forgotten all about taking pictures and am just relishing the food, the company and glad to be alive on this wonderful day in Sooke. I've waited over 50 years to get to Vancouver Island and I guarantee I'll be back a lot sooner than that.

I regret not getting a picture of the group or myself with Chef Shirley, that's negligence on my part, but I hope I've convinced you to put yourself in the hands of the team at Spirit Culinary Excursions and if you have half as good a time as I did you'll have gotten more than your

a time as I did, you can have gotten more than your money's worth. And you will probably get to go salmon fishing to boot.

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