



Kayak cuisine

Gourmet food and the scenery of Canada's Gulf Islands make an irresistible combination

By Sue Frause / Special to The Herald - Saturday, July 22, 2006

As a rookie kayaker who takes to the waters only occasionally, I was apprehensive about spending a long weekend paddling and camping in British Columbia's Gulf Islands with folks I didn't know.

But the name of this particular outdoor adventure lured me in: "Gourmet Kayaking Weekend."

Now in its second season, this outdoor foodies' adventure is the brainchild of Eric Pateman of Vancouver's Edible British Columbia. The 30-year-old entrepreneur teamed up with James Bray, a chef and owner of Blue Planet Kayaking in Victoria, B.C., for a unique gastronomic getaway.

For three days, Bray skillfully led and artistically fed our group of 10 kayakers and two guides.

Our launch site, Cedar-by-the-Sea, is a 15-minute drive south of Nanaimo. Following safety and paddling instructions by Bray and fellow guide Alex Blais-Montpetit, we donned spray skirts, personal flotation devices, sun caps and sunscreen.

Blais-Montpetit, our 26-year-old guide from Montreal, gave us a stern warning: "The most dangerous thing about kayaking is that you may fall in love with it."

The route takes us across Trincomali Channel to Pirates Cove Provincial Park on DeCourcy Island and then on to Blackberry Point on Valdes Island where we set up camp for the two nights.

We paddled as a group in eight kayaks, some in singles and the others in doubles. It took me a while to get into the rhythm of the double kayak, to be "one with the water."

After several hours, we arrived at Pirates Cove for a much needed nature break and a snack of homemade granola bars and apples.

Bray told us a bit about the history of DeCourcy Island, which in the late 1920s and early 1930s

was home to the Aquarian Foundation, a religious cult led by Brother XII.

The self-described "Twelfth Master of Wisdom" persuaded 8,000 followers to give up their worldly possessions and follow him to this island. He faced trial in 1933 for dishonest dealings, but disappeared without a trace. Today, there are rumors of buried treasure on the island.

After taking to the boats again for another two or three hours, we traversed Pylades Channel to Blackberry Point on Valdes Island. We paddled close to shore along the Cliffs of Valdes, towering sandstone monuments rising more than 300 feet.

I've seen the magnificent Malaspina Galleries on Gabriola Island, but these formations are stunning and surreal. It's as if local artists were hired to carve the sensuous renderings. I almost expected to see red "sold" dots on some of the more impressive installations.

Bray pointed out a primitive floating home where "Crazy Pete" lives. We spotted this colorful character throughout the weekend, as he voluntarily patrolled the beaches, chatting with kayakers.

At last we pulled into the white clamshell beach of Blackberry Point. Elegant arbutus trees overhead framed the organic carpet. It's more Mediterranean than Pacific Northwest.

While we pitched our tents, Bray, whom I quickly dubbed "Chef Coleman" for being able to create gourmet meals on two Coleman stoves, pulled his wilderness kitchen together with fellow guide and sous-chef Mont-Petit. James prepared a late afternoon lunch of hot smoked albacore tuna Nicoise salad with fingerling potatoes, tomatoes, green beans, olives, eggs, truffle mayonnaise and fresh basil vinaigrette.

This isn't your typical camp fare of freeze-dried food and Toblerone bars. All the menus are prepared from local ingredients featuring Vancouver Island organic vegetables, pasture raised poultry, wild B.C. fish, artisan cheeses and creative desserts.

Later that evening, he made another memorable meal, again served on brightly colored blue and yellow plates: seared rare albacore tuna loin, goat cheese stuffed polenta cakes, Puttanesca sauce, braised greens, arugula pistou, black olive tapenade and Calabrese peppers. Dessert was a hazelnut financier with a Merridale Cider reduction, chevre noir (goat cheddar) and caramelized apples served with Cherry Point Blackberry Port.

Dinners were served with such fine British Columbia wines as Alderlea Pinot Gris, Blue Grouse Pinot Noir and Winchester Cellars Chardonnay from Vancouver Island and Joie Year One Noble Blend and Tinhorn Creek Gewurztraminer from B.C.'s Okanogan Valley. Mornings we were awakened to locally roasted coffee made in a French press. I was first in line.

Bray is skilled beyond his 33 years. Born and raised in Ontario, he jumped into cooking as a way to support his snowboarding habit at B.C.'s Silver Star Resort. His resume includes stints as a tree planter in B.C. and working for a chef in Tofino. He's been a kayak guide for 10 years.

After moving to Victoria, he managed the restaurant Canoe and was a waiter at Brasserie L'Ecole.

"My big passion is food and wine," said James, who speaks almost as quickly as he can create a meal for 12 hungry kayakers.

He loyally supports such local island vendors as Fantastico Coffee, FAS (Finest at Sea Seafood), Cowichan Bay Farm and Butterchik.

More paddling, more yummy food

Day two brought more of the same blue skies and calm seas. After a breakfast of brioche French toast with blackberries and maple syrup, Gamon bacon and sauteed fingerling potato hash browns we were off to Cardale Point. We paddled close to shore and spotted eagles high above us. Other wildlife sightings included seals, cormorants, pigeon guillemots and mink.

Lunch was spread out under a grove of shade trees and included hot and cold smoked salmon club sandwiches with avocado and chipotle mayonnaise on sage garlic bread.

The day's paddle time was another four to five hours and it was a warm one. It was also Canada Day and the start of a three-day weekend; dozens of kayakers arrived during our absence.

As I spotted the red and blue "Kayakpalooza" tarp marking our campsite, I realize how tired and hungry I was. Even the solar sawdust-composting toilet tucked into the woods was a welcome sight.

Bray pulled out all the corks for our farewell dinner that included chicken leg confit, fingerling potatoes, shelled English peas, baby morels, little carrots and foie gras butter. BC wines and a divine dessert of rose petal Pavlova with fresh whipped cream and strawberries rounded out the menu.

The evening's entertainment was watching yet another spectacular sunset and stirring up bioluminescence in the water. I slept outside on this final night, watched over by an almost-quarter-moon and the Milky Way.

Sunday morning, after a breakfast of wild mushroom omelets with talleggio cheese and pan-fried fingerling potatoes, we packed up our kayaks and paddled back to our launch site at Cedar-by-the-Sea.

I laughed at my apprehension about spending a long weekend paddling and camping with folks I didn't know. I've just made 11 new friends.

And fallen in love with kayaking.

Sue Frause is a Whidbey Island freelance writer and photographer. She may be contacted at skfrause@whidbey.com

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