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Steven Hellman is co-owner of Foodies on Foot, a Toronto-based culinary tour company.

OTHER CULINARY TOURS

■ While Foodies on Foot offers great bang for the buck, there are other culinary tours to waddle through, including the popular and award-winning Culinary Adventure Company which offers a broad sampling of gastronomic indulgences. Check them out at www.culinaryadventureco.com/

■ For the better part of two decades, A Taste of the World has led participants on intimate tours with a cross cultural emphasis. Learn more at: www.torontowalksbikes.com/index.html

■ For day-tripping foodies, consider taking in an Elora-based tour that visits several local restos, ranging from pubs to high-end crepe houses during this two-hour event. Plan to book at least a month in advance as the tour sells out quickly. Visit eloraculinarywalkingtour.com/ for details.

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A MOVEABLE FEAST

Inspired by a mutual love of Toronto's gastronomic diversity, two enterprising foodies drop their day jobs in favour of sharing their passion for culinary discoveries

With the rise of The Food Channel and the emergence of celebrity chefs like Susur Lee and Lynn Crawford, the past decade has seen a virtual food explosion taking place in Toronto. Indeed, over 1,300 establishments opened in 2012 alone making any foodie want to dive in fork-first.

Coinciding with that increase has been the advent of a new type of food experience: the culinary tour. Often intimate affairs, these events usually offer even the most ardent foodies something new. Whether it's experiencing the history of a local 'hood like The Junction, or nosing your way through a sandwich-themed jaunt, food tours offer a fun, festive and unique way to take in Hogtown while sampling some of the best grazing the city has to offer. Along the way, you realize foodies are pretty passionate people.

It was this shared passion that triggered co-founders Gloria Czomko and Steven Hellman to abandon their careers and launch Foodies on Foot in 2012.

"The business got started when Gloria and I first met," says Hellman. "At the time, I was managing a law firm, and had created a social media marketing business which was helping small businesses successfully market themselves."

"I was always a foodie, travelling the world to eat. When I met Gloria, both being entrepreneurial, we decided to create a company that focused on the three passions we shared: a love of food, the utmost respect for small businesses, and the city of Toronto. From there, Foodies on Foot was born."

Hellman says the focus of the business is to create "food experiences" that step outside the norm to create a themed experience around gastronomic outings. These can range from creating intimate dinners in conjunction with the creativity of a great chef, or a themed trip like "Foodival," billed as Toronto's first carnival-themed food festival. "We draw inspiration from the experiences we enjoy most in our day-to-day life."

A typical tour visits five to seven locations, grouped around a certain theme. Tast-

ings run the gamut between sweet and savoury, pass through several different neighbourhoods and can last up to four hours. Cost is usually somewhere around \$65, plus the cost of a TTC day pass, if applicable.

One of the more popular outings is the exhaustive 501 street car food tour, that stretches 25 km along Queen West, beginning in Parkdale and finishing in Riverdale, and encompasses six neighbourhoods, including stops at everything from vegan restos to gourmet grilled cheese sandwich bars.

Prior to launching Foodies on Foot, Hellman and Czomko spent two years eating their way through the city, averaging one new location every two days. Hellman says research included meals at over 500 restos, and from those they selected the "tastiest, locally-owned businesses, and focused on those that are the most unique, have a great story and caring people. We pay each location for the tasting and develop true relationships with the locations that participate."

Building relationships requires time, and time is

something that's in short supply when your business is taking off. At present, the co-founders personally engage in all aspects of the business, which leaves little time for anything else, although they say plans are —ahem— afoot to partner with "people and organizations that bring a different skill set to future events we are planning."

Hellman says they are focused on developing more corporate and private events, while planning to unveil newer public events in the not too distant future.

The biggest pleasure derived from the business, Hellman says, is seeing people from all demographics come together at each event and form new friendships.

"Food truly brings people together, and when it does, inhibitions drop and we connect on the purest level. Outside of the day-to-day events, I love the freedom that owning your own business provides. While you do work more hours that you would work in a standard job, the freedom it provides is liberating."

To plan an event, visit www.foodiesonfoot.ca.