

Enjoy a moveable feast through Pasadena

By Michelle J. Mills, Staff Writer

Posted: 08/28/2009 12:32:43 AM PDT



Guests of the Melting Pot Food Tours try falafels and chicken shawarma at "Father Nature" in Old Pasadena during a walking and tasting tour through Old Town Pasadena, Saturday, August 15, 2009.
(Correspondent photo by James Carbone)

Imagine munching on a *torta*, nibbling on dim sum and sampling a Tibetan buffet all in one day.

You can do this, plus taste falafels, gelato, cake, chocolates and teas without driving to several neighborhoods.

For three hours every Saturday and Sunday, Melting Pot Food Tours' guides lead an epicurean walking adventure through Pasadena. The tour is filled with not only treats for the palate, but tidbits for the mind as well.

Melting Pot Food Tours was formed by sisters Lisa and Diane Scalia, Alhambra natives and graduates of Cal Poly Pomona. Lisa Scalia had been a real estate appraiser for more than 20 years and was seeking a career change.

"I love food and I love travel, and I thought how can I combine those two things into a business?" Lisa Scalia said. "A food tour is what I came up with."

She took the idea to her sister, who is in personalized food services such as catering and personal chef work, and they talked about it for about a year before launching the Los Angeles Farmers Market/Third Street tour last summer. In July, they added the Old Pasadena tour.

The sisters do a lot of research before creating their tours. First they seek out a neighborhood with a number of good eateries within walking distance from each other that are also independently owned and operated.

These restaurants generally have been in neighborhoods a long time, she said. They are run by locals . . . and they have a much more personal touch than a corporate restaurant."

The Scalias spend two to three months putting the tour together, which includes writing an informative narrative and securing the tasting stops and menu plans. They work with the restaurants in selecting cuisine that has a broad appeal for tasting.

The area for the tour also has to have an interesting history.

"The food is the main focus, but you can't just take people place to place to eat because they can do that on their own," Scalia said. "You have to add in the entertainment factor, so we tell the stories about the neighborhood."

Architecture is a big highlight on the Old Pasadena tour, which also makes a point in showing that the area offers much more than chain restaurants. Lesser known eateries take the tour spotlight, such as Tortas Mexico, Father Nature and Equator.

"I think Equator is my favorite stop," Scalia said. "I think it is one of the best Asian fusion restaurants. It's got the whole package: it's got atmosphere, it's got service, it's got food, it's got good prices."

Tour groups average 12-15 people. The fee of \$49 includes all the food. At this point, the restaurants are the same on every tour, but if there is enough demand, the Scalias say they will assemble different lineups for additional Pasadena outings.

The sisters are currently scouting neighborhoods for another downtown Los Angeles tour.

"It's a really fun activity for locals and visitors alike because L.A. is so spread out," Scalia said. "Chances are you know the neighborhood you live in and the neighborhood you grew up in, but you really don't know the other neighborhoods.

"It's really like being a tourist for the day in your own city."

If you are planning to take a Melting Pot Food Tours outing, Lisa Scalia has some tips to help make your experience more enjoyable.

"Be prepared to be entertained, it's not just eating," Scalia said.

Don't eat before the tour; save room for tastings.

Dress for the weather in casual clothing.

Wear comfortable walking shoes.

Remember to heave a hat, sunglasses and sunscreen.

Bring a camera. Video cameras are permitted, but check with your guide before taping.

Please leave pets at home.

Booking in advance is recommended, especially on holiday weekends, although tickets may usually be purchased a minimum of four hours before the tour starts. Reservations for all tour guests are required; add-ons and "walk-ins" are not available.

Bring money for parking (you will only need to park once, as this is a walking tour) or consider taking the Metro Gold Line, as the Pasadena tour start is near Memorial Station.

Arrive 10 minutes prior to start of tour.

Allow extra time in case the tour runs long or you find a place you that would like to return to that day.

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