

THE QUEEN OF KENSINGTON

Free your inner Bohemian by Hailey Eisen

SOOK-YIN LEE FOUND HER little blue row house on Kensington Place by accident. Six years ago she was heartbroken and was looking through the personal ads in *NOW Magazine* hoping to find something that would cheer her up. Next to the personals was a small ad for a house for sale in a back alley of Kensington Market. She was intrigued and went to check it out — in no time the house was hers.

“I got it for a song,” recalls this hip Canadian film star and host of CBC’s radio show, *Definitely Not the Opera*.

I met up with Lee last month at her 11-foot-wide pad that’s squashed in the middle of a row of mismatched houses. She was in the middle of a media blitz — in preparation for the premiere of her latest film, *Shortbus*, at the Toronto International Film Festival. The film has already created quite a buzz and Lee is full of praise for the film and its director John Cameron Mitchell. “It has a big heart, and it pushes the boundaries of sex on the screen,” she says. “It was a lot of fun working on it.”

As we walk through the mid-morning bustle of Kensington Market, Lee eases into the role of tour guide — introducing me to shopkeepers, pointing out her favourite hangouts and opening my eyes to a Kensington known only by its locals. “I’m mad in love with this place,” she says. “I crave community in a neighbourhood — and Kensington’s got it.”

The market, which in the 1920s was home to 80 per cent of the city’s Jewish population, is now a hot spot for tourists, foodies and hipsters alike. Residents of the market hail from all parts of the world and bask in the laid-back vibe of their small but vibrant, non-commercial corner of the city.

“Here, people from all walks of life happily coexist,” says Lee. “It’s hard to find that.”

A hipster’s guide to Kensington

Lee leads me out onto Augusta Avenue just as the strip is coming to life. Trucks line the narrow street, delivering piles of fresh fruit and veggies, merchants tidy their stores, and restaurateurs are hard at work preparing their patios for the lunch rush. The feeling is unlike anything else in Toronto — and for a moment I feel as though we are travelling through Europe. The first stop on Lee’s carefully planned out tour is **Casa Acoreana, Luis Pavao & Sons (235 Augusta Ave.)**. This coffee shop and bulk food store literally corners the market,

and, Lee says, it’s one of the best views of the hustle and bustle. Sip your coffee on the small roofed patio and watch the world go by. This shop is family run and has had its place in Kensington for more than 40 years. “They really make a terrific latte,” says Lee as we pass through the shop. Back out into the sun, we literally bump into Brad Kurtenbach of **Kensington Market Organic Ice cream (66 Kensington Ave.)**. Lee absolutely loves his organic homemade concoctions including lavender blueberry, rose petal and especially chocolate cayenne pepper. This is his third season servicing

Kensington Market, and locals are totally eating this stuff up. We say good day to the ice cream man and continue on our way. Lee, who is decked out in a vintage 1970s black and white polyester dress attracts quite a bit of attention as she walks through the narrow market streets. She’s friendly to all of the shop owners — many of whom are now her friends. “I’m really happy here,” she tells me. “A lot of artists live in this area, and we all hang out together.” Without much time to stop and observe the organized chaos that’s now taking shape on the street —



Toronto celeb Sook-Yin Lee adores the Kensington vibe

we are off again.

Next stop, **Latin American Emporium (243 Augusta Ave.)**. Lee is a huge fan of this small shop that smells incredible the moment we step inside. Lee greets the store owner with an “Hola” and then draws my attention to her favourite menu items.

“I came here yesterday for lunch,” she tells me. “For two dollars you can get a pupusa — it’s incredible.” Specializing in Latin American foods, tropical fruits and vegetables, this store/restaurant is worth checking out.

On our way out of the store, Lee marvels at how unique the selection of food is in this area. “I don’t know if I’ll continue to live here as an old lady,” Lee says. “But, I can imagine rolling myself out of my little house, 20 feet down the alley, and into the market to get my food.”

A night on the town

I ask Lee to show me where she and her artist friends hang out in the evenings because it seems to me that if you lived in Kensington you would never really have to leave the neighbourhood.

As I expected, Lee’s favourite places to go for drinks and dinner are just around the corner from her house.

“This is the neighbourhood hangout,” she says, pointing out **Ronnie’s Local 069 (69 Nassau St.)**. “It’s a great place to meet friends.” They serve all sorts of beer, and the patio is usually filled with hip Kensington locals.

For dinner, (or lunch) Lee tells me I absolutely have to try **Hibiscus (238 Augusta Ave.)**. Opened last year, this vegan food shop aims to meet a number of special dietary needs. They serve gluten-free pastries, sugar-free cookies and soy milk smoothies as well as salads, soups and sandwiches.

“When I eat here I just feel really good,” says Lee.

The restaurant owner, Joseph Tam, invites us in for some vegan ice cream. (It’s delicious!) He explains that he shops for all his food in the market in order to help out his neighbours.

Right outside of Hibiscus is **Mad Crepes**, run by Jessica Dubtton, a student selling her wares in the market for the summer. She’ll be serving homemade organic crepes from her little red and white stand until mid-October, so it’s not too late to sample her hard work. Kensington is a foodie’s paradise and organically minded shoppers will be especially pleased with the selection. Try **Urban Herbivore (256 Augusta Ave.)** for vegan takeout, and **4 Life Natural Foods (257 Augusta Ave.)** for fresh organic produce.

If, while in the area, you find yourself craving a good steak, Lee’s favourite spot is **La Palette (256 Augusta Ave.)**. This funky French bistro makes the best steak frit around.

“I’m a wannabe vegetarian,” Lee says with a laugh. “But I don’t have the discipline.”

But just because La Palette serves meat, doesn’t mean they don’t have a conscience. Owner Shamez Amlani is one of the organizers of Pedestrian Sundays in Kensington Market (a car-free event that runs all summer long), and his employees use bikes and rickshaws to shop for all of the food, wine and beer the restaurant needs.

Other fabulous, hip food finds in Kensington include: **Torito Tapas (274 Augusta Ave.)**, for a truly Spanish experience; **Rice Bar (319 Augusta Ave.)**; and **Big Fat Burrito (285 Augusta Ave.)**.

One taste of Kensington Market is sure to leave you wanting more.

Old school flare

No trip to the market would be complete without wandering in and out of the funky retro shops that line Kensington Avenue.

“You will likely find me hanging out in **Courage My Love (14 Kensington Ave.)**,” says Lee. “My friend’s family owns the store, and they have an astonishing knowledge of different fashion periods and designers.” Vintage fanatics will go crazy for this boutique and the fabulous finds you can snag here. Other shops to check out are **Exile (62 Kensington Ave.)** and **Bungalow (273 Augusta Ave.)**, among others. On any given day a treasure awaits you.

Kensington is also home to some unique high-fashion boutiques. **D’lightful (202 Augusta Ave.)**, has a limited selection of trendy designer threads.

Though Lee is currently doing a lot of travel for the upcoming *Shortbus* release, she wouldn’t trade her home in Kensington for anything. Unleash your inner hipster and join her down in the market this fall.



Big Fat Burrito, a favourite market eatery