



# KAREN VIVA-HAYNES

## IT'S ALL ABOUT BALANCE AT VIVA TASTINGS

BY SHERYL KIRBY

The slow and local food movement is sometimes perceived as being too strict, eschewing anything imported or out of season, but true food lovers know that it's all about balance. By all means, eat locally and seasonally whenever possible, supporting local farmers and industries, but to forgo important elements like olive oil, lemons or, oh, chocolate... well, that's just downright silly.

Karen Viva-Haynes and her delightful College Street shop, Viva Tastings, perfectly embody that easy-going philosophy. The Cordon Bleu-trained chef and caterer has carefully chosen a selection of items based, first and foremost, on flavour. With a philosophy of "never buying something that doesn't taste good," Viva-Haynes strives to fill her bright, airy shop with local and organic items, but also carries other hard-to-find artisanal foods if she believes them to be the best products available.

It's important to note that Viva Tastings is much more than a storefront café and take-out shop. Viva-Haynes runs a full-scale catering business out of an industrial kitchen in the basement of her home. She also offers courses, team-building exercises and tasting events. On top of that, she has booths every Saturday morning at both the St. Lawrence North and Brick Works farmers' markets, where customers old and new can purchase her beautifully prepared creations that include terrines, tarts, empanadas and other items that could easily be mistaken for pieces of art, so carefully conceived are they. Viva-Haynes refers to herself as a gourmet food artist, and even has a background in the art world to sup-

port that claim, as does her daughter, Amanda Kali Bent, who spent a year working side-by-side with her mother getting the shop up and running after it opened in late 2006. Viva-Haynes's husband, John Bent, lends a much-appreciated hand in the operation, as well.

Seven years of selling her wares at St. Lawrence Market have allowed Viva-Haynes to get to know the farmers there and to forge relationships with them. Her tasting menus have always been based on locally sourced and natural ingredients with no additives or preservatives where possible, but she got more into the artisanal side of things when she opened the College Street shop and found herself faced with the task of selecting products to grace the shelves of her store.

In both stocking her shop and in preparing her own culinary creations, she makes a point of supporting local food producers and artisans. The vegan-friendly pastry for her fabulous empanadas comes from Plen Organics. The fridges in the shop are stocked with the ever popular Monforte Dairy cheese; Cumbrae meats; Pingue prosciutto from Niagara; organic, fair-trade chocolates from Delight in the Junction; and baked goods from fellow St. Lawrence market vendor Sweet Everything. The shelves include spices from Arvinda's, chutneys from Hi-

**Viva Tastings terrines, above: Roasted carrot and Chardonnay-infused goat cheese; Leek, asparagus and shiitake; Roasted vegetable in roasted garlic tomato aspic**

malaya Gourmet, and honey products from Honey Pie, as well as flours from Merrylynd Organics. All coffee served in the shop is from Merchants of Green Coffee, who roast and grind the fair trade organic beans to order a couple of times a week. “Can you taste how fresh it is?” Viva-Haynes asks, as I sip a cup. “I won’t have anything that isn’t fresh.”

And while Viva-Haynes recognizes the need to carry and support local food producers, she has chosen to fill the rest of her shelf space with imported products that not only meet her “must taste good” philosophy, but which are also organic, fair trade or artisanal in some way. I spy Spanish Iberica ham alongside that Niagara prosciutto, and the shelves reveal a selection of various fair trade teas, unique preserves and jams, fair trade organic chocolate, as well as an intriguing selection of olive oils and vinegars.

A beautiful display of produce is artfully arranged in one of the coolers, each item picture perfect. In order to provide her customers with the freshest produce and to showcase local producers, Viva-Haynes has welcomed the growers right into her store. Every Thursday afternoon from 4:00 until 7:00, she runs a farmers’ market at the shop, with goods sold by farmers from Fosterholm Farms, Hagerman Family Farms and Vicki’s Veggies, all located in Prince Edward County. Certainly a win-win situation for all.

She also features locally grown produce at tasting events, including an heirloom tomato tasting and the First Fruits of Spring media event, where she threw convention on its head and offered attending media an array of savoury bites featuring strawberries, such as a pork tenderloin with strawberry marinade, bruschetta with strawberries in place of tomatoes (mixed with balsamic vinegar and onions), and strawberry and spinach salad rolls. She laughs as she admits that sweet stuff has

never been her passion in the kitchen, preferring to work with savoury items instead, but as customers regularly request sweet items, she has complied with homey offerings like rice pudding or chocolate pudding (both in smaller individual serving sizes) as well as an array of cookies and unique muffins baked in popover pans so they’re tall and fun. And with flavour combinations like ginger lime, cheddar and Worcestershire, blueberry and orange, and raspberry and white chocolate, they’re fun to eat, as well.

Viva-Haynes has created a space that perfectly embodies the philosophies of the Slow Food movement, of which she is a member. Everything in the shop is either local or organic, grown sustainably, and ethically produced, and everything has been carefully considered for its ability to please the senses. Viva Tastings is an inspirational shop where the customer can support local and organic food producers without compromising on the most important aspect of why we eat in the first place – because it tastes good. □

**Viva Tastings**  
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Sheryl Kirby is the editor and publisher of TasteTO.com, a website dedicated to the food scene in Toronto. She studied culinary arts at the George Brown School of Hospitality and spent many years running a concert and event production company where she got to cook for rock stars. She has written for *NOW Magazine*, *Gremolata* and the *Well Fed Network* where her work focused on food politics and production issues.

### Karen Viva-Haynes at Viva Tastings

