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Food-focused walking tours in L.A.

Sisters Diane and Lisa Scalia lead Melting Pot Food Tours. At the Original Farmers Market and in Old Pasadena, they tell stories and stop for samples. They join similar operators.



Melting Pot Food Tours co-founder Diane Scalia leads a group through the Original Farmers Market in L.A. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

By Jessica Gelt

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The story of Los Angeles can be told through its food. Neighborhoods, cultures and history come into focus through a bite of bread, a nibble of cheese or a sip of tea. But it's impossible to learn all this through a speeding (or barely inching along) car window. Like most of the world's great

food cities, L.A.'s gastronomy is best experienced on foot.

That's where a new food tasting and walking tour company called [Melting Pot Food Tours](#) comes in handy, not just for tourists, but for Angelenos looking to learn more about the splendid flavors of the city they love.

Founded in the summer of 2008 by sisters and L.A. natives Diane and Lisa Scalia, Melting Pot Food Tours (not to be confused with the chain of fondue restaurants called the Melting Pot) offers two regular routes. The first includes the Original Farmers Market and extends from Fairfax Avenue to La Cienega Boulevard down 3rd Street. The second explores the alleys and boulevards of Old Pasadena.

There are other food walking and tasting tours in the L.A. area: notably, [Six Taste](#), which guides guests through Little Tokyo and downtown L.A.; James Beard-nominated chef and author [Robert Danhi's](#) Asian cuisine tours through neighborhoods including Little Saigon and Thai Town; and [L.A. Commons' Trekking L.A. series](#), which offers summertime culinary tours of East Hollywood and elsewhere. In this mix, Melting Pot can best be described as a general-interest tour, with a mandate to entertain and please the palate rather than educate and challenge it.

The Original Farmers Market tour hits 11 stops, and an unholy amount of food is consumed, including "caviar cheese," baguettes and olives from [Monsieur Marcel](#); fresh peanut butter from [Magee's House of Nuts](#); rich monkey bread from [Thee's Continental Pastries](#); sausage and deep-fried yucca at [Pampas Grill](#); and decadent spider rolls at [Mishima](#), a small strip mall sushi star on 3rd Street.

In Pasadena, foodie *flâneurs* are treated to nine tastes, including fresh gelato from [Tutti Gelati](#); *carne asada* tortas and pineapple *agua fresca* at [Tortas Mexico](#); shrimp *shumai* and basil mignon at [Equator Restaurant and Cafe](#); and an in-depth sampling of tea at [Bird Pick Tea & Herb](#).

Family emphasis

The Scalia sisters are devoted to patronizing only independently owned and operated businesses. "We strongly believe that small, family-owned businesses give character, charm and depth to a neighborhood," Lisa says. And the personal stories that these accessible business owners share provide the bulk of the tours' humor, entertainment and pathos.

At [Mignon Chocolate Boutique](#) in Old Pasadena, third-generation owner Anoush Terpoghossian tells the story of her grandfather, who, in 1910, founded Mignon as a bakery in the Ukraine before being banished to Siberia by the Soviet Union's Communist regime.

He escaped to Tehran, where in the '60s the family business expanded to include chocolate. Soon the shah and his family bought chocolates from the shop and Terpoghossian's father came to the palace to decorate the Shah's cakes.

"We served the shah the royalty chocolates," Terpoghossian told a group of nine mostly Canadian tourists on a recent Sunday while handing out saffron marzipan and pomegranate dark

chocolate ganache, as well as deliciously bitter green tea truffles hand-rolled in matcha powder.

Diane Scalia begins the Original Farmers Market tour by mentioning that the market has more than 700 employees who, cumulatively, speak nearly 20 languages.

"Cultures blend nicely here," she says before guiding guests through a maze of stalls to [Bob's Coffee & Doughnuts](#), where they sip coffee and eat honey-wheat doughnuts, cinnamon rolls and maple bars. "Bob is the patriarch of the Farmers Market. He's worked here since he was 11; his father owned the original meat market."

A bit later, at [Littlejohn's English Toffee House](#), Diane tells a love story that makes the group sigh in unison. It's about how owner Michael Graves, who as a teenager apprenticed at the shop, eventually became the master candy maker.

One day he was working in the little dipping room, which looks out a large glass window on the market, and "a pretty woman walked by and smiled," Diane says.

"So he said, 'I have to go find her.' And she was dining upstairs." The rest, as they say, is history. Michael and his wife, Colleen, have been married for 10 years and have two children.

In Los Angeles, a city that can feel as lonely and vast as its miles of freeways, hearing the personal history of the owner of a shop or restaurant you may have walked by dozens of times has a way of sparking a cozy feeling of connectedness. It's a feeling that the Scalia sisters nurture with their warm, often quirky personalities.

'We live to eat'

Raised in Alhambra, Diane and Lisa describe an idyllic upbringing in a home filled with food and laughter. Their father was a real estate appraiser (a career that Lisa, despite being a die-hard foodie, later chose) and their mother a homemaker.

"We're of Italian heritage and basically our motto is, 'Where other people eat to live, we live to eat,'" says Lisa. Diane, who says she trained in her mother's kitchen, went on to become a private chef and caterer. She also wrote a cookbook called "Angel Food" that is now out of print.

Lisa recalls that the first time she realized how powerful a city tour could be was when her father took her, at age 15, on a journey from their home in the San Gabriel Valley to Wilshire Boulevard, where she saw the Ambassador Hotel, the Brown Derby and Perino's for the first time.

"I'll never forget that," she says, adding that she has acted as an L.A. tour guide for visiting relatives, friends and friends of friends ever since. So when she was looking to reinvent her career, starting a food tasting and walking tour company seemed a natural extension of her gifts. Diane was happy to join her.

A year later, with more than 1,500 visitors served, the sisters are beginning to establish a

valuable sense of community along their well-worn routes.

During a recent Farmers Market tour, Joan McNamara, the affable owner of [Joan's on Third](#), bustled out of her busy restaurant and shop to hug the sisters. They chatted briefly about hair products while a helper served McNamara's famous Chinese chicken salad and the Sardinian flatbread that she was trying out for the first time.

McNamara walked up to each person on the tour, checking to see how they enjoyed their food. A couple took a picture with her as a neighborhood woman walking her dog ambled by clapping her hands. "Ladies and gentlemen, Joan!" she announced. "Joan on Third!"

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