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## These tours were made for eatin'

Want to feel like a tourist in the Triangle? Take one of the walking food tours offered in Durham, Chapel Hill or Raleigh.

Taste Carolina and Triangle Food Tours have started offering tours for the culinary minded, and what surprises even the companies' owners is that most of the people going on the tours are locals.

"We're getting a lot of people who want to explore where they live," says Joe Philipose with Taste Carolina.

Leigh Eckle with Triangle Food Tours agrees. "The biggest thing people say to us, 'I've lived in this area, but I really don't know where to go to eat.' [The tours] give them a glimpse of what each restaurant has to offer."

Among the locals on these tours have been Jack and Elizabeth Snoeyink of Chapel Hill. "It sounded like fun. We both like restaurants," Jack Snoeyink said during a Triangle Food Tour in Chapel Hill.

It's also a nice thing to do when you have company in town. Lara Handler decided it would be a fun afternoon while her father, Norman, was visiting from Silver Spring, Md. So Handler, her father and her husband, Brian Moynihan, also went on the Triangle Food Tours' Chapel Hill outing. "They always invite me down to get a good meal," Norman Handler said.

One thing is for sure: You will not be left hungry after either company's tour.

I took a Chapel Hill tour with each company; each stopped at least eight times for a bite to eat or a sip to drink.

Taste Carolina's tour was more food-focused and included a visit with four vendors at the Carrboro Farmers Market. Its T-shirts proclaim: "Ready your Belly." The tours always include tastings of beer, wine, chocolate and cupcakes.

The Taste Carolina tour started at Neal's Deli in Carrboro and then moved to the farmers market where we tasted cheese, pecan pie, tomatoes and wine. Then we ventured to Miel Bon Bons chocolate shop, Carrboro Beverage Company, Acme Food & Beverage Co.,

Open Eye Café coffeehouse and roaster, and Bliss cupcake shop. We ended at Cypress on the Hill, a fine-dining restaurant.

Meanwhile, the Triangle Food Tour was more well-rounded and included details about Michael Brown's murals dotting Chapel Hill and the history of the Crook's Corner location, where Rachel Crook was murdered.

This tour started at 411 West restaurant, continued to Southern Rail, a restaurant tucked inside two dining cars, then went to Panzanella, the restaurant associated with the cooperative grocery store Weaver Street Market. Then we hit Glasshalf, the Carrboro Beverage Co., Talulla's, Cypress on the Hill and ended at Sugarland, a cupcake and gelato shop on the eastern side of Franklin Street.

A love of food

Each company had its own distinct beginning.

Triangle Food Tours started in 2007. Leigh and Peter Eckle run a company that helps RTP executives relocate to the area. In a way, their day jobs involve creating personalized tours for those families. They suggested to the Downtown Raleigh Alliance that someone offer culinary tours, like those in New York and Chicago. And so, the alliance asked the Eckles to organize them.

It helps that the Eckles love food. "When we were first married, we lived outside of Brussels," Leigh Eckle explained. "Of course, that starts your love affair with fresh food."

Philipose of Taste Carolina is a former lawyer whose day job is in corporate strategy for Kerr Drug. Philipose admits he is a tad food obsessed: "It's hard for people to understand how much I think about food. I'm not a skinny man for a reason." He had been mulling culinary tours as a side business when a restaurant owner connected him with a woman with the same idea: Lesley Stracks-Mullem.

Stracks-Mullem, who had just finished her master's in business administration, said she always found herself planning outings centered on food for friends and family. "I have to show off my city," the Durham resident said. Now she runs the tour company on a day-to-day basis and guides most of the tours.

As a result, she's lost at least 10 pounds since the walking tours started. But if you go on such a tour, don't expect the same result.

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