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# Sips And Cinema In Toronto (PHOTOS)

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Event tourism is a huge niche, be it sporting events like The Super Bowl and The Olympics, annual culinary and cocktail events, like Tales of the Cocktail and Aspen Food & Wine Festival, or Edinburgh's Fringe and Montreal's Jazz Fest for arts and theater savvy audiences.

These events, whether of an artistic or athletic nature draw in big crowds and big bucks to their respective cities. That's why everyone is vying for the Olympic gold or for the World Cup to make their city the epicenter of the universe, if only for a minute. South Africa's World Cup has done wonders to not only South Africa, but for all of African tourism.

I've been privy to many of these events from Sundance to Edinburgh, several times over as a theatrical and comedic participant and as a journalist. I've even whipped it up for a weekend at a Super Bowl in Arizona. I've cried with the crowds in South Africa at The Draw in Cape Town before the pending World Cup. I've yucked it up in Montreal for their comedy fest and I drank like a sailor, several times over, at Tales of the Cocktail in New Orleans, all in the name of work of course. Whatever the rhyme or the reason, I must say I've loved every minute and every one of them.

Event-driven travel is a great way to stamp the passport, put air miles in the bank and tackle tourism by enjoying a destination and immersing yourself in the event. Not to mention hobnobbing with like-minded enthusiasts isn't a bad gig either, as many a marriage or a business merge have gone down at many of these events.

So, when I got the invite to attend Toronto's International Film Fest, or [TIFF](#) as it is called, I jumped at the opportunity to celebrate the 36th annual festival. It was a mad mix of a few of my many interests and passions; film, travel and journalism and a great cuisine and cocktails.

An A-list line up of celebs were in attendance this year, from Clooney and BFF Brad to Bono and The Edge, not to mention our Lady Madonna who was there in a directorial position. The city was riddled with the celeb-set.

In the true indie spirit, TIFF is genuinely a great place to discover a small film that finds its way on to the biggest screens or perhaps showcases the next "it" star. That's mixed together with your basic blockbusters and A-list celebs premiering in a safe city that loves its cinema as much as its stars.

Based out of [The Hyatt Regency Hotel](#), yet experienced in theaters and venues throughout the city, over 400,000 people attended the fest this year to watch films from 65 countries. Naturally this level of celebrity and savvy cinema activity can only lead to one thing, a great tippie in Toronto to celebrate the city's cinema success.

After checking in to The iconic [Fairmont Royal York](#) in the heart of Toronto's downtown district, I had my first dinner and tippie at their Epic Restaurant, which is known for local and sustainable ingredients, including herbs and honey from the roof top garden. Their British black cod with Dungeness crab paired seamlessly with the 2008 Alvento Viognier from Niagara. Epic's extensive wine list showcases several Canadian wines from Niagara and Prince Edward.

For the cinema set, the film feeling hits you once you walk through their iconic doors. The Fairmont Royal York has a rich tradition in hosting celebs and royals alike and in providing the perfect backdrop for many a film, from "The Killing Fields" to "Grey Gardens" to "Cinderella Man," to name but a few.

My first day, in an attempt to pair sightseeing with cinema, I slipped in to [The Distillery District](#), Toronto's only heritage district. Gooderham and Worts Distillery once produced millions of gallons of distilled whiskey and spirits in the 1800s. Today the district is also a hub for shooting films, such as "Chicago," "X Men" and "Cinderella Man."

Before heading over to TIFF, we popped in to [Ciao Wine Bar](#), in the tony neighborhood of Yorkeville for pizzas and wine. Bono naturally stole every one's attention mid-meal as he and The Edge exited the uber trendy Hazelton Hotel, a hub for the celeb set across the street. I got caught up in U2 euphoria as I ran off to TIFF to catch Clooney and cast from Ides of March in a spirited press conference.

In true politico form, there to promote his highly politicized film, "The Ides of March," all eyes were on the ever-affable George. It had been a while since I'd done film press conferences. This was a great one and a fun way to jump back in, with George entertaining the room and naturally riffing with his A-list cast, who appeared to adore him.

After a balance of both cinema and city, I was ready for some serious plates and pours. That evening we delighted in wild Digby scallops and papardelle pasta and a series of Canadian wines at the trendy [Nota Bene](#) on Queen West and University Avenue. The cinematic scene was ever-present with black and white iconic shots of De Niro and the likes adorning the walls.

Post-dinner it was all about [Barchef](#), the city's standout on the cocktail front. It was a total sensory overload with the Victorian décor, hued candle lighting and arousing aromatics: a mix of herbs, spices and caramelized fruits. It was a true step back in time. Yet their approach is both classic and contemporary with a number of punch bowls and a list of molecular cocktails, such as the Black Truffle made with Black Truffle "snow," smoked salt, coconut foam, fresh lime rind, gin, coconut and elderflower liqueurs. This is Toronto's definitive can't-miss cocktail spot.

Admittedly, I caught a bit of the film buzz just one day in. I was already rearranging my schedule, as I had seen the city's can't miss two years before. Now I could simply enjoy being in the city and the cinema without touristy to do list.

I made the right choice in switching mindsets a bit as that Saturday morning with Coppola may have been the favorite moment of the entire weekend. The Renaissance Man was incredibly generous to the audience sharing stories, experiences and advice. He was so approachable and down to earth and started the seminar asking the audience of actors, writers, directors and techies, "How can I help you?"

Whatever knowledge he had, he was willing and rather anxious to impart on all, leaving us slightly better than he found us. The natural storyteller was only too happy to reminisce and share on-set stories, which had the cinema-savvy crowd hanging on the edge of their seats and on his every word. Yet he would have much rather shared his knowledge or an insight that would move the crowd forward in their careers and artistic endeavors versus just entertaining us, which he did in spades.

His imparted knowledge ran the gamut. Apparently, he learned how to work suits at a studio due to his experience of working the system in his New York City college to get the money he needed to pay for his productions, regardless of university budgetary restrictions. He's a big fan of extensive theater-driven games and creative explorations pre-shoot with his cast that range anywhere from making meals together to having a Venetian-style masquerade party. His final advice was for men to definitely get married and women to never ever.

The brilliant bon vivant claimed that it was his famed Coppola wine business that fueled his films later in his career. Not a bad day job, one that he recommended to the crowd, not winemaking per say, but a sustainable side job. His vines have and still do provide well for him and his artistry. Coppola was a tough act to follow, but another Clooney conference for his other film, "Descendants," stood up well to the test.

Our dinner at [The Fifth Grill and Terrace](#) that night was a spirited one. The French-styled steakhouse is an evocative spot, set on a rooftop terrace with spectacular downtown views of Toronto. The GM, Frenchie, was a consummate host -- and super sexy and cinema worthy in his own right. He even had a few drinks on the menu named in honor of him. Naturally, we had to tipple back. The Frenchie and the Frenchie Misses Miami complemented the perfect petite filet and lamb on the table and a trio of cheeses.

The final day was a flawless finish with a major Madonna moment, sitting in on her press conference for her film "W.E.," a movie about Wallis Simpson's affair with the king. I wanted a little more of the truth or dare Madonna at the table, but those days are long gone. She was professional, poised and a bit buttoned up, but her skin was insane, like a baby's bottom.

That was followed by a final dine at chef Tom Brodi's TOCA at the newly opened [Ritz Carlton](#), the absolute celeb epicenter of the festival with Clooney and Stacy Keibler among others in house. Everyone was in there, for press conferences and for celebrity sleep overs.

Arriving back that night things were a bit mellower, as all of the celebs were out at their premieres. So, we had the sexy and serene scene more to ourselves as well as the chef's attention when we went in to dine.

TOCA restaurant wowed us from minute one with its contemporary glass-encased cheese cave, wine display and walk-in wine cellar. The fancy fish and chips to start was utterly knee weakening with Mill Street beer-battered Yarmouth lobster, followed by a B.C. line caught halibut with Berkshire bacon as the main. That is a must. The Canadian angus rib eye was another table fave.

I finished off my TIFF experience with several toasts après dinner at TOCA Bar at The Ritz. Similar to the cuisine, the cocktails and the menu are seasonally based and the list consists of many twists on the classics.

This is not common in Canadian bars like it is in several US cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Portland, San Francisco, Seattle and several others. What we now take for granted is groundbreaking in this spirits scene. Trust that the Ritz crew at TOCA Bar are seriously pushing the Toronto cocktail envelope, serving the most sophisticated sips in the city with their spicy mezcal margarita and the chili-lychee Collins among other show-stoppers.

It was a quick trip in, but in the spirit of cinema, to quote an infamous actor, I'll be back.

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