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## Tracking the Bieb and the Bard in Stratford

By STEVEN McELROY  
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Souvenirs for sale in Stratford. Ian Willms for The New York Times

ON a sweltering afternoon recently I stood in a dusty skateboard park in Stratford, Ontario, surrounded by about a dozen sullen-looking boys, all around 17. I mentioned someone they might know, someone who a few years ago used to hang out there, too, and a couple of them said he was a jerk. They could have been jealous, of course: We were discussing Justin Bieber, who not long ago was a local kid busking on the street a few blocks from this park and is now a pop star estimated by Forbes magazine to have earned \$55 million, even before last week's release of his third full-length album, "Believe."

The brooding Stratford boys did not want to give their names, or to say much at all. As they lazily kicked gravel and avoided eye contact, I did not volunteer much either, since I did not think they'd be interested to know that I had come to the park directly from a sharp, moving production of "Cymbeline" at one of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival theaters nearby and that I was trying to learn my way around this very small town known for the Bard and the Bieb.



Stratford, much like its most famous native son, is a town with humble beginnings that now draws hundreds of thousands of fans — or rather, tourists — for the Shakespeare festival, celebrating its 60th-anniversary season through October. And while the festival is the main draw in town, it is not the only one; increasingly, Stratford is becoming known for its food and music culture, and of course for its homegrown pop idol.

I arrived in Stratford just as the festival's productions were beginning previews and before the crowds were there in force. Fresh off a flight to Toronto, I rented a car and took Highway 401 West to 8 West, a journey of about 80 miles that passes farms, the Mohawk Race Track, an occasional Motel 6 and a small village called Shakespeare that predates the festival by about a century. Stratford itself, whose population is about 32,000, has the feel of a sleepy suburb where the "everyone knows everyone" cliché could have originated.

Until you consider the festival. The annual event is a mammoth presence every April through October, even though the entire operation is diffuse. It comprises five performance spaces (totaling 3,728 seats) in a few different places around the city, in addition to a huge costume and prop warehouse. This year a season of 14 productions is being produced on an annual budget of \$60 million — enough to employ 1,000 people. The program includes "Much Ado About Nothing," "Cymbeline" and "Henry V" — all by the namesake playwright — as well as Thornton Wilder's "The Matchmaker" and crowd pleasers like the musical "42nd Street." Oh, and Christopher Plummer, from nearby Toronto, will appear in July with a new solo show, "A Word or Two."



A street in downtown Stratford, Ontario. Ian Willms for The New York Times

Today's festival is a far cry from its beginnings — in a single tent erected in 1953. For decades, the city, the seat of Perth County, had been an important railway junction, a busy hub for the Canadian National Railroad, with a maintenance yard for steam engines. In the 1950s, when diesel began to replace steam, Stratford's key business began to ebb, and the economy did, too. Enter the journalist Tom Patterson, who saw a Shakespeare festival as a possible savior. Though he had no background in the theater, he surrounded himself with people who did: He hired Tyrone Guthrie as the theater's first artistic director, and Alec Guinness brought star power to that opening production when he played the title role in "Richard III."

The festival that Mr. Patterson spawned is now sprawling, and it would be easy to spend an entire weekend seeing shows each afternoon and evening. Throw in a tour of the costume and prop warehouse, a visit to the festival's extensive archive — is that Christopher Walken as Romeo!? — and a stroll through the special 60th-anniversary exhibition on the festival's history, and you might miss the rest of what Stratford has to offer. That would be a mistake.

Since one of the town's major industries is catering to hordes of tourists, Stratford has a vibrant culinary culture dedicated to feeding them, much of it located around Market Square (actually a triangle), the hub of

downtown. The trick is positioning yourself near it, a strategy my partner and I followed by staying at the Three Houses, a bed-and-breakfast run by the very amiable David James Lester. We stayed at the main house, an 1870s Italianate building with a large common area for daily breakfast, where we were assigned the Yellow Room, a spacious and serene place tastefully appointed in its namesake color with a view onto quiet Brunswick Street.

Three Houses is only a few blocks from Market Square, where every Sunday morning in the summer, a Slow Food Market takes over the small open area, not too far from the Stratford Chefs School and a high concentration of restaurants and some remarkable specialty food stores — Chocolate Barr's alone could make the trip to the town worth it — along Downie and Ontario Streets.

As much as I love to wander aimlessly in a town I'm unfamiliar with, a bit of guidance seemed prudent, so I signed us up one afternoon for Flavors of Stratford, a culinary walking tour. Our guide, Maureen Argon, led a two-hour stroll that included stops at — and snacks from — a handful of places, including the Milky Whey, a spacious fine cheese shop (painted on one wall, a Clifton Fadiman quotation: "Cheese — milk's leap toward immortality"); Jenn and Larry's Brittle & Shakes, a father-daughter operation decked out like a 1950s drugstore soda counter; and Revel Caffè, owned by Anne Campion, who views coffee as a culinary experience. I ended up back at Revel for an espresso after the walk, and again the next day.

On a morning stroll another day, I wandered into the offices of the Stratford Tourism Alliance. Shelves along each wall were stocked with brochures and cards advertising a weekly farmers' market, which has been held on Saturdays since 1855 (separate from the Slow Food Market) as well as guided and self-guided walking tours of historic areas, antiques stores in the nearby towns of Shakespeare and St. Mary's, music and food festivals, and more.

Given pride of place in the center of the room was a table with copies of a "Bieber-iffic" map of the former stomping grounds of the boy star. Cathy Rehberg, the Alliance's marketing manager, said tween girls love to come for a copy of their own, before moving on to Scooper's, Mr. Bieber's favorite place for ice cream (where the wall bears a photo of Mr. Bieber with the actress and singer Selena Gomez, who visited last summer), before moving on to the skate park, Stratford Northwestern Public School and other places his aura might be felt.

Some will want to check out the bronze star embedded in the street near a spot — on the steps of the festival's Avon Theater on Downie Street, on the perimeter of Market Square — where Mr. Bieber used to play his guitar and seek donations from passers-by. Mr. Bieber is of course the most famous musician to hail from Stratford, but he's not the only one. A vibrant (for a relatively small town) music and busking scene continues today, on the streets and in bars like the year-old Evergreen Terrace Cafe, just off Market Square, which is becoming a local hot spot. According to a few Stratford residents, including Nathan McKay, a self-described "music virologist and community developer" (and former next-door-neighbor of Mr. Bieber), the bar music scene is a varied one, from bluegrass to folk to heavy metal.

Visitors to Stratford this summer can also go a bit more highbrow. The Stratford Summer Music festival (July 16 to Aug. 26) features classical, jazz, folk and world music in indoor and outdoor performance spaces, and Art in the Park, a summer art fair since 1968 (Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays), features the work of Canadian artists alongside the Avon River, which slices across the midsection of the city. The parkland around the lake offers plenty of benches and stretches of green to relax or picnic — and a jogging trail for anyone so inclined.

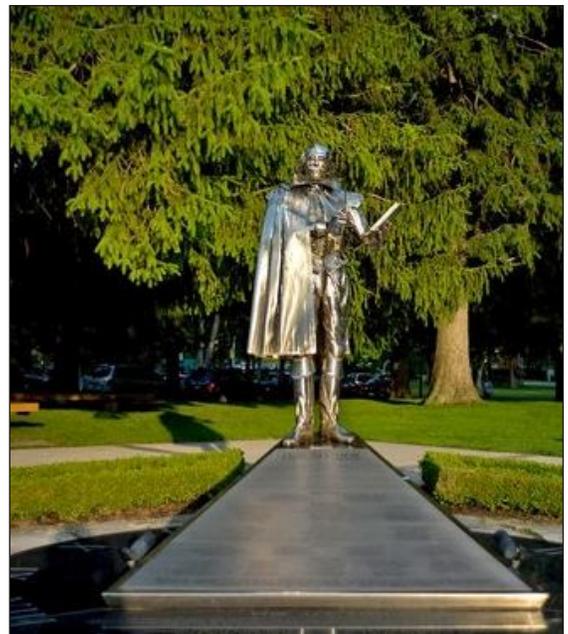
Stratford is the type of town that makes you want to stay longer, but if your schedule permits, leave a little time on the way back to Toronto for a quick stop in the town of Shakespeare. There, along with several antiques shops, are the Best Little Pork Shoppe (where the spicy pepperettes — sticks of cured meat — are addictive) and the Perth County Welcome Center and artisan market.

That was where I found my most durable souvenir from the trip: a T-shirt with a cartoon illustration of Justin Bieber and William Shakespeare together, smiling. "Bill and Biebs," it reads. In a sense, the shirt captures the modern-day essence of the small town that was about eight miles behind us — its un-slick marketing wins you over. My conversion didn't end with Stratford itself. I had arrived there a serious Shakespeare enthusiast and not so much a Justin Bieber fan. After I left, I bought his new album.

## If You Go

### WHERE TO STAY

Three Houses Bed & Breakfast Inn (100 Brunswick Street, Stratford; 519-272-0722; [thethreehouses.com](http://thethreehouses.com)) is one of many B&B options in the area. Rooms are available in the 1870s Italianate main house, one of two Edwardian town houses and a garden house (yes, there are actually four buildings). The owner, David James Lester, makes a great breakfast. Rates are 195 to 495 Canadian dollars (about the same in U.S. dollars).



A statue of Shakespeare.  
Ian Willms for The New York Times

## WHERE TO EAT

Bijou (105 Erie Street, Stratford; 519-273-5000; [bijourestaurant.com](http://bijourestaurant.com)) has an ever-changing menu that depends on what is available from local suppliers. The daily options are posted on a blackboard on one wall of this small bistro run by the husband-and-wife team Aaron and Bronwyn Linley, graduates of the Stratford Chef's School.

Revel Caffè (50 Wellington Street, Stratford; 519-305-1600; [revelcaffe.com](http://revelcaffe.com)) can be a hangout or a place to grab and go; the coffee beans come exclusively from a farm in the Nicaraguan rain forest.

Down the Street (30 Ontario Street, Stratford; 519-273-5886; [downthestreet.ca](http://downthestreet.ca)) and Foster's (111 Downie Street, Stratford; 888-728-5555; [fostersinn.com](http://fostersinn.com)) both offer casual dining with food made from local ingredients. Both are popular post-theater drinking hangouts, too, where you're likely to run into actors from the Stratford Shakespeare Festival winding down after their shows.

## WHERE TO SHOP (FOR FOOD)

Chocolate Barr's (136 Ontario Street, Stratford; 519-272-2828; [chocolatebarrs.com](http://chocolatebarrs.com)), run by the husband-and-wife team Derek and Jacqueline Barr, is one of two big, competing chocolatiers in the city.

Rhéo Thompson Candies (55 Albert Street, Stratford; 519-271-6910; [rheothompson.com](http://rheothompson.com)) is the other. Started in 1969, this candy store offers more than 100 kinds of chocolates, including a signature "mint smoothie" flavor.

The Best Little Pork Shoppe (2146 Highway 7 and 8, Shakespeare, Ontario; 519-625-8194; [porkshoppe.com](http://porkshoppe.com)) is just a few miles outside of Stratford, and offers lots of pork products as well as baked goods. Visitors from Toronto often buy meat, leave it in a freezer outside the store and pick it up on the way home at night after a visit to the Stratford Shakespeare Festival.

St. Jacobs Farmer's Market (878 Weber Street North, Waterloo; 519-747-1830; [stjacobs.com/farmers-market](http://stjacobs.com/farmers-market)) is a bit out of the way — just over 30 miles east of Stratford — but offers a chance to visit a nearby Mennonite community where horse and buggy is the main mode of transport. Choose from a huge selection of fresh fruits and vegetables, housewares and a lot more.

## WHAT TO DO

The Stratford Shakespeare Festival (Festival Theater, 55 Queen Street, Stratford, and other locations; 800-567-1600; [stratfordfestival.ca](http://stratfordfestival.ca)) is of course the biggest attraction in town, with five theaters and an annual season of more than a dozen productions. Currently celebrating its 60th anniversary, the festival also offers tours of its costume and prop warehouse, courses, lectures and other events.

Flavors of Stratford: Off the Eaten Path (877-812-8687; [flavorsofstratford.com](http://flavorsofstratford.com)) is a guided walking tour of several local businesses that includes tastings and the opportunity to meet store owners, and offers a good chance to get to know the downtown area on foot, too.

Stratford Tourism Alliance (47 Downie Street, Stratford; 800-561-7926; [visitstratford.ca](http://visitstratford.ca)) has its outpost in the middle of the small downtown area. Here, brochures and other materials provide a dizzying number of options for what to do in and around Stratford, either with a guide or on your own. Don't forget to pick up a copy of the "Bieber-iffic" map of the area, on which Justin Bieber's old haunts are laid out for a self-guided tour for your tweens ... or yourself.

