

# Chicago Tribune TRAVEL

**More travelers seeking out the best kitchens in the world**



**By Irene S. Levine, Special to Tribune Newspapers**

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When my mother took a vacation a generation ago, she wanted to get as far from her steamy stove as possible. Things have changed. Now, women and men are flocking to destinations that promise even a peek inside someone else's kitchen.

Travelers are signing up for cooking tours and courses (with professionals and home cooks), both to learn new recipes and hone their cooking skills. They're opting for vacation destinations that focus on food and wine and making pilgrimages to public

markets and food festivals where they can speak directly to producers and purveyors of food products. They're also finding ways to sidle up to locals, all in pursuit of more authentic food experiences tied to a specific place.

The geographical boundaries of culinary tourism have expanded far beyond the traditional cooking (and dining) meccas of Italy, France and Spain.

### **Search for authenticity**

Many factors coalesced to accelerate the growth of culinary tourism in the latter half of the 20th century, said Beth Forrest, an associate professor of gastronomy and food history at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y.

"After airline deregulation, more people began to travel," Forrest said. "With globalization of food and food products, they wanted to experience the foreign and exotic at home (such as at ethnic restaurants or specialty food shops) or travel in search of more authentic food experiences. There was a cultural shift, too, in that people began viewing cooking and eating as a form of entertainment."

Ignazio Podda, executive chef of Grand Lido Negril Resort & Spa in Jamaica, added, "In this turbulent economic climate, cooking vacations offer a down-to-earth, guilt-free vacation for every type of traveler."

### **Boot camp**

Lucretia Norman, of Jacksonville, Fla., yearned for one more mother-daughter getaway before daughter Ashley left home for medical school. Because the two had always enjoyed cooking together, even when Ashley was a toddler, they decided to enroll in a four-day Bistro Boot Camp offered at the culinary institute's Hyde Park campus.

Attired in chef's uniforms with jackets, black-and-white check pants and hats, they learned the techniques of French bistro cooking, from roasting to braising to baking.

They prepared and tasted soups, stews, omelets, tarts, breads and pastries, all under the tutelage of institute chef-instructors.

"We were totally immersed in food from the minute we got up each morning," Lucretia said. In addition to hands-on lessons and lectures, they had cafeteria breakfasts with young chefs-to-be, shared lunches with their small group and enjoyed dinners at the school's on-campus restaurants. At night, they retired to a nearby Marriott Residence Inn.

Each year, the institute runs dozens of continuing-education courses for food enthusiasts, ranging from two to five days, at three of its campuses: New York, San Antonio and Napa Valley, Calif.

### **Cooking tours abroad**

Wesley Davidson, of Vero Beach, Fla., had always wanted to see the south of France. Last year she signed up for a weeklong cooking vacation organized by Griffith Gourmet, a small company based in Chappaqua, N.Y.

Davidson and four other participants stayed at La Pitchoune, the small stucco house in Provence once owned by Julia Child. The pegboard on the kitchen wall still shows the outlines of her cooking tools. After spending each morning cooking in Julia's kitchen (with Cordon Bleu-trained chef Kathie Alex, an American who has lived in southern France for many years), Davidson leisurely explored markets, small towns and museums with other foodies.

"Seeing how the French shop in specialty stores really was an eye-opener," Davidson recalled. She brought home recipes to share with family and friends and considers the trip an "investment" in home cooking and entertaining.

### **Hotels, resorts and inns**

The list of hotels, resorts and small inns finding ways to woo food and cooking aficionados is endless.

"The hospitality industry is about providing something extra, and food is an easy way to show value added," explained the culinary institute's Forest. Here are just a few examples:

Though the resort is wine-themed (even the spa treatments are wine-infused), food plays a prominent role at the adults-only, all-inclusive Secrets The Vine, which opened in Cancun in August. Featuring eight specialty restaurants, the extensive program of daily activities includes regular cooking demos featuring Mexican specialties, guided kitchen tours, hands-on cocktail- or sushi-making classes, wine-paired gourmet dinners and coffee and wine tastings.

The Breakers Palm Beach, one of the most iconic hotels in America, is still owned by descendants of founder Henry Morrison Flagler, who built the property three generations ago. The luxury hotel has added an emphasis on food to its winning formula of sun and sand. During the growing season, the resort stages an Herb Harvest festival. Guests can tour the organic herb and vegetable garden beside the ocean. In addition, food and cocktail menus at the resort's nine restaurants showcase a different herb each week.

The culinary program at Rosewood San Miguel de Allende, a boutique property in central Mexico, includes a "food foraging" program. Guests accompany executive chef Victor Palma to a nearby farm that grows some of the area's highest-quality, chemical-free and nutrient-dense vegetables and fruits. After the group returns to the hotel's open kitchen with their bounty, Palma oversees a hands-on cooking experience using such local staples as chiles, avocados and varieties of blue, red, yellow and white corn.

BedandBreakfast.com recently published a list of 10 top culinary inns offering cheese-making classes, olive-oil tastings, French cooking classes, chocolate tastings and chef-for-the-day programs.

Whether travelers are seeking new tastes or new experiences, culinary vacations create special memories and bonds.

"Tourists once brought home kitschy souvenirs like refrigerator magnets and miniature Leaning Towers," Podda said. "Now they're more likely to stuff their luggage with wines, cheese and salumi or come back with photos of food."

### **If you go**

The Culinary Institute of American boot camps in Hyde Park, N.Y.; St. Helena, Calif.; and San Antonio start at \$895 for a two-day session. The institute warns that classes fill very quickly, so flexibility is helpful. 800-888-7850, [enthusiasts.ciachef.edu/boot-camps](http://enthusiasts.ciachef.edu/boot-camps)

The five-day stay at Julia Child's Provence home via Griffith Gourmet, Chappaqua, N.Y., is \$3,650. The company also offers other gourmet trips. 914-238-1425, [tinyurl.com/cwblw5e](http://tinyurl.com/cwblw5e)

Secrets The Vine Cancun's all-inclusive rates start at \$669 per room double occupancy. 866-GO-SECRETS, [secretsresorts.com/vine-cancun](http://secretsresorts.com/vine-cancun)

Rates at The Breakers Palm Beach start at \$299 per night double occupancy. 888-273-2537, [thebreakers.com](http://thebreakers.com)

Rates at Rosewood San Miguel de Allende in Mexico start at \$450 per night double occupancy. 888-ROSEWOOD, [rosewoodhotels.com/en/sanmigueldeallende](http://rosewoodhotels.com/en/sanmigueldeallende)

BedandBreakfast.com rates start from \$100 per night double occupancy. 800-GOBANDB, [bedandbreakfast.com/toplists/culinary-travel-inns](http://bedandbreakfast.com/toplists/culinary-travel-inns)

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