

THE PIE'S THE LIMIT

When You Cook Up Creative Vacations, The World Is Your Menu

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New York. Mexico. France. Some food enthusiasts go to great lengths to satisfy a craving, try a new dish, or perfect a cooking technique. Many even tailor entire vacations around learning to prepare meals with their favorite ingredients. And whether you enjoy saucy Italian cuisine, spicy Cajun food or decadent French desserts, there's a trip for every taste.

Not even the current economic slump seems to be curbing diehard foodies' appetites for culinary adventure. Half of all participants in a recent American Express travel survey



indicated that the opportunity to try new exotic dishes was paramount when choosing a vacation destination. No drive-thru taco for these folks – they prefer to travel to Mexico for the real deal.

Perhaps a trip to California wine country is more your speed. Or learning the art of cheese-making in Greece. Or preparing ceviche in Peru. Considering a culinary vacation? The following destinations should whet your appetite.

FRANCE

For those who enjoy cooking with fragrant cheeses and wines, heavy creams and rich custards, France is the destination for you.

Popular French dishes include frog legs, snails and ratatouille, along with sinful pastries filled with fruits or custards. The meals here are diverse and divvied up by region. In the north, you'll find heavy butters and sour creams, cauliflowers, artichokes and apples. Cuisine in the northeastern area, which is influenced by the Germans, often incorporates sauerkraut and beer. Coastline areas boast fresh seafood such as sea bass, herrings, scallops, mussels, crabs and clams. In some southwestern areas, meats include duck, geese and pigeon.

There are cooking schools located countrywide, but your best chance for one-on-one training with local chefs is in the countryside. A popular southern location for culinary tourists is Provence, which is known for a Mediterranean style of cooking that incorporates lots of olives and olive oil.

Classic Journeys offers a seven-day *Bon Appetit Provence* culinary tour, which begins and ends in Avignon. The spectacular tour features four cooking classes, including one-on-one lessons with the chefs at the renowned L'Instant

TRIP TIPS

1. Decide what **type of food** you're interested in, along with where you'd like to visit. Are you craving seafood and sandy beaches, or aged cheeses and fresh mountain air?
2. Determine **how much cooking** you'd like to do, and how serious you are about learning technique. Would you like to spend your days cooking one-on-one with a master chef, or spend a few hours per day in a cooking class, followed by tours to sample local fare?
3. Choose a **style of accommodations**. Are you drawn toward chi-chi hotels or cozy country Inns, for example.
4. Consider **time management**. Would you like a tour guide to organize your day, or would you enjoy some free time to explore the area on your own? Do you want to be part of a large tour group, or a more intimate affair. Most experts suggest sticking to small groups for a more personal experience.
5. When **hiring a tour guide**, make sure he or she is an expert in the area. You want to make sure they know the area inside and out. You don't want to have worry about all the little details - that is why they are there. Make sure they speak the local language, as well as English, so you can communicate.
6. **Other things to consider when planning your trips:** Don't be afraid to ask for references. After all, it's your trip. You want to leave satisfied.

Gourmand restaurant and classes at a local lavender farm. The trip's *piece de resistance* is a chef's farewell dinner replete with instruction at Michelin-starred La Mirande restaurant in Avignon. Guests stay at a 17th Century chateau, and participate in picnics and walking tours to capture local flavor. The trip also includes a visit to the Châteauneuf-du-Pape wine region, whose name derives from a castle built by the Popes when they ruled from Avignon (\$3,695 per person). Be sure to take time and explore the region's nature, wilderness, landscapes, historical cities and picturesque villages.

MEXICO

Epicureans who appreciate cooking with corn, rice, tomatoes, fried or dried chilies, sweet potatoes, avocado, coconut, pineapples and mangos are drawn to Mexico.

Indigenous dishes here include enchiladas, quesadillas, arroz con pollo, tortillas and tamales, along with fruit-based desserts such as mango pudding. Mexico blends ancient food traditions of the Aztec and Mayan cultures with those brought from Spanish colonists. Corn has been a staple in many dishes for thousands of years. Pintos are common in the north while black beans are popular in the Yucatan Peninsula, and food is often charred to create flavors.

Puebla is a popular destination for its culture and colonial cuisine, and is especially known for its mole, a sauce made from seeds, nuts, chocolate and spices. An increasing number of culinary travelers are visiting the Yucatan, located on the north of the Yucatan Peninsula, where the cuisine is less traditionally Mexican, and more influenced by the Mayan culture, as well as the Caribbean, European (French) and Middle Eastern cultures. Regional dishes include Poc Chuc, a Mayan/Yucateco version of barbecued pork; Queso Relleno is a gourmet dish featuring ground pork inside of a carved edam cheese ball served with tomato sauce and Sopa de Lima, a turkey, lime and tortilla soup. Habanero chiles accompany most dishes, either in solid or purée form, along with fresh limes and corn tortillas. Epiculinary offers a Yucatan culinary trip that includes six nights at an inn, cooking classes with a professional chef, tours of the markets and countryside, and visits to local residents' homes to watch how meals are prepared (\$2,745). Make sure to take time for snorkeling or diving in the crystal clear Caribbean waters and tan on its stunning beaches.

CALIFORNIA

California has been dubbed "The Land of Wine and Dine" for its top food producers and no-table wineries, and its cuisine is influenced by Mexico, Asia and the Pacific Islands. It's known for its fusion cuisine, which combines distinct cooking styles and ingredients. Californian Chef Wolfgang Puck is considered one of its pioneers by fusing European and Asian cooking. Travelers can shop farmers' markets for fresh local and organic foods in the Shasta Cascade region or in the Los Angeles area.

Wine connoisseurs will enjoy Sonoma and the Napa Valley, and wine and culinary tours abound in the area. One example is Classic Journeys' *Napa and Sonoma Culinary Treasures* six-day tour, which begins and ends in San Francisco. The tour includes myriad wine tastings and excellent cooking instruction (the region is known for its olive oil and other agriculture). Expect country picnics, visits to Chalk Hill Estates' culinary garden of herbs and spices, tours of artisan towns and a stroll across the Golden Gate Bridge (\$3,295 per person).

LOUISIANA

The state of Louisiana (aka, the "Gumbo State") blends African, Caribbean, Spanish, Italian and French cultures and traditions to create turtle soup, crawfish, jambalaya and other delicacies. Its signature gumbo dish typically consists of okra, tomatoes and an assortment of meats, such as chicken and sausage. Soul food is a popular southern cuisine that includes catfish and chicken, chitterlings (the small intestines of pigs) and greens. Most dishes have rich, robust flavors and are often spicy. Travelers can restaurant hop in the French Quarter, or venture upstate to visit the food markets. Louisiana offers a unique array of food festivals involving catfish, meat pie, duck and shrimp.

For a true adventure, tour the state's culinary trail through its five regions: Greater New Orleans, Plantation Country, Cajun Country, Crossroads and Sportsman's Paradise by contacting the state's tourism office.

While in New Orleans, make sure to visit the funky, charming French Quarter, the city's oldest neighborhood, check out the bustling nightlife and take a driving tour of the area's stately plantations.

Classic Journeys operates Cultural Walking Adventures, Culinary Tours, Family Journeys and Private Journeys in over 65 regions worldwide. The company has been named a "World's Best Tour Operator" by *Travel + Leisure* magazine and one of the "Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth" by *National Geographic Adventure* magazine. View a complete list of all tours and destinations at www.ClassicJourneys.com/World or call 800-200-3887. See just the culinary tours at www.ClassicJourneys.com/Culinary