

Baltimore

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In Tepoztlán, Mexico, Cocinar Mexicano's Magda Bogin shows how to make different kinds of mole.

TRAVEL Gourmet Getaways

Add a little spice to your travels with an international cooking vacation.

By Stephanie Citron

"Honey, I found the frozen pig's blood!" an exuberant Rebecca Miller exclaimed into her cell phone to her husband, Russ. No, the Millers aren't in a pagan cult: The Parkton residents are burgeoning chefs, and Rebecca had just located what they knew to be the crucial ingredient for a perfect Beef Bourguignon.

While at a one-day traditional Provençal cooking class, the couple had learned that creating a high-heat reaction between the proteins and sugars on the surface of the meat by braising it in pig's blood (through a chemical process known as the Maillard reaction) creates a coating of concentrated flavor. It's an arcane and highly sophisticated method of cooking best observed in the place it was developed: France.

While planning their Anniversary trip to France last May, the Millers sought out a full day of hands-on cooking instruction and processes. Tentatively, they wondered: "Are we skilled enough? Will the chef speak English? How will we find our way there?"

To alleviate their apprehension, the couple consulted with The International Kitchen, a U.S.-based travel agency specializing in culinary travel. The company organized a cooking class for them with Chef Daniel Peyraud at Atelier Culinaire Provençal in Provence, France.

Before the Millers departed the U.S., Peyraud's wife called them and provided them with driving directions to the marketplace in Aix-en-Provence where they would meet to select their provisions. On the way back to Atelier, after an afternoon at the outdoor market, the three stopped to pick red-colored wild poppies—in order to use the petals for crimson pigment in sorbet.

Atelier Culinaire Provençal cooking school is in an old stone house on a working vineyard at the Château de Clavier wine estate in Mirabeau, a Provence wine region. Bound stalks of fragrant herbs hang drying from the ceiling of the kitchen, making them readily available.

Daniel Peyraud's cooking lesson included the preparation of a multi-course meal. Along the way, he revealed his personal techniques and strategies for preparing the consummate Provençal cuisine. Peyraud had the Millers prepare the dessert (sorbet and crepes) first, so their hands didn't smell like garlic (a crucial ingredient for the main course) while preparing it.

They learned that sautéing and then pureeing pears is a preferred technique to thicken a white sauce (rather than adding flour, which diminishes the flavor). To bind brown sauce, Peyraud taught them, puree carrots with a lump of butter, or add cocoa powder.

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He also advised that every chef should have a separate cutting board for poultry. Peyraud showed them the proper way to remove the meat from the bone (the flavor is markedly diminished in store-purchased cutlets). Unexpectedly, he threw the bones into a pot with no water, browned them, and then built a sauce around it. "Sauce goes on the plate first, as a backdrop to present the food," Rebecca says.

Rebecca Miller pauses to reflect. "This one very special day has enriched the way we cook and eat," she says with a sigh.

To make sure that you have the same kind of successful and life-altering experience, ask yourself the same questions that Catherine Merrill, founder of Epiculinary Culinary Tours poses to her clients pursuing culinary travel. What is your budget? Do you want hands-on or demonstration lessons? What is your level of cooking experience? Do you want to be in a sophisticated hotel or resort, or are you looking for a farmhouse in the country? Do you mind driving and exploring the country on your own, or are you looking for an all-inclusive package? Do you want wine seminars too, or strictly cooking instruction?

Gail Chzarzan, a Baltimore commercial Realtor, was looking for a serious cooking experience in Provence. She "didn't want to be at the Cordon Bleu, spending the entire day learning to chop onions." The International Kitchen booked her into the cooking school at the Château de Berne in Lorgues, Provence. Her group shopped in the Lorgues outdoor market with Chef Pierre-Dominique Cecillon. "I kept pinching myself as we walked through the market with this adorable chef," recalls Chzarzan. "An accordion began playing nearby and suddenly the chef grabbed me and we began dancing."

If Europe's not on your wish list, you can always head west, across the Pacific Ocean—and you may save money in doing so. "The price of an entire deluxe culinary tour in Vietnam is less than the cost of most airline tickets to Europe," says Merrill. And you won't be roughing it: "The food and service is extraordinary." One possible journey begins in Hanoi with cooking lessons and accommodations at the exquisite Sofitel Metropole hotel (\$2,195 for seven nights, plus gourmet cooking lessons in Hanoi and Saigon, and cultural excursions around the country).

An Internet search for 'culinary travel' turns up pages of ostensibly niche companies that specialize in culinary tours and cooking classes. But largely, it is 'buyer beware,' warns Karen Herbst, founder of The International Kitchen. Herbst was a licensed travel agent for a decade, and she cautions that a traveler booking culinary programs needs to follow the same precautions as a regular traveler.

Take Italy, for example. Largely popularized as a destination of distinctive provincial gastronomic treasures, courtesy of the bestseller *Under the Tuscan Sun*, Italy captures an estimated 80 percent of culinary travelers. Due to the Internet's ability to host grandiose websites, "just about anyone with a hotplate is offering cooking classes," says Joyce Falcone, of culinary tour operator Italian Concierge.

The variety of cultural tours and accommodations vary as much as the cooking experiences. Booking agents offer package excursions or can customize a trip. Travelers can reserve cooking classes or tour regional wineries and food producers. Be aware that the more exotic and remote the destination, the more likely you will want an established facility or experienced tour guide to ensure that your safety and interests remain on course.

Wherever you go, check the credentials of the tour operator arranging your itinerary, urges Falcone. Do they specialize in culinary travel? How quickly do they return your calls? Do they have a staff on hand and offer 24-hour international telephone numbers to reach someone in case of an issue? Check to see whether they have been written up in any travel guides or magazines. And, by all means, do the same investigation with the establishments that they are recommending; specifically what, exactly, is included in the package? Find out what you're spending your money on: Is it for five-star hotels, or on the culinary portion of your trip? Is any transportation included? Are all meals included, or only those prepared with the chef? Is the instructor a local who "just likes to cook," or a professional chef?

A growing trend in cultural touring is a complete guided tour with an insider—but dispel any vision of a mammoth tour bus. "Anything larger than a van for twelve would never make it around those craggy, loopy roads on the Amalfi Coast," says Deborah Patterson, the painter, art historian, Italian linguist partner of Baltimore-based Italian Gusto. With business partner Josianne Pennington, her outfit offers cooking, wine, and art tours throughout Tuscany and the Amalfi Coast. Using a single hotel as base (no repacking), the group explores vineyards and wineries, visits producers of prosciutto and balsamico, while also learning key Italian phrases and exploring the art history of the region. Patterson and Pennington escort every excursion personally, and host pre-trip meet and greet cocktail parties. The trips range from \$2,500 to \$3,000 and include roundtrip airfare, hotel accommodations, transportation for scheduled trips and other amenities.

If you want to stay closer to home, there are plenty of exotic locations only a short jaunt away.

Cocinar Mexicano is in the small town of Tepoztlán, Mexico, just an hour from Mexico City. The village is renowned for ritually celebrating all of Mexico's ancient festivals, as well as its dedication to holistic and organic remedies. Conveniently, Cocinar Mexicano's New York City-area-code telephone number rings directly into the Tepoztlán house of

owner Magda Bogin.

Cocinar Mexicano (\$1,895 per week, not including airfare and accommodations) is a culinary program that is committed to immersing its students into traditional Mexican cuisine and customs. Each of the culinary workshops is planned around a major holiday.

Bogin greets her students at the JW Marriott in Mexico City, then guides them to places like Aguila y Sol, an avant-garde Mexican restaurant, whose cuisine reflects impending Mexican holidays. One in particular is dedicated to the Day of the Dead. "The whole meal was black!" recalls one attendee, Allison Sherwat, of northern Virginia.

Up first were black margaritas with black sugar cubes; next came empanadas stuffed with dark huitlacoche. "Huitlacoche tastes like mushrooms finely chopped and sautéed for a long time," says Sherwat. "Actually, it's a fungus that grows on corn. In fact, it's delicious." The main dish was duck turine with black mole.

After lunch, the group piled into waiting vans and headed for the largest traditional outdoor market in Mexico City. They purchased the native spices, herbs, and vegetables necessary for their cooking ventures. Bogin instructed the group to buy flowers, marzipan, miniature coffins, and iconic symbols to create their personal Day of the Dead shrines. (Rather than the ghoulish icons depicted by Americans, Mexicans consider this a sacred time to pay homage to deceased loved ones.)

Next it was on to Tepoztlán for their week-long workshop. At nearly 5,500 feet, Tepoztlán's breezy, year-round tropical climate cultivates a nourishing array of vegetation and herbs for its people and their livestock.

Bogin invites many different chefs into her kitchen to teach the techniques of a distinctive Mexican specialty or region. The class learned the preparation of simple dishes like guacamole and hand pressed tortillas, and ultimately graduated to making the perfect mole sauce—which, done properly, can take three days to create.

They learned how to select and use chilies, and the proper order in which to roast and toast seasonings and vegetables to achieve the right textures. Bogin took them to the outdoor market to select ingredients. Some meals would be in the homes of the townspeople, who shared their ancient recipes, folklore, and dinner tables with the visiting students. In the afternoons, Bogin arranged historic excursions to neighboring towns, and evenings were spent tasting local wine and sampling margarita recipes.

The most anticipated demonstration of the week is known as The Tale of Two Moles. "Mole is every traditional Mexican woman's pride" explains Bogin. It is passed down through generations. She invites two local women to the kitchen, who bring all of their personal ingredients. They assign prep work, then lead the students to the spice mill where everyone grinds. Immediately after, the group divides to join the local women in their homes to assist in the three-hour stirring process.

Upon departing, the chefs present their students with mementos of moahetes (mini mortars and pestles), declaring "the pleasure was theirs to share!"

Despite Europe's popularity, culinary travelers can still find fresh, exotic experiences on the continent. Amy Eber, a chef, teacher, and world-wide traveler living in New Jersey, found Cuisine International (a company representing mostly European cooking schools) through an Internet search. She then did a Google search of the highly recommended Glorious Greek Kitchen Cooking School and resident chef Diane Kochilas—and discovered that "Diane is the Ruth Reichl of Greece," says Eber. Kochilas's school is on the remote island of Ikaria (where a 4:1 goats-to-humans ratio is common), and is no easy trek from Athens. Eber flew from Athens to Samos, and then caught a three hour ferry over to Ikaria. Kochilas and her husband Vassilis Stenos met her at the pier.

Classes focused on preparing a full meal. Every vegetable or herb used grows in Vassilis's garden, or wild nearby. "If we needed rosemary, Diane and I hiked down and picked it," says Eber. "If we needed two potatoes, Vassilis would dig them up."

Eber and her classmates learned to make homemade phyllo dough with a standard hardware store dowel. They learned a new, waterless method of cooking octopus that preserves the flavor—the result was butter-tender octopus cooked with fennel, oranges, and olives. They marinated lamb chops in ouzo (anise liquor). For a finale, they rubbed tender Ikarian goat meat with garlic and rosemary, then brushed it with olive oil and juice from fresh lemons and roasted it in a traditional Ikarian wood-fired oven until it became crusty on the outside. (Eber proclaims, "Goat is the new beef!")

Eber was also captivated by the afternoon excursions. "You'd never find these people and places by wandering the island on your own." For example, there was the day they went to see a beekeeper. "Beekeepers are like winemakers; the

quality of their product depends on the livelihood of the crop.”

On this day, the beekeeper’s hives were on the other side of the island because the thyme that grew there was in bloom, so Kochilas showed them some harvested hives in her garage. Dressed in beekeeper outfits, the group learned to pull the panels out of the hives to retrieve the honey from the wax. The garage contained jugs of honey produced from every kind of vegetation on the island. Afterward, lunch consisted of homemade goat cheese, bread, and olives.

Ikaria was one of the first places on earth known to produce wine; Homer wrote about it in his epic poems. Naturally, they spent an afternoon with a winemaker, who scours the island for grape varieties close to extinction and revives them, producing authentic ancient flavors. “His sprawling vineyards went on forever,” says Eber.

Then there was the outing when her group hiked down to a circular natural stone pool mentioned in the ancient writings of Hypocrites. The pool is fed simultaneously by the cold ocean and steaming hot springs, and is reportedly a remedy for anything that ails aching joints.

“Part of the experience,” Eber says, “is getting to see and taste things that you never knew existed.”