

CULINARY TRAVEL STORIES FROM SMARTERTRAVEL.COM

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By Molly Feltner, SmarterTravel.com staff

Food is the world's most popular hobby. It's not just about eating, though. Food, and now cooking, is a big attraction in many popular destinations, not just for gourmands and chefs, but for any traveler who enjoys a meal and feels at home in the kitchen. In areas known for good eating, you'll often find tour operators, cooking schools, hotels, and even individual chefs offering tours and classes geared toward visitors who want to learn about local foods and traditional cooking methods. Options can range from tours of markets and specialty food shops to multi-day packages with intensive hands-on cooking classes with top chefs and visits with food artisans.

To inspire your culinary vacation planning, here's a look at five top destinations and suggestions for good-value food tours and cooking packages.

Provence, France

Referred to by the locals as cuisine du soleil et du coeur—cuisine of sun and heart—Provençal gastronomy places an emphasis on using age-old recipes and methods while cooking with nothing but fresh meats and locally-grown produce in this sun-drenched corner of France. And, unlike the rest of the country, the natural flavors of food are not drowned with heavy sauces but expressed more fully with herbs and olive oil. "The cuisine is quite varied and lighter on the system, with tremendous flavor through the warmth of garlic and onions, the acidity of tomatoes and lemon juice, the tartness of goats' cheese, and the light touch of herbs," says Madeleine Vedel, owner of the [Cuisine et Tradition](#) cooking school in Arles.

Seafood serves as a base for Provençal classics such as soupe de poisson (fish soup) and bouillabaisse (a fish dish served with a side of broth), and ingredients like lavender and black truffles lend an exotic flavor to many dishes. Almost every meal entails the use of olive oil and fresh vegetables, primarily tomatoes, eggplants, and zucchini.

You can find cooking schools in Provence's major cities, but for more authentic seasonal cooking, you'll be happier taking a home-based class in a small countryside village. Quality multi-day classes aren't cheap (you can easily pay upwards of \$5,000 for a week), but there are more affordable options.

For slightly more than \$700 per couple, you can book a three-day course with accommodations at the [Auberge la Fontaine](#) in the hilltop village of Venasque in the Vaucluse region. Near the Mediterranean coast in the village of La Cadriere d'Azur, the [Hostellerie Berard](#) schedules five-night cooking classes once or twice per month with Chef Rene Berard. Double occupancy rates start at \$1,634 and include accommodations, breakfast, four cooking classes, four lunches with wine, and visits to local markets and artisans.

Vedel, with her husband Erick, offer more focused weeklong cooking programs throughout the year at [Cuisine et Tradition](#), which is also a B&B. Commencing September 24, their "Hiking & Feasting Week" (\$1,855 per person, double occupancy), makes you earn your meals with hikes led by Madeleine through the countryside and along seaside cliffs. You'll also enjoy evening cooking classes and meals with Erick, shopping in the Arles market, and visits with a cheese maker, honey maker, and other local food artisans. For the same rate, you can book the "Fall Classic Gourmand Week" from October 8 to 15, which skips the strenuous hiking in favor of more artisan and market visits.

In the village of Condorcet near Nyons, personable American hosts Anne and David Reinauer run in-depth, weeklong ["French Cooking Classes: A Week in Provence"](#) with French chef Daniel Bonnot. Programs cost \$2,800 per person and include six nights' accommodations; most meals and wine; five cooking classes; and visits to the local market, wineries, an olive-oil mill, a lavender distillery, and other food producers and sellers.

For regional travel information, go to the official [France tourism website](#) and click on the link to the area or city in Provence that interests you.

New York City

Why travel the world in search of authentic ethnic cuisine when you can sample the best dishes from North and South America, Europe, and Asia in one place: New York? "Every culture on earth lives within one of the five boroughs, so there's a multitude of culinary choices," says Richard Ruben, a chef-instructor at New York's [Institute of Culinary Education](#). Addie Tomei, who runs [Savory Sojourns](#) culinary tours, adds: "All the different ethnic groups want to have the food they had at home, and they want it to be authentic. Plus, New Yorkers are very demanding and used to eating well, so standards are high."

It would take many visits to fully experience the culinary offerings of all the city's different ethnic neighborhoods, so it's best to limit your explorations to one or two areas at a time. Several tour companies host in-depth food tours of individual neighborhoods that highlight some of the location's top fresh-food markets, specialty shops, and eateries. Some even feature cooking demonstrations and lessons.

[Foods of New York Tours](#) runs two of the most affordable programs in the city: a Greenwich Village tour, which runs every day and includes food tastings at bakeries, specialty food stores, a cheese shop, and an authentic New York pizzeria; and a Chelsea Market tour, which runs Friday to Sunday and features stops at a high-end fish market and the largest produce shop in the city. The three-hour tours cost \$38, which covers all tastings and a New York food guide.

Susan Rosenbaum, the guide for [Enthusiastic Gourmet tours](#), also leads affordable tours of the Lower East Side, Chinatown, and Little Italy. Tours last about three hours and cost \$45, which covers all tastings. Visit her website for an up-to-date tour schedule.

The charming Brooklyn-born Addie Tomei (who happens to be the mother of Marisa Tomei) and her guides at [Savory Sojourns](#) lead 18 different itineraries plus custom tours around the city. The tours hit all the most popular ethnic neighbors, plus a few lesser known gems like the Middle Eastern markets and restaurants along Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue. Savory Sojourns' tours tend to include more than the typical walking tour, such as cooking lessons, sit-down meals with wine, and behind-the-scenes visits with chefs, depending on the itinerary. Costs range from \$95 to \$175 per person. Tours can be booked by individuals on specific dates or arranged any time by groups with six or more people.

[The Institute of Culinary Education](#) (ICE), New York's largest cooking school, runs in-depth, half-day tours that focus on a particular neighborhood or type of cuisine. For example, Richard Ruben leads a tour and cooking class centered on the Union Square market, and chef Gerri Sarnataro runs a program that visits the best pastry and

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chocolate shops in Lower Manhattan. Tours cost \$60 to \$100 and are scheduled throughout the year. Amateur chefs with more time to spare can sign up for ICE's "[Cooking in New York: A Five-Day Global Culinary Adventure](#)" that combines neighborhood tours and restaurant visits with cooking lessons at the Institute. Classes start June 26 and October 23 and cost \$975.

Read SmarterTravel.com's [New York Travel Guide](#) for information about transportation, where to stay, and what to do.

Oaxaca, Mexico

The state of Oaxaca (wuh-HAH-kah) is the culinary heart of Mexico, where thousands of years of indigenous cooking traditions have blended with hundreds of years of Spanish influence to create cuisine with a surprising mix of flavors. Ingredients like chili peppers and chocolate are often combined in one dish, and locally-grown produce and meats are picked up fresh from the market and painstakingly prepared using traditional tools like volcanic stone mortars and clay pots. "In Oaxaca we make slow food at its best," says Susana Trilling, a chef who runs the [Seasons of my Heart](#) cooking school.

Sometimes called the "land of seven moles," Oaxaca is best known for its seven major varieties of mole, a chili-based sauce often served over chicken that can require 30 or more different ingredients to make it properly. Mole negro (black), a sweet variety flavored with cocoa, is the most popular, but mole amarillo (yellow), verde (green), and rojo (red) are also common. Many dishes also incorporate corn, quesillo (string cheese), and chilies. Chapulines (fried grasshoppers) are often served as an appetizer or snack, and mezcal, a smoky tequila-like liquor is the Oaxaquenos' drink of choice.

Oaxaca City, the capital, and its surrounding villages host numerous cooking schools, most of which are extremely affordable in comparison to similar programs in Europe. At Trilling's [school](#) in Rancho Aurora, day classes cost \$75 and include transportation, a visit to a local market, brunch, a lecture on Oaxacan food, and the cooking of a five-course meal. You can also book multi-day classes and specialty food tours that focus on a specific region or festival, such as a Day of the Dead festival course. Eight-night classes that include accommodations and airport transfers cost \$1,695.

In downtown Oaxaca, Chef Iliana de la Vega teaches classes on request at her restaurant El [Naranjo](#), probably the most internationally renowned restaurant in the city. Classes cost \$60 and include a visit to the Benito Juarez market and lessons for a seven-dish meal preparation. Or, for \$50 per person, you can opt for daily home-based classes at [Casa Crespo](#) with Oscar Carrizosa.

For a more thorough exploration of Oaxaca's restaurants, you can book Zapotec Tours' seven-night [Food of the Gods Festival tour](#) from October 7 to 14. Double-occupancy rates start at \$689 per person and include seven nights' accommodations at a Oaxaca hotel, an arrival transfer, daily breakfast, three dinners and two lunches at a selection of the city's top restaurants (including El Naranjo), plus several food lectures and cooking demonstrations.

To learn more about Oaxaca travel, go to the official [Oaxaca state tourism website](#) (Spanish only) or a third-party site such as [MexOnline](#) or [Go-Oaxaca](#).

Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand

Thailand has some of the most diverse and flavorful cuisine in Asia, strongly influenced by its neighbors and resident ethnic minorities from India, China, Malaysia, and other countries. "Thai food has so many different flavors such as hot, spicy, sweet, sour, salty, and bitter," says Sirisuda Khamngeon of the [Chiang Mai Thai Cookery School](#). "Two or more flavors are often mixed together in one dish, so Thai food is quite different from any other cuisine."

Dishes such as tom yum goong (spicy prawn soup) and gaeng kheaw waan (green curry) are eaten all over the country, but Thailand also has four distinct culinary regions, each with its own local specialties. The central region is known for dishes featuring jasmine rice, while sticky rice and noodles are more popular in the north. Meals in the northeast tend to be savory, and southerners spice their food fiery hot.

Bangkok, the nation's capital, is a good place to experience cuisine from all four regions, and several of the city's ritziest hotels offer Thai cooking schools that are open to anyone. The highly rated [Oriental](#) runs the best-known school in the city, with morning classes scheduled Mondays to Saturdays. Classes cost \$120 each. A different meal is prepared every day of the week, so you can take multiple classes without repeating dishes. The hotel also has a [five-night package](#) that includes accommodations, four cooking classes, daily breakfast, limousine airport transfers, a welcome dinner, and an hour of massage. Double-occupancy rates start at \$1,450 per person.

More affordable classes can be arranged at [Nipa](#), the Landmark Bangkok's traditional Thai restaurant, seven days a week. Prices range from \$39 for a one-day course to \$144 for a five-day course covering cooking lessons, a gift box with spices and herbs, a recipe book, an apron, and a voucher for lunch or dinner at the restaurant. The preparation of a different five-course meal is demonstrated each day. Special weekend rates at the four-star Landmark hotel start at \$99.

There are also options for more hands-on courses taught in home-style facilities in Bangkok and the northern city of Chiang Mai. [The Baipai Thai Cooking School](#) in Bangkok has one- to five-day cooking classes that run Tuesdays through Sundays and cost \$37 per day. Each day, students prepare a four-course meal at their own cooking station with the help of instructors. Free transfers to the school are also included.

If you want to take cooking classes outside overcrowded Bangkok, the Chiang [Mai Thai Cookery School](#) in northern Thailand, which is operated by a Thai-English couple, Sompon and Elizabeth Nabnian, is an excellent option. One- to five-day classes run every day and start at a mere \$26 per day. Classes include a morning activity such as a visit to the market to buy ingredients, morning and afternoon cooking lessons and meals, and transportation to and from the school.

For more travel information, go to the [Tourism Authority of Thailand website](#).

Tuscany, Italy

Tuscany is home to cuisine so fresh, simple, and tasty, that its dishes, which were once considered peasant food, now draw visitors from around the world. The best meals are always made from whatever is in season and picked up fresh at the market that day. "Tuscan cooking is fairly straightforward and very savory," says chef Guido Stucchi-Prinetti of Badia a Coltibuono. "There is a rather liberal use of selected herbs: rosemary, sage, thyme—always fresh."

Saltless Tuscan bread, tomatoes, beans, and, most importantly, extra virgin olive oil are elemental to most meals. At a proper full Tuscan meal, anti-pasta and primo courses of gnocchi or pasta precede secondo courses of local meats like prized Chianina beef or wild game such as rabbit or boar.

Demand for culinary travel in Tuscany is high and even though there are dozens of cooking schools and tour options in the region, spots in popular schools can sell out early and prices are steep. Booking a weeklong package with a lesser known school or taking a shorter one- to three-day class with a top chef can help ease pricing and availability woes.

For \$2,490 per person you can book a seven-night "[Italian Cookery Course](#)" package at the Casa Ombuto villa in Poppi or the secluded Torre del Tartufo villa in Chiaveretto (both in the hills between Florence and Arezzo). Packages at both locations include villa accommodations, most meals with Tuscan wines, four hands-on cooking lessons, and excursions to locations such as wineries, a salami factory, and a traditional chestnut mill. Courses are scheduled several times per month through October at both villas.

In Florence, [L'Amore di Cucina Italiana](#) runs a weeklong course in the offseason, from November 28 to December

5, for \$2,695 per person. The course includes accommodations at the Hotel dell Arti, five cooking classes, most meals, sightseeing excursions, and visits to food artisans and markets.

If you'd prefer to take a short course, Stucchi-Prinetti's [Badia a Coltibuono](#) wine resort in Chianti offers one- and three-day classes in a nearly 1,000 year-old former abbey. Day classes can be arranged by appointment on Wednesdays and Fridays. The \$199 cost covers a cooking lesson, a wine sampling, lunch, and a guided tour of the cloisters and aging cellars. Three-day "Traditional Tuscany" classes cost \$1,149 per person (double occupancy) and include three nights in what was once a monk's cell, three cooking classes, a market visit, olive oil and wine tastings, and all meals. Start dates are scheduled in July and October.

Chef and cooking personality Judy Witts Francini leads one of the most acclaimed short cooking programs in Tuscany, the [Divina Cucina](#). All classes are led by Judy, and begin with shopping in Florence's central market to purchase ingredients for a custom menu and to taste olive oil, cheeses, vinegar, and other foods. Classes also include a wine pairing by a sommelier, a hands-on cooking class and meal, and a Divina Cucina cookbook and apron. Classes are scheduled throughout the year and cost \$375 for one day, \$700 for two days, and \$1,000 for three days.

To learn more about Tuscany travel, go to the official [Italian Government Tourist Board](#).

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