

FORK

IN THE ROAD

Travelers are discovering the joys of experiencing a destination through its food and drink.

BY THERESA GAWLAS MEDOFF

When AAA members and best friends Lara Deloza and Wendy Kinna, both of Delaware, visited Las Vegas to celebrate their 35th birthdays, they didn't go for the gambling or the partying. "We're not gamblers, and we both really appreciate food in all its forms, so it became a more culinary-focused trip," Deloza says. "We made a list of restaurants we wanted to try. There were a lot on the list. Too many. We only had five days, so we made like Hobbits. We'd have first breakfast, second breakfast, first lunch, second lunch, etc. We still talk about the chef's tasting menu at Red Square [at the Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino.]"



Outstanding in the Field meal at North Arm Farm, Pemberton, British Columbia

COURTESY OF JEREMY FENSKÉ/OUTSTANDING IN THE FIELD



An Outstanding in the Field event at Growing Power's community garden in Chicago's Grant Park



COURTESY OF CAROL WALLER

Trailing of the Sheep parade in Ketchum, Idaho

COURTESY OF JEREMY FENSKÉ/OUTSTANDING IN THE FIELD

The pair so enjoyed their Vegas vacation that on their annual birthday getaways they now focus on their food choices as much as on other tourist experiences. One year it was Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina, to enjoy the sunshine and Southern cuisine; another year, New York City for theater and dine-arounds; then San Antonio and Austin, Texas, where the culinary highlight was watching chef Paul Qui at work in the open kitchen of his restaurant Qui; and last year, Washington, D.C., with an "around the globe" dining theme.

Deloza and Kinna aren't alone in seeking out culinary experiences when traveling. Food tourism, as it's often called in the travel business, is growing rapidly. Between 2006 and 2013, the percentage of U.S. leisure travelers who "travel to learn about or enjoy unique and memorable eating and drinking experiences" jumped from 40 percent to 51 percent, according to Mandala Research.

Just think about all the photos of food your friends post on Facebook, and you'll have to agree that people take their food seriously.

FROM PIZZA TO HIGH-END RESTAURANTS

"It's an interesting phenomenon. [Food tourism] is not just on the rise with people who would identify as foodies, but with people in general, because it's not just about looking for a gourmet experience. There are folks that are just looking to take pizza tours or brewery tours," says Patrick Evans-Hylton, Virginia's culinary adviser for tourism.

As Evans-Hylton notes, food tourism extends well beyond dining at high-end restaurants. It includes not only wine trails but also the ale trails, whiskey trails and bourbon trails that have sprung up all over. South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Kentucky and Mississippi all tout barbecue trails. The food scene is the number-two reason that visitors travel to Charleston, South Carolina, according to the city's tourism office. And with good reason. Charleston, a city of just 128,000 residents, boasts four James Beard Award-winning chefs. The popular Charleston Wine and Food Festival, coming March 2-6, 2016, attracts more than 23,000 people eager to wine and dine.

Many food and drink festivals have added a host of additional experiences that make them even more worth traveling for. Consider the four-day Trailing of the Sheep Festival held each October in Idaho's picturesque Wood River Valley. Not only does it include multiple opportunities to feast on lamb, but it also includes cooking classes; a fiber festival with workshops, exhibits and lectures; a folklife fair featuring Basque, Scottish, Polish and Peruvian dance and music, plus sheep shearing and a wool exhibition; and perhaps the best photo op of all: 2,000 sheep parading down Main Street in Ketchum.



Dr. Diez Canseco, a descendent of a Peruvian president, welcomes guests into his home for a meal of regional specialties at a Trafalgar Be My Guest event.

IN THE KITCHEN WITH THE MASTERS

If lamb-cooking classes in Idaho don't appeal, you can take enthusiast classes at such famed cooking schools as Paris' Le Cordon Bleu, Julia Child's alma mater, or the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York. You can learn to make cheese at Mountain Goat Lodge, a bed-and-breakfast on a goat farm in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. You can help milk the goats, too.

AAA member and amateur chef Cara O'Donnell has planned several weekends in Hyde Park, New York, around Saturday cooking classes at the Culinary Institute of America. And when the Reston, Virginia, resident took a trip to Italy, her first step was to sign up for a cooking class in Assisi. "We didn't have hotels yet; we hadn't booked a rental car. The cooking class was number one on the agenda," she says. It turned out to be a great way to become immersed in Umbrian life, she adds. "The woman held the cooking classes in her home. We went to the market with her first and picked out the ingredients, then walked back up the hill to her home to make and eat all these foods—and, of course, there was plenty of wine."

O'Donnell, a self-described "wine geek," has visited New York's Finger Lakes and California's Sonoma wine regions many times, but her bucket-list wine destination is Spain.



Guest chefs from Birch and Barley in Washington, D.C., prepare dinner at Arcadia Farm at Woodlawn in Alexandria, Virginia.

FOOD TOURS, FORAGING AND DINING ON THE FARM

Food- and drink-themed tours have also become popular ways to get to know a destination, says Joyce Weinberg, founder and owner of City Food Tours, which offers a variety of such tours in Philadelphia and New York City, including food tours of Greenwich Village and Chinatown in New York as well as new Prohibition-themed cocktail tours in both cities. "You basically learn everything about a place through the food that's eaten in the city. It tells you the complete history, geography, economic history, culture, demographics—you name it," she says. "It's a great way to sum up a place."

And these days, you can not only shop at local farmers markets or pick your own fruit at an orchard, but you can also go on a guided food foraging expedition. Among the many experiences on Tauck's Grand European Family Holiday, for example, is a truffle-hunting expedition in Italy's Umbria region with truffle-sniffing dogs leading the way.

Trafalgar's Hawaiian Explorer First Class trip includes a farm-to-fork experience in which guests "forage" on a farm for fresh produce such as lettuce, snow peas, red dragon carrots and watermelon radishes from which the chef makes the salad course for a dinner outdoors. The meal finishes up with coffee made from beans grown on the organic farm.



Guests shop at a local Florentine market with Chef Libero before heading to his restaurant for a pasta-making lesson.



The 2016 Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival

Each year on the last weekend of September, Galway City, Ireland, celebrates the "bold man that first ate an oyster" (Jonathan Swift) at the Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival, the world's longest running oyster festival. Established in 1954, the Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival has welcomed more than a half-million visitors who have consumed more than 3 million oysters—all washed down with champagne or stout while listening to some of the best musicians in Ireland.

AAA members can enjoy the opening night of the 2016 festival with an exclusive AAA departure, September 20–25, 2016, from \$1,275 per person.

Go to AAA.com/Explorations for more information about this and other culinary-themed vacations developed exclusively for AAA members.

The Foraging Mixology Experience at the Carneros Inn in California's Napa Valley offers an adults-only twist on the concept. Guests find herbs, fruits and garnishes on the resort's farm and then learn how to make a signature cocktail using the fresh ingredients. One guest foraged a quail egg, from which the bartender fashioned a whiskey cocktail.

Chef Jim Denevan's Outstanding in the Field, a gypsy pop-up dining concept, stages 80–90 communal dinners at farms, orchards and ranches across North America each year. Spokeswoman Lisa Supple estimates that one-third of the attendees travel from out of state for the meals, making the dinner the centerpiece for a visit to a new or favorite destination. There are even Outstanding in the Field devotees, nicknamed "Fieldheads," who attend numerous dinners throughout the regular May–November dining season. The meats, produce and dairy products served at meals in these unique locales are all locally sourced, and they're prepared by guest chefs whose ranks include more than a dozen James Beard candidates. Still to come this fall: dinners in New England, the Mid-Atlantic, the Southeast and Southwest.

DINING WITH THE LOCALS

Food tourism feeds into the current interest in having local, authentic experiences while traveling. Trafalgar's popular Be My Guest program, a special meal experience offered on nearly every itinerary, certainly fits the bill. Oftentimes, the experience is a meal eaten in a local home or on a farm.

When Be My Guest was tested in Sorrento, Italy, five years ago, it was an instant hit. "On a trip that has so many highlights—Rome and its Colosseum, Venice and the canals and gondolas, Florence—on a trip that had been running for 30 years and with those sights included, Be My Guest became the most popular part of the trip, which was quite incredible to us," says Paul Wiseman, president of Trafalgar USA. Trafalgar has since custom-designed more than 100 Be My Guest experiences throughout the world.

Trafalgar doesn't limit its food experiences to meals, however. On its Costa Rican Adventure, guests meet chocolatiers in their local workshop. The Splendors of Japan itinerary incorporates a sushi-making class in the Ginza District, and the Best of South America tour includes lessons in making Brazil's national cocktail, the Caipirinha.

Cruise lines have come aboard the food-tourism craze, too. Five years ago, Oceania Cruises opened Bon Appétit Culinary Centers on its ships, where guests can take a variety of fun and tasty cooking classes. The response was so positive that Chef Kathryn Kelly, Oceania's director of culinary enrichment, soon introduced Culinary Discovery Tours while in port. Oceania now offers more than 40 of the popular food tours. "We have guests who book just for the culinary experience," Kelly says. "I believe the best way to travel is to experience local food, wines, artisans."

More and more travelers agree that Kelly's approach to tourism is a good one.

Next up for culinary travelers Deloza and Kinna: a trip to Europe, probably France. "I've never been out of this country, so that is one of my driving forces," says Kinna. But they're looking forward to more than Notre Dame and the Eiffel Tower. "I've had such an opportunity to experience a lot of different kinds of food here in the U.S., but I've never experienced them in their home countries. We've eaten a lot of French food on our trips, so it's going to be interesting to experience it locally."