



A Recipe for Local Culture

"Food is a convivial thing. It's about pleasure. It's about fun. And it's part of everybody's life," says cookbook author Claudia Roden (profiled below). Roden says recipes tell stories: When you step into the kitchens of chefs and home cooks in other countries, you learn about not only regional ingredients and dishes, but also local history and customs. Here are seven culturally immersive cooking programs around the world. What stories will you have to tell after making dolmades in Greece, mole poblano in Mexico, or spicy papaya salad in Thailand?

THE COOK

NAME: Claudia Roden

LOCATION: Originally from Cairo; now based in London

PROFESSION: Author of 10 cookbooks, including *A Book of Middle Eastern Food* and *The Book of Jewish Food*

SPECIALTY: Authentic cuisine from the Mediterranean and the Middle East

HOW FOOD CAN UNITE US: "Eating together creates a special bond that makes people open up—even where there has been a lot of conflict. For example, I'm Jewish, and I've been involved in events with Palestinian chefs in Chefs for Peace [a nonprofit organization based in Jerusalem]. People expect you to be on their side if you're talking to them about what is important to them, as food is. They feel if you are interested in that, you'll be interested in them."

ON COOKING AND TRAVEL: "For me, it's important to see how a recipe tastes on the ground. I get so happy traveling to research food because of the contact with people and the making of friends. It becomes a whole world, added to your own."

HOW TO EXPLORE OTHER CULTURES'

CUISINES: "Eat the real food of the people, rather than just the innovative food of a chef. Ask a taxi driver, 'Where do you go to eat?' When you talk to home cooks, ask, 'What's your favorite recipe?' There is always a story behind traditional dishes."



FOODIQUETTE: In China, don't stand your chopsticks upright in your rice bowl; they resemble the sticks of incense burned at funerals and therefore signify death. In Egypt, leave a little food on your plate to show that your host has been generous; in Belgium, clean your plate or you'll be considered wasteful. Dinners in a Danish home can last five hours; if they're filled with good food and conversation, they're described as *hyggelig* (HEW-ge-lee), which means cozy, comfortable, and friendly.

TRIPS WORTH TAKING

ECUADOR

YACHANA LODGE, 593/(0) 2-250-5108, YACHANA.COM

Guests at Yachana Lodge, along the Napo River in the Ecuadorian Amazon, experience the area's indigenous Kichwa culture through lessons in wild-life, medicinal plants, and cooking. The lodge's two-day gastronomy and culinary tour (an addition to the lodge's regular three-day itinerary) takes you into the rain forest to gather ingredients for traditional Amazonian dishes, which Kichwa chefs will help you cook.

WHAT YOU'LL MAKE: Tilapia wrapped in banana leaves, cooked over an open fire; *llapingachos*, patties of yucca and cheese; roasted beetle grubs (nicknamed "jungle bacon" by the lodge's guides); *chicha*, a fermented yucca drink; chocolate from cacao beans grown on Yachana's organic farm.

HIGHLIGHTS: Meet students at Yachana Technical High School (started by Yachana's foundation and supported by the lodge). Watch for toucans and long-tailed potoos on forest walks. Take part in a cleansing ceremony led by a local healer.

PRICE: Five-night stay (recommended minimum), \$1,050, includes all activities, lodging, and meals.



FRANCE

PURPLE TRUFFLE, 33/(0) 6-23-91-81-65, PURPLETRUFFLE.COM

The Brittany region on France's north-west coast is known for its oysters, *cotriade* (a fish and potato stew), hard ciders, crepes, and galettes. During private, customized trips with Paris-based Purple Truffle, local chefs welcome you into their kitchens to learn how to prepare the region's specialties.

WHAT YOU'LL MAKE: Dishes include Breton-style clams with garlic; tomatoes, artichokes, and goat cheese with marjoram; Breton galettes, which are savory pancakes made with buckwheat flour, filled with ham, cheese, and a

FIRST PERSON

My Big Fat Greek Dinner

Dick Hadsell / Crete's Culinary Sanctuaries participant / Greece

"Nikki [the program director] takes a group of us to visit a family friend, Despina, who lives in a small townhouse with her husband, daughter, and 6-year-old grandson. Despina and her daughter are out on their deck making spanakopita. We gather around them, and Despina shows us what the ingredients are and how she does it. She's made her own phyllo dough, which is amazing for us because at home we take it out of a box. She uses spinach and feta cheese, and she makes the dish in a great big round pan.

We ask all kinds of questions. Then we move into the kitchen, and there's hardly enough room for any of us to move around, but we're enjoying every minute of it. It's very intimate. Despina's got this bucket full of snails she picked in the mountains. They're crawling out over the edge, right there in front of us. She keeps reaching under the sink and getting a cup

of the greenest imaginable olive oil to cook the snails in. She sautés some with rosemary and others with barley. While she's cooking, I look under the sink, and I say to my friend David, 'Look at this!' It's a five-gallon bucket of olive oil. He looks at it and says, 'That's nothing. I just passed by the grandson's room. Right behind the bed is a gigantic urn full of olive oil!'

When everything is finished, we help put the tables together on the deck and bring the dishes outside. Despina's husband, Manolis, comes home, and we all drink the family's homemade wine. Then we have a hellaciously good meal."

fried egg; *far Breton*, a custardlike cake containing brandy-soaked prunes.

HIGHLIGHTS: Tour an oyster farm with the owner as your guide; then, with the help of a local wine expert, pair mollusks and muscadet. Taste homemade goat cheese, cider, and regional pastries at a Brittany farm. Stay in an 18th-century manor overlooking the pink granite coast.

PRICE: Seven-day trip described above, \$8,890 for two people, includes lodging and some meals.



GREECE

CRETE'S CULINARY SANCTUARIES, 30/69-4822-6150, COOKINGINCRETE.COM

About 40 small-business owners are part of Crete's Culinary Sanctuaries, an organization that aims to preserve the island's natural and cultural heritage while presenting educational programs to travelers. In May, join the "Magnificent West" seminar, based in the small village of Vamos, to practice Greek cooking and spend time with the area's chefs, organic farmers, bakers, and vintners.

WHAT YOU'LL MAKE: Seafood and seasonal dishes such as grilled octopus; sardines cooked in grape-leaf packets; dolmades made with zucchini flowers; *horta* (braised wild greens); fava bean puree topped with onions and olive oil; yogurt served with wild-thyme honey.

HIGHLIGHTS: Sample varieties of organic olive oil at a farm and factory. Identify poppies, sage, iris, and chamomile during a guided botanical hike to the coast. Sip a glass of local wine in the garden next to your private, restored 19th-century stone cottage.

PRICE: Six-day trip, from \$2,252, includes meals and lodging.



MEXICO

MEXICAN HOME COOKING, (415) 262-0806, MEXICANHOMECOOKING.COM

Chef Estela Salas Silva's maternal great-great-grandmother came from France to Mexico in the 1860s to cook for wealthy families in the city of Puebla. Today, in the nearby town of Tlaxcala, Silva passes on her ancestors' recipes, which mix French, Spanish, and indigenous cuisines.

WHAT YOU'LL MAKE: *Mole poblano*, a sauce with flavors of dried chili peppers, cinnamon, chocolate, and ground nuts; soup made with *huittacoche*, a fungus that grows seasonally on corn and is considered a delicacy; *gaznates*, pastry tubes filled with cream and sprinkled with powdered sugar.

HIGHLIGHTS: See the pyramids and murals at the nearby Mayan ruins of Xochitecatl and Cacaxtla. Hike to the 14,646-foot summit of La Malinche, a dormant volcano. Relax by the fireplace at Silva's bed-and-breakfast.

PRICE: Seven-day trips, from \$1,250, includes meals and lodging.

MOROCCO

THE INTERNATIONAL KITCHEN, (800) 945-8606, THEINTERNATIONALKITCHEN.COM

The "Feast for the Senses in Morocco" program with the International Kitchen leads travelers into the maze-like medina of Fez, a 1,200-year-old city in northern Morocco, to learn the country's cuisine from Berber chef Lahcen Beqqi. You'll take part in four half-day cooking classes, tour Fez's historic sites, and dine at local restaurants.

WHAT YOU'LL MAKE: Traditional Moroccan dishes such as lamb *tagine*, a slow-cooked stew with dates, prunes, and roasted almonds; cous-cous prepared with chicken and seven types of vegetables; *cornes de gazelles*, crescent-shaped pastries filled with almond paste.

HIGHLIGHTS: Smell the cumin, cinnamon, and saffron at the souk. Visit tanneries that produce Fez's famous soft leather. Sleep in a 14th-century palace.

PRICE: Six-day trips, \$2,800, includes meals and lodging.

FIRST PERSON

One Order of Spiny Death-Traps

Marian Klausner / International Kitchen participant / Morocco

"On the first day, our guide walks us through the souks in Fez and we taste all kinds of things: fresh olives, different kinds of fruits, nuts, cheese. As we walk, he also purchases fresh fish, cilantro, parsley, and tomatoes that we will use to cook a fish tagine. Then we bring all the ingredients back to the kitchen.

Our cooking instructor that day is named Amina. She speaks in Arabic and French, and we have a translator. The way Amina cooks is a little loose, because she's been cooking for 50 years. A little of this, a little of that. She hands me a baby artichoke to slice up. The baby artichokes in Morocco look like spiny death-traps. So I'm laughing, and Amina is laughing at me, but in a lovely kind of way. 🍅 Quite a few other women who work as helpers in the kitchen come to hang out with us. In the background, they're listening to Moroccan music on the radio. They turn it up, and we all dance in the kitchen. There is this incredible ambiance, all of us laughing together. 🍅 My goal wasn't to come out a Moroccan chef. I wanted to learn about

cooking because I think it's a great way to learn about another culture. I got exactly what I wanted."



SOUTH AFRICA

ANDULELA, 277(0) 21-790-2592, ANDULELA.COM

Cape Town's Bo-Kaap neighborhood, once known as the Cape Malay quarter, is home to a large population of Muslims whose ancestors were slaves from Southeast Asia and East Africa. On the "Cape Malay Cooking Safari" with Andulela, you'll meet shopkeepers, street-food vendors, and home cooks who will help you prepare Bo-Kaap's spicy fusion of cuisines.

WHAT YOU'LL MAKE: *Samosas*, fried pastries with savory fillings such as minced lamb, potatoes, onions, coriander, turmeric, and garam masala; *roti*, a soft, unleavened bread; sweet, mild Cape Malay curry with chicken.

HIGHLIGHTS: View a photo exhibit about the neighborhood's history at the Bo-Kaap Museum. Stroll the neighborhood's streets lined with pastel pink, blue, and green homes. Drink a mug of *falooda*, a rose-scented milk beverage.

PRICE: Half-day tour, \$67, includes a meal.



THAILAND

PREM COOKING ACADEMY, 66(0) 5330-1500,

COOKING.PREMCENTER.ORG

Sweet, salty, buttery, bland, astringent, bitter, spicy, cool-refreshing, and sour—these nine flavors are key to the medicinal values of Thai foods, according to chef Su-Mei Yu, the founder of the Prem Cooking Academy in Chiang Mai. During the academy's four-day course, you'll explore these flavors in cooking classes with three local chefs.

WHAT YOU'LL MAKE: Seasonal dishes might include prawns with fresh kale and lime sauce; spicy papaya salad; steamed pumpkin with grated coconut and sesame seeds.

HIGHLIGHTS: Harvest Kaffir lime leaves, lemongrass, and basil from the Prem Academy's organic garden. Prepare alms trays for monks at a nearby temple. Lounge on the private deck of your suite.

PRICE: Five-day trips, from \$2,250, includes lodging and most meals. **A**