

Culinary Travel

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Whether it's Anthony Bourdain exploring exotic locales, a glossy photo layout of delectables in a magazine or food porn posted online by friends, today's travelers are inundated with images of food and drink, from the everyday to the sublime.

The appeal is universal—and travelers are biting. In fact, an astounding 95 percent of American travelers are interested in some kind of unique food experience when they travel, according to the 2016 Food Travel Monitor, a global study conducted by the World Food Travel Association (to be released in May 2016). “That's up from 47 percent in 2013,” says Erik Wolf, founder and executive director of the World Food Travel Association. “So we can basically say that almost everyone now is interested in food and drink when they're traveling.”

For some travelers, the food and drink is not only an interest to be incorporated into a travel experience, but a major factor that actually drives travel decisions. While this phenomenon is increasing across all age levels, millennials are the ones most likely to base a travel decision on culinary interests. According to a July 2015 study by Destination Analysts, Inc., 69.4 percent of millennials are “food & cuisine driven travelers,” although baby boomers also made a strong showing at 62.7 percent.

Millennials' fascination with food can be especially lucrative—according to Skift's report, *The Rise of the Millennial Traveler*, by 2020, millennials will represent half of all global travel spending. Travel professionals who invest in capturing these travelers now will see ongoing payoffs.

Qualifying the Interest

Not only is today's foodie more likely to base their travel decisions on culinary options and opportunities, but they're looking for a different kind of culinary experience than in years past.

“Anthony Bourdain has singlehandedly changed the landscape of travel,” says Charles Wolfe, senior travel advisor at Direct Travel Vacations, based in Naples, Florida. “Before him, travelers were looking at Michelin guides to find the best of the best. But now people are asking to go deeper, to experience the local culture through the cuisine.”

“People today are looking for an authentic experience,” agrees Leigh Elizabeth Bryant, president of Avondale Travel, based in Jacksonville, Florida. “They don't want to go to another chain restaurant. They want to experience the local foods and the local culture they find within the flavors of the food.”

To be sure, it's easy for a travel agent to recognize a hardcore foodie client. “They're the ones who come in talking about the restaurants and wineries and microbreweries that are on their wish list,” says Bryant. But others need to be teased out. “We ask questions to see where their interests lie,” she says. “We might ask if they like to cook, or if they've seen a popular food-based or travel television show, and then go from there.” Those are the questions that can lead to, for example, a cooking experience with a local chef, a culinary city tour, a wine-tasting excursion and so on.

The Power of Culinary Travel

The value of the culinary traveler to travel agents is twofold: today's commission and tomorrow's return customer. Engaging in all aspects of culinary travel can be perceived as an investment. Some of it pays off immediately and in big dollars, such as commissions on tours as well as the hotel, air and car arrangements necessary for a food- or wine-focused vacation.

As culinary interest continues to flourish, tour operators are adding ever more commissionable options to their menus of possibilities, ranging from city tours and cooking classes in restaurants to a tour and private meal/wine tasting at a wine boutique.

However, sometimes the return comes later. “Say they go somewhere this year and I’ve found them a culinary tour or a great restaurant or a private food guide. Next year, they’ll go somewhere else and they already know that I’m the one who can hook them up, so they’ll come to me to arrange the whole trip,” says Wolfe. Similarly, he says when it comes to restaurant recommendations, “It’s just part of the service. I take one for the team. But when you put it together with the air and hotel and other tours they’re buying, it’s worth it.”

Helping a client time a trip well can also be key—not just for the big events, such as a destination’s Restaurant Week, annual harvest or a food or brew festival, but the smaller ones that add authenticity to a trip. “Travel professionals can add value to their relationships by recommending timing that will allow a client to experience an interesting event,” says Wolf of the WFTA. “Try to sleuth around a little to find out in advance if there will be locals-only food-oriented events that a visitor would love to go to—and talk about once they get home.” As an example, he cites Gastropote in San Sebastian, Spain. “It takes place every Thursday evening with live music, vendors selling tapas and wine, deals and discounts. It’s very much a locals-only event, and visitors love it. It’s a shame to miss it by a day.”

In the Know

As ever more options become available online, it’s become clear that one of the reasons travelers turn to travel professionals is for their role as advisor, someone who can separate the wheat from the chaff and offer up valuable expertise and recommendations. “Authenticity is crucial,” says the WFTA’s Wolf. “There are some food festivals, for example, that travelers would find sorely disappointing while others are really unique.”

While travel agents can’t possibly know the ins and outs of every destination, they can turn to sources that most travelers don’t have. Aware of the ongoing appeal of culinary travel, local tourism offices have started to focus on many aspects of culinary travel, from restaurant reviews and chef interviews to listings of fairs and festivals, tours and more. Tour operators are increasingly adding culinary-based tours and options. And travel professionals can reach out to others in the industry.

“If I haven’t been somewhere recently myself, I use my network,” says Wolfe. “I’ll call the boutique onsite and other local partners to get restaurant recommendations, ask about what’s hot and what should be avoided, what’s getting press and so on.”

Bryant does the same and also turns to co-workers in her office for additional insights. “I’m gluten-free so that’s become an area of expertise for me,” she says. “We have another advisor here who loves beer and really knows his microbreweries. We all work together and share our expertise.”

To venture further into the culinary market, the World Food Travel Association has offered the Certified Culinary Travel Professional (CCTP) program since 2008. The program costs \$497 and covers such areas as demographics and psychographics of culinary travelers, product development, marketing and more. Graduates receive the CCTP designation, as well as the ability to use the logo and marketing support.

While the culinary market is growing organically, agents who highlight their culinary expertise on their social media and through other marketing efforts are likely to receive a larger portion of the culinary travel pie—and be well positioned to see the returns continue through the lifetime of the relationship.

“Once you’ve touched someone emotionally like that—and food is one of the most intimate emotional connections you can make—you will have that client for life, so the returns just keep going and going,” says Wolfe.

Local and Fresh in The Palm Beaches



Buccan, Palm Beach, Florida

With 47 miles of beaches yielding an abundance of seafood and a reputation as the Winter Bread Basket for the U.S., it's no surprise that The Palm Beaches have been at the forefront of the farm-to-table movement and a burgeoning culinary scene.

"This is the type of destination where the farm-to-table concept has been part of our DNA since day one," says Ashley Svarney, director of public relations and communications for Discover the Palm Beaches. "It's not a fad; it's a way of life here. Our history has very deep roots in tourism and agriculture. Now, we have so many innovative chefs and micro-brewers who help tell our story and bring an authentic, local connection through the food and drink they serve to our visitors and locals alike."

And that movement is being recognized nationwide—in April 2016, Condé Nast Traveler readers voted the Palm Beaches as one of the "Best Food Cities in the U.S." The article highlighted just a sampling of the diversity visitors can find throughout the area, from The Cooper, a casual chic farm-to-table restaurant especially acclaimed for its brunches, to Chez Jean Pierre, an authentic French bistro with more than 350 wine selections.

And then there's Buccan, featuring signature New American "small plate, big flavor creations," under the helm of Chef Clay Conley, who many credit with sparking the current exciting evolution of the culinary scene in the Palm Beaches.

"His presence established an evolution within the local culinary scene, attracting young, talented chefs to The Palm Beaches," says Svarney. "Since then dozens of other vibrant chefs have converged in the destination, many of whom have opened their first original restaurants and utilize the area's fresh, local ingredients. It's more than 'celebrity' names here—these are the award-winning, celebrated chefs who are actually in the kitchen preparing these delicious dishes for guests to enjoy."

For those who want an introductory taste of the flavors of The Palm Beaches, three culinary tours currently showcase different areas: Savor Our City tours go behind the culinary scenes in Boca Raton and Delray Beach; the West Palm Beach Food Tour serves up tidbits of history, architecture and culture along with tastings from six top local restaurants; and the Taste History Culinary Tours travel throughout the region, infusing local history into the experience along with the chance to meet restaurant owners and chefs.

Flavor Palm Beach is another great way for visitors to get a taste of the local cuisine scene: Throughout the month of September, more than 50 eateries offer prix fixe menus for lunch and dinner. And throughout the year, festivals large and small showcase the innovative food and drink of the region. Just a sampling includes the Palm Beach Food and Wine Fest in December, with award-winning chefs, culinary personalities, winemakers and more; 120 craft brews and ciders at the August Craft Beer Bash; November's Delray Beach Wine & Seafood Fest; and Jupiter's Field of Beers festival in January, voted the #4 beer festival in the country by readers of USA Today.

To keep up with the culinary scene, including interviews with local chefs, a calendar of events and more, check out Discover The Palm Beaches at PalmBeachFL.com and on Facebook ([Discover the Palm Beaches Florida](#)), Twitter ([@PalmBeachesFL](#)) and Instagram ([@PalmBeachesFL](#)).