



## Traveling to eat: Food tourism grows in USA

By: Samantha Gross  
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NEW YORK — Surrounded by imported pasta and grains, Carol Berger inhales deeply, raises her arms and shuts her eyes in semi-religious appreciation.

"Look at that beautiful prosciutto over there," she sighs, pointing at a glass case filled with jewel-tone meats, while others on the guided tasting tour shuffle into the shop to gape at a large jar of black truffles.

The expedition through the specialty shops of Manhattan's Chelsea Market is just one stop on the Florida resident's culinary ramble through New York City — and she's not alone.

Nationwide, an increasing number of vacationers are basing their travel around food and wine — and a study released Wednesday says that 27 million Americans have made culinary activities a part of their travels within the last three years.

"It's something that really took off in the past five years or so," said Cathy Keefe, the manager of media relations for the **Travel Industry Association of America**, which helped pay for the study along with Gourmet magazine and other organizations.

Of the 160 million U.S. residents who travel for leisure, about 1 in 6 have recently taken a food tour, enrolled in a cooking class, toured a winery or otherwise participated in culinary activities as part of a vacation, according to the study.

Nearly half of that group took a trip or chose a destination because of the food and wine activities they would find there.

Walking from a bread bakery toward a wholesale seafood shop across the way, Berger, a payroll tax accountant from Del Ray Beach, Fla., said her trip to New York — planned with a group of foodie friends she calls her "dinner club" — was motivated by food.

"We come to New York to do restaurants," she said, recounting one particularly eye-opening experience: "It was the first time I tried sea urchin, and it was fabulous."

New York state is one of the most popular destinations for food travel, outdone only by California and Florida, according to the **TIA** study.

For Carmen Botez, that crush of interest became apparent last year, when the 29-year-old found herself essentially drafted into becoming a tour guide. After launching a Web magazine offering a virtual "chocolate tour of New York," Botez was deluged by hundreds of requests for the real thing. She has since launched her own company, New York Chocolate Tours, which charges visitors \$70 apiece for a tasting tour of the city's high-end sweets shops.

The increase in culinary tourism has accompanied a rise in emphasis on food throughout American culture, said Barry Glassner, a sociology professor at the University of Southern California and author of the book "Gospel of Food," published last month.

"We define ourselves by how we eat. We show others and we show ourselves what kind of people we are by how adventurous we are about food," he said.

Glassner attributed the shift, which he said has accelerated over the last 5 to 10 years, in part to the many foods that new waves of immigrants have brought with them to America.

The increased availability of new items at supermarkets around the nation, the appearance of more food-oriented television programming, and the many Internet food discussion boards have also played a role, he said.

"Many people now when they travel would be ashamed to come home and say they didn't see the main museum or didn't taste the national dish," said Glassner. "We believe that if we've tasted their food we've gotten closer to their culture."

That may account for the success of companies like The International Kitchen. The Chicago-based enterprise, which offers cooking-class vacations to Europe, has been growing each year, said owner Karen Herbst.

Foods of New York Tours Inc., which charges \$40 for the tour of Chelsea Market and for its other excursions around the city, is also drawing a growing crowd. After recent expansion of 30% yearly, ticket sales for 2006 totaled more than 14,000 — up from about 2,500 in 2000, said owner Todd Lefkovic.

Companies following a similar model — offering tours that alternate walking, talking and tasting — have been springing up elsewhere around the country. Shane Kost, who opened Chicago Food Planet tours last year, said the company became profitable almost immediately. Kelly Hamilton said her New Orleans Culinary History Tours were fully booked within months after opening in 2004, although business has since slowed following Hurricane Katrina.

The tours, Hamilton said, allow people to go beyond the usual sightseeing to experience a destination more intimately, incorporating the senses of taste, touch and smell. In Chicago, Kost focuses on showing people spots that are local secrets, helping them feel like they're going off the beaten path.

Of course, for many tourists, culinary travel is less about education and more about finding unique eating and drinking experiences. More than half the travelers who seek out food and wine activities make a point of trying local cuisine and restaurants, according to the TIA study, which was performed by Edge Research and surveyed 2,364 leisure travelers between July 21 and Aug. 9.

The study respondents had volunteered to participate in online questionnaires, and results were then weighted to reflect the general population.

Pam Hays, of Fayetteville, Texas, said she and her husband make sure to sample the local cuisine wherever they travel.

"In New York," she said, "at breakfast we discuss lunch; at lunch we discuss afternoon snack; at afternoon snack we discuss dinner."

Hays, who was on the Chelsea Market tour, is a general manager at a restaurant, but plenty of others can enjoy such activities without that kind of expertise.

"We're not connoisseurs," said Mark Littlejohn, a merchant sailor from Long Beach, Calif., also on the tour. "This is to me more interesting than museums. ... You can actually experience it."