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Culinary Trekking

By Rachel Zemser, CCS

MISE EN PLACE


Whether you're a supplier offering a tour to your R&D menu-developing customer or an internal corporate restaurant team seeking to generate new ideas, your culinary tour planning should align with your budget. A big budget might permit you to hire a culinary tour consulting company and to fly your R&D and marketing teams to a choice location. A small budget might mean organizing a culinary tour in your own city or combining it with an upcoming trade show the team has already planned to attend. Whatever the budget's size, anyone can organize a successful culinary tour. But it takes research and smart planning.

A pre-tour brainstorming session should pinpoint the tour group's core competencies, future menu plans, and any trends or specific food items they'd like to explore.

Make a list of desired "tangibles," such as menu concepts, flavor profiles and specialty ingredients—then craft a plan that targets specific establishments. Sites can include restaurants, coffee shops, crafty artisan boutiques, pushcarts, farmers' markets, ethnic eateries and supermarkets, or even a local food manufacturer that is amenable to a tour. Locations should be prescreened to ensure they still exist, the menu items are current and the food meets your group's expectations. The final itinerary should include each establishment's street and web address, current menu, and your group's daily agenda (sequence of visits, time allotted for each visit, etc.). To minimize stress and distractions, professional transportation can be prearranged. For walking tours, make maps available.

LOCATION³

Big cities provide opportunities to experience big-picture trends, such as artisan comfort food, small plates, better burgers, kids' cuisine and street food. They also can offer insights about the dishes and flavors the locals regularly eat.



Food manufacturers and menu developers are always looking for creative ways to attract new customers while keeping their loyalists excited. Trade journals do a great job of identifying the latest flavor and menu trends, but there's no substitute for actually tasting the food on site. Culinary tours let food industry professionals experience new flavors and concepts, check out unfamiliar gold-standard items, and find inspiration for future menu items and retail products. But you have to get out of your test kitchen and go.

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A Boston tour could include fresh seafood, such as steamers, clam chowder and lobster rolls. “Boston is a great place to see all the lobster rolls that the city has to offer, because everyone makes it in their own unique way,” says Tom Mottl, product development technologist, American Pride Seafood, New Bedford, MA. He recommends the seaport area, which runs the gamut from hole-in-the-wall chippers to the Legal Sea Foods test kitchen, where every night they try out new dishes that may or may not make it on to the “official” menu.

New York City is notable for its dizzying, unmatched diversity of cuisines. “New York is the place for walking trend tours, be it burgers, sandwiches, pizzas, handhelds, Vietnamese or fusion,” says Sandy Cook, R&D chef, Firmenich, Plainsboro, NJ. The city’s latest culinary current is indoor street

food. He describes some of the new East Village eateries as “street fare–inspired restaurants with limited, specialty-item menus.”

Miami cuisine reflects the evolutionary fusion of North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, known as “Floribbean” cuisine. Norman Van Aken, chef-owner, Norman’s, Orlando, FL, and Norman’s 180, Coral Gables, FL, has noticed that more R&D chefs are visiting Miami to learn about tropical fruits such as sapote, sapodilla and guanábana (soursop). These exotic flavors inspire menu ideas for marinades, steak sauces and cocktails, as well as retail concepts like ice creams, chip seasoning and frozen meals. But chefs also want new menu ideas. “Ten years ago, the Cuban sandwich was all the rage, but that menu item has worked its way across the United States and back,” he says. “Now people are looking to add excitement to their menus, excitement that can be found in the untapped menus from Peru, Brazil and Argentina.”

Out west, San Francisco is a great place to explore artisan food, local produce and farm-to-fork concepts, many of which can be found at the Embarcadero Ferry Plaza Farmers Market, a gourmet extravaganza that features local artisan foods like

Scream Sorbet, Cowgirl Creamery cheese and Frog Hollow Farm jam. Chez Panisse in Berkeley has been using organic, sustainable, seasonal ingredients since 1971, and many other restaurants, including Manresa in Los Gatos, famous for its biodynamic vegetables grown in the Santa Cruz mountains, have followed suit.

The Pacific Northwest is famous for fruits, wild mushrooms and seafood—and Seattle chefs know just how to showcase these local ingredients. From the Washington apple sorbet at Lola’s to the yellow foot mushroom pizza at Serious Pie and the exciting array of seafood at Pike Place Market, Seattle shows how superb sustainable cuisine can be.

Sustainability is also becoming a reality in Durham–Chapel Hill, NC. The area provides a prime example of farm-to-fork dining, intertwining the bounty of farmers, animal producers, artisan food makers and restaurateurs. This sensibility was reflected in an Oct. 2008 *Bon Appétit* article, “America’s Foodiest Small Town,” which noted the presence of over 120 small farms—many of which have been organic pioneers—within a 50-mile radius of Chapel Hill. Southern cooking takes on a uniquely refined sensibility in the region.

Trek Trending

City	Possible Theme	Key Stops
Boston	Seafood Sensations	Faneuil Hall, Seaport area, Legal Sea Foods, Anthony’s Pier 4, Jasper White’s Summer Shack, Skipjack’s
New York City	Upscale Street Fare	Baquette, Porchetta, Luke’s Lobster, Led Zeppole
San Francisco	All Things Artisan	Ferry Plaza Farmers Market, Chez Panisse, Manresa, Acme Bread, Show Dogs
Miami	New World Cuisine	Fruit & Spice Park, Norman’s 180, Francesco, Graziano’s, D. Rodriguez Cuba
Durham–Chapel Hill	Sustainable Southern Hospitality	Magnolia Grill, Locopops, Scratch, Piedmont
Seattle	Sustainable Seattle	Pike Place Market, Lola, Serious Pie, The Corson Building, Cupcake Royale, Portage Bay Café

TOUR TIPS

Every culinary tour should have an official photographer, a discussion leader and a note-taker who captures the group's observations at each site. The recorded comments will enrich the debriefing session when you get home.

It's also easy to overdo it and order too much food, so preorder to ensure that you get what you want and not much else. Focusing on small plates, appetizers and shared dishes will help the team sample more items while maintaining an appetite.

Choose a halfway point for an extended break. It's important for everyone to clear the mind, refresh the palate and prepare for several more hours of focused eating.

DEBRIEFING THE TOUR

Within a day after completing the tour, the team should reconvene for a debriefing session. Review photos to refresh everyone's memories, then distill the key culinary observations into a manageable list of core ideas and concepts. Those can then be translated into quantitative data that fit your (or your customer's) original culinary tour goals. A trained debriefing leader, preferably someone who was not part of the touring group—to maintain neutrality—should lead this session. "If the facilitator expresses an opinion or judgment, it jeopardizes the group's ability to generate broad and deep ideas," says Susan Howe, partner, Intrinsic Group, Dublin, CA. "This is counter to creating 'breakthrough thinking.'"

A culinary tour can offer your organization valuable insights into marketplace trends. Your sales and marketing folks can survey the culinary landscape for opportunities, and your scientists and chefs can assess what is truly possible from a manufacturing and technical standpoint. Together, you can collaborate to identify feasible product platforms and translate them into real ventures. ●

Rachel Zemser, CCS, has a B.S. and M.S. in food science, a culinary arts degree and almost 15 years of food-industry experience. She is a member of the Research Chefs Association and is an industry consultant.

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