



Booking for cooking

These days people are happy to cook everything under the sun – quite literally, too, as activity holidays abroad comprise a growing sector of the travel market, no doubt because of the British climate and despite the vagaries of the economic one. Carole Elgueta takes a look at the ingredients that make a great break for those who like good food

Ever since man learned how to control fire, cooking has been a popular pursuit as a means, if for no other reason, of staying alive.

More recently in Britain, however, interest in cooking has greatly intensified and where once the French would scoff that the British eat to live, now many of us Brits can happily claim that we eat to live.

As bookshelves groan under the weight of cookbooks on everything from soup to sushi, cooking programmes abound, from the BBC TV's regular *Saturday Kitchen*

programme in which a steady stream of celebrated restaurant chefs showcase their skills, to competitions like *MasterChef*, which give the keen home cook the chance of rubbing spices and shoulders with cooking royalty.

One former *MasterChef* winner I once met, James Nathan, who was sweating in the kitchens of The Vineyard at Stockcross under the watchful eye of Michelin-starred celebrity John Campbell at the time, told me that, even though he wasn't earning a penny for his labours, he

hadn't for a moment regretted throwing over his career as a barrister for the privilege of working in such an esteemed kitchen.

Indeed, never has so much dripping fruit, gleaming fish, juicy meat and organic vegetables been paraded in front of our eyes on screens as we watch all sorts of chefs sweat, scrape, simmer, chop, braise, bake and boil in front of our eyes. And still, it seems, we can't get enough, as the perception of cookery has shifted out of the domain of the dreary domestic science room into the realms, these

days, of fun... and even sun.

One firm specialising in cooking holidays in sunnier climes was started by the then 25-year-old Lorne Blyth some 12 years ago in Italy. Lorne was neither cook, travel operator nor Italian speaker, but she was someone, as she says, seduced by the idea of la dolce vita, who had spotted a need for middle-range cooking holidays for "people who were looking for something different".

Says Lorne: "Walking holidays were established, but all the cooking courses were very posh, with top London chefs. I wanted something more authentically Italian, something that would appeal more to people like me."

She was obviously on to something because, from a small start with just eight clients and one villa in Lazio, "like Topsy, the company just grew" says Lorne, and her ATOL-backed, internet-based Flavours firm now offers week-long holidays in several venues in Tuscany and Sicily ("those are the favourites," she says), Puglia and Umbria, and there are also short breaks in Tuscany and Bologna.

At least 20 per cent of travellers are based outside the UK. "We've had people from Jamaica, South Africa... that's the beauty of being internet-based," says Lorne, adding that, despite the vagaries of the recent economic climate, they've recently enjoyed a 50 per cent uplift in business.

Lorne puts this down to the fact that while "years ago people only went on one holiday, now they take more and want something that they can take back home with them. We now have many regulars, which is why we started to add more locations."

Lorne, who had only just returned from a 1,000-kilometre drive across Italy when we spoke, sources the villas herself. They change and range in style from a hunting lodge in Puglia built in the 17th-century for a local count, to an 18th-century farmhouse in Sicily. All of them come with en suite rooms and private swimming pools and are for the exclusive use of the holiday party.

"Many of them we have used for a long time, and are often the country houses of rich businessmen from Milan who rent them out to us exclusively for a few weeks," she ►



Pasta masters – guests on a Flavours holiday in Italy learn how to make pasta from the experts





◀ says. Flavours houses no more than nine holidaymakers per villa and, on a typical day, the group are given their aprons and equipment after breakfast and get to grips with the dish of the day, which will vary according to the region, the chef (a professional local) and the seasonal ingredients.

In Tuscany, for instance, there are likely to be pecorino and ricotta cheeses, rustic dishes such as lamb al Chianti, pork ribs with black olives and pine nuts, Tuscan bean soups and maccheroni with sausage and truffle butter. In Puglia, it's more likely to be burrata – a creamy mozzarella cheese, seafood risotto, stuffed vegetables and hand-made orecchiette (a type of pasta shaped roughly like small ears), while Sicily's Moorish influence means lots of citrus fruits, spices, peppers and rice with broad beans, fish and olives.

Nevertheless, although the idea is to get into the "whole Italian way of life, it's also important that whatever people learn, they can reproduce at home," says Lorne, "so we check the recipes beforehand, so that the ingredients can be found anywhere."

Holidaymakers prepare to make lunch (above and above right). Inside and out of a typical Italian holiday villa

At least half the people on the holidays are single people searching for the good company of other like minds, while others comprise of groups of friends and mothers and daughters. Sometimes the holidays have been bought as birthday presents.

"They suit people who are interested in cooking, getting some new ideas, and going to restaurants in good company. You wouldn't book this holiday if you weren't sociable," says Lorne.

On a week's holiday, you can expect to have five cooking lessons. Downtime is spent at wine tastings and visiting cheesemakers, seeing the local sights, or just chilling out on the by the pool... because, even though you might have cooked lunch yourself, this is not just a learning experience. As Lorne says, it's also a holiday, "with the emphasis on the word holiday".

After all, cooking can be fun, but there are priorities.

Cooks' tours

Holidays with Flavours start from £899 per person (there is no single supplement) for three nights/four days in Tuscany. Prices include all accommodation, lessons, meals, local wine, tastings, trips and transportation, plus £100 towards flight costs.

For a brochure or more information, visit www.flavoursholidays.co.uk or telephone (0131) 343 2500.

More holidays

For cooking holidays in Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Portugal, Thailand, Mexico, Russia and the UK, visit www.golearnto.com

Other useful websites for cooking holidays worldwide are www.cookingholidays.co.uk and www.responsibletravel.com/holidays/cooking