11 Questions to Ask When Choosing a Culinary Vacation

1. What are the instructor's credentials? - The popularity of culinary tourism has led to a lot of new cooking schools and classes. Many are led by professional chefs. Others aren't. You want to search for a program led by a professional chef. They have years of experience and can give you a more in-depth culinary immersion. They are also better equipped to answer questions beyond the recipe in front of them.

2. Where is the program located? - Yes, the old saying, "Location! Location! Location!" applies to choosing a culinary program, too. Let's use the example of choosing a French culinary vacation. It might seem logical to choose Paris as it's France's most well-traveled city. However, like most large tourist cities, the restaurants and cooking schools design their menus to generic ideas of a cuisine. To truly understand French cuisine you must get off the grid and look towards a region like the Loire Valley.

3. From where are they sourcing the ingredients? - Just because the program is in a region rich with agriculture doesn't necessarily mean the program is utilizing the best ingredients. I attended a school in Tuscany where I opened a package of bland looking chicken breasts direct from the grocery store, bar code and all.

4. Will the chef have any distractions while leading your class? - Chef's like to multi-task, often running cooking schools alongside bakeries, catering businesses, restaurants, etc. Those other lines of business can often pull him away from teaching the class you paid to participate in. Or, she's constantly interrupted by staff members asking questions about tonight's dinner prep. Your program should be the instructor's main responsibility for the week.

5. Ask whether classes are held in a restaurant, home, or teaching kitchen? - The equipment in restaurant kitchens are often vastly different from what you have at home making it difficult to replicate what you learned. On the contrary, home kitchens also might not be suitable for a true hands-on learning experience. Only so many people can gather around one stove. The ideal facility is a learning kitchen with multiple cooking stations.

6. Will I be gaining hands-on experience? - This may sound like an obvious question, but you'd be surprised how many cooking classes translate to a cooking demonstration. You can watch a cooking demonstration at home on TV. Make sure you get to roll up your sleeves and cook!

7. How many students are in the class? - Remember, the larger the class, the less individual attention you'll get. Also, the harder it will be to gather around the instructor's cooking station. When it comes to a culinary vacation, smaller numbers aren't a luxury but a necessity. It might also be a good idea to ask how many cooking stations there are versus students in the class.

8. What will you be cooking? - When we researched our Italian culinary program, I asked each tour operator what recipes we'd be learning. Many were just teaching pizza and handmade spaghetti with marinara sauce. I already have both of those dishes mastered, so I kept looking until I found a program that taught me something new.

9. What other gourmand related activities are part of the culinary experience? - Much of learning a local cuisine occurs beyond the kitchen. Look for programs that visit farmers markets and food producers.

10. Does the tour include the local wine or beer culture? - Food and drink develop together throughout a regions culinary history to enhance and complement each other. Ask if brewery, winery, or distillery visits are included in the agenda. You might also want to inquire about the instructor's knowledge of local drink.

11. Where will you be staying? - Accommodations for culinary programs range from five-star hotels to farmhouses to luxury chateaus. Some rooms have private bathrooms and some utilize shared bathrooms. Some programs may switch hotels if multiple regions are covered. Ask for specifics on where you'll staying and look up online reviews.

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