

Top 4 Cooking School Vacation Destinations

Traveling to these notable international food destinations may help you learn to cook like a native.



The kitchen at Morocco's La Maison Arabe hotel, which hosts cooking classes using native spices.



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May 15, 2017

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One of the best ways to truly experience a culture is to sample its cuisine. Cooking has become a popular passion with the explosion of cooking competitions on TV and the abundance of authentic cuisines available in U.S. cities. Around the world, destinations are taking advantage by offering classes that allow you to combine an exotic vacation with a unique learning experience. The best part? You get to take the recipes home, allowing memories of your vacation to live on every time you fire up the stove.

Mexico: Pass the fish

Mexican food, named an "intangible cultural heritage" by UNESCO, varies greatly by region. In the Yucatan, the southeastern point of the country, food has a strong Mayan influence, since that region has Mexico's largest Mayan population. Classic dishes include cochinita pibil (pork marinated in sour orange juice) and achiote paste (a red paste of annatto seeds and garlic) — fish in achiote paste and spices is a classic dish from the region. My class at [Casa Lecanda](#), an exquisite boutique hotel in Mérida, was with "Top Chef Mexico" 2016 contestant Christian Bravo. I learned how to prepare the fish dish, pan-sautéed in lime butter.

Others made a cold soup of pureed pineapple and chaya, a super-nutritious local plant related to spinach (it's found in the Yucatan in everything from scrambled eggs to soup) and a salad of beets and longaniza sausage. Another great option for delving into the local fare is Los Dos , Mexico's first cooking school devoted to cuisine from the Yucatan. The school is located in a restored mansion with a terrace and garden in downtown Mérida.

Maldives: India with a twist

This tropical island nation of 26 atolls, pristine white beaches, and a pale turquoise sea is southwest of south India and Sri Lanka, so its food shares many ingredients with those regions: coconut milk, curries, seafood, spices, and fruit. I adore south Indian food, and the Maldivian cooking class at Spice Spoons Cooking School did not disappoint — nor did the setting. The school is located at Anantara Dhigu, a private-island resort featuring 110 overwater suites and beach villas in South Male Atoll, along the shores of the Indian Ocean. At our individual cooking stations, we learned to make tuna coconut milk curry, crab cakes (rich in crab, not stuffing), and vermicelli rice noodle pudding studded with raisins and almonds. We then feasted on our lunch on the beach, next to that surreal blue sea. Later, the resort's Swiss-born executive chef, Walter Butti, led a tour of his vegetable and herb garden.



Some of the colorful spices and ingredients found at the La Maison Arabe cooking school in Morocco.

Morocco: Bring the spice

Savory-sweet combinations are the hallmark of the food of this North African desert country, like tagines (stews) of lamb with dates and couscous, chicken with green olives and preserved lemons, and lamb tagine with raisins, almonds, and honey. In Marrakesh, at the elegant, 26-room [La Maison Arabe](#) hotel, the fine-dining restaurant hosts cooking classes at a nearby courtyard house with intricate mosaic tilework and carvings. During the class we learned about delectable Moroccan spice blends, including cinnamon, cumin, cloves, peppercorns, and coriander.

Thailand: Through the garden

In bustling Bangkok, [Amita Thai Cooking Class](#) offers a four-hour experience at a private home along a peaceful canal off the Chao Phraya River. After touring the chef's garden to sniff Thai basil (which smelled of citrus), tiny bird's-eye chile peppers, and kaffir lime, we cooked our lunch. The results: tom kha gai, which is coconut milk soup with chicken, lemongrass, and galangal; chicken with cashews and dried chile; and, hands-down, the best pad Thai I'd ever eaten. Afterward, we dined beneath mango, star fruit, and rose apple trees, facing the quiet canal.

Now it's time to take my lessons home and recreate my trip. Who's hungry?

Sharon McDonnell is a travel, food, and history writer in San Francisco.

Photos courtesy of La Maison Arabe