

Culture, Cobblestones & Cuisine

Chef Donnie Ungaro takes *Indulge* on a European food tour

by Christie Judson

Offering rich heritage, stunning landscapes and diverse cultural experiences, Europe has long been considered one of the world's most exciting travel destinations.

In addition to some of history's most famous sights and well-known scenery, Europe is home to a cornucopia of old-world cuisine and, not surprisingly, boasts many of the world's finest restaurants and eateries.

Coupled with the fact that it comprises 50 unique states – all within relatively close proximity to one another – these qualities have made Europe a sought-after port of call for culinary tourists in pursuit of unique and memorable eating and drinking experiences. From budding 'bon vivants' to experienced gastronomes, food aficionados of all types are flocking from around the world to capture a taste of this multi-faceted continent.

But with so many flavours and regions to choose from, where is a food lover with a quest for adventure to begin? Offering this sage (if not slightly unconventional) advice, Culinary Ink chef Donnie Ungaro says: "Throw away the guide book, stay away from five-star hotels, don't eat 'on the strip' and always order the house wine."

"If you want a truly authentic culinary experience, you have to be adventurous," says the colourful chef, who provided catering services for actress Kate Beckinsale during a recent shoot in Vancouver.

"Don't play it safe. Put away any preconceptions of how food should look, feel and taste. Have an open mind and don't



Chef Donnie Ungaro

rely on a tour guide because you'll get the watered down version and you'll come back disappointed."

Ungaro said that when travelling abroad he prefers to "eat his way around a town" on a food crawl, sampling an appetizer or course "here and there."

"Moving away from complicated 11-course dinners. I like to walk until I hear a crowd.

"Yes, sometimes you might find a dud, but sometimes you find a real gem."

The same goes for wine.

"Anyone can pick an expensive bottle, but I get excited when I find a really great house wine for less than eight euros. It's about experiencing the local food and culture."

Recently featured on City TV, Ungaro said that although Europe's well-known Michelin-rated restaurants are "phenomenal," he gets most excited by the local dishes and recipes that have been passed down by the "old-school" grandmothers.

"The 'nonnas' are the original cooking instructors," he says. "They are the keepers of secret family recipes and the ones that most chefs aspire to cook as well as... they use items they grew themselves and always put love and attention into everything they cook."

"To the naked eye, it looks simple and thrown together. To somebody in the industry, it's complex and difficult to replicate."

So, with all the time and money needed to embark on a European food tour, where would Ungaro recommend adventure-seeking 'foodies' go and what should they eat?

Although he admits it's purely subjective, the well-travelled chef says there are six absolute "must dos" when it comes to experiencing the continent's best. Other than Italy – his all-time favourite destination – following, in no particular order, are Ungaro's top picks.

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Italy

Oh, Italy. I want to live there. It's all about enjoying a meal slowly with family. Everything tastes so different. The land, the minerals in the soil, the smell of the burning olive branches, it makes everything taste so unique. Venice is all about the fish market. I love the fresh anchovies. They're bigger and juicier, but way milder than what we're used to here. At happy hour, you also have to try the cicchetti, their version of tapas. Each place has a house specialty – mini open-faced sandwiches, salami wrapped around cheese, minced ham on crostini. You get a paper plate and pay about a euro each for a 'glass and a bite.'

An agriturismo bed and breakfast farm in Tuscany is a must. My wife and I stayed at the Le Caggiolo. We sipped homemade wine while overlooking the countryside and dined on Pici pasta, which was hand-rolled by the grandmother right in front of us. The local specialty is wild boar ragout, which I absolutely loved but my wife found too gamey.

My other favourite spot is Cinque Terre, which consists of five secluded seaside villages connected by a train system. There is a great restaurant in Vernazza called Il Pirata. It is run by hilarious twin brothers who make the best cannoli and dessert espresso I've ever tasted. Getting to our nearby room was like climbing up a goat trail – 180 steps, no rope, no rail, surrounded by the sea.

Piedmont is a gorgeous region. It's famous for its gnocchi and home of Barolo wine. I'd walk a mile barefoot on broken glass for a glass of that wine. It's a heavy, thick, old, complex red that goes great with roasted meats, pan-roasted pheasant and venison."

France

Definitely go south. Buy a baguette, some wine and cheese, and ride a bike to one of the 1,000-year-old caves for a picnic. Or, go explore a local winery or enjoy a simple cheese and onion Alsatian tart with a glass of wine while overlooking a farmer's field.

Paris was OK, but too many tourists. Even off-the-path an 'authentic' meal was still touristy. The champagne and escargot were good but there was no charm or authenticity. It felt forced. That's the problem with going to a major city. However, sipping coffee in an iron chair on a busy street in Paris is unforgettable. It's like being in a painting. I also loved the banana-Nutella crepes from the street vendors.



Spain

Spain is well-known for its wine, tapas and Iberico breed of pork, which makes for excellent prosciutto and salami. My dream dinner would be paella on the beach. I would go to the market and buy a \$20 paella pan along with all the fresh ingredients of the region — seafood, rice, chorizo sausage — and cook it over an open fire while drinking the local wine. Heaven.

Greece

Greece is not really known for its food, per se. It is better known for its philosophy on food. The Mediterranean diet is all about the fish, wine and olive oil. The locals live to be 100 years old and look great so they must be doing something right! I recommend touring an olive-oil farm to sample all the different varieties. Like wine, there are many different flavours. My ideal dining experience would be going to an authentic, family-run restaurant, ordering the catch of the day – which, literally, was caught just hours before – and staring out over the sea.

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England

Heston Blumenthal's restaurant, The Fat Duck, in Bray, Berkshire, England is like nothing else in the world. Blending culinary art with molecular food science, it is on the cutting edge. The kitchen looks more like a science lab and the food plays with your mind and confuses your senses. One of the well-known menu items is a drink that is both hot and cold at the same time. Of course, I'd also hit a local pub for traditional fish and chips, a pint of warm ale and mushy peas with mint sauce.

Ireland

The food is nothing to write home about but the Guinness there is life-changing. Maybe it's the fact that in Ireland it is made with well water, or because there is something about the people, the history, the sights and smells, but it just tastes better there. Going to Irish pubs is definitely a cultural experience. They are very social, family-friendly places where the locals take their kids to see friends. It's not about getting drunk, it's about hanging with your neighbour. The Irish spirit magnifies the experience. It makes the food and drink taste better. That is what culinary travel is all about. ☺



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