

Incentive Travel for “Foodies”

By Brian Martenis, Managing Director Incentive Worldwide Travel

Studies have shown that eating is everyone’s favorite pastime. Eating is the very thing that most people look forward to and enjoy above all. (You were thinking perhaps it was something else)? Not only do people like to eat but cooking and fine cuisine is now becoming of great interest, part of the Green Movement and is a unique entertainment. People love to cook food, learn about food and its origins, taste new and interesting flavors of food and even learn unique and creative plating techniques. Most “foodies” know that a fine meal begins with your eyes. Were it not for man’s desire for spices we all might still be thinking the world is flat.

Recently I have become more and more aware of the many variations there are for the addition of food related activities on an incentive travel program. Not long ago in Paris I did a cheese tasting with wine since I believe wine tasting is somewhat passé. It went over very well and our expert was fascinating concerning the true intricacies of cheese making, flavor, color, texture and wide range of enjoyment. I understand that there are people who say they really don’t like cheese. Considering the thousands of varieties that are available in the world, I would say that they have simply not tasted the right ones yet.

A couple of weeks ago I was visiting Niagara on the Lake on the Canadian side of the falls. A totally quaint and picturesque village, Niagara on the Lake is perfect for a small executive meeting or very special upscale incentive program for perhaps 2 or 3 nights. As a destination, it could easily be teamed with Toronto. It really makes for a different, exciting and memorable trip experience.

Besides the quiet charm of Niagara on the Lake, along with one of wonders of the world, Strewn, a winery nestled in the heart of Niagara’s wine country is Canada’s only winery cooking school and a very unique venue at that. Strewn combines an “insiders” experience including hands-on cooking class and demonstrations with wine tasting. It can be done as a team builder, just for fun or use as a lunch or dinner experience. As this region is known as a top producer of Ice Wine, those unfamiliar will be treated to something very new.

On that same trip, I was in Toronto for Trailblazers a unique incentive marketplace providing meetings with key partners from Monaco, Germany, Switzerland, Britain, Ireland and Canada. This outstanding educational and networking opportunity was hosted at the magnificent Fairmont Royal Your Hotel. The Grande Dame of Toronto is more than a place to spend the night and dine; she is a part of Toronto and Canada’s history. Imagine a glorious ballroom on the opening night of Trailblazers with each country showcasing foods common to their country. The food was presented in food station style and one could graze from country to country dining and learning at the same time. Knowing about the cuisine of different countries is so important to an incentive travel planner.

One afternoon I was taken on a special tour of the rooftop garden of The Royal York by Executive Chef David Garcelon. The roof is lush and verdant with every kind of lettuce, herbs, several tomato species (ever hear of black tomatoes)? It is an education in horticulture. They even have a couple of grape vines. I thought it very cool that they grow all of the mint used in the Mohitos served in the hotel's cocktail lounges. Along side the vegetable garden, The Fairmont Royal York has its own bee hives and harvests their own brand of Royal York Honey.

From Toronto and Niagara on the Lake I flew down to St. Martin and participated in Successful Meetings University-Caribbean Islands at the charming and totally renovated Radisson St. Martin Resort, Marina & Spa. St. Martin (the French side) has long been known as the culinary capital of the Caribbean. During a visit to the new and magnificent Westin Dawn Beach, St. Maarten (on the Dutch side of the Island) Executive Chef John Bakker, (another Canadian), served lunch based on "The Power Foods" Broccoli, Wild Salmon, Grass-Fed Beef, Walnuts, Olive Oil, Blueberries, Flaxseeds, Pumpkin, Spinach, Tomatoes, Turkey Breast, Yogurt, Shitake Mushrooms. It was a lesson, a lunch, an experience. What a clever way to take something expected like a nice lunch and transform it into something timely, delicious, helpful/healthful and above all, memorable. The never ending flow of Champagne probably negated all of the healthy properties of the food, but what can a true foodie do?

Australia provides all sorts of new and interesting foods like Kangaroo, Crocodile, Emu and the like. I really can't think of a single country or part of the United States that would not provide an interesting food theme. Instead of simply thinking of a meal or banquet I try to think of where the function is and what can be done to make it unlike any other food function my guests have been served. In San Francisco we created a food station buffet with Asian selections from Chinatown, Italian specialties from North Beach, Fish and seafood direct from Fisherman's Wharf, Champagne and Caviar from Nob Hill and desserts prepared at Ghirardelli Square. Wine pairings were served at each "section of the city". I used the stunning, San Francisco landmark "Room of the Dons" in the legendary Intercontinental Mark Hopkins. We actually stayed at the famous Fairmont (very nearby) but whenever possible, if it works, I like to use what is best and most memorable at several hotels. As long as it makes perfect sense.

In Singapore we divided our incentive group into teams and had an "Asian Cook-off". Nothing too exotic mind you, but we learned about the cuisine of Singapore which in itself can be very unique, we cooked, had a great time and then all ate together. Cooking and food related activity is a great team building exercise. I previously wrote of the caviar and Vodka tasting I once did in St. Petersburg, Russia. Most Americans have not experienced good Caspian Sea Caviar so they think they don't like it based on their experience of fishy inexpensive domestic fish eggs. Biting into a warm freshly made belini, topped thick rich Russian sour cream and a generous dollop of gorgeous dark brown, glistening, buttery, Osetra Caviar, they all now fell as though they have "arrived". They feel they have discovered something magically their own. They won't stop talking

about it and they won't stop eating it! Food, once again can be quite an outstanding bonding experience.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Don't ever forget or underestimate man's favorite activity. It gets more and more important and popular by the day. What was once Julia Child is now a whole Food Network. American Chefs are as renowned as European. Emeril, Paula, Bobby Flay. Rachael Ray has several shows on The Food Channel as well as Network TV. A magazine called "Everyday with Rachel Ray!" Food is hot, it is now, creative and for the moment in the incentive travel world still underused. Capitalize on it now! In a couple of years it will be another, "been there done that!"