

The Hotel Cipriani, an Orient-Express property in Venice, has been offering cooking classes for years.

Tour operators use imagination to create culinary tours

By Felicity Long

It might surprise many travelers to learn that many of the restaurants earning the best reviews from the New York Times and other top U.S. culinary authorities are in Europe. From Comme Chez Soi in Brussels to Sjomagasinet in Goteborg, Sweden, these establishments are so enticing as to draw visitors from across the Atlantic and around the world.

While Americans may not hop on a plane just to eat well, travel agents can use cooking classes, commissionable packages and culinary fairs as icing on the cake for clients already Europe-bound.

Wine lovers can explore top wineries in France and Italy on tours from French Wine Explorers.

The itineraries are designed by

most famous castles in Bordeaux.

"Guests are also more interested in adding a short wine tour onto a trip to Paris, and we're able to help with private wine tours in any of the French wine regions," Greene-Sollin said.

Noting an uptick in demand for wine touring in Spain, Portugal and Italy, the company also offers programs in regions such as Tuscany, Piedmont, Rioja, Ribera del Duero and Porto.

The operator pays agents 8% commission.

All this service comes with a price: Rates range from \$3,995 to \$5,595 per person, double, land-only.

But Bobby Zur, a travel agent with Franklin Lakes, N.J.-based Travel Artistry, said the accommodations, transportation and services of a wine expert on a customized tour that he booked "were clearly worth every penny to the client."

individual chefs who prepare it," said Amateau. "That's the reason it's so much fun to take a single class while you're away or an entire culinary vacation."

The concept of learning to cook while on vacation is not new. The venerable Hotel Cipriani, an Orient-Express property in Venice, has been offering classes for years, thanks to Natale Rusconi, the hotel's general manager. Guest chefs have included Julia Child and James Beard.

Guest chefs on tap for 2007 are Michel Roux of Le Gavroche in London and Massimiliano Alajmo of Le Calandre in Rubano Padova, Italy.

Another Orient-Express hotel, the Villa San Michele in the Italian hillside town of Fiesole near Florence, offers a cooking school, set to begin its fourth year.

Guests choose from several classes, including the Symphony of Pasta course and the Children's Cookery School for kids ages 8 to 14. Prices for weeklong courses range from less than \$1,000 to more than \$7,000 per person.

Barcelona, which already lures visitors with its modern architecture and lively waterfront, pulls in chocoholics with its Chocolate Fair, held annually in October. The event drew 35,000 visitors in 2005.

Visitors are also encouraged to take time to visit the city's chocolate museum, the Museu de la Xocolata, where they can learn about the origins and development of chocolate.

EUROPE

Tuscany's Chianti region is a popular stop on gourmet tours from tour operators such as Country Walkers and French Wine Explorers.



Villa San Michele is home to a cooking school offering classes taught by well-known chefs. Pictured, an outdoor Children's Cookery School class for kids ages 8 to 14.



Gourmet travel can also cross over into other niches, including adventure travel, thanks to products such as Country Walkers' Tuscany and Umbria walking tours.

"We recently incorporated cooking classes into several Italian tours when we created some of our Women's Adventures," said Kat Lane, Country Walkers' tour manager. "Our intent was to accommodate some of the common interests among an increasing number of women travelers."

The popularity of cooking programs is on the rise, according to Janet Amateau, a chef specializing in Sephardic Jewish cooking who offers commissionable cooking classes in Spain. That's partly because they offer an interactive, participatory experience for travelers who want to do more than sightsee while on vacation.

"Food is not only unique to countries and regions but to the

Lauriann Greene-Sollin and Jean-Pierre Sollin, two sommeliers who use their connections to give tour participants insider access to local European vintners.

The tour operator also creates customized itineraries led by expert guides.

While traditional wine destinations such as Bordeaux remain popular, Greene-Sollin, French Wine Explorers' president, said she has noticed a trend toward guests staying at wineries.

To that end, the company offers stays in the historic Chateau Pichon Longueville, one of the

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