



Eat, Travel, Be Merry (Part 1)

As a foodie and chef, I am passionate about combining travel with new food adventures. When on the road, my zest

for unearthing culinary gems takes a back seat only to ... well, not much. Great meals, ones we consider “unforgettable,” have common elements that create enjoyment and mold the memory. Most of my best meals have been out of town, some as simple as a mouth-watering sandwich served streetside. Case in point: the deliciously messy tripe sandwich I ate standing at the straw market in Florence, Italy, this past September.

Business trips and family vacations alike, we all must eat, so a little detective work and common sense can usually yield exciting and delicious results. I’m not speaking of the ultra-exotic (sea slugs and raw unfertilized duck eggs in Beijing?) but more of the localized flavors—the ones that carry generations of tradition onto the plate and tell a story about a city’s history or its indigenous fare. I invite you to embrace the (slightly modified) quote, “When in Rome, eat as the Romans eat.” Here are some suggestions on how to best go about it.

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Don’t Plunge in Blindly. Do some research before you depart. A little digging online or at the bookstore can usually produce a few key spots worthy of further inspection. Magazines like Bon Appetit, Food & Wine, Condé Nast Traveler, and Gourmet offer unbiased reviews and articles that carry credence and generally pull no punches. Being privy to information like directions for tucked-away restaurants with no signs (usually the best, by the way), pricing, and attire can save time, money, and embarrassment. Be sure to check the source when claims like “Best Chowder in New England” come up. Smaller city papers have “Best of...” competitions and are usually more reliable because the voting is done by locals. Consider billboards or oversized ads you see once in town to be “must-avoids,” especially in and around your hotel.

Phone a Friend. You may have built-in resources (friends or relatives) living in your destination area. Ask them for their recommendations or a reliable contact that can provide you with quotes like, “I know the best jambalaya in New Orleans, bar none, and it’s cheap, but it’s a hole in the wall.” Word-of-mouth referrals are still opinions, but if credible they can save you research time and aimless wandering.

Go Local. Locals shy away from the big, shiny places and so should you. There’s no better prequalification than to enter a quaint eatery saying something like, “Bill at the camera shop said you guys make the best calamari in town.” They will treat you as one of their own! Hotel concierges or local travel bureaus are often unreliable, unless you really interrogate them. Usually they go by what they are told and by those that reward them for sending guests their way.

Watch, Look, Listen. Do a little spying on your family’s behalf. Ask them to wait outside while you go in to investigate a potential tourist “booby trap.” It’s far easier to make an executive decision or decline a convincing maitre d’ alone than with hungry kids and spouse. Analyze the clientele. If you are outside the U.S. and see mostly American patrons, you are probably about to be caught in a tourist trap. Or, if you are deep in Georgia and everyone is speaking “Yankee,” get out fast!

Keep a Dining Journal. A diary of sorts, this kind of journal asks the right questions (price, value, service, quality), so you can do mini-reviews and take notes. Traveling can be stressful and distracting, so this secures information you may otherwise forget. It is also a great reference tool to have for friends and family when they travel. Every region, island, or country has its own unique culinary treasures waiting to be discovered. Yes, it seems like an endless journey, but that can mean only one thing —more destinations and more eating.

Next time, Part 2: Highlights of my chance encounter with Travel Channel author/chef Anthony Bourdain and some special restaurants in Hawaii, Italy, and the U.S. that I consider personal favorites. □

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