



# Fork, Knife, Passport

Three excursions where  
learning to cook is as much fun  
as sampling the final product.

**BY BEKAH WRIGHT**







Food. Mouthwatering, scrumptious, heavenly food. It triggers the senses to evoke emotions, memories and, most especially, pleasure. Aromas and flavors of a local specialty remain imprinted in the mind, forever linked with that place. It's little wonder people will travel to the ends of the earth for one more bite of a beloved dish. There are lots of reasons people plan their trips around cuisine — not just to consume it, but to learn techniques and recipes they can re-create at home.

### Savoring Scandinavia

Months before boarding the *Viking Sky*, Bob Lee was eagerly anticipating the dining he'd indulge in on the 15-day Viking Homelands cruise. Germany, Denmark, Norway — delectable entrees from the voyage's stops in eight different countries awaited, not to mention those in the ship's myriad dining venues. As someone who loves to cook, the Santa Ana, California, resident relished the recipes listed on Viking's website. Then he noticed an additional activity option: Viking Ocean Cruises' Kitchen Table, an onboard cooking school. Now this was right up his alley. "Diving into a recipe on my own at home is one thing, but learning at the elbow of a chef is even more exciting," he says.

The Viking Kitchen Table shore excursion is an interactive culinary journey led by the ship's executive chef. Participants explore the culture and cuisine in ports of call, with a visit to the local farmers' markets to handpick

ingredients for an onboard cooking class. Culinary skills are then honed on the ship at The Kitchen Table, a demonstration cooking and eating area, followed by the resultant three-course dinner.

Revved up by the excursion, Lee made sure to fit in other culinary offerings during the cruise. Beyond lessons at the Viking Kitchen Table, he also engaged in Armagnac and whisky tastings, as well as cooking demonstrations. During a sea day of traveling between Tallin, Estonia and Gdansk, Poland, the ship's Sky Theatre showcased a performance of a different kind — the cooking talents of executive chef Eric Poutot and executive pastry chef Shamsheer. [vikingcruises.com](http://vikingcruises.com)

### Inspired in Italy

For Lee, Viking Sky's cooking classes were a happy discovery. Other travelers, like Judy Witts Francini, find their lives changed by a country's cuisine. Originally from San

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Making pasta in Italy; cooking with Viking chef Anthony Mauboussin; absorbing tricks of the trade at Divina Cucina; the bounty at Rim Thai. This page: Learning culinary methods and secrets from Mauboussin and enjoying the results.

Francisco, Francini worked as a pastry chef in one of the city's five-star hotels. In 1984, she decided she needed to travel and booked a flight to Florence. Italian food's heady flavors and aromas can be intoxicating, making a diner nearly swoon. And swoon Francini did, canceling her return ticket to continue immersing herself in Italy's food scene. Turns out, it was her calling.

Unable to afford pricey weeklong cooking classes, Francini chose a one-day market-to-table program, focused on the Florence farmers' market. "To me the market is the heart of the city," she notes, "and an insider's glimpse of everyday life as well." Since 1988, Francini, now known as the Divina Cucina, has invited visitors along for the ride in culinary classes and tours; the program has evolved into a three-hour market tour with lunch. "We charge our batteries by hitting one of my favorite bakeries for Torta Fedora, a long-lost dessert I adore," Francini

says, "or we stop across the street at Casa del Vino for Prosecco and a truffle sandwich."

The main event occurs at the historic Mercato Centrale in San Lorenzo. On the itinerary are wine and truffle tastings, plus plenty of stories from local merchants. As her Florence Market Tour no longer includes a cooking component, lunch is upstairs in the market's gourmet food court. Attendees renting a villa with a good kitchen, though, can book onsite lessons with Francini.

Students inspired by the Florence Market Tour can keep exploring Italian cooking by partaking in Francini's Divine Days, a custom one-day or one-week program, or her weeklong Kitchens of Chianti or Secrets of My Sicilian Kitchen. In the Chianti wine region, three days are set aside for cooking, with the rest of the week devoted to activities like truffle hunting, exploring the Certaldo Market and savoring meals in restaurants in Greve, Panzano and Castellina.

Secrets of My Sicilian Kitchen transports attendees to a seaside locale replete with sleepy romance and tantalizing fare. "In Sicily," Francini says, "you can find some of the best Greek ruins, Spanish-style chocolate and the noble cuisine of the Monzu, inspired by the French chefs, and Tunisian couscous." With Sicily's southwest coast as a springboard, the tour includes visits to Castelvetro, Porto Palo, Sciacca, Selinunte, Trapani and Palermo, with four days spent cooking meals inspired by the region. [divinacucina.com](http://divinacucina.com)

### Spicy in Thailand

At sunrise, monks bestow blessings on the Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai. This sacred act seems apropos, as the resort's cuisine is widely considered a spiritual experience. Enter the Rim Thai Kitchen Cooking Studio and its range of classes. "The school's reputation precedes it," Melanie Terrell, a Daly City resident, says. "I based my first visit to Thailand on getting behind Four Seasons Chiang Mai's stove."

Rim Thai's morning classes, whether for groups or one on one, begin at the local food market. A two-hour ingredient treasure hunt commences, along with taste-testing new discoveries, like thousand-year duck eggs, which reveal tasty black orbs when peeled. Then, their baskets brimming with organic bounty, chefs-in-training head back to the school for signature programs like Thai Street Food Delights, Mastering Thai Curries, Thailand Lanna Cooking, Culinary Tour of Thailand and Healthy Siam Cuisine.

Enrollees tackle set menus that change according to the day. On tap for Fridays is som tum, a spicy green papaya salad, tom zaab moo, a northeastern-style spicy pork soup, phad kaprow gai, a minced chicken stir-fry with hot basil, and phad see ew goong, stir-fried rice ribbon noodles with prawns and soy sauce. Knife skills are put to the test

**This page:** The main event at Mercato Centrale. **Opposite from top:** Learning to cook at the Four Seasons; Rim Thai Kitchen Cooking Studio.







carving vegetables for dish presentation. By noon, food is plated, ready to linger over with Thai wine and beer. Smells, tastes and the steps that brought the masterpieces to fruition are cemented into memory banks.

Die-hard cooks will want to roll from a morning class right into one of the school's afternoon programs. Held from 3 to 5 p.m., specialty classes include a Healthy Juice Workshop, Fruit and Vegetable Carving, Thai Coffee and Tea Master Classes and, of course, a three-dish cooking class. Kids age 5 to 12 can even get in on the action with afternoon instruction tailored especially to them.

Closing out the day is Thai Kitchen Live, a dining experience from 7 to 9 p.m. Students lend a hand preparing traditional salads, Thai curry and steamed delicacies from the wok. Toasting follows, with wines from Southern Thailand and Mae Rim beer and spirits. After all, there's plenty to celebrate — attendees have just learned some cherished secret recipes. [fourseasons.com/thailand](http://fourseasons.com/thailand), [fb.chiangmai@fourseasons.com](mailto:fb.chiangmai@fourseasons.com) **M**

