

Why Study Culinary Tourism?

ANSWERS FOR A
HEALTHY LIFE

BY JANET CHRZAN

THE FIRST TIME I heard about the academic study of tourism—an undergraduate course at the University of California at Berkeley entitled the “Anthropology of Tourism”—I thought it was a joke. While I never took the class, unfortunately, now, 20 years later, I have devoured the writings of that particular professor and many others, while seeking to understand how and why tourism serves as an important vehicle for food and dietary change.

The importance of food to travel is obvious to anyone who has heard about someone’s vacation. Returning travelers tell of new foods eaten, new habits learned, and sometimes, in the case of spa and cooking-school vacations, of travel specifically for the food. In 1998, folklorist Lucy Long (a Penn Ph.D.) first

used the term “culinary tourism” to indicate travel for the purpose of experiencing other cultures through their food. Culinary tourism has since engendered a number of academic books and articles.

As a nutritional anthropologist, I am interested in culinary tourism because I want to know how much individual dietary change results from the tourist experience. Informants tell me that travel reorganizes their food world. How does this process occur? Does it continue after travel? Are there resulting long-term dietary and health consequences? Rather than an interest in how tourists experience other cultures through food, my focus is on how they experience *themselves* through other cultures’ food.



Many varieties of heirloom potatoes can be purchased at the St Pierre Sur Dives market, Normandy, France.



A culinary tourist itinerary found on the side of the road in Tuscany, Italy.

Tourism and travel reveal aspects of ourselves that our professional and home lives may obscure. Free of everyday concerns and expectations, vacations are where we can explore personal and cultural meanings, allowing us to re-examine our identity. Travel is a form of play that involves “getting away



Monks are shown eating in the Il Sodoma frescoes at Monte Oliveto Maggiore Monastery, Italy.



Above, dusk falls on the Castle Banfi Vineyard, Montalcino, Tuscany, Italy. Right, artisanal beans and ancient recipes are served up for the tourist trade in Pienza, Tuscany, Italy.



from it all.” Doing something interesting, learning something new, and taking risks gives us the opportunity to reform or reframe our identity. Many vacations involve activities precisely designed to create emotional and perceptual growth, resulting in personal change. Some, such as cooking-school vacations, teach us new ways to promote health with food. In my preliminary research on dietary change and travel, vacationers tell me that travel is their primary means of learning different food habits and promoting good health.

My research focuses on travel to Tuscany, Italy, a favorite destination for American travelers, especially those who consider themselves to be culinary tourists. Conflated with the Mediterranean diet and considered nutritious, Tuscan food is very popular in America. This fuels interest in the region as a vacation spot, as well as a place where physical and emotional renewal can occur. With its multitude of spas, cooking schools, and other health and behavior-related learning experiences, Tuscany has come to define well-being to many potential travelers. To the travelers I work with, the Tuscan food model and the experiences that arise from a Tuscan vacation are perceived as some of the most powerful tools available for self-renewal.

Janet Chrzan

Tuscany is considered to be a promised land where new ways of living are learned, the spiritual self is transformed, and the body healed through new dietary practices.

As a nutritional anthropologist who studies food behavior and health, I want to know if this translates into new behaviors and health consequences once these travelers come home. If so, can Tuscan food teach us how to eat in a healthy manner that is culturally meaningful to Americans? 🏠

JANET CHRZAN is a Ph.D. candidate in Penn’s Anthropology Department. Sponsored by the Museum’s Women’s Committee, she will be leading a culinary tour of Tuscany during the Summer of 2006.

For Further Reading

Boniface, Priscilla. *Tasting Tourism: Travelling for Food and Drink*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003.

Graburn, Nelson H. H. “Tourism: The Sacred Journey.” In *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, 2nd ed., edited by Valene L. Smith, pp. 17-31. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989.

Hall, C. Michael, ed. *Food Tourism around the World*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2003.

Heldke, Lisa. *Exotic Appetites*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Long, Lucy, ed. *Culinary Tourism*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004.

MacCannell, Dean. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, 2nd ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.