

3 TOP SPOTS FOR THE GLOBAL GOURMAND

By Karen Loftus

If you're looking to dive deeper into the culinary culture of a country, here are three spots worth the stop:

For today's savvy traveler, where and what you eat is as important as to where you stay and play. So, if the dish is big on your list, here are three decadent yet different directions to head in, in Europe, Asia, and Central America.



THE ONLY INDUSTRIAL TEA PLANTATION IN ALL OF EUROPE IS ON SAO MIGUEL ISLAND IN THE AZORES. PHOTO BY KAREN LOFTUS

PORTUGAL'S PLATES AND POURS

When I moved temporarily to Barcelona ten+ years ago, I could not believe everyone wasn't talking about the place. My new expat, then longtime Barcelona resident friend put his finger to his lips and whispered, "Shhhh..." Clearly word got out on that one.

So, I may regret when the word's out on this one. Yes, Lisbon is big on many people's list, but overall Portugal has remained relatively under the American radar.

My first trip in, I cruised along the idyllic Douro Valley, stopping along the way to hit the many old-world wineries, where tastings, tours, and perfectly-paired meals followed, at a leisurely pace. I never saw a single American, until my last winery, where I met someone from my hometown.

Oddly, the Azores are even more elusive. 900 miles off the coast of Portugal, the nine islands are green, volcanic, and remote, perfectly fertile for food and wine production. There's a lot of seafood on the islands, but what really hits you upon arrival is the beef. It's an agricultural culture, not unlike New Zealand or Ireland.

So, meats, creamy cheeses from cows, sweet bread (Massa Sovada), a vibrant wine culture, and a tea plantation with the only industrial



LOCAL AZOREAN WINES WERE SERVED THROUGHOUT ALL OF THE MEALS AT 10 FEST. PHOTO BY KAREN LOFTUS



COZIDO DA FURNAS A TRADITIONAL AZOREAN STEW LIKE DISH COOKED UNDERGROUND. PHOTO BY KAREN LOFTUS

tea plant in all of Europe are but a few of the Azores offerings.

The culture is so fertile, it draws acclaimed and Michelin-star chefs in from all over the world for ten days in the summer for the 10 Fest Azores. Chefs like Denmark's Brian Hansen and our own T.J. Dell Donne from Johnson & Wales have their way with local ingredients, alongside eight other chefs over a ten-day period. The small paired plates over the course of an evening are a great intro into the culture. Their wine is hard to find outside of the islands. So drink up!

If You Go: Book now for next year's fest. Visit Azores (VisitAzores.com) has all there is to know about the islands and the 10 Fest Azores. For a cruise in the Douro Valley before, book the Douro Azul (douroazul.com).

TOKYO'S CULINARY CULTURE IS POPPING

It's no secret that Tokyo has been topping the global culinary charts for some time. This year's Michelin guide alone had 12 three-star, 53 two-star, 161 one-star, and 325 Bib Gourmands.



NOMA'S RENE REDZEPI AT TOKYO POP UP. PHOTO BY KAREN LOFTUS

Scandinavian super star Rene Redzepi was so taken by the culture, he set up a five-week NOMA pop up in Tokyo. After 11 trips in, Redzepi finally flew all 77 NOMA employees, including his dishwasher, in from Copenhagen for the pop up.

His 17-dish meal was in such high demand, there was a 66,000-person wait list. I was privy to one of the last seatings, where Lars Williams, his longtime head of Research & Development, led us through the meal.

Each dish, including the actual dish itself, had a story to tell from where and how Lars and Rene came up with it, to how they harvested, foraged, or convinced a local farmer to sell them the white unripened strawberries, versus the red ripe, or what amount of work went into befriending the one female fishmonger in a male-dominated culture. This experience was really taking a bite out of the contemporary culture and digesting the history throughout.

Redzepe served up far more than sushi in every small plate. A few fan favorites were the raw, as in semi-alive, botan ebi with wood ants, which adds a bit of citrus. The shaved monkfish liver literally—as in it is not a saying, but a fact—melted in your mouth. The koika cuttlefish, served with a bowl of rose petal doshi broth, was simply beautiful.

By the end of the meal, I was truly, madly, deeply in love with the Japanese cuisine, Rene's team, and with life itself. The passion on the plate and in the room was palpable. Now I have to head to Copenhagen to explore that culture and experience his Nordic cuisine. I don't care how long the wait. I'll even stand in the cold...for months.

SERVING UP SEASONAL DISHES AT MANOLO CARACOL. PHOTO BY KAREN LOFTUS



DONDE JOSE'S MARIO CASTELLON IN CASCO VIEJO. PHOTO BY KAREN LOFTUS

If You Go: Fly Air Nippon Airways (ana.co.jp). The Japanese Airline is completely committed to the Japanese culture and cuisine. With their Connoisseurs Program, they work with renowned chefs and restaurateurs.

PANAMANIAN PLEASURES

When you think of culinary capitals, Panama isn't the first place that comes to mind. Think again. Endemic dishes, extinct seeds, and intimate chef dinners are all the rage. Just don't mention the f word: Fusion.

A decade ago, Spanish chef Manuel Maduro was one of the first to take a chance in the once gang riddled neighborhood of Casco Viejo. The historic district and World Heritage site is now the epicenter of trend.

In the heart of Casco, as locals call it, Manolo Caracol Restaurant (manolocaracol.net) was and is a destination unto itself. Gourmands who enjoy a gallery-like ambiance will feel right at home while dining through the fixed ten dishes and drinks, with contemporary art adorning their large white walls.

Caracol takes farm-to-table to a whole other level with their own farms and the reviving of extinct seeds. Their seasonal and endemic dishes are a part of their classic cuisine with Panamanian influence. By Panamanian, they mean Afro-Caribbean, Chinese, and Spanish.

Casco's culinary scene is exploding with restaurants like Donde Jose (dondejose.com). Young chef Mario Castellon has no intention of expanding or replicating his little urban oasis. All of his focus is on his intimate 16-seater.

Donde Jose just has two seatings of 16 a night, where the chef comes out personally and explains each dish and pairing. Castellon is all about the Panamanian cuisine, culture, and products. Donde Jose may just be Panama's new NOMA. Time will tell...

If You Go: Panama Vacations (vacationtopanama.com) not only sets up your chic boutique hotels and outdoor adventures, they have the skinny on the local culinary culture and can arrange reservations. ♦



BOTAN EBI WITH WOOD ANTS AT NOMA POP UP TOKYO. PHOTO BY KAREN LOFTUS



ONE OF THE TEN DISHES AT PANAMA'S MANOLO CARACOL. PHOTO BY KAREN LOFTUS