

## [travel]



Photo from Barry Frangipane

Guests on Savory Adventures culinary tours of Italy enjoy dining among such picturesque settings as this balcony overlooking the seaside town of Positano.

# Culinary travel cooking with gas

By JEFF HOUCK

jhouck@tampatrib.com

TAMPA » Millions of tourists will fly this year to Tokyo, zip along on a bullet train and take in a view of Mount Fuji.

Only a few dozen will get to have celebrity chef Roy Yamaguchi as their personal culinary tour guide.

In September, the Hawaiian fusion-chef best known as the namesake of Roy's restaurants will partner with the Sarasota tour company AuthentEscapes to escort a few dozen travelers to his favorite food haunts in the world's most populous metropolitan area.

For about \$7,000 (not including airfare), Yamaguchi will share his insider's take on restaurants — he loves the delicious variety served in the basements of Tokyo's department stores — interact with guests and cook a gala dinner for the entire group.

"I was born and raised there, so I know the Japanese culture," Yamaguchi said last week from his home in Hawaii. "I try to use the ingredients from that certain city and country to come up with a five- or six- or seven-course dinner."

Yamaguchi's culinary themed tour is part of a booming wing of the travel industry that increasingly caters to gourmands and food lovers tired of the usual tourist traps.

Bored with the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben and the Colosseum, experienced travelers now want to consume the culture of the countries they visit by eating and cooking their food in restaurants and classes. Feeding the hunger for exotic flavors are Travel Channel shows such as "No Reservations" with Anthony Bourdain and "Bizarre Foods With Andrew Zimmern," both of which take viewers to exotic dinner tables around

the globe.

In early 2009, the Michigan-based Specialty Travel Agents Association named culinary travel one of the industry's fastest-growing segments, despite the downturned economy. Culinary options available worldwide include learning about food production, local-markets excursions, cooking classes, wine tastings and farm stays.

Chefs, authors and tour companies are rushing to cash in on the niche.

Joining Yamaguchi on the AuthentEscapes roster of trip celebs are such luminaries as chef-restaurateurs Ming Tsai and Jean-Georges Vongerichten, and Bon Appetit executive editor Victoria Von Biel.

Yamaguchi has been touring with the company for six years. During a trip to Egypt several years ago, he cooked dinner for 100 on a secluded plaza amid the Great Pyramids of Giza. He'll accompany an-



Photo from Dan Ryan, LLC

Chef Roy Yamaguchi will escort travelers to favorite spots in Tokyo.



Kathleen Flinn, center front, leads a tour group at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris.

other group to Australia in April.

Access to big-name stars is a strong lure. Alice Travel in Fairfield, N.J., is booking a Caribbean cruise in January for Paula Deen "Deeniacs" aboard the Celebrity line's Solstice ship with the Food Network star, her husband, Michael, and her sons, Bobby and Jamie.

Part-time Anna Maria Island resident Kathleen Flinn, author of the cooking school memoir "The Sharper Your Knife, The Less You Cry," performed cooking classes and demonstrations during a 10-day Mediterranean cruise aboard Holland America's

MS Noordam earlier this year. Through eight ports of call, she tailored dishes to ingredients found in the local markets.

Flinn started participating in culinary tours after AAA approached her about leading a tour last year through the Parisian neighborhoods where her book was set.

Her most surreal moment came when she showed a group of fans the spot where she dropped a duck she was preparing at Le Cordon Bleu cooking school, an episode she chronicled in the book. A half-dozen travelers lunged to take photos of the empty kitchen floor.

"For them, that was a really big deal," she said. "For me, it was a realization I had emblazoned certain areas of Paris and the school into a bigger story."

Debbie and Barry Frangipane of Valrico began leading tours of Italy when they lived in Venice. Visiting friends and family convinced them that their advice and tips were so good, they should start a company.

Savory Adventures with personal chef Dolce Debbie was born two years ago. They lead small groups several times a year to the less-traveled

Amalfi coast and towns like Piamonte. A recent trip featured a class taught in the home of legendary Italian cook Mama Agata, who has served meals for Jacqueline Kennedy, Sophia Loren and Fred Astaire.

For \$5,900 per person minus airfare, the tour includes everything customers need from the moment they land until they fly home, including Mercedes limos and an Italian cellphone.

Next year, in addition to a Piamonte trip timed with the October white truffle festival in Alba, Savory Adventures will branch out to France with a tour led by Tampa chef Gui Alinat of his native Provence.

"What Debbie and I want to share is what it feels like to live there," Barry Frangipane said.

"Part of that is going to markets and cooking day by day and not deciding what to eat until you see what the fishmonger has," he said. "It's watching the artistry of the butcher as if you were watching an artist painting. People want an alternative to the monuments that is uniquely theirs."

Reporter Jeff Houck can be reached at (813) 259-7324.