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THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

## Senior Traveler

# A recipe for learning abroad

By Alan Solomon  
FOR THE INQUIRER

There was the 70-year-old, newly a widower, with his son.

"He was trying to recapture memories of his Italian American childhood," Mary Beth Clark recalled, "and share it with the one son who still talked to him."

Cooking schools aren't the first travel option to pop into the minds of most seniors. Not cooking, on the other hand, has its obvious appeal. That's why we have cruise ships.

But, for travelers who have done the standard London-Paris-Rome-Amsterdam checklist, or bought T-shirts at every known Caribbean port, and want a deeper understanding of a culture, what better way than exploring its cuisine in a hands-on sort of way?

"Honestly, I can't think of one drawback for attending any cooking course anywhere," says Clark, who operates the International Cooking School of Italian Food and Wine, based in Bologna, Italy.

There may be no drawbacks, but there certainly are plenty of options. Cooking Schools Worldwide ([www.cookingschool-guide.com](http://www.cookingschool-guide.com)) lists dozens from Argentina to the United Kingdom and the United States. Other sources include the Culinary Travel Guide ([www.foodvacation.com](http://www.foodvacation.com)) and *Frommer's 500 Places for Food & Wine Lovers*, which came out this year.

Clark, through her school ([www.internationalcooking-school.com](http://www.internationalcooking-school.com), 212-779-1921), has been guiding foodies and would-be tortellini-twisters through the culinary wonders of the Emilia and Romagna regions of northern Italy for more than 20 years. Endorsements are many. Freshest, from the September 2009 *Condé Nast Traveler*: "The happy medium of exciting travel and serious lessons is Mary Beth Clark's International Cooking School."

(Disclosure: I've taken a Clark class. Complete disclosure: I flunked tortellini.)

Clark's programs are designed for grown-ups of all ages, but she says about half of her participants are 50-plus — and that, she welcomes.



Mary Beth Clark teaches a hands-on cooking class in Bologna, Italy, using ingredients bought at an outdoor produce market.

"Family is often settled, and it's the stage of calm," she says. "They tend to get along well, don't sweat the small stuff, and have a great attitude of enjoying everything."

"Now they travel for a particular reason — cooking, opera, art classes, learning a language, or a desire to experience something different."

For some, it's as much about sharing an experience with a loved one.

"About four years ago, three sisters came with their three daughters — probably about 55 years old and 25 years old. Just delightful," Clark says.

"A newly retired pilot was given this by his wife so they could learn to do something together."

Understand that you're not going to go directly from four days' instruction at a tourist-centric cooking school outside Paris to upgrading the stuffed squab at Le Bec-Fin. But there's a real good chance you'll be able to create a genuine, almost-from-scratch *lasagna bolognese con ragu con salsiccia* that will make the neighbors' homemade version taste canned.

Choosing the right school can be tricky, and at these prices — Clark's weeklong sessions this year started at \$3,450 (lodging included, double occupancy) — it's best to get it right. Some schools

are more hands-on than others — some are primarily demonstrations, others are a mix. If you want to roll and cut your own gnocchi, chose accordingly. Consider class size and language.

Some classes attempt more cultural immersion than others. Again, it's your call. Consider the weather: If heat isn't your cup of sangria, skip Madrid in midsummer. Consider the geography: If you're not up to hills, think "flat."

Always ask for references, and do check them.

Clark, with seniors in mind, adds this advice:

"If health is an issue, better to be in a city than stuck in the countryside somewhere in a Third-World country with no medical assistance."

And finally, Clark's most basic recipe for happiness:

"Choose the country of one of your favorite cuisines, right? If you like the ingredients and cooking style in those restaurants back home, the percentage increases for a successful journey."

## Senior moments

**REI Adventures**, specializing in active trips, reports that 42 percent of its 2009 travelers are 50+. Among seniors' favorites as winter approaches: cruises to the Galapagos and Antarctica. [www.rei.com/adventures](http://www.rei.com/adventures).

**Appalachian Mountain Club** features year-round "50+ Adventure Camps" based at its lodges in New Hampshire's White Mountains. Walks, hikes, and in winter, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. Five-night programs from \$453 (all-inclusive, per person, double occupancy). [www.outdoors.org/lodging/fall-fifty-plus.cfm](http://www.outdoors.org/lodging/fall-fifty-plus.cfm).

**Furnace Creek Inn & Ranch Resort** in Death Valley (a cooler place than you'd imagine, with a remarkable golf course): 60+ get 10 percent off rooms for one-night stays, 20 percent off for two-nighters, 30 percent off for three nights or longer. Mid-October-to-April rates start at \$207 per room, single or double. [www.furnacecreekresort.com](http://www.furnacecreekresort.com).

**Pay the regular rate** for the first night (\$229 and up) and the **Westin Jersey City Newport** will add second and third nights linked to your birth year: Born in 1949? Pay \$49. [www.westin.com/jerseycity](http://www.westin.com/jerseycity).

**Toronto's Park Hyatt**, near some of the city's best museums (including the knockout Royal Ontario Museum), trims rates 40 percent for 55+. At the recent exchange rate, that would drop a \$345 U.S. double (sample mid-October price) to about \$207. [www.parkhyatttoronto.com](http://www.parkhyatttoronto.com).

**In New Orleans**, the **National World War II Museum** opens three new venues Nov. 6, including a theater featuring a Tom Hanks-produced 4D film and a Stage Door Canteen entertainment-dining space. Discounts for 65+: \$4 off \$16 museum admission, \$2 off \$9 theater tickets. [www.nationalww2museum.org](http://www.nationalww2museum.org).

All promotions are subject to change and availability.



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