



FEAST *for* *the* SENSES

With gourmet cuisine, onboard cookery schools and culinary shore excursions, river cruises can be a mouth-watering treat. To whet your appetite for post-Covid travel, river-cruise expert **Jeannine Williamson** shares some of her favourite foodie memories...





Food is truly one of life's great pleasures, to say nothing of a perfectly chilled glass of wine or two to go with it. Add a wonderful location to the mix and life doesn't really get any better than that, does it? In fact, food and travel go hand in hand; be it a meal in an unforgettable

location, the first taste of something you've never tried before, joining locals for a coffee in a street café or sipping a glass of bubbly against the backdrop of vineyards where the grapes are grown.

For many travellers, food has become one of the major factors when it comes to choosing a holiday, no doubt influenced by food travel shows from leading chefs such as Rick Stein and Gordon Ramsay. Of course, there's another crucial reason why gastronomy is such an important part of travelling. Through food and drink we can discover the culture and history of a country, and it's as much a part of the travel experience as visiting local landmarks.

Lockdown has made me realise how much I miss the many amazing foodie experiences I've enjoyed on river cruises both on board and ashore – so while we're all hungry to start travelling again, I'm sharing some of my favourite food memories.

Clockwise from top left: The lavender fields of Provence; wine-tastings are a highlight of many a European river cruise... as are local culinary delights; A-Rosa serves up a treat on the sun deck; see the tea harvest in Assam on a Brahmaputra cruise



WHERE IN THE WORLD

FRAGRANT FLAVOURS IN PROVENCE

You see it is not just for the bath,' said our guide as I bit into a delicately scented biscuit and took a sip of cloudy lemonade, pleasantly surprised by the floral flavour.

Since the 16th century, lavender oil has been distilled in Ardèche, where vast fields paint a purple swathe across the landscape each summer. Though I'd previously thought of it purely as a fragrance, my snack at the Lavender Museum in Saint-Remèze proved this plant can be tasty, too.

The visit was one of many appetising excursions on an indulgent cruise along the Rhône and Saône in southern France, and we returned to our ship, Amadeus Provence, laden with lavender nougat, sweets, olive oil and honey.

Another day took us to the Camargue, where we admired the famous white horses, black bulls and pink flamingos before exploring the capital, Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, with its artisan market. Once again I returned loaded with bags; this time of prized Camargue rice, salt from the marshes, and the irresistible Sexy Flamingo rosé wine.

Get on board

7-night 'Treasures of Burgundy and Provence' cruise, round trip from Lyon, departing 16 September 2021, from £1,782

👉 amadeus-rivercruises.co.uk



My snack at the Lavender Museum in Saint-Remèze proved this fragrant plant can be surprisingly tasty, too

JUST MY CUP OF TEA

The Brahmaputra flows through lush Assam in the shadow of the Himalayas. Wild tea plants were discovered here in 1834 by Robert Bruce of the East India Company, which led to this north Indian state becoming the world's major tea-growing region.

At a plantation I learned about the history and production of tea while sipping the prized 'second flush' harvest that produces a more full-bodied brew. Afterwards we walked through waist-high bushes where women in jewel-bright saris picked the precious leaves, carrying them in baskets hanging from their heads. Another excursion, later in the week, took us to a tea factory

where we saw how the jade-green leaves are dried, sorted and graded.

Back aboard the MV Mahabaahu we sat down to another deliciously authentic Indian meal, as always with meat and vegetarian options and a plethora of tasty breads and condiments. The truly brave (or mad) could try *bhut jolokia*, grown in Assam and also known by the innocuous-sounding name of ghost pepper, though it is actually the subcontinent's hottest chilli.

Get on board

11-night 'Kolkata and Brahmaputra River' cruise, round trip from Kolkata, departing 8 April 2021, from £3,149 including flights

👉 cruisingholidays.co.uk



GUTEN APPETIT IN GERMANY

Navigating narrow locks is a novel part of river cruising, and the scene must have looked particularly jolly to the passers-by who stopped to watch A-Rosa Silva sail past on the Rhine. It was only 11.30am, but we already had our glasses of chilled Moselle in hand as we eagerly watched our chef prepare *flammkuchen* on the sun deck. This regional speciality – like a thin pizza topped with crème fraîche, sliced onions and bacon – turned out to be the perfect post-breakfast snack (or pre-lunch, depending on how you look at it).

German-owned A-Rosa makes a point of immersing its guests in the regional food and drink scene, and the process began as we set sail from Cologne and crew members came round with trays of foaming local beer.

Extensive mealtime choices included hearty sausages with curry sauce, the curiosity of rice pudding at breakfast, and pretzel bake (akin to a savoury bread-and-butter pudding) at dinner. You can even buy a loaf of A-Rosa's tasty rye bread to take home.

Get on board

7-night 'Romance on the Rhine & Moselle' cruise, round trip from Cologne, departing 17 April 2022, from €1,332

[arosa-cruises.co.uk](https://www.arosa-cruises.co.uk)





SWEET TREATS ON THE MEKONG

Leaving our ship, *AmaDara*, to reach the village of Cai Be on small boats, we sailed through a colourful floating market where freshly picked fruit, vegetables and other wares were hoisted high up the masts to serve as shop signs for the vendors below.

We weaved in and out of tiny fishing vessels, whose one and two-man (or woman) crews cast their nets just as they have for centuries. We passed wooden barges with piercing red eyes painted on their bows, an age-old custom to scare off the monsters once believed to lurk in the depths.

Safely ashore, we enjoyed a hands-on experience as smiling locals invited us to try their wares or have a go (and mostly fail) at making ultra-thin pancakes over a sizzling hot plate. Afterwards we savoured our sweet treats over cups of fragrant jasmine tea, and although my misshapen coconut candy bore little resemblance to the confection deftly rolled out by the vendor, it still tasted good.

Get on board

7-night 'Riches of the Mekong' cruise, from Kampong Cham to Ho Chi Minh City, departing 29 November 2021, from £2,535

amawaterways.co.uk

Smiling locals invited us to have a go (and mostly fail) at making ultra-thin pancakes over a sizzling hot plate

AN INSPIRING TASTE OF FRANCE

One day in 1945, Julia Child ordered her first meal in France. It consisted of oysters on the half-shell, followed by sole in parsley sauce with a green salad – and it changed her life.

Child's subsequent cookbook became a bestseller, introducing French cuisine to the USA, and 75 years later I followed in her footsteps to the atmospheric surroundings of La Couronne, the Rouen restaurant where she enjoyed that modest but momentous dinner.

Afternoon tea at the famous *auberge* – reputedly the oldest in France – is available on selected Seine sailings aboard Uniworld's *Joie de Vivre*, and I took my chance to tuck into *tarte*



tatin, the sweet Normandy staple of caramelised apples.

There were more treats back on board as the ship has its very own French bistro, which resembles a Parisian street café. I even signed up for a fun and informative cookery lesson in the ship's show kitchen, *La Cave des Vins*, complete with a chef's hat and apron to keep as a souvenir.

Get on board

7-night 'Paris & Normandy' cruise aboard *SS Joie de Vivre*, round trip from Paris, departing 10 April 2022, from £3,343

uniworld.com/uk



ENJOYING THE GOOD LIFE, ITALIAN STYLE

Moored on the Venetian waterfront, we had no need to look for an eye-wateringly expensive pavement café. Our taste buds had been tantalised earlier that day, when hostess Francesca chalked up her menus in the dining room of La Bella Vita, an elegant, 20-guest hotel barge whose name aptly translates as ‘the beautiful life’. Then, after the bell had sounded to summon us to its convivial communal tables, chef Andrea provided an explanation of the dishes and Francesca talked us through the wines. Menus showcased delights such as guineafowl with black truffle, carrot-and-ginger cream soup with scallops, seafood macaroni, a variety of Italian cheeses and, naturally, tiramisù.

Cruising the River Po and the Bianco Canal between Venice and Mantua, La Bella Vita felt like a very glamorous floating house party. And there was another culinary treat in store with a private dinner hosted by the owner of the 17th-century Villa Ca’Zen, the rural retreat where Lord Byron wrote some of his finest verse and – needless to say – courted the resident countess.

Get on board

6-night ‘Venice & the Po Valley’ cruise, departing 18 July 2021, round trip from Venice, from £2,890

📍 europeanwaterways.com



Clockwise from top left: A floating market on the Mekong; terraced vines in Austria’s Wachau Valley; apple tart is a taste of Normandy; guineafowl is a menu favourite on a Venetian canal cruise; French-style oysters inspired a gastronomic revolution

APRICOTS ALL ROUND

Sampling local specialities ashore is something I always look forward to on a river cruise, and I felt I’d earned a little self-indulgence after the half-hour uphill walk to the ruins of Dürnstein Castle, perched high above the Danube. That said, it was worth the climb just for the panoramic views of Austria’s Unesco-listed Wachau Valley.

Wine grapes are not the only crop to flourish in the richly fertile soil below. Renowned for its sweetness, the plump Klosterneuburger apricot enjoys EU ‘protected designation of origin’ status, with only some 200

farmers allowed to use the name. On the way back down from the castle I stopped off to reward myself with a plate of the cinnamon-sprinkled dumplings known as *marillenknödel*. And I didn’t need much persuasion from the waitress to add a restorative shot of apricot liqueur. Warming to the theme, after polishing off the dumplings I bought some fruity souvenirs, including jam, chutney and apricot-flavoured chocolate, to take home. 📍

Get on board

7-night ‘Danube Dreams’ cruise, from Budapest to Deggendorf, departing 3 September 2021, from £2,544

📍 avalonwaterways.co.uk