



The Lure of Local Markets

Paola Westbeek explains the magic and wonder of wandering food markets while on holiday to learn about cuisine and culture

Paola Westbeek is a food, wine and travel journalist who has tasted her way through Europe, interviewing chefs, visiting vineyards and reviewing restaurants. Her work has appeared in *FRANCE Magazine* and other publications



In *An Omelette and a Glass of Wine* (1984), Elizabeth David—the culinary author whose words and recipes revolutionised the way postwar Britain ate—devoted five chapters to the markets of France.

Her evocative essays, penned for various publications between 1955 and 1984, transport us to sun-drenched villages as they come to life with the hustle and bustle of market day. Customers line up to buy freshly churned butter by the basketful in Yvetot, Normandy. In Montpellier, an elderly gentleman carefully selects tomatoes and artichokes, “one by one, as if he were picking a bouquet of flowers”. At

the Saturday market in Valence, the scent of herbs and succulent peaches leaves little doubt that we’re at the gateway to southern France. For David, food markets reflected the culture and traditions of a region just as much as its respected museums, galleries and cathedrals.

I couldn’t agree more.

Weeks before we set out to discover a new holiday

destination, I take great pleasure in scouring the internet to map out an itinerary of local markets, including those held within a one-hour radius of the town we're staying in. Markets are more than a place to shop for food (or run-of-the-mill souvenirs like soap, straw baskets and kitchen towels). They are an essential part of truly broadening our horizons. And isn't that the very reason to travel?

stop at the supermarket or meal served at a hotel as part of an all-inclusive package deal will ever provide as much gratification and sense of human connection, not to mention delicious memories.

But how can you really get the most out of a market trip while on holiday? For me, that means getting there early in order to avoid the avalanche of tourists that will

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Strolling through markets—from the tiny ones with the offerings of only a handful of farmers, to the most impressive that start on the town square and wind through several streets—is how I discover new tastes and have developed my culinary repertoire. In fact, it is at markets that I have learned the most about food and cooking. No formal training required. Buying seasonal vegetables still dewy from that morning's harvest, a regional pastry from the person who baked it, or perhaps something you've never tried before is not only extremely gratifying, but it is, literally, the ultimate way to savour your destination. It is in these products and encounters that one develops a true understanding and appreciation for food and the love that goes into bringing it to our tables. No quick

inevitably descend upon the town, especially in summer. Between 9am and 10am is really the sweet spot when I can enjoy a leisurely stroll and peruse the stalls without the snail's pace of crowded streets or endless queues. It's no wonder this is the time when most locals are doing their shopping. And that's an added bonus, especially if you happen to speak the language and can engage in some food-related small talk. I've learned how to make a stellar green bean salad, grow courgettes, choose porcini mushrooms, bottle my own tomato sauce, taste olive oil and even discovered the history of sangria, Agen prunes and Genovese basil, all while standing at a market stall.

While I am fanatical about meal planning at home, rarely will I visit a foreign market with a shopping

list. Instead, I let the season and my senses guide me. In summer, for example, a post-market lunch might start with cantaloupe halves with the pips removed and the hollows filled with a shot of port. Or, I'll thinly slice a variety of colourful heirloom tomatoes and top them with crisp shallots, a mustardy vinaigrette and lots of fresh flat-leaf parsley. With a loaf of sourdough bread, this is a light yet satisfying meal on its own. Summer tomatoes are also excellent for making easy savoury tarts. Simply brush some mustard or olive tapenade over ready-made pastry, top with the tomatoes, scatter with a handful of capers and bake until golden.

In spring, you can do the same with green asparagus, slathering the pastry with cream cheese and finishing it off with fragrant lemon zest to add vibrancy and lift the flavours. Should you not be in the mood to actually cook, simply let the stalls selling olives, prepared salads and Mediterranean delights such as dolmas (stuffed grape leaves), hummus and falafel come to your rescue.

If you're travelling in autumn or winter, the markets may not be as abundant, but don't let that or the cooler weather lure you into the nearest shop. A sundry of mushrooms, rustic root vegetables, cabbages and dried legumes await, as do vendors who are ready to

tempt you with numerous hearty local specialties.

In fact, one of my fondest food memories was following my nose on a cold winter morning in Alsace to a stall selling choucroute (sauerkraut simmered in white wine with warming spices like cloves, peppercorns and juniper



berries). I looked in fascination as it was scooped from steaming vats into containers for customers who obviously didn't mind queuing in the frosty February air. Of course, I did the same. And it was worth it.

That afternoon, from my little house in the Vosges Mountains, I gently heated the choucroute as I had been instructed, topped it with boiled potatoes, opened a bottle of local Riesling and very much felt like a local. ■