



**TRAVEL
BY
TASTE:
FROM THE
FIELDS**

Lullaby Tea

Steam drapes the tea bushes on the slopes of São Miguel in the Azores. Women in long aprons pick leaves from the orderly rows by hand. From 100 yards away, I hear voices. The women are singing. Not your random in-the-shower solos. These songs are melodic and fitting for their slow toil.

“What is that, a Portuguese hymn?” I ask my guide.

“Folk songs,” he tells me, “handed down through their families.” Many islanders, he explains, believe this is why Azores tea is so robust: The bushes embrace each song and respond with hearty leaves drenched in flavor.

This is the only place in Europe where tea is harvested. The soil and climate mimic conditions in tea-growing regions of Asia. But the singing, apparently, sets it apart.

Later, at a small cafe, I sip a whole-leaf orange pekoe. It tastes more exotic than the tea in my cupboard. I figure the spectacular surroundings must be at work. But then one of the field workers walks past my table, still humming. I look into my cup of tea. Could it be listening? — DEBRA BOKUR



Land Snails
ISLE OF PINES

Feet on the Table

In the bushes behind the postcard-worthy beaches of New Caledonia’s Isle of Pines are thousands of stealthy *Placostylus fibratus*. They creep slowly on a giant fleshy foot, eat voraciously, and are endemic to this island. My plan is to have them for lunch.

For millennia these large land snails have been a source of protein for the indigenous Kunie people. “Their numbers have dropped drastically,” my Kunie guide, David, tells me. “Authorities now control harvesting. You can only eat them here.” Lucky me. Naturally, the Kunie blame the dwindling snail population on the ravenous French colonialists, the French blame it on tourists and scientists blame it on the introduction of foreign predators. All for a 4-inch creature with that ridiculous foot poking from its shell.

I eventually find them on the menu at the romantic La Pirogue restaurant at the swanky Le Meridien hotel. I’m sipping a French sauvignon when the plate arrives: six sizzling snails in their shells. The fleshy feet have shrunk and turned black in the prep. I load one onto crusty bread, drizzle on some garlic butter and bite. It’s more tender than I suspected, and dare I say ... delicious? (Yes, garlic butter always helps.) And do I detect a soupçon of white wine? I ask the French waiter, who nods in nonchalant agreement.

I smack my fingertips to my lips, butter dribbling off my chin. “Magnifique!” I exclaim. The waiter looks and walks away. — AMANDA JONES

We’ve been served (clockwise from left): snails in New Caledonia, rare cheese in Croatia, home-cooked curry in Zanzibar.



A Flock of Cheese

There is no shade for the sheep on the moonscape island of Pag off Croatia’s northern coast. Among the sheep is a 40-something man named Mate (rhymes with “latte”), his brown hair ruffled by the Mediterranean breeze. Mate lets out a gentle singsong call: “Na mala, na” (“Here little ones, here”). The sheep come running to his voice. Mate perches on a stool behind one female and squirts her milk into a dented metal pail. It will take a lot of time, and many sheep, to fill the pail.

Mate takes me aside and cuts a chunk of cheese. It crumbles like Parmesan and is often served with olive oil to bring out the intense nutty flavor. I think I detect a hint of sage on which the sheep grazed. Mate waves and says “Bok,” a Croatian phrase that means hello and goodbye, and rushes out to the pasture to check on his “little ones.” — KRISTIN VUKOVIC

Pag sheep produce just one quart of milk per day. To make a 5-pound wheel of Paški cheese, it takes a day’s output from 19 sheep.

A Zanzibar Kitchen

I’m afraid of the shredder — a sharp spike poking through the floor. I’ve encountered this device in the home of Mustafa, a staffer at Paradise Beach Bungalows on Zanzibar. “Come,” Mustafa had told me back at the resort. “You cook curry octopus with my wife.”

So I followed Mustafa home, where I met Maja, a woman of few words, and her shredder. She gestures for me to peel green mangoes while Mustafa combs through the rice, tossing aside pebbles or shells or something. I don’t ask. Maja straddles the shredder to carve coconut strips. Mustafa’s mother arrives, supporting herself on bent tree branches before sitting on the floor to eat. The coconut and mango subdue the curry’s spices. The octopus is resilient but not rubbery. The mother and I murmur with mouths full. It’s one of the best dinner conversations I’ve ever had. — BARBARA WYSOCKI



An Evening Wok

Hong Kong Island is hot. I watch a chef, wearing Crocs, transfer food from woks to plates and hand off the meals to two elderly women. They sprint toward customers who occupy flimsy plastic stools. Trailing the ladies is an even older man in shin-high socks, running with two large beers.

Of all the food carts in this part of Hong Kong, Shing Kee is the busiest. The carts, or dai pai dongs, do not resemble hot-dog wagons or food trucks. They look like the objects that would be tossed to the curb if a restaurant owner decided to remodel his kitchen. I sit beside this heap of paradise and feel the heat as a burner roars to life. And then I make a selection from the sticky menu.

The meal arrives on plates that probably had trading value at a 1980s Tupperware party, but the taste defies my surroundings. The stir-fried clams are sweet, perfectly complemented with bitter black-bean sauce and swigs of perspiring ale. I nod to the chef, but he's too busy working the woks in his food-stained Crocs. — NOAH LEDERMAN

ANDREW WATSON/GETTY IMAGES



Fish Chowder
BERMUDA

Splash in My Soup

Let me come clean here: I don't like chowder. It isn't the taste. It's the texture — and the calories. And that means trouble on Bermuda. An expat whom I met on the plane over told me fish chowder is the island's national dish. "It's on every menu," he said.

Sure enough, sitting down for my first meal at the Fairmont Hamilton Princess' Heritage Court, I ask about the specialties. The server stresses one in particular. "Fish chowder," she says. Then, sensing I'm a chowder doubter, she goes to the kitchen and returns with a sample, saying, "Give it a try."

The waitress can't tell me exactly what kind of fish they use. The locals know it doesn't matter. What goes *around* the fish is what matters. But even that's hard to pin down, because chowder recipes are guarded. At Henry VIII Restaurant in Southampton, for instance, the recipe is not allowed to leave the kitchen. And while locals don't necessarily argue about the best chowder, their taste buds are quite discerning.

"If someone's fish chowder isn't up to par, they'll hear about it," says 64-year-old taxi driver Ronald Scraders, during a ride through the center of the island.

By day three I'm practically a chowder connoisseur. Around this time I also discover that, although each chowder has its own character, all of my bowls have had two common ingredients: black rum and sherry peppers sauce. Small bottles of each appear on tables everywhere. So I'm not sure if it's the chowder or the bottles, but something has me hooked. — KAREN ASP

We've been served (from left): Magic syrup in Bermuda, special sauce in Vietnam and a rare gem on Kangaroo Island.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: TOHRU MINOWA/AGE FOTOSTOCK; EVERETT KENNEDY BROWN/CORBIS; PHILIPPE WIDLING/CORBIS; CHAD CHISHOLM; TODD COLEMAN; OPPOSITE: VICTOR KORCHENKO/AGE FOTOSTOCK



LIVELY BITES Three words often said at mealtime in Japan: *I dare you*. (Above, from left): Tiny lake shrimp peek out from a bowl of soybeans. A plate of globefish can cost \$175, but that's nothing compared to what can happen if the chef hasn't filleted the fish exactly right — its toxins can cost you your life. Honey-glazed lollipops look shiny and sweet until you notice the tentacles — yep, they're octopus lollipops.



Open with Care

I learned how to wield a bottle of fish sauce in Hanoi, on mainland Vietnam, while slurping steaming rice-noodle soup — pho — at a hole-in-the-wall kitchen. A fellow diner nudged a locally made amber liquid, Red Boat, toward me and smiled. So by the time I make my way to the island of Phu Quoc, 30 miles off Vietnam's southwest coast, I'm using the stuff on everything. This is when I meet Mrs. Linh for my first Vietnamese cooking class.

"We make something easy," Mrs. Linh says. In a clay pot over hot coals, we simmer garlic, red chilies, green onions and *nuoc nam*, known as, yes, fish sauce. When I ask Mrs. Linh why the sauce is so addictive, she says the makers of Red Boat use anchovies that are "fermented for a year, and pressed." The stuff is said to be so pungent that Vietnam Airlines staff can sniff it out on potential smugglers. Armed with this information, I consume the sauce like milk on cereal, knowing I will not be taking a bottle home. — CHANTAL MARTINEAU



Open with Force

The wind blows wildly. Pelicans stretch their ballooning necks. It's a boisterous day on Kangaroo Island when Paul Polacco bounds off his boat with untamable hair and a net filled with shells. Paul is the only scallop diver in South Australia, plucking half a ton of scallops a week for local restaurants. He cracks open a shell and holds out the meat. There's no butter or angel-hair pasta in sight. "Down it," Paul says. The scallop is briny. It's also sweet and creamy because there are no competing flavors — like butter or pasta. When Paul offers another, I hold up my hand. "Save it for dinner." — KATE PARHAM