

CULINARY AWAKENINGS

COOKING TOURS

STIR UP CULTURAL AWARENESS

BY ROBERT J. NEBEL

JOHN WILSON WAS TIRED OF 80-HOUR WORKWEEKS. Being the food and beverage director for the Fernbank Museum of Natural History had its perks, but Wilson wanted to slow down. The 49-year-old Roswell resident knew he could switch gears and do something else within the food industry; yet becoming a head chef at a fine bistro, a caterer or even a restaurateur was not exactly his idea of slowing down. He had to find work that consisted of the things he cherished most throughout his 20-plus-year career.

After much brainstorming, Wilson had an epiphany: combine his

love of cooking, travel and teaching by taking small groups of people on culinary tours throughout Europe and the United States. Out of this eureka moment, Wilson created Culinary Vacations, a company that organizes excursions to Italy, Spain and France. These trips are neither laid-back, nor are they boot camps for "serious foodies." Instead, Wilson, who is known to his students as "Chef John," leads getaways that are both educational and fun for those who love good food, wine and travel.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN WILSON

One of Chef John Wilson's classes enjoys their final meal together

UNDER THE "TUSCAN SUNRISE"

Inspiring sunrises radiating over vast olive groves and 18th-century villas are just a few of the highlights found on Wilson's trip to Tuscany. Andrea Wuori of Sandy Springs

raved about her experience on this culinary adventure into the Italian countryside. A cooking enthusiast at heart, she enjoyed the schooling, as well as the sights, smells and sounds of Southern Europe. "There is

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and a chocolate factory.*

something about the way the Tuscan sun shines," she recalled. "They also have cuckoo birds which make a sound that you can never forget."

Wuori, along with two of her friends, loved waking up to the serene Tuscan sunrise followed by intimate cooking lessons in the villa's kitchen. On this trip, as with most available through Culinary Vacations, the education might begin in the kitchen, but it certainly does not end there. Wilson extends the learning with fun activities such as tours of regional wineries, as well as an olive oil production plant.

"We do a lot of cooking on this tour," he explained. "We follow that up with several related side trips. A lot of cooking can get tiring. I don't want to burn anyone out." Wilson is careful not to overbook the trips, and an entire day of shopping and dining in the towns of Castellina and Greve is included in the tour. Another free day included in the package invites students to explore the Chianti region or take a bus to Florence.

HEART OF THE FRENCH COUNTRY

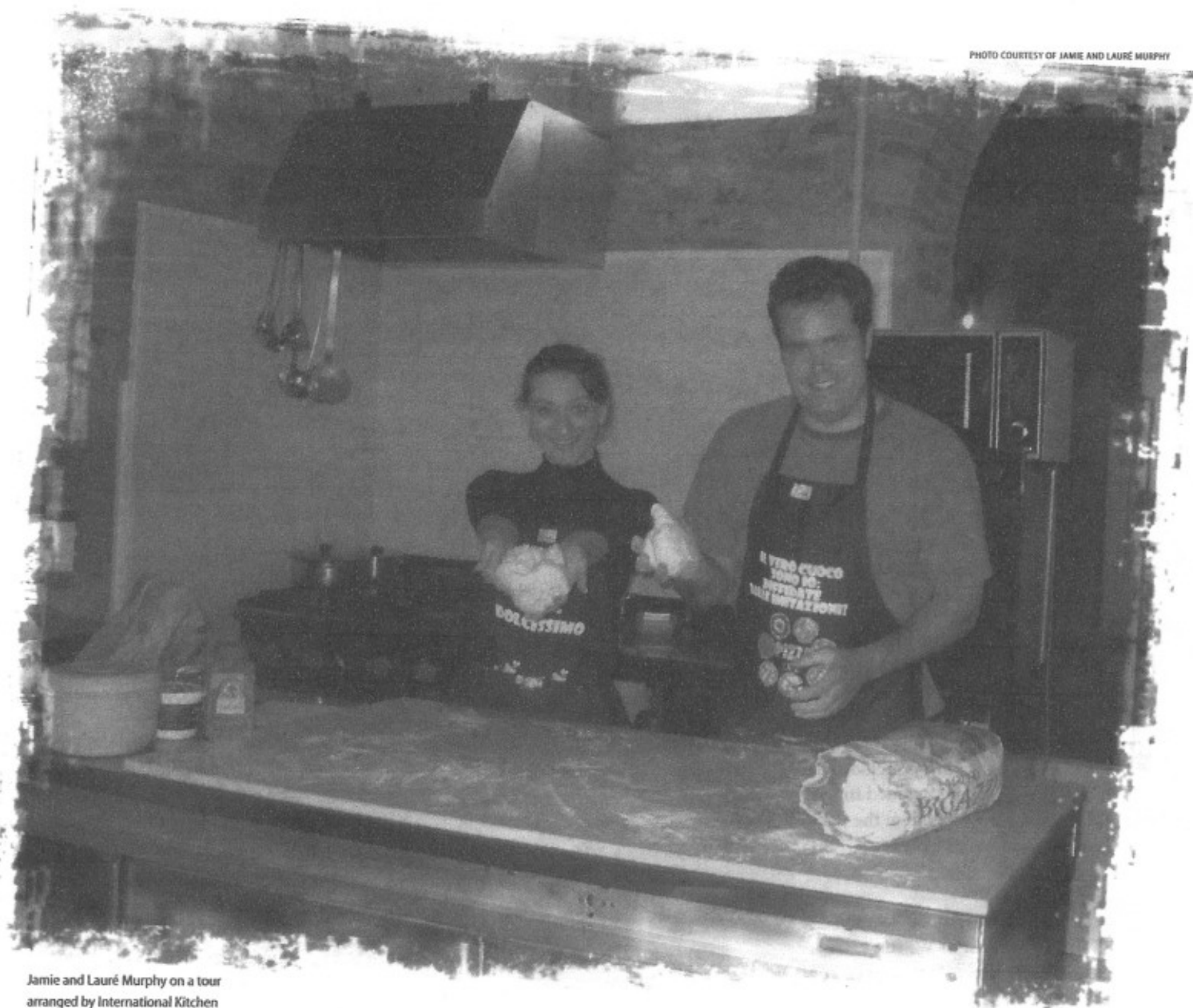
Wuori, a veteran of four of Wilson's tours, found the trip to Provence, France to be one of her favorites. It happened on a lark. "Chef John had some cancellations and he called to see if I would go," she said. "I'm glad I went because I learned a lot."

Noves, France is more than heaven on earth. This hidden treasure of a town is home to Mas Bellevue, a classic five-bedroom French home where Wilson conducts his culinary tour. With the Alpilles mountain range as a backdrop, guests learn the fine art of French cooking. According to Wuori, the dishes, which included leg of lamb, vegetable



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PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMIE AND LAURÉ MURPHY



Jamie and Lauré Murphy on a tour arranged by International Kitchen

couscous, pork chops and mouth-watering goat cheese, were just as exquisite as the scenery. Of course, a trip to Provence would not be complete without a visit to a local winery and a chocolate factory. The indulgence continued with an afternoon bread-baking lesson at a local bakery. Side trips to towns like Saint Remy de Provence and Baux de Provence gave her a taste of France that most tourists never experience.

Culinary tour participants like Wuori agree how important it is to have a Culinary Institute of America trained chef like Wilson on a tour. "You will come away with more cooking and cultural knowledge," she explained. Perhaps the best part about his trips is that they are intimate, with no more than eight people on each tour. For those interested in a culinary experience without traveling abroad, Wilson created the Weekend

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHN AND LINDA TONGE

John and Linda Tonge experienced some wildlife on a recent trip to a South African winery



As a “student” you do not have to be a professional chef; you just need a little culinary savvy and an open mind.

Gourmet Getaways package, which takes place at the Sweet Biscuit Inn near the Biltmore Village in Asheville, N.C.

Aside from the amount of time and travel he puts into Culinary Vacations, Wilson can be found hosting cooking demonstrations at local Williams-Sonoma outlets, as well as in his classroom at Perimeter College where he serves as the culinary director. While it's obvious that Wilson has not slowed down, he's doing what he loves even if it turns out to be an 80-hour workweek.

A TASTE OF SOUTH AFRICA

Wilson is quick to note that as a “student” you do not have to be a professional chef; you just need a little culinary savvy and an open mind. For John Tonge, cooking has

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been an interest since he was a child. "I used to go to Hearts restaurant on Peachtree near Rumson Road," he recalled. "I would get bored and go back to the kitchen. It gave me instant gratification."

Perhaps that was the motivation behind his recent culinary adventure. Much like its competitors, A Cook's Tour offers culinary trips to Italy and France. However, when Tonge and his wife Linda strolled by the Seattle-based outfit's booth during a Wine South event, they were intrigued with another location listed on the menu — South Africa. The Midtown couple wasted no time phoning David Iverson, the owner of A Cook's Tour, to book their trip.

The Tonges had their share of apprehension about visiting South Africa. "I was concerned about the political situation," Linda admitted. "I wasn't sure how much things have changed since apartheid collapsed." Those fears melted away when they arrived in Cape Town at the beginning of their journey. They were greeted with friendly people, pleasing scenery and previously undiscovered wines. "Since apartheid, South African wines have become wildly popular," Linda explained. "On that trip, we found out what we were missing."

The Tonges were also skeptical because as seasoned travelers, they prefer to chart their own course rather than explore new places in a

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Culinary tours serve as ideal introductions not only to the world of cooking, but also to cultures and lifestyles around the world. Careful planning is recommended as each trip is designed toward specific needs and interests.

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group. Not this time. The small size of the group combined with Iverson's professionalism made the trip palatable for the Tonges. They stayed in a 17th-century Dutch home on an attorney's farm where the group dined on local game. "We ate what he shot," Linda said. "One of the dishes was South African deer."

Aside from exotic entrées at dinner, the Tonges visited Cass Abrahams, the queen of Cape Malay cuisine. Abrahams teaches classes and prepares a scrumptious lunch in a home in the Franschhoek Wine Valley. Similar to California's wine country, visitors are encouraged to take advantage of all that the outdoors has to offer including horseback riding, fly-fishing and biking.

AN EYE-OPENING EXPERIENCE

Believe it or not, culinary vacations are not all about cooking. They are tours meant to broaden horizons. When the Tonges ventured outside the kitchen, they went on a safari in Kruger National Park. They also explored Robben Island, where former South African President Nelson Mandela spent most of his 26 years of imprisonment.

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Jamie and Lauré Murphy of Sandy Springs embarked on a three-week cooking tour of France and Italy to celebrate their first wedding anniversary and Lauré's birthday. The trip, arranged through Chicago-based International Kitchen, began in Paris and concluded in Positano, Italy. "The adventures were countless and the cities that we visited were so full of history, culture and flavorful cuisine," Lauré said of her experience.

The highlight of their sojourn was the Italian portion. The "Cooking and Walking in Umbria and Tuscany" tour satisfied the Murphys' love of cooking and athletics. They stayed in a renovated 13th-century building in Piegara, a hilltop village in central Italy. Their classes took place at an eatery featuring an ancient open fireplace where the food was cooked right in front of them.

Although their trip did not consist of a group tour, the Murphys had the opportunity to explore the terrain with a few native Italians. "During the day, we would travel by car and then on foot with two locals, Daniele and Simon," Murphy recalled. "They taught us about agro-tourism in the area and how locals are encouraged to restore farms and buildings to their original state by the government."

In the evenings, the Murphys returned to the chateau to cook with their non-English speaking chef Nicolina and her translator Angela who made the lessons go smoothly. The Murphys learned how to make a number of Italian dishes including tiramisu and homemade pasta. "I always thought making pasta would be difficult," Murphy said. "It isn't [difficult] when you have the right teacher."

Murphy admitted that the cooking tour made her and her husband more adventurous and braver in the kitchen. Now, that's a practical souvenir that can be enjoyed long after the vacation ends. ❖

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