

# Be a world food adventurer

## Don't be afraid to try the time-tested favorites of the locals

BY GIG GWIN

*Travelers Century Club*

Eating exotic food in other parts of the world can be scary, exciting and rewarding. Thanks to my parents, who taught me to be adventurous at the dinner table, I can appreciate a plate of haggis in Scotland, sea eels in Tonga, conch fritters in the Bahamas or roasted rooster comb in Portugal.

Of course, I have to admit my courage was tested in Mongolia a few years back when the guide I had hired pulled the car off a country road and asked if I'd like to visit an encampment of nomads. While I hesitated to answer, a group of curious youngsters surrounded the car. I mustered a smile and was escorted into a tent in which one family lived.

As my guide and the bearded elder talked, it became clear that my presence was causing a good deal of excitement. The conversation became animated as the elder discussed the problems he was having with mountain lions attacking his cattle and yak.

I sat on a low stool, observing a pot of bubbling white liquid covered by an unappetizing yellow film. Black flies converged on the surface. Soon my worst fear was realized as the elder motioned toward the pot and back to me. I was being offered a bowl of yak soup.

I can't recall ever being less attracted to food, but I couldn't refuse my hosts' hospitality. The first sip went down the hatch, and it wasn't all that bad, although my lips began to numb a bit. As I took more sips, the numbing expanded to my chin and cheeks, for reasons I never understood. I looked the elder in the eyes, held up my bowl and said, "You know, I might have another bowl of that white stuff."

The second bowl went down more smoothly, although I developed a twitch in my right eye. Then I suggested we start a hunting safari to eliminate the lion menace. Wisely, my guide gently intervened and led me back to the car and my hotel.

Fortunately, most food in foreign lands is much tamer.

### Adventures in taste

As explorers of new places around the world, we travelers should consider food one of the true embodiments of a region or country. Dining abroad brings out the best in people. We learn new recipes, new tastes and often experience a whole different style of eating, but it can only be done if you start with a spirit of adventure.

Are you a little timid when it comes to eating? Are you a bit uneasy when a menu is presented and you're faced with an abundance of strange words? Do you tend to shy away and ask for something simple? When you visit a new place, do you ask if they have a McDonald's?

If any of those practices applies to you, it might be time to enter the delicious world of new food and, particularly, local dishes. Remember, if you're somewhere else in the world and local food is available, it's probably a dish that has been around for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. It may take you back to another time, and could become a part of your treasure trove of culinary knowledge.

### Do your homework

Before you head off to a new location, check the Internet or grab a book and do some reading on the local cuisine. After



Photos by Stars and Stripes

**Above: Diners toast before a meal at an outdoor restaurant in Stavanger, Norway. Below: Cooks prepare hot food in large batches to warm shoppers at the Christmas market in Erfurt, Germany.**



you've arrived, if you're in a fairly large hotel, the best way to assimilate local food is via a luncheon buffet. If it's a good restaurant, it will be replete with choices. Ask the waiter or maitre d' for suggestions about what local cuisine is popular. Sometimes the restaurant will have little name cards to help you with your decision. This also gives you a chance to try a little of everything.

If you're going out, you might want to choose a restaurant that is recommended by the locals. I try to find a place where families eat. If you look for an establishment with grandmothers, kids, aunts and uncles gathered around, you have probably found a good place to eat with fair prices and a menu that will suit your palate.

It is also helpful to ask around for rec-

ommendations from your hotel staff and concierge. Explain your price range because a great gourmet meal, totally out of your budget, may leave you with a bad taste and grievous harm to your wallet.

On the other hand, if you can afford a great meal, consider the evening an investment in your travel dreams and memories. If needed, make a reservation. That prevents a lot of extra bar time, but if you find yourself in a holding area, try the local drink. I learned to enjoy ouzo in Greece, a pisco sour in Peru and plum wine in Japan.

Another rule of thumb is that any meal tastes a little better if you're hungry. The French almost totally ignore breakfast, so when their lunch or late dinner approaches, they've eaten less and they appreciate their main courses a little more.

### Exotic food

What is exotic food? Is it truffles in southern France, reindeer meat in Finland or ostrich in South Africa? That kind of food may be over the line for you. Food that is completely off the wall is sometimes more of a challenge than a delicacy.

One uncommon food is haggis. It's one of those "sounds bad, tastes good" foods. Haggis is made from the innards of a sheep, but you can easily become accustomed to its flavor, particularly with morning eggs.

The Chinese seem to think everything is exotic and a delicacy, so if you go to a Chinese market, don't be surprised to see baskets of live turtles, frogs, snakes, cats, dogs and the ever-popular fish eyes. India also has an exotic menu. Since many Hindus are vegetarians, they have many wonderful nonmeat dishes spiced with curry for a flavor that, once you become accustomed, will bring you back for seconds. My biggest surprise in exotic food was ostrich. It tastes more like beef than bird, and is delicious. Ostriches are being raised internationally and becoming a regular in many fine restaurants.

One of my favorite eating experiences was in Nairobi, Kenya. Near the airport is a restaurant called the Carnivore. It offers a large selection of wild game roasted over charcoal and carved at your table. Slices of hot, steaming crocodile, antelope and zebra are rotated along with more mundane beef, chicken and pork. Camel also is on the menu. It's so tough, you can't chew it down. It's like beef-flavored chewing gum, and you never quite get through it.

So don't order the camel, but do try a few local dishes wherever you go, and if you can, avoid the local version of McDonald's.

Gig Gwin has been to every country in the world, and all 50 of the United States. He owns Gwins Travel in St. Louis. Reach him at ggwin@gwins.com.