

# MUCH ADIEU

## MOREISH MEANDERINGS



By Alana Lowes

*am surrounded by an unexplored world of breathtaking sights, alluring sounds, flamboyant flavours and scrumptious aromas... around every corner is a new journey just waiting to happen...*

It's chilly and the sun has begun setting as we first arrive at our home-stay lodging in a small village in the Sapa region of Northern Vietnam. Our hiking party huddles around an inviting open fire pit inside the wooden hut that will be our home this evening.

The weathered face of our host instantly lights up the room as she enters with a basket overflowing with the most vivid, leafy-green water spinach among a selection of other herbs, that just moments before, had been slashed and plucked from her vegetable garden. This is all part of tonight's feast that is being prepared to be shared with the host's family and visitors.

In my experiences, Vietnamese dishes are always served proudly with the freshest of ingredients and this beautifully portrays the attitude of the Vietnamese towards

food which forms such a major part of their identity. Water spinach is abundant in this region, not only in garden beds but also sprouting readily in the wild as we discovered while hiking across the hillside that day. I'm excited; food does not get any fresher than this! I make a mental note to grow my own vegetables and herbs when I return home.

I now take that wonderful experience of eating this most flavourful and fresh, locally sourced produce as the mantra for the recipes that I write and every meal that I prepare.

As a foodie who adores exploring, I have discovered that cuisine is as much about the culture as it is about the food itself and this can't be taught from recipe books. Immersing oneself in a new culture opens up unexplored vaults of information and offers a deeper appreciation for the dish you prepare. It allows you to put the weekly shopping list aside and give you the creative licence and confidence to experiment with a few distinguishing flavours and techniques that you have seen along the way.

One of the most rewarding food-travel experiences I have had abroad was at a cooking class in Istanbul, Turkey. At Cooking Alaturka, owner and Cordon Bleu chef, Eveline, led me on a journey through the aromatic flavours at the heart of Turkish cuisine: from Ottoman-style lamb to more contemporary dessert dishes and the secrets of the famed Turkish coffee.

A cooking class while travelling allows you to become more bold and discerning in your food choices for the remainder of your journey. On a recent trip to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, I ventured out of the busy city to the tranquil country surrounds of Bayan Indah, The Culinary Retreat.

The moment I walked through the bamboo gates I knew this was

a special place. Set within a beautiful Malaysian tropical garden, the cooking school is surrounded by an amazing array of plump, native Southeast Asian fruits and kaleidoscopic flowers. If this place doesn't inspire culinary creativity, nothing will. Not only did I taste new dishes for the first time, but discovered the origins of Nyonya cuisine, taught at Bayan Indah, which stems from the inter-community marriage of Straits Chinese and Malays. The cuisine is a fusion of Malay ingredients (herbs and spices) and Chinese cooking techniques.

From learning to cook new dishes yourself at one end of the spectrum to enjoying fine dining and silver service at the other, there is always food inspiration to be found when travelling. Whilst it is the fresh, comforting and simplistic food that I love cooking at home, it is when I am in big heaving cities like New York that I love to treat myself to Michelin Star dining at some of the best restaurants in the world.



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While on *MasterChef Australia*, we had a series of challenges in New York City. It was during this trip that the contestants decided to splurge on a once-in-a-lifetime experience at Corton, a two-star Michelin restaurant. Head Chef Paul Liebrandt took us on an extraordinary journey of flavours, textures and aromas, all tied together with flawless culinary techniques.

Let's face it, molecular gastronomy isn't for every home kitchen, but these sorts of experiences allow you to appreciate that there are no limits to creativity with food preparation and presentation. I now relish in the enjoyment of beautifying my platters of food to give my guests the best possible experience and take them on my own journey of flavours, textures and, of course, the scent of mouth-watering dishes.

The wonderful thing about travelling is that you can return home with inspiration from the food you have discovered and the people you have met and use these ideas to create dishes including your fresh local produce. I like to think of it in a 'shop local, cook global' kind of way.

Back in Australia, I'm standing in an aisle at the grocer's, not with a shopping list but rather, a list of food inspirations that reads more like a round-the-world itinerary.

I'm in search of rosewater, rose jam, panch phoran, mace and Iranian saffron. The Indian shopkeeper shows me where the panch phoran is kept. He is more than happy to offer step-by-step instructions of how to make the most delicious masoor dal and he recounts the story of his mother teaching him, passing on her family secrets.

Although I have not yet visited India, I've just been inspired by the shopkeeper's nostalgic memories and so my mind drifts to my next foodie dream destination... hello India!

*A lifestyle journalist, Alana Lowes is living a love affair with all things fashion and food related. Exploring flavours, creating recipes, cooking and sharing these experiences with others is most important to her. A third-place finalist finish on MasterChef Australia 2011 catapulted her into a dream career as host of the recently launched food and travel show A Taste of Travel, currently airing on Australia's Channel Ten.*