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# 10 Tricks to Find Your Next Memorable Meal

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Tales from a chef on the road



The scene from the dining room of Siete Fuegos in Uco Valley, Argentina

By Chef Clint Jolly

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# Pre Planning

## *Set the stage before your journey*

There's a good balance between planning every meal and serendipity, but a little pre-trip effort can go a long way to ensure a good foodie adventure. If you're a culinary traveler then chances are you already have reservations at the top spots, but these tips will help you find the hidden gems and local haunts that have often been the highlight of my trips.

### **#1 Know your mission**

Spend a little time looking ahead to make a short list of ingredients and dishes that define the region. Find the most popular, weird or interesting things that sound good to you and map out a plan to find them. A brief overview of how an area has been colonized or where the people originated from will give you a good insight on the direction of their food. Understanding the climate and growing seasons will also open doors to the cuisine. For example, pickles are hardly a local delicacy in tropical areas as most items will grow year round avoiding the need for preservation. At the very least, know enough of the history and style of the region to avoid missing out on the real treats native to the area.

After my first trip to Mexico where I spent better than a week suffering through resort "food" I vowed to return with a better understanding of how to discover the culture there. I bought books, searched online and read magazines about the Yucatán and started to discover many of its rare ingredients and ancient Mayan dishes. Upon return the second time, I was better prepared with a short list of dishes to enjoy and a restaurant or two to seek out. By the third trip, I had dialed in dishes and ingredients down to the city. This led to a few road trips full of food adventures in little towns throughout the peninsula. Pomuch for breads and pastries, Temozón for smoked pork, Celestún for crab on the beach. By the fourth trip local papers had caught on and wrote articles about my visit and the fifth return was an invite from the UN to share my love for Mexican cuisine. In under 60 total days of travel in Mexico I was hosted by their own government as an expert by focusing my search and some key introductions to people in the industry.

## #2 Ask for connections

Hit up friends and colleagues before you leave for connections to locals. A few messages or a quick phone call can save hours of research, and generally reveal the places best to avoid. Super bonus if you have friends that get your style and are into an adventure, as a meal with good friends is always better. Even putting it out to the world online will make connections you would otherwise miss through friends of friends.

Another Portland trip to visit friends was full of great meals. They had waited for my visit to dine at Kachka, a Russian and Eastern European spot known for their zakuski- basically filling the table with small samples of everything on the menu. We wrapped up the night as the last table in the place with full bellies and minds reeling from all the vodka “tasting” we had done. On the same trip I was introduced to one of the best dishes I have ever tasted at a little food trailer turned restaurant called Thai Me Up. The owner wanted to go from mobile to a permanent shop, but the costs were a bit too high to finish the project so he parked the trailer in the lot and went to work, taking orders inside and running to the trailer to cook them. We didn’t even look at menus, as the chef knew my friend and without hesitation delivered khao soi, a brothy noodle dish full of spices, sour and umami goodness. As luck would have it I missed my plane that night and we got to have it again the next day!

## #3 Learn the language.

Every country, and even regions within the country, can have a whole new dialect and vocabulary to describe their food. Spend a few minutes searching for words and phrases before venturing out to make the ordering process a little less frustrating.

I thought I was fairly well versed in Spanish food vocabulary until I landed in Argentina where everything was turned upside down. Aguacate was palta, piña was ananá, puerco was cerdo, on and on. Early in the trip I tried to order an emparedado at a counter service spot only to learn they call them sandwiches too. Even in the US after waiting in line for bit at Mother’s in NOLA, I was quickly lost when the gal asked me if I wanted the debris. Thankfully she smiled and pulled me to the side to take my order so the line behind me wouldn’t get too ruffled. “Oh honey, let me help you”. One Ferdi Po’boy later and I was walking the streets with a full belly and a smile.

# Upon Landing

## *Scoping out the town*

The first day or afternoon spent in your new location can be key to laying out the rest of the trip. I like to make sure the first afternoon and evening are free to do some on the ground “research” using some of the tricks below.

### #4 Ask the locals, but find the right ones

Locals know best, but not all of them will give you the best suggestion. Asking the clerk at the desk of your hotel or the taxi driver will generally point you to where the tourists go. Usually good but hardly ever adventurous. Instead ask them where they go when family comes to visit, or where to find the best of the dish you are looking for, and let them know you’re adventurous and don’t mind a place with more of a local feel. Help them help you by asking pointed questions instead of broad.

One spring a few years back I had a trip cancel last minute and decided to take a solo road trip to California wine country instead. I knew I wanted to make a stop at my favorite estate in Sonoma, but that was as far as the plan covered. Over a glass of Zin I asked the winemaker/owner, Randy, which direction I should drive and where I should stop along the way. I ended up tasting some awesome pinots from places along Anderson Valley that I never would have stopped at. The final tasting was at Toulouse where the nice gal pouring suggested a bed and breakfast just outside of Mendocino as the stop for the night, and even called in a reservation for me. I sat at the bar of the hotel and watched whales swim by in the pacific as I sipped a gin and tonic. The bartender sent me up the road to Trillium where I enjoyed a perfectly cooked piece of rock fish and met a couple traveling from London that had just arrived from a few days in San Francisco. Inspired by their visit I added a day to the trip. The next morning I headed south instead of west, grabbed dinner at Cocksomb in SF on a night that the chef/owner Chris Cosentino happened to be working the pass. After I ate a bit too much I was blessed to have him sit for a few minutes and chew the fat about biz and his soon to open restaurants in Napa and Portland. A chain of dining and drinking adventures all stemming from trusting the right local.

## #5 Hit the bar

Just like an average joe, chefs like to grab a cocktail after work (ok, maybe a few...). They also tend to hang out with bartenders and servers due to the similar schedules, so it ends up being a small network of folks. Chat up the bartender at a local spot and ask where you should eat. Ask them if they know any chefs or cooks, and try to get “the word on the street” about up and coming places. As always, make sure you ask where they go when they want a good bite.

An early evening cocktail in San Francisco had a friend and I chatting about dinner options. In a big town like SF there are no shortage of great choices, but there are plenty of poor ones as well, so I asked the gentleman at the bar for a suggestion. After a bit of back and forth about what kind of experience we wanted he suggested a place called Bellota for paella and Spanish tapas. We arrived without a reservation, which got “that look” from the hostess, until I mentioned the bartender sending us over. We were soon sat at the open kitchen and were delighted by pintxos, beautiful red wines from Rioja, paella and decadent desserts.

## #6 Go to the market

Find the fish or produce market and watch for chefs buying their ingredients. They get there early for the best. Say hi and ask where they cook, or what they are doing with all that food. You’ll usually find the small mom and pop type operations this way, with a chef that is super passionate about his ingredients and experience. You get the bonus of possibly making reservations through them in the moment, or at the least being able to ask to say hi to the chef when you go in to dine. If you aren’t spotting any chefs then start chatting up the vendors and see where they are selling their goods. At the least, exploring a market can be one of the best ways to spend a morning in a new town by seeing the local products and discovering new and interesting ingredients.

Portland has no shortage of outdoor markets and one fall morning I found myself wondering among the stalls post breakfast. A peak behind one of the tents revealed a gentleman loading boxes into his trunk and hurriedly speeding off. I asked the vendor who was taking away all the goods which kicked off a conversation about the best of the best in Portland. I proceeded to have a day filled with stunning cocktails, bites big and small and overall a great tour of a major foodie city in the one full day we had to do so. Better yet, it set the tone for later visits as I knew the landscape a bit and still had a handful of unexplored spots in my pocket.

# In the moment

## *Serendipity has its perks*

### #7 Follow your nose

It's common advice to trust your senses and it applies to finding a great meal as well. Since smell really is a huge part of taste, follow your nose down the street and around the corner when you catch the scent of a grill or fresh baked bread. In warmer climates most restaurants are very open so a walk down the block can offer a whole host of aromatic delights. And it goes without saying that you avoid the offending spots as well.

An afternoon stroll through the square of Chacras de Coria in Mendoza led us to a narrow trail marked as a bike path. Just across a narrow bridge, the dirt trail took a sharp turn to the right and was mostly covered by a tree branch. Just as we started to turn around the smell hit us. That unmistakable sting of burning wood enriched by animal fat hit my nostrils, my head snapped back to peer a little further down the path. Stray dogs ran along the canal barking at others held back by barb wire topped fences lining the left. Trash dotted the path and spilled over into the canal on the right. Ahead, a black chimney rose above razor wire with a plume of smoke rising into a blue sky. We walked on to find Anastasio El Pollo and booked a table for the group that night where we enjoyed one of the better asados we had in all of Argentina and a bottle of wine each for about \$25 per person. That lovely wood smell also caught my nose as we returned to Pisté after a morning exploring Chichén Itzá a few years ago. We parked the car at the hotel and a whiff of grilling chicken led us a block down the street to Los Pájaros. The “restaurant” consisted of a small charcoal grill and a handful of plastic tables and chairs, the lovely server/hostess/cashier/bartender kindly stacked two chairs for me to avoid the embarrassment of this big American ending up on the floor. Ordering consisted of deciding on a half or whole chicken and how many beers we needed and concluded with one of the best meals I have had on the road. And all for under \$10 USD! Two great meals shared with lovely friends that I will remember forever because I caught a whiff of smoke and followed it.

## #8 Walk, don't run

Walk the streets, read the menus, ask questions. Hit more than one spot in a night and browse menus over a drink or small plate. Poke your head into doors and lead with a smile, you'll often find something interesting in unexpected places.

Again in San Francisco we were looking for a good dinner option and nothing was turning jumping out at us. We decided to just commit to an off the cuff progressive dinner and grab small plates at a handful of shops throughout the night. We were in the Union Square neighborhood with plenty of options on every block. I can't recall every stop we made, but can tell you that I had a great lamb kebab and a watermelon salad at E&O Trading Company which led to many great meals at the locale on later visits. Similar experiences turned up one of the best Spanish spots I've ever been to in NYC with Boqueria.

## #9 Read the customers and the host

If you're in Mexico and the restaurant is full of white folks, move on. If you walk in and ask about a table, and the host looks at you puzzled and wondering if you got lost, grab a seat and tell them to surprise you.

A group of friends that were not so adventurous got brave and left dinner plans up to me. I took off walking into Chinatown with them reluctantly following me as we dodged deliverymen shuffling dollies of food and cheap porcelain around the narrow streets and I poked my head into the door of restaurant after restaurant. One finally fit the bill as I saw a wall full of aquariums filled with fish, tables of Asians and a host that met my eye and then looked around as if he thought there was a prank being staged. We were ushered to a private room with a large round table as the host greeted us in broken English and a big smile. I pointed at the tank with a black bass in it and asked for it steamed with black bean sauce. The server grabbed drink orders and my guests asked when we were ordering food, I told them it was handled. Shortly after, a huge bass showed up on a big platter, perfectly steamed and dressed in pungent fermented black beans and garnished with vegetables. The rest of the table decided to order noodles as they weren't keen on their dinner looking back at them. I devoured the whole thing without caution. If phone cameras were around back then I'd be sharing a



photo of the smile on my face with chili oil glistening on the corners of my mouth, a fish skeleton in one hand and a Tsingtao in the other.

## #10 Don't be a "foodie"

Know the ingredients and the style and be comfortable with it. Don't expect ketchup for your fries or butter for your bread in Argentina. And don't ask to speak to the chef to find out if he can make an egg white omelet for you. The restaurant doesn't mind you taking a moment to grab a good shot of the plates for your Instagram feed, but let's not interrupt the service by rearranging the table at every course. Part of dining out in other countries is observing the cultures and learning to enjoy them, or at least understand them enough to make a good judgment on whether you do or don't enjoy them.

I mistakingly assumed that Argentina would be similar to the Latin cultures I had known from past experiences and was a bit shocked to not see any spices or huge variety of produce. I went to an Asian restaurant and was disappointed in the food, then again at a Mexican place and a shawarma shop. It was only after I realized that when you're in the land of steaks and red wine you eat steaks and red wine. In Uruguay I found myself trying to explain that I wanted my coffee before lunch while the waiter looked at me confused, as I also had a Fernet and Coke in front of me. In a country fueled by maté, they don't need a pick me up from espresso so it is savored with dessert. After all the anticipation built up standing in line at Katz' Deli in NYC I could hardly form a sentence to order a sandwich, I ended up asking for a pastrami "with everything". "What do you mean?" Was the return as the counterman looked past my shoulder hoping for his next customer to have their shit together. Umm... "Some Swiss and mustard. Do you have onions?" He smirked and piled the pastrami high, slapped a piece of cheese on it and gave me extra half sours and pickled tomatoes on the side. "We make sandwiches, not salads." I struggled through ordering slaw at another counter, confused about where to get a drink and finally found a table where I had my first life changing experience brought about by perfectly juicy pastrami and rye without anything else in the way.

## #11 Give up control

In the right place at the right time, letting the server or chef guide the meal is the way to go. They know what is the best, and they want you to have a great experience so they won't steer you wrong. Give them guideline on budget, dietary restrictions, etc., hand the menu over and be ready for a great ride!

In Lima, Peru we had a group of eight at a private table in Maido. The restaurant designs a tasting menu that we elected to skip, but the server offered up a few suggestions and we asked if he could just pick the entire meal. Some guests were a little reluctant, but in the end it was all hugs and smiles as we took a journey through sashimi, nigiri, bao buns, seared cod, braised beef and dessert ceviches that were all simply divine. I first remember learning this years ago at Willi's Wine Bar (RIP) in Santa Rosa. We asked the server for some suggestions which came out as we perused the small plates menu more, and by then we just told her to keep coming with it. I'm pretty sure we ate everything on the menu that night...



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