

food



the edible
part of
culture



The food of the country you plan to study in probably wasn't the first thing you thought about (or maybe it was). But your tastes may be more well-defined than you think. Do you eat meat heartily? Or not at all? Do you have breakfast always, sometimes, or never? Is coffee your salvation or your enemy? Like many other lifestyle choices you make almost subconsciously on a daily basis, what you eat and drink will be called into question while you're living overseas. Breakfast doesn't mean cold cereal. Dinner may happen at lunchtime, with the complicated dishes and extended mealtimes that involves. Soda isn't ubiquitous, but alcohol might be more readily available. Food and beverages are different away from home, and that's because they satisfy something deeper than hunger and thirst.

Eating and drinking what and how the locals do will give you a feel for how people in your host country live, think, and interact with the world around them just like talking to new friends, playing a sport, or volunteering can. Reach beyond the boundaries of what feels safe to try something new and different, because that's what studying abroad is all about. Not to mention that you'll end up with some new favorite dishes that will prevent you from regretting one bite.

<< bon appétit, buen provecho, bisimillah

Food is eaten for sustenance, but what and how it's eaten is part of a country's—or a region's—culture. People eat differently around the world because they are different. Food options and local specialties arise out of a society's nature, geography, and history. The Japanese, surrounded by water, eat much more seafood than Americans—and what swims in the Sea of Japan is different than what swims in Chesapeake Bay. Argentines, with their vast pampas and numerous cattle ranches, love their meat: red, thick, and cooked in the tradition of the gauchos. The French relish dishes prepared with the rich sauces they're known for—but you'll notice that their portion sizes compensate for that richness.

what's available, what's done

Many of the foods you like just may not be available overseas. Try getting a chicken Caesar salad in Spain or peanut butter in India. Even when it's available, the food you're expecting will often be prepared in ways you're not expecting. Basic pizza in Italy is just garlic, basil, and tomatoes on a very thin crust. In most places in the world, coffee comes in small cups without milk, and is very strong or very sweet depending on where you are. You may be able to find Starbucks, but that's usually a sure sign you're in the tourist part of town.

Beyond the food served, the entire concept of meals varies from culture to culture. Mediterranean and other warm-weather cultures tend to eat late, and in much of the world, dinner before ten o' clock simply isn't done. In other places, dinner is less important as the main meal is taken midday and what we call dinner is replaced by a small meal eaten mid-evening.

In general, meal times are more strictly defined than they are in the U.S. If the midday meal is traditionally between two and four o' clock, and you're hungry at one o' clock, it can be hard to find a place to eat. In the beginning, you can save a bit from breakfast to tide you over, but after a few weeks, you'll be on the local schedule yourself.

go on, just try it

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do” is actually really good advice. If food is a mirror of culture, you don’t want to come home without experiencing the food of your host country. That means putting aside as many preconceptions as you can. Get used to small, strong cups of coffee, and give fish a try (that’ll expand your options almost anywhere you study). Even if you’re not a big meat eater, hit a churrascaria in Brazil or taste black pudding in Ireland. Most of your eating adventures will be pretty tame, though you might get a shot at sampling sea urchin or snake blood. They may not become your new favorites, but at least you can say you’ve tried them.

The truth is that ingredients, spices, and preparation will be different from what you’re used to, but you’ll find enough similarities with things you like to end up with a diet that satisfies you completely. Looking for foods from back home is far less satisfying than exploring local foods. Ask how meals are prepared and served—what spices are used? what condiments are typical?—because that’s part of learning about your new culture. Consider taking a cooking class—a fabulous way to expose yourself to local food and drink and practice your language skills at the same time. You’ll be surprised at what becomes routine if you give it a chance.

get informed, get committed

Read the food section of any travel guide to learn which national dishes you should make a point of trying when you’re overseas. They’ll tell you to look for congee in China, ceviche in Latin America, shabu shabu in Japan, and curry in India and eastern Asia. The more informed you are, the more comfortable you’ll be seeking out traditional cuisine instead of searching for hamburgers and Irish pubs that are rarely very Irish.

Committing to eating the food of your host country is a lot like committing to speak its language: both will help you learn and experience more. Until you’ve had a wurst and beer for breakfast in Munich, you haven’t lived.

a health lesson

We in the U.S. can learn a lot from the diets of other countries. Many are much healthier than ours, with little or no junk food, between-meals snacking, or saturated fat. Not surprisingly, many societies have a lower incidence of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes—issues reaching epidemic proportions in the U.S. Portion size is a big part of it. A small dinner of fruit, yogurt, cheese, and a glass of red wine is a healthy meal, and a good lesson for us in the super-sized States.

special needs

If you have special eating habits, research your destination carefully before assuming that the food you need or want is available. Travel guides can again be helpful, as can program staff and other students who have studied in your host country. If you are committed to a particular way of eating—vegetarian, vegan, kosher, macrobiotic, etc.—or have health issues that result in a special diet, you may find it difficult to eat the way you do at home.

Rather than packing granola, peanut butter, and tuna instead of clothes so you can eat “properly” while abroad—or spending your precious time complaining about the food—learn what’s available that fits the bill so you can experience the food of the culture you’re living in. Being flexible about what you eat will make that easier.

take care where—and what—you eat

Almost anywhere in the world you’ll be tempted by street food for sale: satay sticks in the night markets of Korea, fish at the shore in Thailand, ice cream on the beach in the Middle East. Beware, though: standards of cleanliness vary widely, and even where things appear clean, bacteria in the food and water is different from that in our own diets, particularly in the developing world. Eating the wrong things can lead to pretty uncomfortable situations—sometimes even situations that require medical attention. Just because locals eat something and feel fine doesn’t mean you will. So, balance exploring with being careful.

Eat where others are eating, avoid street food in general, drink bottled water, and eat only fruits you peel. Eat uncooked vegetables only in situations where cleanliness is reasonably assured, such as in a restaurant of a quality you can trust. Common sense and advice from your resident staff will go a long way.

drink well and wisely

What you drink—whether alcoholic or non-alcoholic—gives you another chance to experience how the locals live. In general, wherever you go, you'll find many people drinking bottled water—both carbonated and still—and few drinking soda. Aranciata in Italy, tamarind agua fresca in Mexico, and mint tea in Morocco are thirst-quenching staples. Lunches that include wine or beer are more common overseas. And most of us don't have beer for breakfast, but in some places, that's part of the routine. Expect that beer to be stronger than you're used to as well, and often served in giant mugs.

Singha, Cruzcampo, Tsing Tsao, and hand-drawn Guinness are part of being abroad, though. Forget the Bud and try what's local. In many countries, wine is inexpensive, delicious, and part of the customs in every way. Tasting local wines in South Africa, Chile, France, Italy, Spain or anywhere you study is a fun learning experience. You wouldn't want to come home after a semester in Japan unable to discuss the virtues of hot versus cold sake. And we haven't even mentioned Campari, ouzo, jenever and the countless indigenous liquors you'll find around the world.

In most countries, drinking age laws are more permissive and drinks are more widely available than in the U.S.—meaning young people abroad are exposed to alcohol at an earlier age. Of course, there are also places in the world—such as the Middle East—where alcohol is limited or outlawed because of official or predominant religions. Use of alcohol in those places is illegal, punished harshly, and definitely not worth the risk. Always obey the drinking laws of your host country if any exist.

Of course, if you don't want to drink alcohol, don't. Either way, sense and moderation play the same part in drinking abroad that they do at home. Because of the role alcohol plays in their cultures, most local students handle it with care and respect; drinking to get drunk, binge drinking, and alcohol abuse are largely U.S. phenomena. Don't forget that while you're abroad, you're a sort of American diplomat and people will see your behavior as typical of American behavior. Beyond that, drunken antics will not win you friends abroad—and can make you a target for situations that threaten your safety.

tips for eating—and drinking—well

- know what you're eating: read about what's available in advance, ask what's a must-try while you're there
- if you have special needs, do your research to find out how they can be met
- learn new ways to cook—and to be healthy
- commit to trying new foods, and make sure you try them in safe environments
- be just as adventurous—and just as smart—when choosing beverages

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