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Whisk away cares with a cooking vacation

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Some people spend their vacations lounging on tropical beaches, others sightsee with a vengeance from dawn to dusk, still others find solace in camping.

Then there's Gary Balcerzak. He goes on vacation to eat and drink . . . and cook.

Balcerzak, a customer support officer with Corporate Deposit Services for Firststar bank, took his first culinary vacation about six years ago. He and a fellow foodie friend from Illinois "fudged" their credentials to gain admittance into two weeklong classes for professionals at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. During Week One, Balcerzak and his neurologist pal, Angela Benavides, sweat their way through 60 cakes and tortes. "It was like boot camp," he recalled. "We spent mornings in the library watching cooking videos and reading cookbooks. We baked from 2 in the afternoon to 9 at night. Recipe after recipe, we had to get in there, boom, do it 1-2-3. We worked our buns off. "Two nights a week, there were study groups after class or demonstrations or wine tastings until 10:30. Then we went home and studied so we could show those chefs we could keep up with them." He calls this a relaxing vacation? "Yes, absolutely," Balcerzak said without hesitation. "We worked so hard all day, but we were wide awake the next morning. We came back (to Milwaukee) wild and full of ideas, ready to cook for our family and friends and ready to do it all over again." And he has. Since that time, he's been back to the Culinary Institute, both in Hyde Park and in the Napa Valley at the school's Greystone campus; to the French Pastry School in Chicago. He's been to the Ritz Escoffier and La Varenne in Paris. He took cooking classes while on vacation in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Now he's considering a stint at the French Culinary Institute in New York City. Because Balcerzak zeroes in on serious cooking opportunities i.e., classes geared to pros he's had to struggle to win acceptance. The first day at the Culinary Institute, the chef-students sent leery looks their way when learning he and Benavides were not part of the professional-kitchen club. As Balcerzak put it: "Who wants to work with Susie Homemakers?" But in the end, "it was really great because we earned the respect of these chefs. We all became great friends." Fortunately, a growing number of cooking schools cater to non-professional but enthusiastic cooks. Cooking schools with recreational offerings have increased from 197 worldwide in 1989 to 420 in 1995 to 523 today, according to the Shaw Guide to Cooking Schools. Among the more well-known schools offering non-professional vacation-style courses in the United States are the New England Culinary Institute in Montpelier, Vt., which offers Whisk Away Weeks and Weekends for non-professionals; Anne Willan's La Varenne at the Greenbrier Hotel and Resort in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va.; and the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco. Even Mickey Mouse got his finger in the pie two years ago when the Disney Institute at Walt Disney World in Florida opened its Culinary Arts program. Here in Wisconsin, Jill Prescott's Ecole de Cuisine in Kohler has shifted its focus in recent years from one-time afternoon or evening cooking demonstrations to weekend and weeklong hands-on instruction under the theme "professional cooking for the home chef." In fact, culinary vacationers make up the bulk of her students, Prescott said. And they come from all over: California, New York, Florida, many from Chicago. She just received word of registrations from a party in Beirut, Lebanon. Students can stay at the American Club if they want, or local bed and breakfasts or motels. "We even had someone stay at the campground up here," Prescott said. Her "total immersion" approach, whether the topic is French bistro or Italian, stresses technique: "When people come up here, we expect they will walk away with a lot of good skills." Prescott insisted that students don't need to know how to cook to sign up. "Even if you've never cooked before, you can come into any one of my classes . . . Anyone can learn to cook." Depending on the group, an Ecole course also may include side visits to cheese factories or specialty food markets or restaurants. Cost ranges from \$175 for one-day participation classes to around \$800 for some weeklong offerings. Those considering a cooking-class vacation for the first time might want to heed Balcerzak's advice: "I would say just go for it," he said. "Do your homework. Know what you want to learn or how you want to specialize. Go expecting to work hard. "If you have

that urge to learn, every chef, every instructor I've had has been wonderful. They do understand we're all there to learn." But not every dedicated foodie wants to sweat in a classroom on his or her precious time off. Elizabeth Orelup, an attorney with Quarles & Brady, prefers "cooking -related" vacations. She just returned from her second mecca to the Aspen Food and Wine Classic in Colorado. The annual three-day weekend, sponsored by Food and Wine magazine, features cooking classes, wine tastings, special dinners and plenty of big-name chefs. You pay one price and go to anything you want. "Aspen is an absolutely gorgeous place," Orelup said. "The classes, while they are short demonstration classes, are still very interesting. It's a great weekend getaway." She's also been to France (Paris or Provence) five of the last six years. She and her friends rent a house, go to markets and cook their own food. So they're "sort of self-guided food tours," she said. This year, a friend in Switzerland is renting a house in Provence for a month to celebrate his 50th birthday. Orelup and friends will be joining him part of that time. "So I will be cooking again in the south of France," she said wistfully. Now that does sound like a vacation. Balcerzak acquired this recipe on a culinary vacation to the Napa Valley campus of the Culinary Institute of America. The class, "Fire, Spice and the Global Grill," was taught by cookbook author Chris Schlesinger. Roast Pork Tenderloin with Orange-Red Onion Salsa 1 orange, peeled, seeds removed, and divided into sections 1 red onion, diced 1 teaspoon minced garlic 5 tablespoons lime juice (about 3 limes) 1 teaspoon minced fresh red or green chile of your choice 1 teaspoon ground cumin 2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro 1 teaspoon chili powder Salt and freshly cracked black pepper to taste 2 pork tenderloins (10 to 12 ounces each) 2 tablespoons vegetable oil To make salsa, combine orange, red onion, garlic, lime juice, chile, cumin, cilantro, chili powder and salt and pepper in bowl. Mix well and set aside. (Mixture will keep, covered and refrigerated, for 3 or 4 days.) Preheat oven to 500 degrees. Sprinkle tenderloins with salt and pepper and heat oil in large saute pan until hot but not smoking. Add tenderloins and sear them well, 2 to 3 minutes per side. Place tenderloins in very lightly oiled baking pan and bake in preheated oven 10 to 16 minutes (depending on thickness), until a peek inside shows just a trace of pink at the center. (If you like your tenderloins more well done, just leave them in the oven another 2 to 3 minutes.) Remove tenderloins from oven, allow to sit 5 to 10 minutes, cut it into 1-inch-thick slices and serve with orange-red onion salsa. Makes 4 entree-size servings. ----- If you're hunting for a place to park your whisk, the Shaw Guide is the standard cooking school reference to check. Shaw's Web site, at www.shawguides.com, offers a complete listing. Click on "Cooking Schools Recreational" and continue your search by state, U.S. region, country, global region, month or specialty. Under the specialty "Vacation Programs," there were 365 listings last week from all over the United States and everywhere from Oaxaca, Mexico, to Noosa Heads, Australia. Or, you can call ShawGuides at (212) 799-6464 or write them at ShawGuides, P.O. Box 1295, New York, N.Y. 10023.

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