

# Dine and dock: How Silversea is betting on food nerds like me

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S.A.L.T. Labs bring the food cultures of the destinations back on board.  
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For many, food is a big part of travel. For me, it's a deal-breaker. If the food anthropology of a destination is not interesting, I'm not going. I count on the cuisine to make my journey feel more real, and I always bring something home – a recipe, an ingredient, spices, spirits, even something as simple as a pot of jam – things that connect my brain to where I've been and what I've eaten.

Former *Saveur* magazine editor-in-chief, Adam Sachs, had heard my call. Silversea Cruises recently introduced the S.A.L.T. program, curated by Sachs, on two of its new ships, the Silver Dawn and Silver Moon. S.A.L.T. is short for "Sea and Land Taste" food experiences on board and off, created to showcase the culinary culture of whatever part of the world the ships are sailing.

S.A.L.T. shore excursions connect guests with chefs, food producers, bakers, winemakers, farmers, chocolatiers, food writers – whoever has a good food story to tell – each in their respective environments. S.A.L.T. Lab cooking classes bring the food cultures of the destinations back on board, focusing on local dishes, with instruction by a regional expert. And a S.A.L.T. Kitchen restaurant is wholly dedicated to the destination's cuisine.



With the S.A.L.T. program, Adam Sachs, left, highlights the flavours at the ports of call for Silversea cruise guests.  
LUCIA GRIGGI/SILVERSEA CRUISES

When the ship moves to a different port, the menu changes course with it.

"It's great to see how open and curious our guests are," Sachs says. "People are really excited about new experiences and asking great questions." Notably, there's usually good wine involved, too.

As far as jobs go, Sachs has a good one. He flies around the world meeting passionate food producers and hospitality people, investigating all this food fun and introducing it to new audiences – cruise ship passengers hungry for a new food experience.

"It's gratifying to confirm our belief that if we gave people a story behind the food and drink they encounter on their travels with us, they would indulge their inner food nerd," Sachs adds.

Nineteen different S.A.L.T. excursions are currently listed – food adventures in Copenhagen and Helsinki, Bordeaux and Bilbao, Belfast and Bergen. Sachs, of course, has his favourites.

"There are many experiences I'm eager to relive – like baking bread in a wood oven steps from the sea at Thalassamou, a perfect little beachside family-run taverna on the island of Paros in the Cyclades. Or visiting Peskesi, a biodynamic farm in Crete with one of the prettiest wood-fired hearths I've ever seen."

Sachs is also excited about an exclusive visit with Franco Pepe in Naples, one of Italy's pre-eminent pizzaioli. "If you love pizza, how could you not dream of this experience?"

His team is also working on new food adventures in Asia, "unpacking the building blocks of Japanese cuisine, which, to me, is one of the great eating cultures in the world," he says.

My S.A.L.T. experience begins in the Portimão Museum, a fish-cannery-turned-museum, while sailing on the Silver Dawn along Portugal's majestic south coast. The museum highlights the region's sardine fishing and canning traditions, beautifully integrating old machinery and artifacts, photography and video – all fascinating and fun.

We retreat to nearby tapas bar Maria do Mar, filling up sardines and mackerel on toast, and bottomless glasses of rosé. My selections from a colourful wall of tinned fish are slipped into my suitcase later on. I love souvenirs that pack flat.

Another afternoon, in Lisbon – a city as delicious as it is stunning – I'm introduced to José Saudade e Silva, the young chef and owner of Cacué. It's one of Lisbon's newest *tascas* – affordable eateries that specialize in classic Portuguese cooking.



José Saudade e Silva runs Lisbon eatery Cacué, specializing in classic Portuguese comfort foods.  
DOUG WALLACE/SILVERSEA CRUISES

He took over the restaurant space from a retiring couple and gave the décor a sprucing up, adding shiny red tabletops, graphic modern artwork and a tiny backlit bar in front of the kitchen. Yet he continues to serve the same type of inexpensive traditional comfort food as the previous owners.

"It is a *tasca* for the future," he says, referring to the makeover, "but I do things the same way they've been doing it for a hundred years." As we dig into lamb arancini and juicy steak sandwiches, I have a shut-my-eyes, loving-this moment.

Back on board at the S.A.L.T. Lab – my canvas apron done up tight, hands washed – something in my mind seems to really click. I spend the hour-long class in a high-tech kitchen making the most exquisite plate of *bacalhau à minhota* – salt cod with onions and fried potatoes. We are truly bringing the flavours of the port into the ship.

I learn that the Portuguese eat more codfish than anyone else in the world, so much so, that the few people who don't like it are ridiculed: "I'd like you to meet Sylvia. She doesn't like cod." I practically scrape the finish off my plate, eating every last molecule.

At home, I discover that my supermarket has scads of bags of deboned salt cod, waiting for me to remake my heavenly dish. Just as the pandemic prompted the expansion of my kitchen repertoire – Indian dishes from scratch, traditional French cassoulet, gluten-free bread – the S.A.L.T. experience has me embracing a Mediterranean diet.

Cod is soaking on my kitchen counter every other week, homemade cod croquettes now a freezer staple. I've taken to buying anchovies at the local fishmonger and throwing them on top of an heirloom tomato salad or whirring them into a salad dressing. I bring home a really small bottle of fancy olive oil, peeling off the price tag before my husband sees it.

Happily, my food memories of the Silver Dawn linger on – and that's precisely the point.

"Obviously, I want people to enjoy what they eat and have a great time – deliciousness is everything," Sachs says. "But I want for our guests what I want for myself when I travel and eat: To come home with a deeper sense of what the food landscape is like there and how it got that way – and what those flavours and traditions mean to the people I meet along the way."

There's always a tin of sardines in my pantry now, too – and plenty of toothpicks. Fridays after work, it's like a tapas bar at our house. Maybe I should start catering.

*The writer travelled as a guest of Silversea Cruises, which did not review or approve this article.*

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