A growing taste for culinary travel
September 01, 2006 | By Marnie Hunter CNN

Travelers seem to have a healthy appetite for culinary tourism, whether it involves making caldo verde or sipping Cabernet Sauvignon.

"It's definitely a growing market. I think it's becoming a very important market as a subset of cultural tourism," said Dr. Rich Harrill, director of the International Tourism Research Institute at the University of South Carolina.

"It's really a fun thing to do," said Barbara Courtney, 54, of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, who spent three days in March taking cooking lessons with her daughter in Tuscany. "When I travel I like to do activities. I'm not a go-sit-on-the-beach kind of person."

While there has been little research into the growth of food tourism, industry insiders are expanding their offerings to keep pace with demand.

Jo-Ann Gaiddosz, who owns Active Gourmet Holidays and arranged the cooking portion of the Courtneys' Italy trip, started organizing and booking tours in 2002 and has doubled her business since 2004 when bookings really started to pick up.

"I think there's just been a lot of awareness brought to cooking and food through all the food shows," she said.

Gaiddosz is not the only travel provider who credits the Food Network and other food-themed programming with helping to boost interest in food and culinary travel.

Michael Coon, director of the Culinary Institute of America's World's of Flavor travel programs, believes television shows and an increased interest in education at travel have a lot to do with it.

"I would say people are looking for an alternative to being on the beach and sort of having more educational elements to their vacations versus relaxation," Coon said.

Culinary tourism providers see a range of ages among food tourists, but people in their 40s and 50s are most common.

"I think that the foodie market is related more or less to the baby boomer demographic," Harrill said. "You have people who are retiring, people with lots of discretionary time and income, some level of sophistication. They're educated, they're interested in wine, they're interested in food."

For the truly committed food-lover, learning to replicate a destination's regional specialties can be a more fulfilling travel experience than hitting the renowned museums and top tourist sites.