

Food and lodging: Seasonal condiments add spice to classes

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By Andrew Baxter

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It must be the ultimate challenge for a business school chef – keeping the French happy. So when Raul Lacara, executive chef at [Stanford Graduate School of Business](#)' Schwab Residential Centre, received a standing ovation from a group of senior French executives at the end of a week-long executive education course, it was a sure sign that his meals had hit the spot.

"All the participants love the food, but we figured that the French were extra discerning," says Gale Bitter, associate dean of executive education at the California school.

Mid-level and senior executives who attend executive education courses are used to the good things in life. Top-class restaurants and five-star hotels are the norm, so business schools have their work cut out keeping them happy.

Stanford takes very seriously the food and accommodation it offers – so much so that, as in last year's ranking, it comes top among open programme providers in this category.

The [University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School](#) also retained its top place for food and accommodation among custom course providers.

Stanford aims to have as many locally-grown or organic ingredients as possible, says Ms Bitter. The seafood comes from sustainable sources, while Mr Lacara keeps a garden for herbs and some vegetables. All the chefs work with the [Culinary Institute of America](#) for ongoing training and menu development.

When it comes to the accommodation, a five-star hotel is the benchmark, and the overall ambience has been given a lot of thought. Bernadette deRafael, director for accommodation and food at the Schwab facility, enthuses over the "palm trees, beautiful courtyards, Mexican architecture, and bright warm colours".

There is a 24-hour concierge service and, among many other little touches, chicken noodle soup is delivered to the room for participants feeling under the weather.

It is not a gourmet holiday, of course, but food and accommodation are an important part of the package, says Ms Bitter. Susan Cates, UNC Kenan-Flagler's associate dean for executive development, notes that the quality of the programme being delivered is paramount, but participants' basic needs have to be met so they can focus on the higher-level issues.

"We are dealing with mid- to very senior level executives who have stressful jobs, travel a lot, and are taking time away to invest, and their company is investing, in their development," she says. "So you need a comfortable facility with nice rooms designed with the executive in mind, in a context where you are not competing with a sorority function, a wedding or a convention."

UNC Kenan-Flagler's Paul J Rizzo Conference Centre is used solely for executive development and is designed as a retreat for stressed-out executives. Meals are taken in the DuBose House, built in 1933 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and there is a 120-room hotel nearby, McLean Hall.

Even if a simple meal is required, such as soup and a salad at lunchtime, the chefs aim to be innovative, says Ms Cates. Soup could be curried vegetable or creamed asparagus and cauliflower, spiced.

Custom programmes are delivered wherever the client wants them to be, and in the past 18 months UNC Kenan-Flagler has held them in India, China, Singapore, France, Germany and South Africa, along with other venues in the US. "We very much focus on how to create that same Carolina experience when we are outside the Rizzo Centre," says Ms Cates.

One issue for schools when catering for overseas participants is how much local food to give them. Most aim for a mixed approach, offering both local dishes and others that the participants would find more familiar, and tailoring the mix for each group.

[Grenoble School of Management](#) in France uses local restaurants for its executive education participants. Inevitably there is great pride in the region's gastronomy, but the school recognises that it would be wrong to take a group of Indian or Chinese visitors only to French restaurants during their stay.

"In most programmes there is a fine balance between trying new foods and giving the participants some exposure

to French culture, but also ensuring they get fed and don't stop eating for a week," says Gael Fouillard, executive education manager.

Often, groups from India or China are keen to try French cuisine. Mr Fouillard recalls one Chinese group that took a liking to cheese fondue from the Savoie region, discovered in Annecy on the way back from trips to Geneva.

In Grenoble, meanwhile, there are some 15 Indian restaurants the school can use and several good Cantonese-style Chinese restaurants, offering fare very different from that served in Shanghai or Beijing but at least a little closer to what participants from China's two main cities may be used to at home.

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