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CRITIC'S POSTCARD

What do chefs Mario Batali and Mary Sue Milliken pack when they go on a cooking vacation? Hint: It's not all clothes.

Let's just say that a frother, aged Parmesan and fresh herbs are some of their essential items.
 By S. Irene Virbila
 Times Restaurant Critic

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I should have been suspicious when my husband, Fred, offered, oh so sweetly, to carry my suitcase out to the car. We were heading to the East Coast to spend 10 days cooking and eating and lazing at our friend Mary's Long Island house.

Fred not only checked my bag for me, he also took charge of it once we'd picked it up at the other end. It briefly crossed my mind that he was up to something. But if he was having a rush of gallantry, I thought I might as well enjoy it. He even wheeled my suitcase into the elevator of Mary's apartment building when we got to New York and installed it in the guest bedroom. How thoughtful.

Then I went to unpack and found my clothes rolled around bottles of olive oil and wine. A jar of anchovies peeked out from my boot, its mate stuffed with plastic bags of salt-cured capers and a bouquet of dried Sicilian oregano. A box of Rustichella d'Abruzzo pasta (penne) snuggled up to my copy of Roberto Bolaño's book "The Savage Detectives." I found a corkscrew and a Japanese plastic mandoline in one of my suitcase pockets along with a skein of *bottarga* (pressed dried grey mullet roe from Sardinia) and what was left of a magnificent hunk of aged Parmesan we'd carried back from Italy a few months earlier.

Not that I really minded any of this. Because my work involves going out to dinner five or six nights a week, we'd planned a stay-in cooking vacation -- on Long Island we'd have access to oysters, clams, lobsters, bay scallops, swordfish and the rest of that great East Coast seafood, plus produce from local farm stands.

Fred's suitcase held his best Japanese knife encased in a plastic sheath, more pasta, carnaroli rice for risotto, a good 10-inch skillet, the spice box he'd bought from *Le Sanctuaire* (when it was still in Santa Monica) and filled with exotic, hard-to-find stuff like top-grade saffron and Turkish urfa peppers, *fleur de sel*, whole cumin and other spices and -- who knows what else.

He had rocambolè garlic (a hard-necked variety with a particularly wonderful flavor) tucked in among his shirts, a handful of shallots -- and plastic bags filled with bay leaves and fresh herbs from our garden. (It makes him crazy to have to pay \$2.99 for fresh herbs in Manhattan.)

I noted that he hadn't forgotten our oyster knives nor the crab crackers. What about a stove top espresso maker and the frother for making a macchiato in the morning? Side pocket. He hadn't left the *Intelligentsia* beans behind either.

Clothes? Who needs clothes?

Oh, I should mention we'd also checked a case of wine in a Styrofoam shipping container. And after a mad dash around Manhattan that afternoon to pick up various other supplies, we were ready to set off for the seaside.

Did we forget anything? Probably. But we had the kind of cooking-vacation essentials that are hard to find without special planning, certainly without paying too much for them.

The return trip? Now that's a whole other story -- one that involves steamer clams on ice, containers of homemade lobster stock and, from a New York deli, *guanciale* (cured pork jowl, an essential ingredient in *bucatini all' Amatriciana*) and salt-cured anchovies imported from Menaica on the Amalfi Coast and sold in a heavy ceramic crock. Somewhere Fred managed to find fresh *magret* (duck breast) from *D'Artagnan* (in L.A., you can only find it frozen) and a giant wedge of autumn Parmigiano Reggiano and more *bottarga* from the quintessential, fourth-generation Italian deli Di Palo in New York's Little Italy. Early that morning, he'd hurried off to *Murray's Sturgeon* to pick up some smoked lox and sable (black cod) to carry on the plane.

And this was just one trip.

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From the Los Angeles Times

What essentials cooks pack for their trips

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When cooks vacation, they pack their essentials

Salt? Pepper? Swimsuit? Circulator? We asked chefs and authors what they pack -- or don't pack -- to go on vacation.

Mario Batali (Mozza, Los Angeles): "When I head out to my Lake Michigan house for the summer, I always stop at Zingerman's in Ann Arbor [Mich.] to pick up essentials for entertaining: Crespone salami, Greek feta, balsamic vinegar, Pedro Jimenez vinegar, eight to 10 kinds of cheeses . . . , killer dried sweet corn to rehydrate for salads, *fleur de sel*, capers from Pantelleria, [Italy], saffron from La Mancha [Spain] and Bomba [a Spanish short-grain] rice for campfire paella, a few Italian olive oils, Spanish *boquerones* [anchovies] . . . a box of fire starter cubes for the pizza oven and a new grill brush.

Paul Bertolli (Fra' Mani Handcrafted Salumi, Berkeley): "I always take anchovies, olive oil, a sharp knife, coffee, a couple of dry *salame*, and a case of wine per week."

Anthony Bourdain ("No Reservations"): "I don't take anything with me but a good attitude. And my feeling on vacation is to either have others cook (as, presumably, they know how to make the local food far better than I do), or make do with what's there."

Michael Cimarusti(Providence, Los Angeles): Two years ago when I vacationed with my family in Hawaii we shipped two cases of assorted wines, foie gras, lobsters and some knives. On past trips, mainly to Kentucky when my father-in-law was still alive, we shipped everything from foie gras to stone crabs to Maine lobsters."

Josiah Citrin (Mélisse, Santa Monica): "When I go to Mammoth, I take my circulator [a temperature control device] and all my meat."

Naomi Duguid ("Beyond the Great Wall" with Jeffrey Alford): "We love working with whatever we find. In southern Thailand once we rented a small house by a deserted beach. We bought a gas cylinder thing for cooking on, and bought a wok from a person in the market, the one she was using, so it was old-style and heavy, and very well seasoned."

Paula Wolfert ("The Cooking of Southwest France"): "I bring gifts . . . bringing a gift and a kiss seems to put the women at ease, then I'm part of the family. I brought garlic peelers to Tunisia and someone wanted to go into business distributing them . . . As for Turkey, I carry those serrated swivel peelers . . . by the dozen."

Dorie Greenspan("Baking: From My Home to Yours"): "Mrs. Meyer's geranium-scented liquid dish soap. I also bring Reynolds Plastic Wrap (France needs to make a technological leap in the plastic wrap department) . . . nonstick aluminum foil, double-acting baking powder and ground allspice. It's easy to find whole berries, but the ground stuff is elusive and I like to have it around for Christmas baking."

Thomas Keller (The French Laundry, Yountville, Calif.): "I take a bathing suit, suntan lotion, a stack of magazines and a few good books. My iPod, of course, as well as a good pair of sneakers."

Michael McCarty (Michael's, Santa Monica): "Nothing. I find it all there."

Mary Sue Milliken (Ciudad, Los Angeles): "Most trips we rent a house or boat so I can cook and our friends navigate/sail. I always take my trusty pepper mill and one very sharp French knife (I give them away at the end of the trip to someone who's hosted). I'm leaving tomorrow to sail from Split [Croatia] to Dubrovnik. Last time we did the southern coast of Cuba where provisions are extremely hard to come by. I took some heirloom dry beans and lentils, a few tablespoons of every spice in my cabinet, a couple of cans: piquillos, anchovies, capers . . . This time I plan to take the assorted spices and seasonings. The rest I will find in the markets there and we will fish every day.

Judy Rodgers (Zuni Cafe, San Francisco): "[For the trip] to the house we rent in Tahoe every summer, the food and equipment list is four pages long, everything from salt to *bottarga di tonno*. To Switzerland every winter [I take] vinegar, extra virgin olive oil and tongs. (The salt is fine there.)"

Corina Weibel (Canelé, Los Angeles): "I always take *fleur de sel*. That's the one thing. I can always buy lemons, olive oil."

Sang Yoon (Father's Office, Santa Monica): "I never leave the house without my measuring cup. What kind of question is this? Why would I take kitchen equipment with me on vacation? I could take the circulator with me and when I get questioned at security I can tell them I like to soak my feet in exactly 92.6-degree water. Makes them baby soft."

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Betty Hallock,
Russ Parsons
and Amy Scattergood

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