

IN THE GRIP OF THE GRAPE

A EUROPEAN-STYLE WINE CRUISE CLOSE TO HOME IN PORTLAND

BY SUZANNE MORPHET PHOTOS BY RICK DUVAL



Chardonnay from Springhouse Cellar, one of the first stops on the Un-Cruise Adventures wine tour.

ON A RECENT WINE CRUISE I learned a few surprising things: a higher alcohol content doesn't make better wine; the smaller the grape, the more concentrated the flavour; and most importantly, you needn't go to Europe for a river cruise that takes in award-winning wineries, spectacular vistas and rich history.

In fact, you need go no further than Portland, Oregon. That's where Un-Cruise Adventures has launched its new wine-focused cruise that takes in four rivers, nine wineries and countless moments of swirling and sipping, both on board and off.

Our home for the week is a replica coastal steamer — the SS Legacy — similar to the ships that plied the Columbia River from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s. It's casual yet elegant, with lots of wooden cabinetry and turn-of-the-century décor. The ship can accommodate 88 passengers, but on this cruise, there are just 63. (A couple from the San Juan Islands occupy the spacious Owner's Suite on the top deck and over the course of the week, they reveal they won a \$217 million lottery in 2013.)

Leaving Portland, we waste no time getting down to the business of pleasure. While our ship waits for us near The Bridge of the Gods on the Columbia River Gorge, we visit three wineries our first day — two in Oregon and one in Washington.

"What's unique about the gorge is the variation in climate, altitude, aspect and soil," explains Carey Kienitz, the winemaker

at Springhouse Cellar, as we taste a flight of his whites and reds amid the Romanesque ruins of this former pear cannery and distillery.

The gorge may still be better known for apples and pears than grapes, but wineries now abound — more than three dozen dot this eye-catching canyon.

Further up the road and set among acres of orchards, Mt. Hood Winery epitomizes this burgeoning industry, where small

"PAST WALLA WALLA, THE LANDSCAPE CHANGES TO ARID PLATEAUS, DEEP-SIDED CANYONS AND BASALT ROCK FORMATIONS THAT ARE BLACKER THAN THE BLACKENED SCALLOPS WE ENJOY FOR DINNER ONE NIGHT."



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to medium size winemakers are quickly making a name for themselves.

“Their ice wine was one of the five top wines out of 1,600 wines at the Great Northwest Wine Competition in 2015,” says Steven Sinkler, a wine expert who’s accompanying us on this maiden wine cruise.

To end the day, we cross the storied Columbia River that Lewis and Clark paddled to the Pacific more than 200 years ago. Arriving at AniChe Cellars, where the all-female winemaking team makes wines in a former horse stable, we sit within earshot of clucking chickens and savour crisp white and complex red blends.

“We make wine that’s going to be a little more feminine,” the winemaker’s daughter explains, “with less tannin. Less ‘muscle’ wines.”

Back on board the Legacy, we join Steve in the lounge to talk and taste yet more wine. (With six wines on tap 24/7, your glass will never be empty.)

“The finest wines in the world are blended wines,” Steve tells us, swirling a glass of red and comparing AniChe’s Seven Gables blend to blends from France’s famed Châteauneuf-du-Pape Appellation, where one wine can have up to 13 varietals.

“She has seven of these grapes,” Steve enthuses about AniChe. “This is a \$125 bottle of wine selling for \$26 ... a spectacular value.”

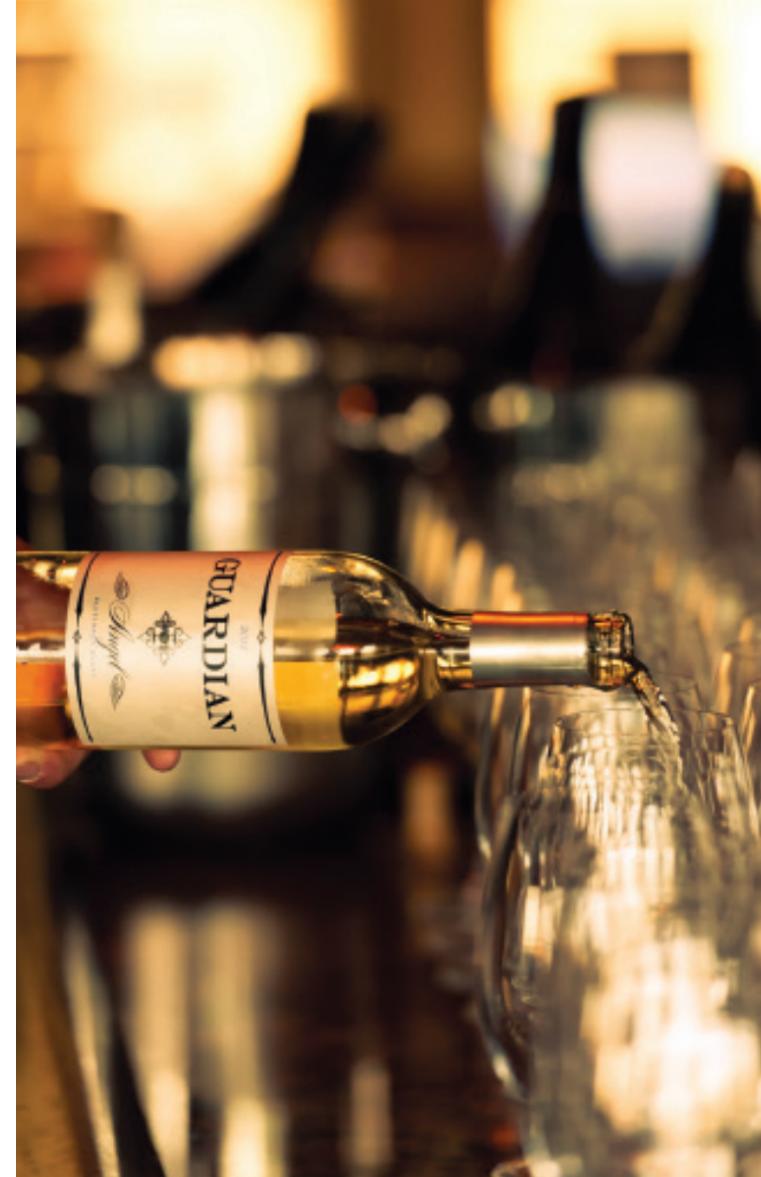
And so our cruise progresses, our small group of wine enthusiasts visiting wineries by day and learning by night, as we move ever eastward.

At Walla Walla, Steve tells us “we’re basically in Bordeaux.” With more than 150 wineries, the town that was once famous for sweet onions has been named one of the top 10 wine regions in the world.

Along with wine, there’s art. At Foundry Vineyards, the owners believe creativity underlies both. From their art-driven artisan labels, to their gallery, to their outdoor sculpture garden, art is everywhere. When we visit, a trio of large tapestries made using an innovative combination of traditional loom technology and new digital technology covers one wall, each a riveting portrait of a person. And right after our visit, a collection of sculptures by Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei was due to arrive.

Back on board the ship on evening, we learn about how the Columbia River region came to be so fertile. At the end of the last ice age — about 15,000 years ago — a glacial dam in present-day Montana burst, releasing a torrent of water that carved out the Columbia River valley and carried topsoil as far west as Oregon’s Willamette Valley.

“Five hundred cubic miles of water,” says on-board naturalist Jackie Hedgpeth. “We can’t even imagine what is what like to break and flow at such a fast rate — up to 65 miles-per-hour in



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places and 2,000 feet high in places. This is why the scablands are so dramatic.”

That’s no exaggeration. Past Walla Walla, the landscape changes to arid plateaus, deep-sided canyons and basalt rock formations that are blacker than the blackened scallops we enjoy for dinner one night.

When we turn up the Snake River, trains carrying cargo and grain whistle past. Near the Snake’s junction with the Palouse, we enjoy a refreshing swim and stare in awe at Palouse waterfalls, carved from those cataclysmic floods of long ago.

On our return down the Columbia Valley there’s time for more wineries, including my favourite of the week — Maryhill — with its stunning views from the patio under a grape arbour. The nearby Maryhill Museum of Art is a bonus, with astounding collections, including sculptures by Rodin and personal memorabilia from Queen Marie of Romania – Queen Victoria’s granddaughter.

By week’s end we’ve learned to sip and swirl like a pro, but my friend Julie and I still can’t pick out those flavours of black cherry and plum and cedar and everything else that oenophiles rave about.

“ARRIVING AT ANICHE CELLARS, WHERE THE ALL-FEMALE WINEMAKING TEAM MAKES WINES IN A FORMER HORSE STABLE, WE SIT WITHIN EARSHOT OF CLUCKING CHICKENS AND SAVOUR CRISP WHITE AND COMPLEX RED BLENDS.”



Replica coastal steamer SS Legacy underway on a wine cruise on the Columbia River.

PHOTO BY PETER WEST CAREY



At our final wine tasting at The Wine Shack at Cannon Beach on the Pacific Coast, Julie throws up her hands. “Who cares anyway?” she asks peevishly.

I laugh and buy a bottle to take home. I may not know a Merlot from a Malbec, but I know a good cruise when I’ve had one, and this one has been – as Steve would say – “spectacular.”

IF YOU GO:

- Un-Cruise Adventures offers its wine cruise — *Ameritage! Four Rivers of Wine & History* again starting April 16. All-inclusive rates begin at US\$3,995 per person: uncruise.com
- **GETTING TO PORTLAND:** We took the Clipper ferry to Seattle and then continued by train. The amount of marble and decorative detail in the recently restored Seattle train station is astonishing. The Amtrak train is comfortable and food is available, but there’s no dining car.
- **STAY IN PORTLAND:** The Heathman is a historic boutique hotel in the heart of downtown: portland.heathmanhotel.com

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