

TRAVEL AND ADVENTURE

Trailing through Oregon's Willamette Valley

By John Blanchette



NORTHWEST FARM - Oregon's red barns and wooden farmhouses resemble the farmlands of New England. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.



FARMER'S MARKET - French Chef Philippe Boulot enjoys one of many Farmer's Markets held in Portland each week. The city has numerous pedestrian friendly venues and many chefs take advantage of the fresh produce and flowers. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.



WILLAMETTE RIVER - The Hawthorne Bridge is one of 10 elegant bridges that span Portland's Willamette River. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.



CHINESE GARDEN - For a little Zen peace of mind, have tea at the Chinese Garden, a two-story Ming Dynasty teahouse in a flower bestrewn water garden. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.

PORTLAND, Oregon - Resting at the confluence of the Columbia and Willamette rivers, Portland was the end of the Oregon Trail, the last stop for thousands who journeyed across America in covered wagons, largely between the 1830s and 1870s, in search of rich, inexpensive farmlands and gold fields.

Only a few profited from the gold, but many more mined the verdant soils, lumbered the tall trees and took employment in the mills built along the waterways.

The rich soils are a product of the Ice Age and subsequent erosion that washed topsoil from as far away as Montana into the flood plains of the Willamette Valley. The occasional eruption of several active volcanoes nearby, including Mount Hood and Mount St. Helens, also contributed to farmlands that grow 170 of the state's 230 crops.

Portland was founded in 1807 by two Easterners, one from Boston and the other from Portland, Maine. They used the quarter it cost them to purchase the government-owned land and flipped for naming rights. Boston didn't win.

Nestled in the foothills of the Cascades and adjacent to the bounty of the Willamette Valley, 10 elegant bridges span the river of Oregon's main hub, the third largest port on the West Coast. "The City of Roses" is just 70 miles from the Pacific in the Northwest corner of the state, and is surrounded by more than half of its population.

A temperate climate and about 36 inches of rain a year, mainly in the winter, keeps the area green and abundant, and 250 parks bring color to the city. Forest Park is the largest naturally forested city park in the United States and the nearby rose gardens were named the most beautiful in the world this year.

The Willamette Valley produces 99 percent of the U.S. filbert crop and fruit and berries grow in wild profusion. Search out Oregon Growers and Shippers to order beautifully packaged local products.

But the product I had come in search of ripens on vines. The Willamette Valley is world renowned for its pinot noir wines and I was there to do some food pairings at local restaurants and tastings in the vineyards. Oregon is the fourth largest producer of wine in the United States, behind California, Washington and, surprisingly, Texas.

Less than a half hour drive from Portland you are

in the midst of a bacchanalia of pinot vines. Over 100 wineries lie in the valley, most with tasting rooms. A pleasant discovery was how well the German Riesling and Gewurztraminer grapes do in this climate. To go with a designated driver, The Grape Escape offers daily trips into the wine country.

Some of the more notable vineyards include Ponzi, which began pioneering world-class wines in the 1970s. Beran Vineyards is a limited producer of exceptional pinot noir, Elk Cove is a multi-award winner and nearby Montinore Estates was my favorite. Located on 250 beautifully landscaped acres, the tasting room personnel are well educated and enthusiastically proud of their product. The white wines are also exceptional, including an amazing late-harvest Riesling.

The only American-owned sake producer, SakeOne in Forest Grove, has a tasting room as well and also offers free sakery tours. The Hall Street Grill in Beaverton hosted a food pairing with the full SakeOne line while I was there, matching everything from sushi and steak to chocolate dessert.

The Willamette Valley has an eerie resemblance to the farmlands of New England and upstate New York, with red barns lying next to wooden farm houses and dairy cows lolling in the summer sun. Even the trees are similar; maples, pines and firs. This chameleon quality brings a large number of film productions to the area, where they can not only re-create New England, but the Midwest, Rockies and even the South.

Much like its East Coast counterpart, Portland was a mill city that had a thriving clothing and bootmaking industry. Although Nike, Jantzen, Columbia Sportswear and Pendleton still have headquarters in the area, the mills now primarily house a "silicon forest" of high-tech industries.

The city is composed of distinct neighborhood districts. Nob Hill is a beautiful Victorian

community on tree-lined streets with gourmet shops and comfortable dining spots. Look for Moonstruck Chocolates, have brunch at Besaw's (established 1902), Steve's Cheese offers tastes from 50 different farmhouse cheese makers and if you have a taste for French pastry and coffee, visit St. Honore Boulangerie.

Portland's award-winning transit system, some of it free, shuttles residents throughout the city to the downtown area. From Nob Hill travel to the artist community of the downtown Pearl District and visit Powell's Bookstore. This city-block-wide landmark is the largest independent bookstore in the world.

Dine on Andina gourmet Peruvian dishes and enjoy the best tropical cocktails in Portland. The Oregonian newspaper awarded it restaurant of the year in 2005. Nearby Park Kitchen chef/owner Scott Dulich was named one of Food & Wines "10 Best New Chefs" in 2004.

For a little Zen peace of mind, have tea at the Chinese Garden, a two-story Ming Dynasty teahouse in a flower-bestrewed water garden. When tea won't do, visit Clear Creek Distillery and taste some Eau de Vie with a whole pear in the bottle. They also make great scotch.

Portland is the microbrew capital of America, with 38 breweries within its boundaries. Around town the McMenemy Brothers have restored over 40 buildings including brew pubs, restaurants and inns. They are much beloved in the city and there are many who boast of having a pint in each establishment.

When in the wine country stay at the McMenemy's Grand Lodge in Forest Grove, a restored 1922 Masonic hall with antique furnishings in the rooms, but no TV. Visit the Irish pub, which has McMenemy's draft beers on tap.

Widmer Brothers brew beer in a 100-year-old brick

building across the river. Take the tour and have a beer in the tasting room.

Portland has numerous pedestrian-friendly streets and multiple Farmer's Markets avail themselves during the week. Many chefs take advantage of the fresh produce.

I visited the market with Portland's top French chef, Philippe Boulot of the Heathman, the National Historic Landmark hotel and the only hotel in the downtown Cultural District. He is friends with the Travel Channel's bad boy bon vivant Anthony Bourdain, whom he worked with in New York. He hosted a book-signing party for Bourdain at the restaurant that is now legendary; wine poured deep into the evening.

Within an hour's drive of Portland is Mount Hood, where ski enthusiasts can ply the slopes into August, the longest ski season in America.

The Timberline Lodge is a National Historic Landmark, located at 6,000 feet. It was built during the Depression as a WPA project, but is probably most famous as the setting for "The Shining." Don't miss the brunch and enjoy chef Lief Benson's homemade cheeses and prosciutto.

Down the road is Bob's Red Mill in Milwaukie, Ore., which grinds over 300 types of flours and cereals on stone mills. The country store sells all the products. For dessert, try Clarke's in Lake Oswego. English chef Jonathan Clarke spent time in the kitchen of Le Cirque in New York. Flambe in Oregon City serves great Dungeness crab, and visit Wine Stock on Main Street for tastes of small area wineries.

Oregon City, about 10 miles from Portland, was the actual end of the Oregon Trail and a covered-wagon monument marks the spot.

IF YOU GO

Willamette Week, a free newspaper, is the best source for what's happening in town. For housing options, restaurants, special events, guidebooks and brochures, contact the Portland Oregon Visitor's Association www.travelportland.com, 877-678-5263.

Oregon Growers and Shippers: www.growersandshippers.com.

The Grape Escape: www.grapeescapetours.com, 503-283-3380.

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