

Aboard a floating snail

Luxury barge cruise showcases food and wine of Burgundy

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Gourmet or gourmand? It's the question of the moment aboard the Esprit. As the luxury barge glides along a canal in Burgundy, its passengers discuss the subtleties of each word. A dictionary pulled from the boat's library settles the matter.

Gourmet, it reads, is "a person who likes and is an excellent judge of fine foods and drinks." Gourmand, on the other hand, is "a glutton"; or someone "with a hearty liking for good food and drink and a tendency to indulge in them to excess."

My fellow passengers and I prefer the former to describe ourselves, now enlightened by our six-night cruise through this gastronomic region of France. By the end of this journey, though, we concede we might be dangerously close to the latter. Over buffet lunches and lavish plated dinners on board, we will have sipped 22 wines

from throughout France, sampled 30 French cheeses and feasted on our French chef's many imaginative starters, entrees, salads and desserts.

And then there's a dinner ashore at a Michelin three-star restaurant where 22 chefs labor over our three-hour meal valued at around \$500 a couple.

In the spirit of Esprit, as defined in that same dictionary, lively conversation accompanies it all.

Fellow Americans

About 95 percent of the Esprit's passengers come from the States. The 14 on our cruise, all from the U.S., are retired or soon-to-be-retired professionals, well educated and with a passion for knowledge.

The arrival of the International Herald Tribune each morning sets off a flurry of activity in the lounge as sections of the newspaper are separated and shared, their contents devoured, the crossword puzzle solved.

Over drinks and meals we discuss films, books, music and theater, debate the future of health care, the role of religion in modern society and

O.J.'s latest antics. But the chief topic of conversation always comes back to wine, followed closely by food.

In this we are led by Anna-Laurence Wuppermann, manager and tour guide of the Esprit and an expert on French wine. Before each lunch and dinner she gives a detailed description of the white and the red to be served.

"You will be in heaven with this wine," she says, holding up a 2001 Corton Charlemagne, a grand cru we sipped with filet de boeuf en croute with sauce bordelaise.

Wines served on board come from several regions in France. In Burgundy, Anna tells us wines fall into four classes: the grand cru, comprising just 1.8 percent of the wine; premier cru, making up 24 percent; village wines, about 36 percent; Bourgogne the remainder. All red wines in Burgundy are made from the Pinot Noir grape. Of the whites, 95 percent are Chardonnay grapes, including all of the Chablis, which, unlike the Chablis jug wine in the States, ranks very high, including three at the grand cru level.

At lunch, Versailles-trained chef Jean-Christophe Bourgoïn emerges



Esprit manager Anna-Laurence Wuppermann pours at dinner. Wines include several in the grand cru class.



from his kitchen in white apron and toque to describe his creations spread on the buffet. Anna does the honors in the evening, introducing each of the four courses in detail. One night we start with a foie gras in a raspberry reduction, followed by escargot. Lamb and duck appear in entrees on other nights. Dessert is crepes suzettes, crème brulee and a fig tart with caramel sauce and vanilla glaze.

Salad always comes after the main course followed by cheese

See **BARGE** on **PAGE 12**

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Barge cruise in Burgundy, France

GO: To enrich your knowledge and educate your palate for fine French food and wine

NO: If you drink wine out of a box and consider a Big Mac a meal

If you go



Getting there: American, United, Delta, US Airways and Air France operate nonstop from O'Hare to Charles de Gaulle airport near Paris. Passengers meet in Paris for the rail transfer to Burgundy on Sunday afternoon, so it is advisable to fly from O'Hare on Friday and spend Saturday night in a Paris hotel.

Cost: Prices for six-night cruises on French Country Waterways' five barges range from \$4,295 to \$6,795 per person, double occupancy. Gratuities average \$360 to \$495 per cabin. Rates cover all meals and wine (including dinner at a fine restaurant ashore one evening), open bar, sightseeing excursions and transfers between meeting points and barges. Minimum age is 18 unless the entire barge is chartered. Hot air balloon flights, minimum of four passengers, are an optional 220 euros (about \$310) per person.

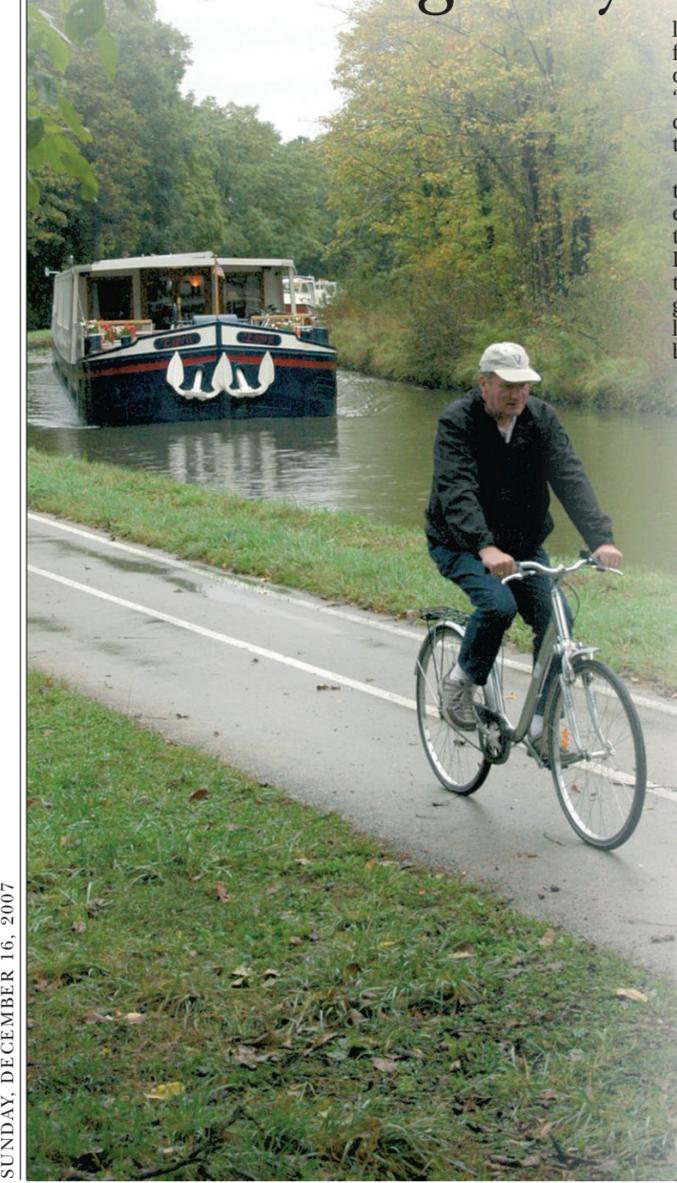
When to go: Cruises operate April through October. Daytime temperatures in central France average in the 50s in April, 80s in July and August and 50s in November. Anna says her favorite month in Burgundy is June.

What to pack: Bring comfortable sportswear and walking shoes. Dress for dinner is smart-casual. For the one dinner ashore and the farewell dinner, women wear dressy outfits and men wear coats and ties.

— Kathy Rodeghier

NEED TO KNOW

French Country Waterways Ltd., P.O. Box 2195, Duxbury, Mass., 02331, (800) 222-1236, www.fcwl.com



PHOTOS BY KATHY RODEGHIER/krodeghier@dailyherald.com
Passengers walk or bike along the canals, left. Lock keepers' houses, above, often sport lovely gardens. The Esprit's deckhand helps maneuver the barge in a lock, right.



Continued from Page 7

presented in what we jokingly refer to as the “cheese chat.” One of the crew appears with a tray of three French cheeses and explains their region of origin, type of milk used, texture, rind or crust.

“If I ever do another cruise, I want this food,” says passenger Laurie Johnson of Charlotte, N.C. The barge has been “a great way to see what the French do with food,” she says. Husband John came to appreciate the wine and sings Anna’s praises for her oenological skills. “She’s passionate about it,” he says.

Indeed, when we aren’t drinking wine, Anna teaches us about it, guiding us to vineyards and wine cellars on half-day trips, always making sure we return to the boat in time for what she calls our “happy hour.” Actually, the fully stocked bar remains open 24/7 and, as with the daily excursions, all drinks are included in the cost of the cruise.

Touring Burgundy

From the time we arrive by TGV high-speed train in Dijon on Sunday until we board the train in Le Creusot on Saturday, we are accompanied by a comfortable motor coach with Anna at the wheel.

She drives us to the medieval wine capital of Beaune and leads a walking tour in Dijon, where we visit a mustard shop run by the same family for 50 years. We visit a 12th-century castle that’s in all the guidebooks and an 18th-century chateau where the handsome count still lives while it is being restored. He greets us in blue jeans.

“My idea is, as much as possible, to take you to family-run places, not just the big tourist sites,” says Anna. Because she and her family live in the area, she knows the locals well. She takes us to the famous Clos de Vougeot grand cru vineyard, but also to a local winery for a private tasting in 18th-century cellars lined with barrels and bottles covered in dust.

Meanwhile, the barge prepares for our return: the staff cleaning our cabins, the chef working his miracles in the kitchen and the pilot and deckhand navigating to the



next mooring.

A slow boat

The barge isn’t meant to be a means of getting from place to place — the motor coach handles that. It functions as an air-conditioned inn that moves — slowly. In our six-night cruise it covers only 60 miles, traveling around 2.3 mph on the Canal de Bourgogne and Canal du Centre and 5 to 7 mph on the Saone River.

“The Esprit, I like to call it the floating snail,” says Anna in her charming French accent.

Passengers can walk at a faster pace — and we do. At the 40 locks the Esprit will pass through on our cruise, we are free to get off and walk along the towpath or ride one of the bikes carried on board.

We take the opportunity to walk off the previous night’s meal, strolling along the canal lined with poplar trees. We pass terraced vineyards, fields of sunflowers and gardens of pumpkins and sugar beets. White Charolais cattle, unique to Burgundy, graze in pastures. Anna teases us that one night they will make their way to our dinner table.

On a bike, we find ample time to detour off the path and explore a nearby village before catching up with the barge at the next lock.

The locks operate manually, with the lockkeepers turning the mechanism that opens the gates to raise and lower the water level. Many of the old cottages next to the locks are still occupied by keepers or rented out to locals. Lovingly restored, they are decked with window boxes overflow-

Burgundy is known for a breed of white cattle, right, which end up on the Esprit’s dinner menu. Desserts, such as creme brulee, below, are greeted with oohs and aahs by diners. Passengers gather in the Esprit’s bar and lounge for drinks and conversation before dinner, above.



PHOTOS BY KATHY RODEGHIER/KRODEGHIER@DAILYHERALD.COM

ing with blooms.

Historic canals

The French canal system began in the early 17th century to move cargo, such as timber, grain or wine, between trade centers. Though more efficient means of transport now make commercial use of the canals almost obsolete, the French Navigation Authority continues to maintain canals for their historic importance and scenic beauty.

Several passenger barge companies operate on the 4,800 miles of navigable rivers and canals crisscrossing France. American-owned French Country Waterways sells passage on the Esprit and four other barges carrying

from eight to 18 passengers.

At 128 feet long and about 16.5 feet wide, the Esprit has only 2 inches of clearance in the locks, pilot Stephane Bulard tells us. Built to haul coal in the 1940s, the 240-horsepower diesel V-8 engine was made by General Motors.

In 1986 the Esprit became a passenger barge. Our twin and double cabins on the lower level contain bathrooms with showers, a tight fit for an average-size American. Upstairs the lounge, bar and dining room are paneled in English oak. On the sundeck we sit and watch the scenery, read books or marvel as deckhand and pilot squeeze the Esprit into the locks. Out in the canal, another barge passes in the opposite direction, its passengers joining us in a

toast.

The canal averages 7 feet in depth and the barge is about 6.5 feet deep. Still, rules dictate that each cabin contain life jackets. As we gather in the lounge on the first evening, Anna jokes that in the unlikely event of an emergency “put on your jacket, come up here and, I guess, have a drink.”

We find we have little to worry about during our week on the Esprit. Seven English-speaking crew members see to our every need. “You’re totally taken care of,” says Sandy Wilson of Laguna Niguel, Calif.

Bruce Rudin of Huntington, N.Y., enjoyed the wine, the company and the fact that he and his wife didn’t have to make any decisions. “Your week is planned completely. You never have to figure out what to do next,” he says.

We’ve been pampered, indulged and spoiled at the table, and we don’t feel the least bit guilty about it. As Anna says, holding up a rare vintage, “You don’t bring this bottle to heaven. Life is short; drink the good wine now.”

The gourmets and gourmands among us agree.

• Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by French Country Waterways.