



No Whining on a Wine Cruise aboard American Empress

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Wine Cruise aboard *American Empress*

By Katherine Rodeghier

There's never a good time to break an arm. Certainly not before a wine-theme cruise in the Pacific Northwest.

Did I cancel? Heck, no.

On *American Empress*, I was better off on board than at home: no cooking, no cleaning, no grocery shopping. And with a capacity of 217 passengers, no big crowds to jostle me.

Even with a cast on my dominant arm, I still could lift a glass of wine.

Make that several glasses.



Katherine Rodeghier could still lift a glass of wine! * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

[Two Rivers, Three States on a Wine Cruise aboard *American Empress*](#)

[American Queen Voyages](#) operates its [paddle-wheeler *American Empress*](#) on the Columbia and Snake Rivers between Spokane, Washington, and Portland, Oregon. It was built in 2003 and updated in 2014.

A few voyages, usually in early spring and late fall, are designated wine cruises with lectures and tastings by representatives of local wineries on board and dinners with the boat's culinary team creating courses paired with their wines.



The 217-pax *American Empress* in Richland. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

In late October, my husband and I began the eight-night itinerary in Spokane where he was happy to hand off luggage he hauled from home with no help from injured me. A two-hour motorcoach ride took us to the boat in Clarkston, Washington, just across the Snake River from Lewiston, Idaho.

The towns take their names from William Clark and Meriwether Lewis, leaders of the Corps of Discovery that passed through on its exploration of the West.

The [Lewis-Clark Valley American Viticultural Area, or AVA](#), straddles the border with 72 percent of the area in Idaho. Wine from Idaho, who knew?



The map of the American Empress wine cruise. * Map: American Queen Voyages

We Get Rolling on our Wine Cruise

American Empress welcomed passengers with a Sail Away Party in the Paddlewheel Lounge where Hadder the bartender handed me a generous pour of Columbia Winery Red Blend.



Hadder the bartender in the Paddlewheel Lounge. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

Glass in cast-bound hand, I wandered to the stern window joining passengers mesmerized by the spinning 42-foot-tall red paddlewheel.

For a dinner cruise on the Snake River, we headed down to Deck 1 and the Astoria Dining Room, the more formal of the boat's two dining venues.



Lobster is served in the Astoria dining room. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

The casual River Grill & Bar on Deck 4, the top deck, has great views from expansive windows and an outdoor seating area.



The big red wheel, cruising through the Columbia River Gorge. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

What's Included in Fares

- 7 nights on board
- A pre-cruise hotel stay
- Ground transfers between hotel and boat
- Hop-on-hop off motorcoach tours

- Unlimited beverages
- Wi-Fi
- Use of bicycles on board
- Port charges
- Taxes
- Service fees
- Crew gratuities

Additional expenses include:

- Premium shore excursions
- Top-shelf alcoholic beverages
- Airport transfers

All About Washington Wine

Our first deep dive into Pacific Northwest wines began with a Happy Hour tasting and lecture, “Washington Wine Education Fun 101,” by [Chris Fulkerson](#) representing the region’s largest privately-held wine producer [Precept Wine](#). Fullerton came on board for the tasting and wine-pairing dinner.



Malbec from Browne Family Vineyards one of the labels of Precept Wines. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

While grapes have been grown in Washington’s volcanic soil since the 1800s, wine-making didn’t catch on until the first commercial vineyards opened in the 1960s, said Fulkerson. Today, vineyards cover about 60,000 acres with 45 percent of wines from more than 1,200 wineries scoring 90 or better on [Wine Spectator](#).

“Washington does a wonderful job of Old-World wines,” Fulkerson said. It’s no coincidence the Columbia River Valley lies along Earth’s 46th parallel, same as some wine regions in France.

Soil and climate influence taste, too. Warm days and cool nights produce thick-skin grapes great for Cabernet Sauvignon. A series of Ice Age floods also contributed to the terroir. Huge glacier-bound lakes covering what is now Montana repeatedly burst their ice dams sending Missoula Floods roaring through the region in waves 400 feet high. They left behind fine, well-drained soil adding earthiness and minerality to wines.



A vineyard in the Columbia River Valley. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

So Let's Eat

Fulkerson, a level two sommelier, paired his selection of wines from [Browne Family Vineyards](#) with an inventive four-course dinner whipped up in the *American Empress* galley. I'm usually not a fan of rosé but loved the Grenache Rosé with my spring roll appetizer. It's light, crisp and dry, good for waking up the palate, said Fulkerson.



Grenache Rosé from Browne Family Vineyards poured at wine pairing dinner. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

His Sauvignon Blanc choice paired well with my salad of berries, candied walnuts and goat cheese as did the dark, fruity Malbec with a flourless dark chocolate torte for dessert.

My favorite accompanied lamb chops, the Browne Tribute Red Blend honoring the winery founder's grandfather, a U.S. spy in Bordeaux during World War II.

Peak Vintages on Red Mountain during our Wine Cruise aboard *American Empress*

We had a close look at vineyards at [Red Mountain](#) on a premium shore excursion *American Empress* offers on most voyages, not just its wine cruises (the excursion was \$109 per person).



Terra Blanca vineyard on Red Mountain. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

Enroute guide and former Washington State Senator Jerome Delvin told us most of the 20 AVAs in Washington are small, and though the state ranks No. 2 in U.S. wine production after California, it produces only 10 percent of the nation's total output.

“Washington wines have gotten a good reputation over the years,” he said. They’ve won many awards. And they’re cheaper than comparable wines in California. “You can get a good cab for \$60,” he said. “In Napa you’d pay \$100.”

Wines on Red Mountain aren’t cheap, however, but are the most expensive in the state. Known as one of the top Cabernet Sauvignon regions in the U.S., wineries in other AVAs pay top dollar for grapes grown on its slopes.



Grapes in a Terra Blanca vineyard. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

From Vine to Wine

Daryl Baker, assistant general manager at Terra Blanca winery, led us into one of its vineyards where I plucked grapes from the vines to sample their vibrant taste. Red Mountain's microclimate provides optimal conditions for fine wine, said Baker.

Vines grow on sunny, southwest slopes. Summers are hot, windy and dry — less than 10 inches of precipitation a year—stressing the grapes enough to bring out their bold flavor. Drip irrigation supplements what nature doesn't provide.



Daryl Baker introduces passengers to the vineyard at Terra Blanca winery. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

Over a tasting of six wines, Baker told us Terra Blanca's owners bought the land on Red Mountain in 1992, planted vines and produced their first bottles of wine in 1997. It takes 16 years for grapes to mellow with maturity, he said, and it's not unusual for grape vines to last 100 years.

The oldest vines on Red Mountain were planted in 1975 at Kiona Vineyards and Winery where we indulged in six more tastings with nibbles of cheese. While Kiona makes its own estate wines, it also sells 60 percent of its highly prized grapes to more than 50 other wineries in the Pacific Northwest.



Kiona wine tasting. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

[Hop-On, Hop-Off](#)

Kiona was founded by two engineers at the [Hanford Site](#) where the nation's first nuclear reactor was created to produce plutonium for weapons as part of the secret Manhattan Project during World War II. Exhibits at the Hanford Reach Interpretive Center give the backstory. It's one of four stops on *American Empress's* Hop-On, Hop-Off motorcoach tours from the dock in Richland, Washington.

American Empress provides these flexible tours in each port. Passengers reserve seats for the earliest departures by pulling tickets from a kiosk outside the Purser's Office.

We were happy to hop off at sites that interested us and happy to stay aboard at those that didn't.

[A Gorgeous Gorge on our Wine Cruise aboard *American Empress*](#)

In The Dalles, Oregon, we hopped off at the [Columbia Gorge Discovery Center & Museum](#) where we learned about the region's volcanic upheaval and the catastrophic Missoula Floods that cut a canyon up to 4,000 feet deep and 80 miles long.



Columbia Gorge Discovery Center & Museum. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

The Dalles serves as the eastern gateway to the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. As the river flows west through the gorge, it passes through the Cascade Mountain Range and the landscape changes from the dry, high desert on the east to the tropic-like west which gets 75 inches of rain a year.

We witnessed the change in weather firsthand on a premium excursion to 620-foot [Multnomah Falls](#) (\$79 per person), tallest waterfall in Oregon. Rain began to fall heavily as we departed the motorcoach to experience the irony of viewing this impressive cascade while a torrent pelted our umbrella.

We returned to the boat soaked to the skin.



The Multnomah Falls. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

[Art & Wine on Board](#)

After drying off and hanging up our wet clothes in our stateroom, our mood brightened with Art & Wine Walk.

The boat's collection of artifacts and art encompasses pieces from native Alaska, Russia, the Gold Rush and the early sternwheeler era. All are numbered and described in a booklet in every stateroom for self-guided tours.



Passenger enjoying wine with art during Art & Wine Walk. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

But just for fun, the *American Empress* shore excursion and food and beverage managers lead a guided tour when opportunity permits, not just on wine cruises.

They set up wine stations throughout the boat along with an array of appetizers. We moved deck to deck sipping five samples from the boat's premium wine collection while perusing the art.



Lisa Salmons food and beverage manager pours wine for passengers during an Art & Wine Walk. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

[Waterfall Alley](#)

Next day we cruised through the gorge as *American Empress* Riverlorian Laurence Cotton narrated the passing scenery on the boat's public address system. The 75 waterfalls cascading down the canyon earn it the nickname "[Waterfall Alley.](#)"

Some seasonal falls are mere trickles, others like Multnomah gush year-round.

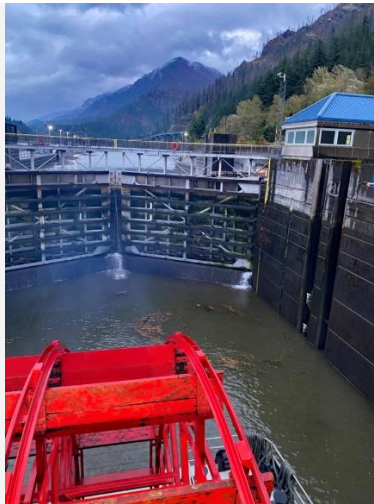


Waterfall Alley is the nickname for the Columbia River Gorge. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

Despite the chill and cloudy sky, I stood on deck to take in the view — with a glass of wine, of course. Between sips I snapped photos of rugged cliffs, riverside rock formations and passing barges.

On a few occasions, *American Empress* had to wait its turn at a lock and dam. It cruised through eight dams, four on the Columbia and four on the Snake.

The elevation difference totals 738 feet, more than eight times the lift of the Panama Canal.



Waiting at a lock in the Columbia River Gorge. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

Still More Wine

As we neared the mouth of the Columbia River in Astoria, Oregon, Sommelier Michael Jagers came on board for a Happy Hour Wine Tasting with samples from Primarius wine's [Battle Creek vineyard](#).



Sommelier Michael Jagers greets passengers to a tasting of Primarius wine. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

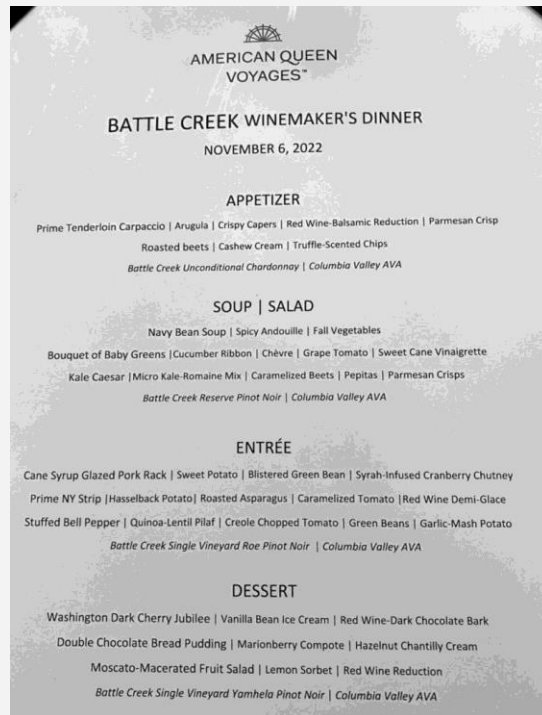


Primarius wine tasting on board American Empress. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

Then on our last night aboard *American Empress*, he welcomed us to a Winemaker's Dinner: four courses paired with four excellent wines. I went from a Chardonnay with Prime Tenderloin Carpaccio to three different Pinot Noirs with Navy Bean Soup, a NY Strip steak and a Washington Dark Cherry Jubilee.



Navy bean soup in the Astoria Dining Room. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier



Menu for Battle Creek winemaker's dinner. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

But we were not done with wine, yet. After disembarking *American Empress* in Vancouver, Washington, we crossed the river to extend our stay a few days in Portland, Oregon. I had heard so much about wines from the Willamette Valley I just had to visit for a taste.

Sarah Gilbert of [Around Portland Tours](#) customized an afternoon of tastings at two wineries, a mere drop in the wine barrel in a river valley 180 miles long and 30 miles wide.

[We'll be Back](#)

We learned so much about wines of the Pacific Northwest on our wine cruise aboard *American Empress* while it pampered us with fine dining, fun excursions and great service from the friendly crew.

I'm looking forward to the day when my fractured forearm is finally fixed so I can easily dig through bottles of wine at my local store in a hunt for those from Washington, Oregon and maybe Idaho, too.

Cheers!

Quick Facts

Itineraries/Fares

American Queen Voyages 7-night *Columbia and Snake Rivers Wine Cruises* on its *American Empress* start at \$2,355 per person (including one hotel night).

Our American Empress Cabin

We were in cabin 202, a **superior veranda stateroom** slightly larger than the deluxe veranda staterooms, the most common cabin category. It's one of two on the boat overlooking the bow through four forward windows and two facing the side, including one in the door to the veranda. While we enjoyed the view as we cruised down the river, passengers and crew sometimes gathered outside our windows disturbing our privacy.

On our fall 2022 sailing the cruise was about half full; dinner was reduced from two to one seating in the main dining room.



American Empress stateroom 202. * Photo: Katherine Rodeghier

Getting There

Passengers fly into/out of Spokane, Washington, and Portland, Oregon.

Wine Cruise Tips

Pace yourself. You'll be poured glass after glass of wine during shore excursions and onboard tastings, wine pairing dinners and other wine events. Don't give in to the temptation to drink every drop.

Uber and Lyft operate in Spokane and Vancouver, Washington, for airport transfers.

Weather in the Pacific Northwest

The Pacific Northwest is notorious for unpredictable weather particularly in April and October/November when wine cruises are offered. The average temperature is in the low 50s

with 12-18 rainy days in Portland, Oregon, and in the 40s with 8-11 rainy days in Clarkston, Washington. Dress in layers and bring rain gear.

Money Matters

Official currency is the U.S. dollar and credit cards are accepted.

Why Go?

- For a thorough introduction to wines of the Pacific Northwest.
- To enjoy the spectacular scenery of the Columbia River Gorge.

Caveats

- *American Empress* does not have a guest laundry or offer laundry service.
- Wi-Fi and TV reception may not be available in some remote locations.
- Arrival in port may be delayed if river traffic backs up at locks.

Interested in this Wine Cruise aboard *American Empress*?

Contact American Queen Voyages at www.aqvoyages.com, info@aqvoyages.com and [866 522-1166](tel:8665221166).

Author Bio

As a travel journalist, Katherine Rodeghier has researched destinations in nearly 100 countries on all seven continents and has taken cruises across the globe. Her travel journalism career began with writing and editing an award-winning newspaper travel section for the *Chicago Daily Herald*. She now contributes to several newspapers, magazines and websites. She's a member of the Society of American Travel Writers and the Midwest Travel Journalists Association.

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