

Free-Flowing FRANCE

Covering delicious ground on a canal cruise through Burgundy.

BY MARGIE GOLDSMITH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHEL FIGUET

Burgundian market finds and (right) tying up at Ancy-le-Franc.

CHARLES DE GAULLE SAID IT would not be possible to have a country with more than 350 cheeses, but there are now 1,200 cheeses in France,” the *Nenuphar*’s captain declared, holding up a platter of *fromage*. (De Gaulle’s actual sentiment alluded to the difficulty of governing a country with hundreds of cheeses, but the implication holds: In France food rules all.) In the name of research, over the next six days we would consume 33 cow-, sheep-, and goat-milk cheeses – and 24 red and white wines – each fit for a duke of Burgundy, as we cruised on the Canal de Bourgogne. This bounty was the reason my husband, Jamie, and I chose a French Country Waterways barge cruise: Burgundy’s vineyards produce some of the world’s best wines, and the region’s superb produce and culinary traditions make it a gastronomic center.

Our home for the week, the 128-foot *Nenuphar* (French for “water lily”), accommodated ten other passengers and us in six king-bedded cabins, each well appointed and comfy with ample storage space, a desk, a private bath, and two portholes that kept the room light and airy. The barge’s salon, bar, dining room, and sundeck afforded space

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for socializing with our shipmates, but we had plenty of alone time when we biked the towpath and explored nearby villages.

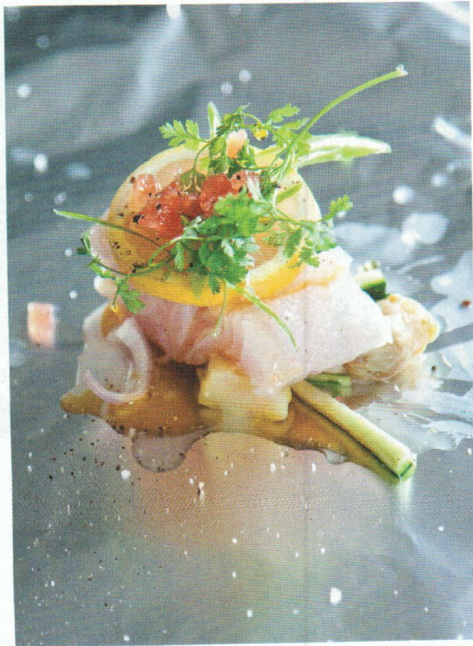
Each day the *Nenuphar* cruised at turtle speed past velvety-green fields of barley and bright-yellow canola flowers; past apple trees, forsythia, and sweetly scented wisteria and lilac trees in full bloom. Herds of Charolais cattle, which come from the southern Burgundy region of the same name, stared as we floated by. When we pulled up to a canal lock (one of 33 we would pass through during the trip), many

of us disembarked to walk or bike along the pancake-flat towpath and meet the barge at the next lock, never much more than half an hour away.

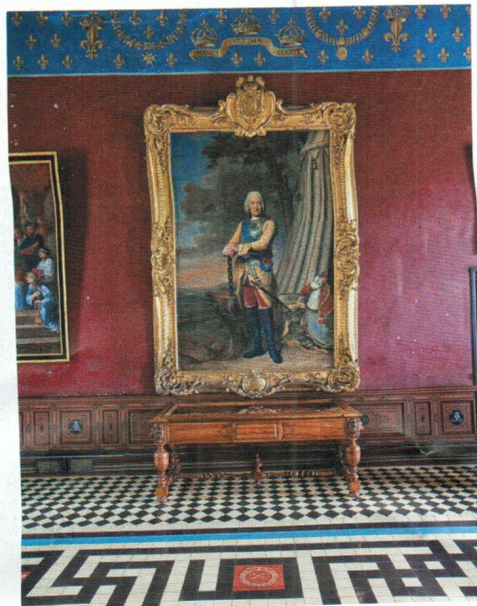
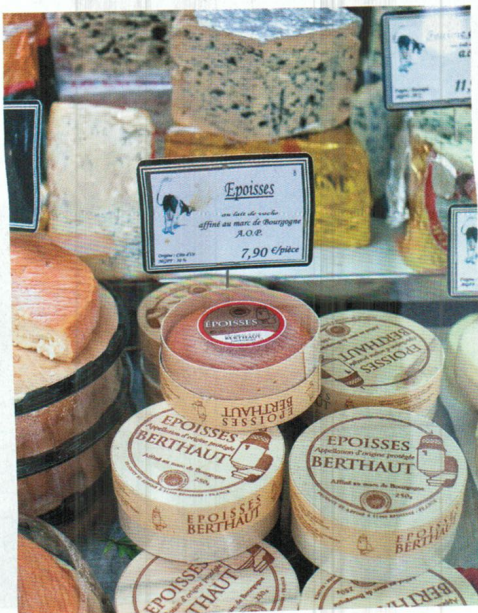
In six days we cruised just under 40 miles, a distance I could have biked in a few hours. Sometimes Jamie and I left the towpath to peddle past centuries-old churches and deserted castle remains. When we returned to the green-and-white barge, chef Tadek Zwan served a lunch buffet that might be *coq au vin* (made with red Burgundy, cognac, and morels), perhaps a broccoli-and-

Roquefort quiche, and salads such as cauliflower with mango and apples, or quinoa with sun-dried tomatoes.

Daily outings, guided by Matthew Walsh, our British captain, revealed just how deeply great food and wine has always infused Burgundian culture and history. At one abbey, Clos de Vougeot, during the French Revolution the state seized the monks' possessions and vineyards and sold the latter to private buyers; the new owners retained one monk because only he knew how to make the wine. Monks at the twelfth-century Abbaye de Fontenay (a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the oldest Cistercian monasteries in France) made wine and cheese, invented the hydraulic hammer, and pioneered the use of a dovecote for keeping pigeons.



Clockwise from above left: *Nenuphar* crew members pour the good stuff; cod en papillote with asparagus and white wine; a 1759 portrait of Gaspard de Clermont-Tonnerre, Marshal of France, at his family chateau, Ancy-le-Franc; and an embarrassment of cheeses at a local market.



EARLY EACH MORNING I'D RUN THE TOWPATH and return to find that Zwan or another crew member had picked up hot croissants and *pain au chocolat* from the local patisserie to add to the breakfast spread of fruit, cereals, cold cuts, cheeses, and on-request hot food. The crew shopped for fresh ingredients at farmers' markets along the route and served them at dinner, a three-course, candlelit extravaganza of specialties such as escargots, *pôchouse bourguignonne* (fish stew), and *oeufs en meurette* (poached eggs in red wine sauce). Unlike traditional heavy Burgundian food, Zwan's meals were always light because he used no thickeners and reduced all his sauces. "It takes much longer," he said, "but that's where the flavor is." We all agreed that Zwan's food surpassed even our dinner in Saulieu at the three-Michelin-starred Le Relais Bernard Loiseau.

Set times for lunch and dinner gave passengers the chance to get to know each other. Our well-traveled group – all Americans – included an 86-year-old retired NASA engineer from Connecticut, who regaled us with stories of his years on the Hubble project. The 69-year-old California marketing retiree (on his fourth French Country Waterways cruise) did the *New York Times* crossword puzzle each morning and told us, "There's no itinerary more relaxing than sitting up front with coffee and a croissant on a Burgundy canal." The honeymooning New Jersey couple raved about the variety and quality of the food and wine.



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And what wines! We sipped a 2007 Châteauneuf-du-Pape, a 2006 Meursault-Charmes Premier Cru, and a 2011 Chassagne-Montrachet Premier Cru. At Domaine Servin in Chablis, where the same family has owned vineyards since the sixteenth century, we tasted Chablis directly from the wine tank, then from an oak barrel, and finally, by the glass. Cheese, that indispensable element of a French meal, appeared before dessert, served with salad and fruit. I liked best the stinky, creamy Époisses, also supposedly one of Napoleon's favorites. Captain Walsh said he loved Abbaye de Cîteaux because the Montbéliarde cows that produce it look so happy.

Too soon, our last night approached. We sat on the sundeck drinking *kir* (invented in Burgundy) as a local accordionist played Édith Piaf songs. When he began one tune, the chef, pilot, sailor, and the two hostesses rushed onto the deck and clapped as they sang along "*Le ban Bourguignon*" ("A round of applause for Burgundy"). And as we watched the sun sink and turn the canal a glittering purplish pink, we too gave a round of applause for our guide and crew, the barge, and life in the slow lane.



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RIVER OF WINE

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WHEN TO GO While barge-cruising season runs from April through October, April through June and September and October promise the best weather.

GO In addition to Burgundy, **French Country Waterways** offers seven-day barge trips in Champagne, the upper Loire Valley, and Alsace-Lorraine. *Departures: Sundays, April through October; from \$6,695, including one Michelin-starred-restaurant meal, use of onboard bicycles, and touring.*



Bordeaux fans: Next spring, **AmaWaterways** will introduce 22 sailings through the renowned wine region on the 116-passenger *AmaDolce*. Prominent wine experts will accompany eight of these 13-day journeys, providing vintage insight along the way. *Departures: Multiple dates, March 22 through November 15, 2016; from \$2,899.*

Avalon Waterways offers ten-day wine-appreciation

cruises from Paris to Amsterdam with an onboard wine expert and winetastings, plus more winetasting in the Rhine Valley and visits to wine cellars and a vineyard. *Departures: October 28, 2015, and October 25, 2016; from \$3,479.*

During eight-day sailings from Avignon to Lyon (or the reverse) on **Uniworld's** decadent 159-passenger *Catherine*, wine aficionados sip midvalley Côtes du Rhône, tour wineries, and taste their way through Lyon's famed Les Halles food market. *Departures: Sundays through November 8, 2015; from \$4,399.*

Viking River Cruises' eight-day river cruise in Bordeaux on the 190-passenger *Forseti* focuses on wine and allows guests to hunt for truffles and blend their own cognac. *Departures: Multiple dates through December 19, 2015; from \$3,599.*

STAY Spend a few extra days in Paris at the newly opened **Peninsula**. Located steps from the Arc de Triomphe, Europe's first Peninsula property opened after four years of renovation to a circa-1864 **Haussmann building**. The

historical property's modern details include customized bedside tablets in each of its 200 sleek, spacious rooms, six dining venues, and a sprawling spa and fitness facility. *Doubles from \$1,500, including breakfast daily and a \$90 dining or spa credit.*

Just off the Champs-Élysées, the classically Parisian **Four Seasons Hotel George V** has 244 colorful, romantic rooms and houses the two-Michelin-starred Le Cinq. For a wine lovers' treat, head 46 feet underground to the property's 50,000-bottle-deep wine cellar for a **guided tasting** of the world's finest vintages with Le Cinq's sommelier. *Doubles from \$1,420, including breakfast daily and a \$90 spa credit.*

At the art deco landmark **Prince de Galles**, rich mosaics, sculptural lamps and fixtures, and bright, interpretive artwork and textiles accent the 159 clean-lined rooms. Savor chef Stéphanie le Quellec's seasonal cuisine at the one-Michelin-starred **La Scène**, and sip Champagne and modern cocktails in the opulent bar Les Heures. *Doubles from \$710, including breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit. VI*



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