




BARGE THROUGH
BURGUNDY
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12.5% Alc. PRODUCE OF FRANCE 750 ml



What better way to sample a region's
food and wine than on a luxury barge?

BELOW: Wines in
Château de
Meursault's cellars.
RIGHT: The Abbey
Fontenay and its
elegant gardens.



Summer showers have just passed, leaving a cool, overcast sky. Our French-trained chef, Noortje (pronounced Nor-chee), arrives on deck in her crisp white tunic to describe the dishes she has prepared for our lunch in her efficient galley-kitchen, to be served by her assistant, Fabiola:

- Salad of chicory, orange slices and toasted sesame seeds with nut oil and orange dressing
- Fresh seafood salad of lobster, shrimp and smoked salmon with an aioli sauce
- Freshly baked onion tart with anchovies and black olive, called a *pissaladiere*
- Fresh summer fruit salad with all kinds of red berries served with *crème fraîche*.

'Bon appetit!' Noortje disappears again with a wave and our captain, François Everson, joins us briefly from his place in the teakwood pilot house.

'Today we are in the Alsace region...' or the Loire, Rhône, Burgundy, Bordeaux—five different wine experiences, one for each day of our voyage.

'I think you'll enjoy the *Pinot Gris*,' says François, pouring a *Tokay Pinot Gris, Grand Cru Beblenheim 1994, Domaine Marcel Deiss* into six waiting glasses.

On the umbrella-shaded deck of the 30-metre luxury barge, *St Louis*, we three couples, strangers until a few days ago, converse happily over François' wine selections and Noortje's cuisine.

The sky is clear, the views stunning. Surrounded by fields of wildflowers and pristine Charolais cows, the only sound of industry we hear is the murmur of dragonflies. We are touring Burgundy's Canal de Bourgogne, charting a gentle course through the Côte d'Or, a region that produces many of the world's most prestigious wines.

For some time, my husband and I have enjoyed learning about wines. With the *Wine Spectator's* announcement that the 1995 white burgundies were 'outstanding', we recognised a serious gap in our education—we did not know a Meursault from a Montrachet. A travel agent's brief profile of the experience put together by François and Noortje (with the backing of an American businessman) led to our signing on for a casual tutorial on French wine and cuisine.

One Sunday afternoon in July, François picked us up at our Dijon hotel, then whisked us to Pont Royal where we enjoyed a Burgundian welcome of *kir royale* (blackcurrant liqueur and champagne) and hors d'oeuvres, followed by a tour of the vessel that would be our home for six nights.

François redesigned the Dutch freighter with an eye to comfort. All materials are first-rate and the

PREVIOUS SPREAD,

LEFT A balloon ride
over the country-
side. RIGHT Noortje,
our French-trained
chef.



LEFT Kia, the author, at rest. TOP Summer lunch: fresh red berries to be eaten with *crème fraîche*. RIGHT Le Montrachet field.

appointments are pleasing. The main salon is part-library, part-dining room with a handsome bar where we gathered for our evening aperitifs. The sleeping cabins are air-conditioned, with full-length mirrors, dressing tables and comfortable shower-toilets. A plus we had not thought of—long European evenings of fading twilight. That proved a special benefit the evening François arranged a balloon ride over the countryside.

We dined al fresco that night, the better to watch our balloon being inflated on the grassy banks beside the canal. The pilot set up while we enjoyed *timbale* of salmon trout with citrus sauce, roasted leg of lamb with sauce of ancient mustard and melange of legumes, and François' wine choices for the evening—*Château Carbonnieux*, *Grand Cru Classé Pessac-Leognan* and *Château Beau-Sejour Bevat 1993*, *St Emilion Grand Cru*. We floated over rows of lavender, chasing cows and brushing treetops until we lit down in a field of haystacks. Then we returned by van, to a dessert of tuile of almonds with calvados sorbet under the stars.

BIKING AND HIKING The days passed easily. We biked and hiked along the pathways beside the canal, exploring small villages and ancient ruins.

François is a talented guide whose love of history, art and architecture became apparent on our personal tours to historic abbeys and châteaux in the area. Extraordinary among these were the Hospices de Beaune, Abbey Fontenay and Château Commarin.

In the evenings, he indulged our interest in French wine. Luckily, our interest was shared by our fellow travellers. Several afternoons were spent visiting wine châteaux and caves (cool tasting rooms with vaulted ceilings), where we sampled and selected wines under François' guidance. At Château de Meursault, we wound through gothic cellars lined with bottles from the 1930s, emerging into a softly lit cavern where we were given silver tasting cups with grooves to swirl the whites and check their colour. Among the Domaine's best offerings, we sampled *Puligny-Montrachet Premier Cru 1993* and *Château de Meursault 1991* and its reds, *Volnay Clos des Chenes 1993* and *Pommard Clos des Epenots 1994*.

That evening at dinner, François gave a demonstration of restaurant wine etiquette.

'Remember, the sommelier is simply asking whether the wine has gone off, not whether you like it,' he said. 'A discreet sniff, a gentle swirl, a quick chewing of the wine in the mouth. Nothing too obvious.'



ABOVE, LEFT & RIGHT
A lock-keeper's
puppies. Haystacks
are part of the
region's charm.

RIGHT Garden urn
at Abbey Fontenay.



THE WINES OF BURGUNDY

Few casual connoisseurs realise that the wines of Burgundy are defined at birth by the land on which the vines are planted. The French system of quality control, *appellation contrôlée*, is, among other things, based on the philosophy of *terroir*—a word that includes all of the unique character of the land on which a vineyard is located, including soil, elevation, climate and orientation to the elements. Position on the slope, for example, will explain the differences that exist between a Grand Cru, a Premier Cru or a village appellation. Factors of drainage, sun and soil—the latter's limestone content, for example—are some of the reasons connoisseurs prefer (and pay more for) Grand Cru wines. Harder to grasp is the dramatic difference among wines produced from adjacent fields. This was demonstrated by the widow of Robert Arnoux, herself a respected winemaker known for her excellent *Clos de Vougeot*, by our tasting of two Premier Crus from fields hardly more than one kilometre apart. Both wines were from the same grape, the same vintage and the same winemaker.

When we asked him for a no-holds-barred 'taster's demonstration', the result was amusing. He plunged his nostrils into the glass, took a deep sniff and gave his first mouthful the vigorous chomping of a horse at a trough.

'My introduction to great wine came by way of a guy who was messing me about,' he explained one afternoon. 'I guess he felt guilty, because he offered Noortje and me an evening at one of the best restaurants in Dijon. "Order anything you want," he said, "but no Romanée-Conti." When the sommelier arrived, I told him: "Give us the best you've got, but no Romanée-Conti." He poured us something so delicious I was hooked. I now knew what those wine chaps were going on about, though I went through a lot of bad wine before developing my taste.'

FIFTY LOCKS We passed through more than 50 locks during our 50-km voyage. Most are operated by on-site lock-keepers who live in charming canal-side cottages with lovely gardens.

A routine we enjoyed was biking ahead to the next lock to summon the keeper. '*Péniche descend* (boat coming),' we announced, jumping off our bikes to man the scythe-shaped levers that open the locks. This allowed the water to rush in and fill the lock basin to the upstream water level. Once the *St Louis* entered the basin, the lock would be opened again to lower the water level, allowing the barge to move downstream.

We realised early on that the trip had surpassed our expectations. But had we learned anything about French wines? The test came on one of our last evenings, when François dropped us off at an elegant restaurant for a gourmet dinner ashore. The responsibility for ordering wine for our table of six was ours. Could we measure up?

Here are our selections, a white followed by two reds: *Santenay Girardin* 1995 Premier Cru, *Chassagne-Montrachet* 1993 'Clos de les Boudriotte' (Domaine Ramonet), *Gevrey-Chambertin* 1992 'Les Fontenys' (Domaine Roty).

We later learned that François and Noortje offer two special wine appreciation cruises for wine aficionados, with exclusive tastings in private cellars and a chance to participate in the famed Wine Auction of the Hospices de Beaune.

On our final evening, we regretted saying goodbye. Lifting our glasses to our hosts, and their excellent crew, Marc and Fabiola, we appreciated how far we had come. The kilometres might be few but the pleasures—of Burgundy's landscape, its food and wine—were many ♣

Singapore Airlines carries a selection of fine French wines on board all flights • SIA flies from Singapore to Paris daily.