

THE GATEWAY TO OREGON WINE COUNTRY

Portland has big-city sophistication
on a human scale BY TIM FISH

In the 159 years since its founding, Portland, Ore., has been many cities—a frontier settlement, a booming timber town and, more recently, the epicenter of the nation's microbrew revival. These days Portland is a wine and food town, and a serious one. • Portland is the gateway to the Willamette Valley winegrowing region, and the rest of Oregon wine country, but that's not the only attraction. The city's culinary roots run deep: James Beard was born here, and in his 1964 book *Delights and Prejudices* he wrote that "good food abounded" in what he called a "food-conscious city." With a population of about 500,000, Portland seems to have more than its share of wine bars and fine dining establishments.

THERE IS SOMETHING QUITE URBANE ABOUT PORTLAND—NOT SURPRISING CONSIDERING ITS HISTORY. AS ONE OF THE WEST COAST'S MAJOR SHIPPING PORTS, THE CITY IS ACCUSTOMED TO HAVING THE WORLD AT ITS DOORSTEP.

"People in Portland spend a lot of money on eating and drinking," says Nancy Ponzi of Ponzi Vineyards. "It's a very progressive city, one of the most European of American cities."

Indeed, there is something quite urbane about Portland—not surprising considering its history. As one of the West Coast's major shipping ports, the city is accustomed to having the world at its doorstep. Yet it's still distinctly American.

Portland's human-scale neighborhoods center around cafés and parks. Downtown, with its historic buildings and old bridges spanning the Willamette River, recalls old river towns and port cities of America's East Coast, places like Pittsburgh and Baltimore.

At the same time, Portland is surrounded by the sort of dramatic countryside that the Pacific Northwest uniquely provides. The 11,000-foot summit of Mount Hood, just east of the city, is visible on a clear day.

And there are occasionally clear days. Portland is notorious for its overcast weather, although it receives less rain annually than Seattle, Atlanta or Baltimore. The weather is not unlike that of San Francisco—even in summer the evenings are cool, although Portland's summer daytime temperatures are generally higher than the City by the Bay's, reaching into the low 80s.

Portland is like San Francisco in another way—both are progressive cities with a strong sense of local character and pride.

"Portland never quite wants to grow up," says native Cory Schreiber, owner and chef of Wildwood restaurant. "Portland enjoys its provincial kind of quaintness. Part of our success is that we limit our growth. We keep it quaint. We keep it small."

David Holstrom, a wine consultant for Bluehour, Southpark Seafood Grill & Wine Bar and other leading restaurants in the city, agrees. "There's a feeling here that small is better. Portland particularly loves small neighborhood restaurants."

Portland is a city of many neighborhoods—small communities, really—and each seems to have its own wine and food personality.

Downtown has many of the old guard restaurants, including the restaurant at the Heathman Hotel, Higgins, Ruth's Chris Steak House and London Grill. Most of the top hotels are there as well, including the Paramount, the Heathman and a new addition, Hotel Lucia, a sleekly modern boutique inn aimed squarely at young professionals. There's also high-end shopping downtown, with Nordstrom, Tiffany & Co., Louis Vuitton and Saks Fifth Avenue on Pioneer Square.

The Pearl District is Portland's SoHo, where former warehouses have been converted into upscale condos, shops and restaurants, attracting a young and well-to-do crowd. Trendy Bluehour restaurant and the fashionable 750ml Wine Bar and Bistro are typical of the neighborhood.

With its old Victorian houses, shops and restaurants, Nob Hill is Portland's quaint neighborhood. It's also home to one of the city's best restaurants, Wildwood.



Top: Bluehour brings exciting food and wine to the trendy Pearl District. Above: Portland fine-dining pioneer and Wildwood chef-owner Cory Schreiber credits the region's natural bounty for the popularity of Pacific Northwestern cuisine.

On the bohemian outskirts of the upscale Laurelhurst neighborhood in east Portland is the hip side of the food-and-wine scene. Typical of Portland's more recent restaurant additions is Navarre, a funky bistro and wine bar with a devoted following of local foodies. The atmosphere is almost collegiately casual—guests order by checking boxes on a paper menu—but the food has heart. Sharing the neighborhood are other buzz-worthy establishments, including Tabla restaurant and Noble Rot wine bar.

And, as you might imagine, Portlanders are devoted to the wines of Oregon and Washington. Fifty-two percent of Oregon's wines are sold in-state, according to the Oregon Department of Agriculture, and much of that is consumed in Portland.

"Portlanders in general seem pretty open to trying new wines, but you need to have plenty of Oregon wine," Holstrom says. "And you cannot afford to be snooty at all about wine in Portland. That will kill your business."

As a whole, the wine lists of the city reflect a passionate yet straightforward approach to wine. With a handful of exceptions (such as the list at the Heathman), most of the lists include a few dozen newly released wines from around the world at generally modest prices. Still, it isn't hard to find a stimulating bottle to have with dinner.

While Portland's restaurant scene represents a wide range of cuisines, many specialize in what is generally called Pacific Northwestern cuisine. Like California cooking, it is largely defined by the use of local and seasonal ingredients. The Heathman Restaurant has been the city's longstanding advocate of Pacific Northwest food, but today chef Philippe Boulot blends in a touch of France. Schreiber at Wildwood and Greg Higgins at his signature restaurant have each spent 10 years perfecting their treatment of the excellent raw materials available to them.

"Salmon, wild mushrooms, Pinot Noir, fresh berries," Schreiber says, "We just have a raw abundance here."

In the end, "raw abundance" may be a good description for the city itself. Portland has all the sophistication of a city several times its size, but also the laidback attitude of a storied old town straddling a couple of rivers.

We surveyed dozens of restaurants and hotels in our research on Portland and what follows are some of the best the city has to offer; all these establishments accept major cards.

WHERE TO STAY

The Heathman Hotel

1001 S.W. Broadway **Telephone** (503) 241-4100; (800) 551-0011 **Web site** www.heathmanhotel.com **Rooms** 112 **Suites** 38 **Rates** \$129-\$209

Portland has numerous fine, historic hotels, but this is the city's class act. Located in the heart of the downtown cultural district and built in 1927, the hotel has just finished a multimillion-dollar upgrade to fine effect.

There's an intimacy to the Heathman that recalls a private club. The diminutive lobby, with its modern version of art deco interior, leads to the cozy two-level Tea Court, with its striking Burmese teak paneling. The accommodations vary dramatically in size and, as with most older hotels, the bathrooms are small,

but all the rooms are finished in an eclectic yet soothing mix of warm colors and modern Asian influences.

WHERE TO EAT

Bluehour

250 N.W. 13th Ave. **Telephone** (503) 226-3394 **Open** Lunch, Monday to Friday; dinner, Monday to Saturday **Cost** Entrées \$20-\$38 **Corkage** \$15

This trendy Pearl District restaurant has a menu that lives up to its high-style atmosphere. Located in a former warehouse and starkly decorated in black and white, the high-energy dining room is packed with tables and a din of chatter fills the room. The cuisine is eclectic and focused on comfort, with strong Italian influences. The slow-roasted suckling pig is a must. The wine list too is eccentric, yet intriguing, with about 120 selections from around the globe, most priced at less than \$75.

Genoa

2832 S.E. Belmont St. **Telephone** (503) 238-1464 **Open** Dinner, nightly **Cost** Menus, \$56 and \$70 **Corkage** \$20

Award of Excellence

This Italian restaurant has all the refinement and seriousness of Napa Valley's the French Laundry, but cuisine based on the Italian trattoria model. The atmosphere is intimate—there are only 10 tables—and diners converse in hushed tones. Service is flawless, and the staff is well-versed in the prix fixe menu, which comes in four or seven courses. The wine list, which has about 200 selections of Italian and American wines, is moderately priced and wisely focused. The pace is unhurried, which is appropriate, because the food is painstakingly crafted and well worth lingering over.

Heathman Restaurant

The Heathman Hotel, 1001 S.W. Broadway **Telephone** (503) 790-7752 **Open** Breakfast, lunch and dinner, daily **Cost** Entrées \$14-\$28 **Corkage** \$15

Best of Award of Excellence

Situated in the lobby of the historic Heathman Hotel, this dining room has a comfortable, clublike feel and one of the more ample wine lists in Portland. There are more than 600 labels from which to choose, and it's a sterling selection both local and international. The menu by executive chef Philippe Boulot is a satisfying blend of French classics and Pacific Northwest specialties.

Higgins

1239 S.W. Broadway **Telephone** (503) 222-9070 **Open** Lunch, Monday to Friday; dinner, nightly **Cost** Entrées \$18-\$27 **Corkage** \$15

Award of Excellence

There's something quintessentially Portland about Higgins. The atmosphere is urban yet warm and unpretentious and there's plenty of comfort on the menu, which is passionately supportive of local and seasonal ingredients such as wild salmon, crab and the like. It shows that even after 10 years, chef-owner Greg Higgins is still very hands-on in the kitchen. The wine list has about 200 selections—a sharply focused collection of Oregon reds and whites laced with top Washington and California bottlings.