



An OCEAN *of* WINE

Wine programs on cruise ships have never been better

BY BEN O'DONNELL



The Oceania *Riviera* carries 1,250 cruisegoers—and an inventory of 18,000 bottles of wine. Prominent winemakers come aboard to hold seminars and dinners, and passengers can opt for food-and-wine shore excursions near ports all over the world.

It's a special night and you want to treat yourself to a seven-course tasting and wine-pairing menu at a fancy restaurant. Fortunately, it's only steps away.

Caviar d'Aquitaine with cream of sea urchin paired with Dom Ruinart Brut Rosé whets your appetite, and soon you're wending through ever more intricate and unexpected arrangements of flavor.

Culatello Gran Riserva—the caviar of prosciutto—and smoked ricotta in tricorn-shaped ravioli with pumpkin velouté

is matched with a Valdamor Albariño Barrica that the sommelier discovered on a recent trip to Spain's Rías Baixas.

The climactic dish, seared Kobe beef cooked sous vide and served with Valrhona sauce, is partnered not with the usual headliner California Cabernet or classified-growth Bordeaux, but the small-production, estate-grown Marchesi Fumanelli Octavius, an Amarone della Valpolicella that plays to the sweet and bitter nuances of the chocolate-based sauce.

It's good—and it should be. Famed chef and cookbook author

Jacques Pépin makes sure of that, since he helps run the place. Plus, the fish on the menu might be freshly caught, the pineapples and bananas locally grown.

Because you're not in a Michelin-starred restaurant in London, Paris or New York. You're aboard Oceania Cruises' *Marina*, in one of its upscale restaurants. You've just disembarked from Fiji and now you're back out on the water, 5,000 miles from California, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean—and at the crest of the new swell in high-end wine-and-food culture on cruise ships.

"Our goal was always to have not just the finest cuisine at sea, but to offer a culinary experience which rivals the best shoreside restaurants," says Bob Binder, co-founder and guiding wine-spirit at Oceania.

Oceania is not alone. Celebrity Cruises, Cunard, MSC Cruises, Crystal and Disney Cruise Lines, as well as smaller ship operators such as Silversea, Windstar, Seabourn and SeaDream, are all pouring talent and money into developing onboard wine and food menus, wine tastings, and even winemaking activities that compete with the best of what's available on dry land.

Vacation cruises have had a hard time shaking a reputation as gauche, spring break-like affairs for adults: insufficiently cultural, indecorously gluttonous, a little tacky. "Booze cruises and belly-flop contests" is how Oceania chairman Frank Del Rio scornfully described the misperception.

"We went in with low expectations on wine and food," says Paul Backman, a wine-loving Brooklynite who recently cruised for the first time in 15 years. But his experience on Oceania's *Riviera* changed his mind.

In recent years, many cruise companies have attempted a return to the era when a voyage on an ocean liner represented the height of luxury. Wine plays a major part in that.

Dave Brozyna, a veteran cruiser and more recent wine collector from Orlando, Fla., has experienced this evolution firsthand.

"The wine programs across the board on all cruise lines have improved tremendously. And not just with the selection of the wines that they have, but also the number of sommeliers, the knowledge of the waitstaff as far as the different wines and [pairings]. Cruise lines over the past five to 10 years have significantly stepped up their game when it comes to making sure that they best serve the customers on board who are really interested in wine."

In addition to the retiree who finds cruising pleasant and undemanding, "our current demographic now has your 45-year-old, who has a family, a great job, they love food and wine at home, and so that's why they come and sail with us," says Chanelle Duarte, a beverage consultant for Celebrity Cruises.

Dianna Brozyna, Dave's wife, describes how a recent family

voyage turned her three grown children on to wine: "We took them all to a wine tasting, and it was the most fun ever, to see the young people start to figure out how wines are with different food pairings and glass choices."

In 2013, *Wine Spectator's* Restaurant Awards program began recognizing the strides in wine excellence on cruise ships: The main dining rooms on all 10 of Celebrity's cruise ships received awards, as did the Oceania *Riviera's* (the *Marina* earned its award in 2014). Oceania's 24-seat La Reserve room, where the pairing menu described above is served (\$165, though La Reserve has other menus priced lower), is officially sponsored by *Wine Spectator*.

Wine lists on such ships can be as full of treasures and discoveries as those at top land-bound restaurants, and sometimes more so.

The list across Celebrity's largest class of ships numbers around 600 selections, with a two-story glass-and-steel "wine tower" acting as a centerpiece to the main dining rooms. The Cellar Masters lounge on certain Celebrity ships offers about 50 wines by the glass and 60 craft and premium beers (wines range from \$8 to \$33 per glass).



Oceania has created identical dining rooms for the *Marina* and *Riviera*, both of which earned *Wine Spectator* Awards of Excellence for the breadth and quality of their wine programs.

"I'd say their wine selection is probably better than a lot of high-end restaurants I've been in" on shore, says Lauren Labreche of Shrewsbury, Mass., who sailed on the Celebrity *Solstice* recently and plans to cruise again this year. "It's quite extensive."

Oceania has six open-seating restaurants on each of its two larger ships, each with its own theme (Italian; steak house; the culinary stylings of Jacques Pépin in a space decorated with the chef's artwork). These vessels carry an inventory of 18,000 bottles each.

MSC opened the popular Eataly Italian dining venue aboard two ships in 2013, and you can now pick up a bottle of Mirafiore Barolo Lazzarito at a steal (\$79) to go with your Gragnano pasta.

"You figure on a boat, they'll just totally rip you off, but it was reasonable," says Backman of his experience on the Oceania *Riviera*. "Not only did the ship have a good selection of wine, but they let us bring bottles on board with a cheap corkage."



Guests enjoy a guided tour and tasting at Domaine de la Janasse in southern France's Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Shore excursions like this one, organized by wine-travel specialist Food & Wine Trails, have become popular among wine-loving cruisegoers.

While MSC is an Italian company, Cunard is impeccably British. The *Queen Mary 2*, *Queen Elizabeth* and *Queen Victoria* serve Champagne afternoon tea: a cup of Earl Grey, perhaps, and a flute of Veuve Clicquot with a selection of scones and cakes (\$30). Cunard's heritage is also in evidence on the main wine lists, where vintage Champagnes, clarets and Ports, like a 1966 Warre (\$495), are abundant.

However, "this year we have made some major changes to our fine wine category," says Edward Dieusaert, bar service manager of wine for Cunard. He notes that collectible wines have become less accessible for even fine diners' wallets, and also that guests are seeking fresher styles. "We list some very popular wines, but alongside [them], some real stars, some wines that can offer something new to even the most savvy wine fan."

Rémy (French) and Palo (Italian) are aimed at the fine-dining crowd aboard Disney's *Dream* and *Fantasia*—so long as the gourmands are at least 18. A specialty is the Vault, where a rotation of the world's most elite wines sails. Only a few bottles of each label are kept on board, but should you want to drink a rare 2007 Sine Qua Non Dangerous Birds (\$2,125) or a classic 1961 Château Latour (\$13,000) at sea, that's where you could do it. Rémy even stocks the legendary 1947 Château Cheval-Blanc (\$25,000)—a nod to the Pixar film *Ratatouille*, in which a supercilious critic orders it from the restaurant of Rémy, the virtuosic rodent chef.

"The ships were developed and created in a way that the parents can leave the children" at, say, Andy's Room—that's Andy from *Toy Story*—and enjoy a bottle of Krug by themselves, explains Salah Chetbi, manager of beverage, specialty dining and amenities for Disney Cruise Lines.

The commitment behind these wine programs becomes even clearer when you consider the logistics of maintaining a high-volume cellar that decamps to a different location on the planet every day.

"Putting together a wine list on a cruise restaurant is a little more complex than doing it on land," says Duarte. At Celebrity, it usually takes six months to assemble a brand new list: A concept is sketched out, tastings are done, selections are made and inventory is sourced, the specifics of which vary, depending on the restaurant, the ship and even the itinerary.

Cruise companies buy from wineries, distributors, merchants, and sometimes even auction houses. Then, if the ship is in, say, East Asia, Duarte estimates that the

wine takes another three or four months to reach the vessel from Florida, where most cruise companies have their U.S. headquarters and wine storage facilities. Over- or understocking a given wine is not a problem that can be rectified in a matter of a few days.

Storage space is always an issue when it comes to wine, and so are storage conditions. "We can control the temperature on the ships quite well, the humidity within reason, but on all ships, there's a fair amount of vibration," says Binder.

Oceania keeps its wine stock midship, where vibration is at a minimum, but it's unlikely you'll be served a shaken-up wine on any line that takes pride in its wine program. The goal is to get the bottles to tables quickly, holding them on board as briefly as possible and keeping wines bought for long-term cellaring in



The popular Italian dining venue Eataly has outposts on two of MSC Cruises' ships, offering well-priced Italian wine selections ranging from Prosecco to Barolo.

Top Wine Lists at Sea

Awards for cruise ships are conferred for a ship's main dining room wine list. Contact the cruise line for details about departure and cruise ports.

COSMOPOLITAN

Summit, Celebrity Cruises; (305) 982-2485

GRAND

Century, Celebrity Cruises; (305) 982-2485

GRAND CUVÉE

Silhouette, Celebrity Cruises; (305) 982-2485

THE GRAND DINING ROOM

Marina, Oceania Cruises; (855) 623-2642

THE GRAND DINING ROOM

Riviera, Oceania Cruises; (855) 623-2642

GRAND EPERNAY

Solstice, Celebrity Cruises; (305) 982-2485

METROPOLITAN

Millennium, Celebrity Cruises; (305) 982-2485

MOONLIGHT SONATA

Eclipse, Celebrity Cruises; (305) 982-2485

OPUS

Reflection, Celebrity Cruises; (305) 982-2485

SAN MARCO

Constellation, Celebrity Cruises; (305) 982-2485

SILHOUETTE

Equinox, Celebrity Cruises; (305) 982-2485

TRELLIS

Infinity, Celebrity Cruises; (305) 982-2485

Wine Spectator award levels:



Grand Award



Best of Award of Excellence



Award of Excellence

The Award of Excellence denotes wine lists that offer a well-chosen mix of producers. The Best of Award of Excellence honors lists of greater breadth. The Grand Award is given to restaurants that show uncompromising devotion to their wine programs.

onshore warehouses. Still, the short-term impact of sea turbulence is minimal. As Chetbi puts it: "We're not living in a Christopher Columbus time when you have to do the crossing from Spain to Santo Domingo."

Having a restaurant that can visit dozens of major wine regions opens up opportunities as well. Once, on a stop in Chile, recalls Binder, "our sommelier team was actually out in the vineyards with the group from Viñedos Emiliana, and they were remarking how the clay soil was incredibly dark and right next to it was a very sandy, loamy soil." The sommeliers were also impressed with how Emiliana used diverse lots to blend its Natura Chardonnay (made from organically grown grapes). Onto the list it went.

Similarly, wineries that do business with the cruise lines will often send representatives aboard to educate the cruise staff. Dianna Brozyna is among those who are pleased with the depth of wine knowledge shown by seagoing sommeliers: "They don't pick the most expensive thing on the menu. They really are passionate about what they do," she says.

And Pépin reserved perhaps his highest praise for the level of service: "I have rarely seen people as well-trained as they have on board really, in the world."



The main dining room on the *Celebrity Solstice*, called Grand Epernay, features a multilevel wine tower to showcase a selection of the vessel's 600-label wine list. The restaurant holds a *Wine Spectator* Award of Excellence.

On many voyages, the wine list represents only the shallow end of the pool of wine experiences available to guests. Wine tastings and seminars have proven highly popular, and they can take various forms.

Celebrity partnered with Riedel to present a tasting that shows how the shape of the glass can enhance the taste of a certain wine style. (Starting at \$82, the seminar includes glasses, for which you receive a voucher for home delivery, though shipping is extra.) The line also hosts food-and-wine tastings "with specific components—a tomato, a lemon—that give attendees the idea of what acids, etc., do," says Duarte.

Often, winemakers themselves will hop aboard, sometimes for the duration of the voyage, to present tastings and pairing dinners. Adam Lee recently did just that on the *Oceania Riviera*, hosting

comparative appellation and single-vineyard tastings of his Siduri Pinot Noirs.

“We provided [tasters] with all the different notes as far as what kind of [winemaking] additions we did, when harvest was, all the vineyards in these different areas,” Lee reports. “That’s the type of thing that was more unusual and in-depth than it would be otherwise” in an educational setting. “They took care of the wine, it was all perfect temperature. Working with the folks as far as serving order, they were all pretty great.”

In 2015, Oceania will set sail with Damian Parker of Joseph Phelps (in a bit of serendipity, Oceania has a ship called *Insignia*, the name of Phelps’ signature red wine), Domaine Chandon winemaker Tom Tiburzi, Brian Loring, Regina Martinelli and WillaKenzie winemaker Thibaud Mandet, among quite a few others.

Binder planted grapevines and owns the small Silver Trident winery in St. Helena, so many winemakers he brings aboard are friends and neighbors. His own Cabernet is called Twenty Seven Fathoms, for the depth of the Panama Canal.

Silversea will have Violet Grgich on an upcoming voyage, and Cunard will sail with representatives of Tenuta di Biserno and Almaviva. Winemaker dinners celebrating rare wines and old vintages are often scheduled as well. At the Cunard Todd English restaurant, they run \$120 for four courses.

Beyond tastings and pairings, MSC and Oceania partner with a company called Blend Craft, which puts passengers in the cellar-master’s chair, offering different varieties and batches of unbottled California wine, which customers then taste to create and bottle

a blend for themselves under a personalized, souvenir label.

The SeaDream line even launched a trip on which passengers take professional-level wine classes (\$1,500 for the course). Participants attend three hours of WSET Level 2–based courses per day for 12 days, mostly at sea, to earn the certification.

Among the more cringe-inducing aspects of the cruise experience is the dreaded shore excursion, be it a staged “swim” with stingrays or a jaunt around Florence with an overpriced chapereone explaining the significance of the Duomo and Michelangelo’s *David*.

But what wine lover wouldn’t consider the trip more amenable if it found its way to Tuscany’s Tenuta dell’Ornellaia from a docking in Livorno (\$369), or Châteauneuf-du-Pape estates like Domaine de la Janasse and Château de Vaudieu on a stop in Marseille (\$329), as Lee’s itinerary did? His tour group visited the producer’s cellars, tasted the wines and lunched in town before heading back to the ship.

From the isle of Santorini to Bordeaux to Auckland, there are now dozens of such experiences available across a number of cruise

lines, in virtually every wine region within a 90-minute drive of the sea, designed either by the cruise lines themselves or wine-travel specialists like Santa Rosa, Calif.–based Food & Wine Trails.

Backman, the cruise skeptic, opted for an excursion in Dubrovnik, Croatia—a walking tour of the city and a lunch paired with Croatian wines (\$229). “I’d never had a Croatian wine until this experience,” he says. On the cruise, “everything we did was pretty much focused on wine. So it was perfect for us.” □

“PUTTING TOGETHER A WINE LIST ON A CRUISE RESTAURANT IS A LITTLE MORE COMPLEX THAN DOING IT ON LAND.”

Chanelle Duarte

BEVERAGE CONSULTANT, CELEBRITY CRUISES



While classic food-and-wine cities such as Venice still entice, some cruise lines, such as Silversea, now dock at even more wine-centric destinations, including Porto and Bordeaux.