

Trail Of The Unexpected: Portland, Oregon

Market forces in a city where fresh is always best

By Tam Leach

Saturday, 13 September 2008

The girl leans forward excitedly, comic-book thick, indie-kid specs slipping down her nose, tattoos peeking out from behind the crisp white collar of her waiter's jacket as she cranes over the trolley. "See, this one has notes of truffles – oh, it's amazing – and this one is a goat's milk – so tangy – and this one here, the Crater Lake Blue: it's local, very robust, won a bunch of awards..."

We're in Bluehour, one of the swankiest of a smorgasbord of impressive Portland restaurants, and our fromager looks like she should be in a punk band. She also couldn't be more enthusiastic about cheese. And after a few days in this town, that doesn't even seem weird anymore.

They're bonkers about food in Portland. Take the heady brew of self-satisfaction and culinary stimulation oozing through a London farmers' market, multiply it by about a billion, chuck in a hefty dose of guileless sincerity, and you'll still be only halfway to comprehending just how Portlanders feel about eating.

It helps that the city is surrounded by farmland, by orchards of apples and cherries, fields of berries and hops. Lush, temperate Oregon grows 50 per cent of the nation's pears and 99 per cent of its hazelnuts (the latter being the official "state nut"); Portland is the largest shipper of wheat in the country. A grand public market was included in the original plans for the city, back in the 1850s; its incarnation in the Thirties was the largest farmers' market in the world.

For all that, Oregon was not immune to the post-war allure of supermarkets and shiny packaging. When the not-for-profit Portland Farmers Market started Saturday trading in 1992, they had just 13 vendors. Now there are 250, four weekly downtown locations, and sales in excess of \$5m (£2.9m). Statewide, 90 farmers' markets serve a population of just 3.5 million. For many, shopping at market has become a Saturday ritual: bands play, chefs dazzle and children take cookery classes, while fresh corn grills on barbecues, berry pancakes are whipped up and pumpkins are carved.

The spread varies according to the season, of course. When not drinking coffee (considered an essential food group), riding their bikes (more, per capita, than any other city in the US) or starting another band, Portlanders bang on about the importance of FLOSS: fresh, local, organic, sustainable, seasonal. You'll be sick of hearing those words by the time you leave – though your palate, health and general sense of cozy community wellbeing will have reaped the benefits.

Even the fast food here is in on the act. The Burgerville chain, operating across Oregon and neighbouring Washington State, serves locally reared, antibiotic-free beef, North Pacific halibut and chips, and seasonal smoothies and milkshakes. Oh, and each of their 39 outlets runs on 100 per cent wind power, composts its waste, and converts used cooking oil into biodiesel.

Beyond the burgers, recommending the best Portland restaurants is like trying to spot the ideal grain of sand on a beach (which are pretty spectacular in these parts, by the way, all tumbling cliffs and white sands). Portland is young and, for lack of a less annoying word, hip, and the city's young, hip residents seem keen to outdo each other in the culinary arts. Creative fine dining is commonplace. Coffee shops are rife, sushi bars a

staple. As laid-back unconventionality is also highly valued by Portlanders – getting tattooed appears to be a civic duty – you can eat fresh fish tacos while watching a movie, or, should you so wish, get married in a donut shop.

And then there's the booze. There are currently 32 breweries in Portland, more than in any other city in the US. You can sample local whiskeys, brandies and unconventionally flavoured vodkas, or visit the country's only sake distillery. Most have tasting rooms; many host art shows and gigs, too.

There are also more than 300 wineries in the state. Having learnt that Oregon Pinot Noir has beaten its French forebear in blind tastings, we hire a driver to tour the Willamette Valley, right on Portland's doorstep. Our driver has the shoulders of a gym devotee, and the conversational manner of Joey from Friends. Except that he has an encyclopedic knowledge of wine, and it doesn't seem like this appreciation is part of his job. How did this muscleman get so into the grape? "Well," he says, and I recognise the rising tide of excitement that I've seen flooding so many Portland faces, "I started dabbling with local wines in the late Eighties. Then I got this 1992 Adelsheim – I tell you what, it knocked my socks off."

The state-run Oregon Farmers' Markets Association website reads: "Oregon farmers' markets, bringing Oregonians together to enjoy and support Oregon's agricultural bounty."

Fortunately, like toddlers eager to spread the love with their first paintings, Oregonians are far too excited to keep the state's culinary creations to themselves. Over the next couple of months, the state will be awash with harvest festivals: with apple picking, grape crushing and beer tastings galore. Local people will be out in force, but visitors are quite welcome, too.

www.travelportland.com. www.portlandfarmersmarket.org. www.willamettevalleyvineyards.com. www.hoodriverfruitloop.com. Bluehour, 250 NW 13th Avenue (001 503 226 3394; www.bluehouronline.com). www.burgerville.com

State lines: Oregon

Population 3.5 million

Area 12 times the size of Wales

Capital Salem

Date in Union 14 February 1859

Flower Oregon Grape

Motto "She flies with her own wings"

Nickname Beaver State

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