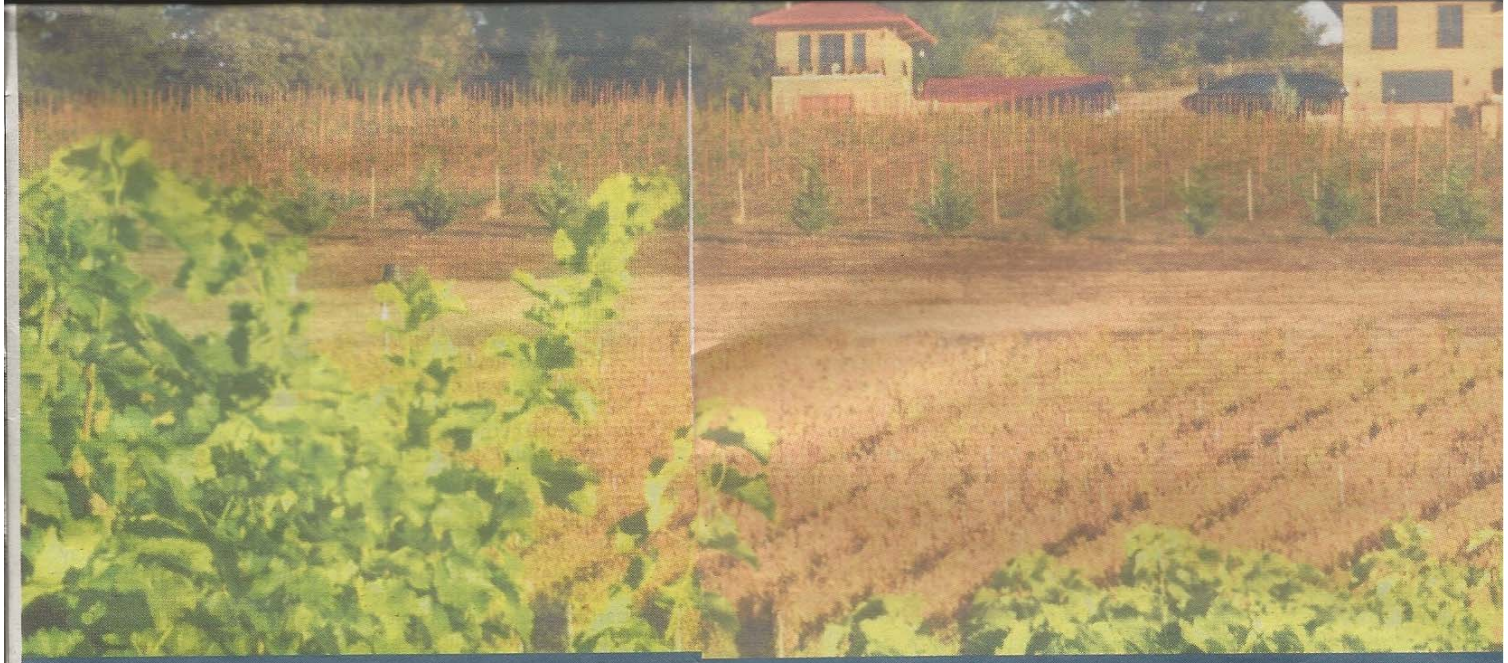

TUSCANY? PROVENCE?

In Portland, they take their local food and wine as seriously as anywhere. Organic and inventive, it's America's new culinary star, says Fiona Sims

When, in the early hours, Portland police were called to a bar to break up a brawl with their Taser guns and pepper spray, they assumed it was business as usual. This fight was different, though. It involved a top chef, the founder of a cooking competition, and a pig.

Eric Bechard, of the Thistle restaurant, in McMinnville, had that day attended Cochon 555, a gastronomic event where five chefs were challenged to use a whole pig to create a series of dishes for an audience of epicureans. The winner, crowned the Prince of Porc, was Jason Barwikowski, who co-owns the charcuterie Olympic Provisions, one of Portland's hottest new restaurants. He scooped the prize for his pork ravioli in broth, pork-belly niblets and banh mi sandwiches — all made using a red wattle pig from Koerperich Farm, in Iowa.

And that's why Bechard and Cochon 555's founder, Brady Lowe, came to blows. "That culinary show involved a pig brought all the way from Iowa — people need to support Oregon farmers and local businesses," Bechard managed to splutter after the effects of the Taser had worn off.

Bechard is not alone in Oregon in his zeal for keeping it local. The state is fanatical about growing things sustainably. Politically, it's liberal: it's big on free speech and self-expression, and it has the highest number of strip clubs per capita in America. (It was outside a strip club where Bechard's pig spat took place.) So, if you're looking for a food destination with a leftwards lean, Oregon's the place.

A one-hour flight up the coast from San Francisco, Portland is often referred to as the most environmentally friendly city in America — and the second greenest in the world, after Freiburg, Germany. Yet its thriving restaurant culture — driven by innovative chefs who put the local produce on a pedestal — should be just as celebrated, as it could give San Francisco, or even New York, a run for their money.

The first stop for the hungry tourist should be one of the bountiful farmers' markets, which operate in every neighbourhood and burst with organic delights. And every Wednesday morning, in Shemanski Park, right in the heart of the city, you can rub shoulders with chefs as they coo over the produce. There are morel mushrooms the size of a child's fist, vivid orange squash blossoms, ready for stuffing, and punnets of plump soft fruits — from earthy marionberries to inky boysenberries — to nibble on while you explore the city. (A little tip: don't eat before you come here). There's even an information stand, which quietly pushes the region's sustainability credentials.

Squeezed between an artisanal goat's cheese producer and a home-made pesto specialist is the salumist Elias Cairo, a co-owner, with Jason Barwikowski, of Olympic Provisions. He's also the first US Department of Agriculture-approved meat curer in Portland. Bearded and grinning behind a curtain of cured sausages, he'll hack off slices of his Greek-style loukanika, spiked with orange zest and cumin, for you to try — one of many varieties he makes.

You might spot Ben Bettinger, chef at the celebrated new Portland eatery Beaker & Flask. "Visiting the market is one of the best things about my job," he says. "We all do it here now — it's not a trend any more. We are spoilt," he adds, holding an armful of organic corn, which he will roast later with chillies and serve as the first course at another local gastronomic shindig, the annual International Pinot Noir Celebration, which sees winemakers and enthusiasts flocking from all over the world for a spot of hallowed-grape navel-gazing.

Did I mention the wine? Chefs and winemakers work closely together here. It helps that

A FOODIE REVOLUTION: WHER

OLYMPIC PROVISIONS
There are eight owners (including the chefs) of this self-styled American charcuterie restaurant in a funky warehouse district a 20-minute walk from downtown. Dishes range from chunky pâté studded with pistachios to moist rabbit with a herb-packed gribiche sauce.
Mains from £7; 00 1 503-954 3663, olympicprovisions.com

BEAKER & FLASK
Expect dark, cosy booths and mint-green walls, while a slick concrete floor pays homage to the building's industrial past. To eat? Staples such as butter lettuce salad — vibrant greens with a buttermilk and tarragon vinaigrette.
Mains from £12; 235 8180, beakerandflask.com

LE PIGEO
The tattoo
Rucker, pu
on French
tiny open
popular ne
Don't miss
orange ma
Mains fror
lepigeon.c

CLYDE C
In the sar
Ace Hotel
but run in
movers ar
Tilden anc
offers an
modern E
simple Sc
Mains fror
clydecom

FARM TO
More loca
at this del

CE? NO — IT'S OREGON

EVOLUTION: WHERE TO EAT IN AND AROUND PORTLAND

SIONS
wners
efs) of
merican
urant in
se district
from
s range
studded
moist
-packed

0 1 503-954
visions.com

SK
booths and
, while a slick
ys homage
ndustrial
ples such as
lad — vibrant
ttermilk and
tte.
235 8180,
om

LE PIGEON
The tattooed chef, Gabe Rucker, puts an Oregon twist on French classics from his tiny open kitchen in this hugely popular neighbourhood bistro. Don't miss the pork belly with orange marmalade.
Mains from £12; 546 8796, lepigeon.com

CLYDE COMMON
In the same building as the Ace Hotel (see Travel Brief), but run independently by movers and shakers Tate Tilden and Matt Piacentini, this offers an American take on modern European dishes in a simple Scandi-inspired setting.
Mains from £10; 228 3333, clydecommon.com

FARM TO FORK, DUNDEE
More locally sourced produce at this deli restaurant in the Willamette Valley, which offers everything from tomatoes from local Simington Garden, with house-made mozzarella, to almond squash soup with goat's cheese and olive oil. They'll pack you a picnic hamper or cook you breakfast, lunch or dinner.
Mains from £9; 538 7970, innatredhills.com

THISTLE, McMINNVILLE
This restaurant has usurped Nick's as the place to go in this winemakers' hub in the heart of the Willamette Valley. The chef, Eric Bechard, serves up beef tongue terrine and pork loin from the next hill, the ingredients aggressively locally sourced, the dishes firmly grounded in modern American bistro principles.
Mains from £11; 472 9623, thistlerestaurant.com

Oregon's main vineyard area, Willamette Valley, is one of the most fertile in the world, and nudges right up to Portland's verdant city limits. Nearly a third of Oregon's vineyards are certified sustainable, organic or biodynamic, and more are on the way. Such is the interest in them, the wine board is offering eco-tours and even oenophile "green getaway" packages.

You can get a good taster in a day visit, but it's more rewarding if you hire a car and spare three days or so to work your way down the bucolic valley, cherry-picking the best producers. Leave Portland on Route 99W and head south towards Newberg. This is where the real wine country starts. Oregon's trademark rust-red barns dot the valley; roadside stalls sell freshly picked seasonal produce. Then the brown winery signs start appearing, bearing names such as Chehalem, Rex Hill and Bergström.

"Oregon is a green-minded state, the sustainable farming is very exciting here, and I think a lot of that interest is because of what's happening in the wine industry — wine breaks down barriers," reasons the biodynamic producer Josh Bergström. On his stunningly situated estate, he farms under a full moon (unless it's raining) and will readily open up his £45 bottles for any visitor to try before they buy.

Cristom Vineyards is on what is arguably Oregon's prettiest wine road, Route 18. "You know, it's pretty easy to be green here," admits the winemaker Steve Doerner. "There's not much pest pressure, and we have less rainfall during the growing season — we didn't actually have to change that much to make wine this way."

Lucky Oregon — particularly Portland, where microbreweries and microdistilleries abound, gourmet-food trucks blossom and exciting restaurants continue to open, most of which celebrate local produce, if sometimes a little too belligerently. The fighting Bechard is proud of the fact that he gets all of his ingredients from 15 small farms within a 35-mile radius of his restaurant — and that includes his pork.

TRAVEL BRIEF

Getting there: there are no direct flights from Britain or Ireland to Portland, but United (0845 844 4777, unitedairlines.co.uk) has connections via San Francisco or Chicago from Heathrow; from £450. Or try Continental (0845 607 6760, continental.com).
Where to stay: the Ace Hotel (00 1 503-228 2277, acehotel.com) is a boutique B&B next to the city's Stumptown Coffee shop and on the doorstep of the hip Pearl District. It has bicycles parked in the lobby and doubles from £81. In Newberg, the Allison Inn & Spa (554 2525, theallison.com; doubles from £189) is a gorgeous new wood and stone spa hotel set in 35 fragrant acres of prime Willamette Valley. Its Jory restaurant (mains from £14) has become a regular hang-out for winemakers.
More information: oregonwine.org, travelportland.com.