

A short drive from Portland, French cuisine and gift items

Sunday, June 17, 2007

Let's begin in the attractive little town of Carlton, a comfortable one-tank-or-less drive from the Portland area.

Plan your itinerary to include a meal at Carlton's fine French restaurant replica, Cuvee (214 W. Main St.; 503-852-6555; www.cuveedining.com). Chef-owner Gilbert Henry, from Alsace, France, wanted to find a place reminiscent of his hometown, a place where he could set up shop. He decided that Carlton was just that locale. So he set to work to create a dinner house with a distinct French accent, a large wine list encompassing offerings from the fertile Oregon wine country and a restaurant drawing diners to his tables because of a sophisticated ambience.

Lovers of true French cuisine will appreciate many traditional favorites such as bouillabaisse, escargots, coquille St. Jacques, steamed mussels and a delicious Moroccan lamb stew called tajine d'agneau. Two signatures of a real French dinner house are crisp pommes frites (french fries) and warm, crunchy French bread with that fabulous just-out-of-the-oven aroma. In both cases, Cuvee excels. Lunch is served Saturdays and Sundays from noon to 3 p.m. from mid-May to Thanksgiving weekend; dinner, Wednesday through Sunday year-round. Prices are reasonable, with most entrees in the \$19-\$23 range; homemade desserts (such as chocolate mousse and creme caramel) are listed at \$6.50.

Chef Gilbert's wife, Susan Barksdale, complements her talented husband as the proprietor of Lulu (503-852-6777; www.cuveedining.com). Lulu is in the same building as the restaurant but open only on weekends from 12:30-5:30 p.m. (Although, if you ask the folks in the restaurant, they'll get you in during restaurant hours.) Lulu offers a variety of merchandise for home and garden. Susan (Lulu) has the fun of visiting the flea markets of France buying diverse items like wicker chairs, hand-woven rugs, handmade tablecloths, dishes and more, then bringing them to her shop.

While in Carlton, visit the Carlton Winemakers Studio (801 N. Scott St.; 503-852-6100; www.winemakersstudio.com) where 10 small, independent winemakers offer bottles of some of the very best that Oregon wine country has to offer. Wineries represented are as small as operations producing only 350 cases a year, so you're unlikely to see their treasures anywhere else. You'll find a large variety, with prices ranging from \$16 to \$45 a bottle. The studio is open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily in the summer (Tuesday through Sunday in winter). Check for special winemakers dinners from April to October (\$30).

A visit to the historic train station is also a treat; Tyrus Evan wines are offered at the Carlton Depot (120 N. Pine St.; 503-852-7010).

If you decide you'd like to stay in Carlton overnight, reserve your room at the Lobenhaus Bed & Breakfast & Vineyard (6975 N.E. Abbey Road; 888-339-3375; www.lobenhaus.com). This resting place is in a tri-level rustic building with a lodge-style atmosphere. Lobenhaus offers six rooms, each with access to an outside deck. Prices range from \$145 to \$165; weekends through October require a two-night minimum. After enjoying the Lobenhaus' sumptuous breakfast, visit the Herbert Hoover-Minthorn House Museum and the George Fox University campus, both in nearby Newberg.

This is the season for farmers markets. Magnificent annuals and perennials await the avid gardener at Hamblin's Nursery (4550 Kings Valley Highway, Dallas; 503-623-2066), where owners John and Calene Hamblin preside over a cornucopia of blooms and greenery. The W.C. Kester Apiaries (9800 Orrs Corner Road, Rickreall; 503-623-5411) sells the real stuff when it comes to beeswax candles. Magnificent hanging baskets are available until June 30 at Wavra Farms & Nursery (7882 Jordan St. S.E., Salem; 503-364-9879). Finally, sweet berries are the theme at South Barlow Produce (29190 S. Barlow Road, Canby; 503-266-3193) where Tony and Zina Martishev will pick the best of the crop for you or you may pick your own.

Reach Gerry Frank, whose column appears on the first and third Sunday of each month, at 503-585-8411, gerry@teleport.com, or P.O. Box 2225, Salem, OR 97308. Frank is a fourth-generation Oregonian and a former chairman of the Oregon Tourism Commission