

# OREGON

## EPICUREAN ADVENTURES By Tina Lassen

**K**elsey Schopp weaves her way through the Portland Farmers Market, deftly parting the crowds for her seven Forktown Food Tours guests trailing behind. Schopp offers an insider's look at Portland's renowned culinary scene, leading the way to high-quality bistros, sidewalk produce stands and parking-lot food carts downtown. Along the way, the tour illustrates the astounding depth and breadth of Oregon's food.

The market is a high point. Wander among the stalls here, and you begin to see Oregon as one big buffet table. Vendors offer heirloom tree fruit (Bosc pears, for instance), free-range meats, freshly milled grains, cranberries, oysters, baby artichokes, fresh steelhead, culinary herbs, Willamette Valley hazelnuts, a fantastic assortment of exotic mushrooms and, well, practically any other fresh foodstuff you could think to eat, almost all from the Beaver State.

"Except for tropical fruit and citrus, we can grow or raise pretty much everything in Oregon—including beer hops and wine grapes," Schopp notes, as the group nibbles on fresh beet salad with housemade ricotta and roasted hazelnuts at Nel Centro. It's all thanks to the state's temperate climate, abundant fresh water and rich alluvial soils. Inspired chefs make the most of the local bounty, fueling a food appreciation that, in turn, raises the culinary and agricultural bar even higher.

The results are apparent as

you nosh your way through a Forktown Food Tour. Addy's Sandwich Bar elevates the simple lunch staple to homemade duck confit with cranberry relish on a chewy baguette. Magic even emerges from modest food trucks, such as the black-bean tortilla *panuchos* from El Taco Yucateco, and eggplant and



PORTLAND FARMERS MARKET

**Portland Farmers Market** Established in 1992, this is one of the oldest such markets in the United States. It's also one of the biggest, with as many as 200 vendors offering produce and prepared foods during the summer.



MIAMI TRUFFLE DOGS

walnut paste *badrijani* from Kargi Gogo. Yes, Oregon black beans, eggplant and walnuts.

Expansive as the food tour is, there is one way to get closer to great food in Oregon: Grow, raise, hunt, fish, forage or craft it yourself. The adventures below are exemplary, and fun.

### HUNTING FOR TRUFFLES

Goose leaps from the bed of Kelly Babbitt's pickup and roars in big gleeful circles through a dim understory of Douglas fir. Right now, he's being a typical exuberant black Labrador retriever, enjoying a late autumn day in the foothills of the Coast Range west of McMinnville.

But with one verbal command, his demeanor clicks into a more serious gear. "Go to work," says Babbitt. Goose drops

**ABOVE:** Seeking truffles is no trifling matter in Oregon's Willamette Valley, where experts such as Kelly Babbitt rely on specially trained dogs.

**RIGHT:** Clammers celebrate success in Seaside.

his glossy black muzzle to the pine duff and begins weaving among ferns and fallen leaves.

He's sniffing for truffles, the elusive fruiting body of a fungus that's prized by foodies from Paris to Portland.

Many types of truffles grow under our feet, like small lumpy potatoes. Only a few varieties, however, are coveted for their uniquely delicate, earthy flavor that can range from garlicky to

fruity. Three varieties—a black, a white and less commonly, a brown—thrive in Oregon.

“The Willamette Valley is the epicenter for these wild truffles,” explains Kris Jacobson, owner of Umami Truffle Dogs. “We have gentle rolling hills and the right amount of moisture, and former pasture land with soil that’s ideal.” Oregon truffles grow in a symbiotic relationship with Douglas-fir trees, Jacobson explains, and just like wine grapes, they have their own terroir. It makes sense that the famous European epicurean delights thrive in a region where famous European wine grape varieties also prosper.

ONLY IN OREGON

• Oregon produces 99 percent of the U.S. hazelnut crop.



• Oregon also leads the nation in production of blackberries and Christmas trees.



• Oregon has many “champion” biggest trees—including a black cottonwood near Salem; a bigleaf maple in Lane County; and a Western juniper near Lakeview.



• The state flower is Oregon grape (mahonia). Though not a true grape, the shrub’s berry is edible.

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The keen nose of a dog can detect a ripe truffle underground. (So can pigs, which were traditionally used in Europe. But, as the joke goes, dogs are much easier to get in the backseat of a car.) Umami’s Jacobson trains dogs to find wild truffles, which she sells to res-

taurants and specialty markets. With ripe truffles commanding about \$400 per pound, it’s not a bad day’s work. Umami also offers “guided truffle forays,” where you can tag along for a hunt with one of Jacobson’s trained handler/dog teams.

That’s where Babbitt and

Goose come in. With the 4-year-old Lab focused on the job at hand, Babbitt leads the way, crunching through the woods of her favorite 10-acre truffle patch. She keeps a sharp eye on Goose, able to distinguish when he’s simply sniffing an animal trail and when he’s



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TACOS BURRITOS

The Willamette Valley's vineyards, growing at the same latitude as many of the finest in Europe, have become famous for their Pinot Noir and Merlot grapes, among others.



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## OREGON SHELLFISH

**Razor Clams** Seafood connoisseurs consider these slender bivalves, found on the broad beaches of the outer Pacific Coast, to be the best-tasting of all native clams. Chefs usually sauté them gently in butter or wine—they are not usually used for chowder, as their delicate flavor is best enjoyed with simple preparations. Large specimens can exceed 6 inches.



**Oysters** Most of the oysters found in seafood stores and on restaurant menus are non-native species brought to Pacific shores from Europe and Asia, chiefly Japanese and Belgian types. The only native oyster, the Olympia (pictured) was originally found from Southeast Alaska to Baja, and is the subject of extensive restoration programs in Washington, Oregon and California. Recreational harvest in Oregon is prohibited, but some commercial growers raise them.



**Spot Prawns** Of the various species of shrimp found in the North Pacific, the most numerous is the spot prawn, which is found from the Gulf of Alaska to Southern California. Chefs take great care cooking these delicate shrimp—even a half-minute too much can result in overdone prawns. Other North Pacific shrimp include coonstripe and sidestripe. There is, technically, no difference between “shrimp” and “prawns,” though the latter term is often applied to larger specimens.



**Dungeness Crab** It's easy to trigger a debate among West Coast residents by asking whether Dungeness or king crab is better—zealous advocates are found in both camps. The Dungeness is the centerpiece of the crab industry from Juneau to San Diego, with large numbers harvested by both commercial and recreational fishers. It's named after Dungeness Spit, on the Olympic Peninsula—which was named in 1792 by George Vancouver, after a similar promontory in Great Britain.



scented a ripe truffle. “If it were a truffle, he'd look at me and start pawing the ground,” she explains, “or he'd come get me and lead me back to the spot.” Together they'd work to unearth the truffle, usually a few inches to maybe a foot underground.

Both Babbitt and Jacobson abhor the use of rakes, an alternate harvesting method they consider unsustainable, disrupting the soil and digging up less-than-ripe truffles. “Dogs only dig when a truffle smells,” Babbitt explains. “And if it doesn't smell, it doesn't taste. And then it's no good.”

Babbitt returns her gaze to Goose. “It's addicting,” Babbitt says of truffle hunting. “You find one, and then you just want to find the next one.”

Customers get to keep the truffles Goose unearths on the guided foray.

### CLAMMING ON THE COAST

Ask native Oregonians for tips about clamming, and most will just shrug their shoulders—and

launch into dreamy retrospectives of childhood vacations at the Oregon Coast. There are certain things one does at the ocean's edge in Oregon: You fly a kite, you peer into tide pools. You throw a soggy tennis ball for the family pooch, you build a bonfire. And you get up early and dig for razor clams.

The sport is decidedly—delightfully—low-tech. Pull on a pair of rubber boots, or at least old tennis shoes. Arm yourself with a shellfish license, a shovel and maybe a pair of gloves. If you want to get fancy, invest in a clam gun—essentially a pipe with a handle that excavates a column of sand like a post-hole digger. As the surf recedes, watch for a clam “show”: either a small hole about the circumference of a Sharpie marker or, if you're lucky, the fleshy tip of a clam neck sticking out of the sand. Time to dig!

There's more sport to it than you'd think. Clams can burrow down quickly, so you need to be efficient with your technique, yet careful not to crush the clam shell. You don't really dig with

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the shovel so much as dislodge the sand so you can slip your hand in and feel around for the shell. Local knowledge suggests you'll do best if you position your clam gun or shovel slightly to the ocean side of the show.

Aim for two hours before peak low tide; choose a calm day, when the critters tend to be closer to the surface. While you can find razor clams along the entire length of Oregon, they really thrive along the north coast in Clatsop County, where an 18-mile stretch of beach accounts for more than 90 percent of the state's razor clam harvest.

Choose your battle carefully, because regulations limit you to your first 15 clams—no throwbacks. There are other rules and seasonal closures, too, so check with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. Maybe it's not a fair fight. But there's a swell of pride and achievement that comes when you pull that first subtly striped copper shell from the porridge of wet sand. Like spotting your first Easter egg or chanterelle mushroom, now you're primed for the hunt. So roll up your sleeves and your sandy pant legs, and get busy digging.

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**MAKING YOUR OWN PINOT NOIR**

It's harvest time in Dundee, Oregon, and the pungent smell of promise wafts through the air. Actually, it's the aroma of Pinot Noir grapes, just snipped from the vines striping the hills of the Willamette Valley. Forklifts move bins of grapes from vineyard into winery, where workers gently guide them through sorting, de-stemming, crushing, and eventually into fermentation tanks and barrels. It's a delicate and precise production conducted under the watchful eye of Laurent Montalieu, a Bordeaux-bred winemaker who owns several wine ventures—including Soléna Cellars, Northwest Wine Company, and the Domaine Danielle Laurent vineyard—in the Willamette Valley.

On this day, Christopher Hermann watches it all intently, too. An attorney with Stoel Rives LLP in Portland who specializes in wine industry law, Hermann and his firm are members of Montalieu's Grand Cru Estates wine club. Members buy in for as little as a quarter barrel, which currently

runs \$5,000 annually, along with a one-time \$5,000 joining fee. Then they participate in the winemaking process with Montalieu, yielding their personal barrel of wine, which will be bottled and labeled just for them. Members can join in the harvest, help sort the fruit, be there for the crush, taste through and choose which of 10

vineyards' grapes they want, even craft their own signature blend. "It's as experiential as you want it to be," says Montalieu.

Montalieu began the club in 2009, inspired by a similar program in Napa Valley.

Hermann joined that first year. "You get to be a participant in the Oregon wine industry," he says eagerly. "This club allows you to be a part of their ecosystem in a way you can't do anywhere else. And it's really wide open—you can do as much or as little as you'd like."



Winemaker Laurent Montalieu delights in helping customers make their own wines.



BRIENA SASH / SASH PHOTOGRAPHY (X2)

## GRAND CRU ESTATES

"Grand Cru," Laurent Montalieu explains, is a French designation given to a region's very finest vineyards. "We give our members access to the best of the best wine grapes in Oregon," Montalieu notes. "At the same time, we want to demystify wine and make it approachable. We encourage our members to trust their palate, to exercise the freedom to say 'I know what I like.'" Thus members craft their own, personal vintages.

And the same is true for the broad menu of culinary adventures in Oregon, starting from the ground up. **GNW**

Tina Lassen lives in Hood River.

**GETTING THERE:** Alaska Airlines (800-ALASKAAIR, [alaskaair.com](http://alaskaair.com)) offers frequent service to communities throughout Oregon. Visit [alaskaair.com](http://alaskaair.com) and [traveloregon.com](http://traveloregon.com).



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