

TASTINGS

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Destination: Wine

On a Caribbean Cruise,
A Hunt for Treasure;
Austria in the Caymans
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By now, you've probably made plans for your summer vacation and you're counting the days until you take off (50, in our case). As you draw up your itinerary, we'd urge you to consider wine discovery a part of your trip -- not just looking for wineries, but for good, unusual wine wherever you are. By searching for good wine, you're also likely to find good food and interesting people. You could even have once-in-a-lifetime Austrian wines in Grand Cayman. No, seriously. That's what happened to us on a recent cruise. Here's the story -- and some tips on how you can have a similar experience.

We try to take a cruise once a year. It's relaxing, and we haven't found any other experience that allows us and our teenagers to enjoy such separate vacations within the same secure surroundings. They go their way, we go ours and we meet at dinner, where they always arrive fashionably late. This year, we booked adjoining rooms on Royal Caribbean's Explorer of the Seas, a seven-day cruise from Miami with stops at Belize City; Costa Maya and Cozumel, Mexico; and George Town, Grand Cayman.

Ship to Shore

Cruise ships offer all sorts of shore excursions, from swimming with dolphins to shopping for diamonds. We prefer to search for restaurants with good wine. Of course, the wine aboard the ship is important to us, too. On other cruise lines, we have taken our own precious bottles aboard and paid corkage to drink them with dinner. Royal Caribbean doesn't allow any alcohol to be brought onto the ship, however, so we ordered from the wine list, which turned out to be interesting and reasonably priced, with more than 150 wines. During the course of the trip, we tried wines on the ship ranging from a Chilean Carmenère to a New Zealand Pinot Noir to a Spanish Tempranillo.

The single most interesting wine we had on the ship was a South African rosé from Fort Simon Estate made from two-thirds Pinotage and one-third Merlot (it was the 2006 vintage and cost \$29). Pinotage is South Africa's

special red grape, but we rarely see a Pinotage rosé and this was quite something, with the peppery qualities of the grape and a very serious backbone. This rosé could stand up to just about any food. We had never seen it before and, indeed, couldn't find it when we returned. We're glad we had a chance to try it.

We struck out looking for good wine restaurants in Belize City and Costa Maya, although it might have been that we were still too tired from our real-world experiences to take a good look. Interestingly, though, we did find local wine in Belize -- made from pineapples and mangoes. Because we couldn't take them back to the ship, we didn't buy them, but any winery that makes both a semisweet and dry pineapple wine certainly deserves a chance. A saleswoman did allow us to taste what she had open, a cashew wine from the same winery. It was a little brown, like a wine we once made, and tasted nutty.

Before we left on our trip, we asked our Web-savvy assistant, Melanie Grayce West, to look around the Internet to see if she could find some wine-friendly restaurants along our route. She explained later how she does this: "I always start my search by reading what food-smart people have to say. My favorite first-hand food review Web sites are Chowhound.com, Egullet.org, Mouthfulsof.com. With these Web sites you will have to sift through information, but what you will find are timely opinions written by average people who enjoy food and traveling.

"Set aside a good hour to do your homework. Start by plugging the location of where you will visit into the Web site's search box. Sift through the reviews and keep a running list of places that get mentioned repeatedly or places that receive enthusiastic reviews. When I have a good list, usually at least 10 restaurants, I start Googling restaurant names to find online menus, other published reviews or even pictures that a traveler took and then posted to a personal blog. Pay special attention to well-organized travel Web sites or sites developed by locals. Some locations, like Grand Cayman, have detailed Web sites like Caymangoodtaste.com with a database of restaurant listings. Cozumel's Cozumelmycozumel.com has a dining guide with great ideas for travelers on a budget."

One restaurant Melanie found on her search was a place in Cozumel called Le Chef. We went directly from the ship to the restaurant and it was perfect -- small and charming, with wine displayed everywhere, clearly our kind of place. Unfortunately, it was closed for lunch that day -- the restaurant had said earlier that it might be open. Our daughter Media, using her fluency in Spanish, confirmed with an employee that the restaurant would indeed be open, but after our ship left, so we were on our own. We walked down the main tourist area and, to our surprise, ran into a restaurant that featured a display of Mexican wines right at the

front door. In a universe of places that tout their potent margaritas and many kinds of beer, this was a surprise, so we dropped in.

Good Wine, Great Dessert

It was called Pepe's and it was lovely -- fancier and more expensive than other places, but nicely air-conditioned, with a good second-floor view of the harbor. It offered the best list of Mexican wines we've seen and our waiter was very proud of them. We tried a lovely, earthy Sauvignon Blanc from Monte Xanic winery and a light, pleasant Chardonnay from Santo Tomás. The biggest surprise, however, was dessert: Media and Zoë ordered crêpes suzette, which were made at the table, just like in the old days. In a week of endless eating on the ship and on land, they later declared this the single best dish of the vacation.

We were ready for the main event. When Melanie was searching for restaurants in Grand Cayman, she stumbled on a brief mention of a place called the Lobster Pot by a Chowhound member named "Sloppy eater." Sloppy said simply, "The Lobster Pot was excellent," and based on that and some other reviews, it made her short list. Before our trip, a man we met at a wine tasting who lives in Grand Cayman also recommended a place called the Grand Old House, which sounded great.

But when we looked at the Web site of the Lobster Pot (lobsterpot.ky), we were struck that not only did it include its wine list, but also said, "Our own imports directly from Austria." And, indeed, what followed was one of the more remarkable lists of Austrian wines we've seen. As we've written, Austrian wine is coming on strong these days -- especially its signature grape, Grüner Veltliner -- but this was special. We don't know about you, but we don't often see lists that include a 1991 Blaufränkisch Eiswein. Clearly, we had to go.

We walked down a main street for a long time, leaving the rest of the cruise people behind and soon wondered if we were lost. Finally, there, near a Burger King and a beach spot where fish caught that morning were being filleted and sold, was the Lobster Pot, an informal-looking upstairs haven on the water.

We had made reservations (even on a Caribbean island and even if you're getting off a cruise, manners, like making reservations and dressing appropriately, are important). We went in and looked at the wine list, which said at the very top: "Go ahead. Try some wines you've never had. Taste it. If you don't like it, we take it back, no problem."

Then we met Gunter Gosch, the restaurant manager and the Austrian responsible for the list (he didn't know we are wine writers). When we enthused about his list, he disappeared and came back with small tastes

of four Austrian whites: Welschriesling, Grauburgunder, unoaked Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc.

He explained that the restaurant orders wine directly from Austrian producers twice a year and that a shipment of 2,000 bottles had just arrived. The freshness showed. The wines were gorgeous, with tastes as pure as sunshine and ripe, flavorful fruit.

Although Austria is best known for its whites, and we were at a seafood restaurant, there was a red on the list that we had to order: Kapazunder Cuvée 2003 from Johann Schneeberger (\$51). The most amazing thing about this wine is that it's made partly from a grape called Blauer Wildbacher that's so rare it's pretty much only grown in one part of Austria.

A Special Treat

Being able to have this wine, which we would never see otherwise, was a treat, and it was indeed special: clean, fresh and vibrant, with great acidity. As we wrote in our notes: "Light yet earthy, very real and very, very clean." It reminded us of a light Pinot Noir, but with such pinpoint tastes it had the focus of a white wine.

When we got back home, we called Mr. Gosch to ask why we had such great Austrian wines in Grand Cayman. He said he came to the Lobster Pot in 2002 after working in the restaurant and cruise industries for many years. At the time, the restaurant had a small, generic wine list, but he thought the restaurant's patrons -- generally business people and long-time Cayman Islands tourists -- would be willing to try something new, especially if it was priced well.

So he began to bring in Austrian wines and told people they could send back any bottle if they didn't like the wine. "We appreciate them taking the risk to order a wine they have no idea what it tastes like," he told us. "If you don't like it, we'll take it back -- not that it has to be corked or anything. It takes the risk factor away." He added: "We all enjoy Austrian wine here. If someone doesn't like it, we're happy to share it later in the evening." He can only remember one bottle being sent back. Now, he says, the Lobster Pot is widely known for its Austrian wines, which sell quickly.

We really had a wonderful vacation. We'll always remember the promenade on the ship, the nights on our balcony and finally, after all these years, winning a game of bingo. But our most lasting memory will be about Austrian wine on a Caribbean island. To us, memories like that are what vacations are all about.

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