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BRILLIANT *Bordeaux* FLOATING THROUGH FRANCE

BY CAROLYN O'NEIL

Saint-Emilion in the
heart of Bordeaux
wine region

Photo by
Vincent Bengold

Right: Sidewalk cafes
in historic Bordeaux

Photo by Deepix

The word Bordeaux conjures images of fine French wines from the world's most celebrated vineyards. Château Lafite Rothschild, Château Latour, Château Margaux, Château Mouton Rothschild, Château d'Yquem, and Château Pétrus are just a few iconic names. Rather than just name-dropping, why not drop in to taste these wines where they were born? Wine tourism, or "oenotourism," invites guests to tour vineyards, witness winemaking, and discover the diverse histories of each château.



With over six thousand wineries from Médoc to Margaux, the Bordeaux region sits on the banks of the rivers Garonne and Dordogne, literally turning water into wine. Emphasizing water's historical significance in its name, a recent Jeopardy clue read: "Words meaning 'water's edge' are one suggested etymology of this city, once the capital of the province of Aquitania." Correct response: What is Bordeaux?

BATEAUX TO CHÂTEAUX

A great way to explore this part of France is to have a home not just by the water but on the water via a river cruise.

The Uniworld S.S. Bon Voyage is a floating boutique hotel with French-inspired design featuring sumptuous furnishings, custom fabrics, and original artwork. With fewer than 125 guests aboard, this luxury river ship provides ample space to relax in the book-filled lounge (there are books here on Bordeaux wines to study, by the way) or soak up the sun on the upper deck, which sports a small infinity pool for a cool dip on a warm day.

The journey begins and ends in the city of Bordeaux, where the ship docks near the centrally located Place de la Bourse and a wide riverside promenade perfect for walking or biking. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Bordeaux blends eighteenth-century architecture with modern commerce, education, and innovation. Minutes from the ship, you'll find historical sites, great shopping, and the Cité du Vin—a modernistic museum dedicated to Bordeaux wine history. But don't be late for dinner.



Above: Soleil Deck on S.S. Bon Voyage

Above right: French pastries on S.S. Bon Voyage

Right: Tour Bordeaux on Uniworld River Cruises

Below: Celebrating food and wine in Bordeaux



BORDEAUX ON THE MENU

While the captain navigates the river, the S.S. Bon Voyage culinary team steers the menu toward regional specialties: steak with Bordelais sauce, fresh Atlantic coast seafood, seasonal produce such as white asparagus, warm bread from the galley oven, and perfectly crafted French pastries. Each course is paired with specially selected regional wines, making dinner both a culinary experience and nightly wine education. Meanwhile, there’s always Champagne or a chilled rosé for the asking, even if not from this region of France!

A cruise highlight was a progressive dinner with a behind-the-scenes ship tour. Wine in hand, we visited the galley to meet the executive chef for velvety pumpkin soup, relaxed in the crew lounge, and then it was up to the bridge for a few lessons in steering a long river vessel.

Seated for dinner in La Cave de Vin dining room, we toasted to all the crew who kept us happy, fed, and safely afloat. Uniworld cruises are all-inclusive, covering activities, shore excursions, food, drinks, gratuities, and airport transfers.

BEYOND BORDEAUX

Leaving Bordeaux city, we sailed north along the Garonne. Views shifted from spectacular hilltop châteaux to neat vineyard rows to the rusting



remnant of a World War II ship. While river cruising is calm primarily, captains must navigate shifting tides and strong currents on these sea-bound rivers. The best appreciation comes from gazing through your comfy cabin’s picture window at night as moonlight shines on the rushing waters.

MÉDOC

A rainbow greeted our first shore adventure in the Médoc region on the river’s left bank. At historic Fort Médoc, an oysterman shucked platters of plump Médoc oysters, cultivated on Gironde estuary rafts and paired with crisp white Bordeaux—principally sauvignon blanc and sauvignon gris. How’s that for an after-breakfast snack?

Next, Château Camensac welcomed us for tours of the beautiful 1799 chateau, wine cellars, and tastings of their Grand Cru cabernet and sauvignon wines from Haut-Medoc.



Back aboard, guests dressed for a festive black-and-white themed evening with an official captain’s welcome. Dinner menus offer a myriad of choices. I landed on grilled local langoustines with pasta and sautéed vegetables, paired with Château Malagar’s Bordeaux Blanc, a blend of sémillon and sauvignon blanc. Prefer a red? Another Chateau Malagar being served was a blend of cabernet franc, merlot, and cabernet sauvignon. The ship’s expert sommelier quickly became the passengers’ MVP.

BLAYE

Our floating geography lesson of Bordeaux continued in Blaye on the Gironde Estuary’s right bank. This charming village boasts a seventeenth-century stone citadel and surrounding wine region, but I chose the morning street market to marvel at local produce, seafood, cheeses, and stalls of colorful scarves and sweaters.

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Above left: La Boca Food Hall

Photo by Teddy Verneuil

Above: A charming bistro in Bordeaux
Photographer credit.

Left: Regional fresh produce



BACK IN BORDEAUX

Food tours offer fabulous ways to taste your way around town with local experts who know where to find the very best coffee, chocolate, bread, and cheese.

We joined the lovely Isabelle Pochat, who leads walking food tours in Bordeaux and Paris. We followed her along cobblestone streets, through the historic Capucins indoor food market, and from shop to shop, sampling pastries unique to Bordeaux: cannelé—tiny, fluted cakes caramelized outside and custard-like inside—and chocolatine—flaky croissants filled with dark chocolate.

Capping off our food tour, we settled in for lunch of southwestern French cuisine at the cozy Gauta restaurant. Isabelle shared servings of food history, too. “In France, we invented the restaurant for sitting, enjoying food, and restoring your body,” she proudly explained. Viva la France!

ILLUMINATING HISTORY

For a unique Bordeaux evening, Uniworld organized a private visit to Bassins des Lumières. Set inside a cavernous concrete building that the Germans built as a World War II submarine base, this immersive exhibition is now the world’s largest digital art space. Images of artistic and architectural masterpieces are projected on twenty-five-foot walls and reflected in vast pools that once shielded submarines, morphing in and out of focus and set to dramatic musical scores.

The war’s dark history fades in these bright lights—a poignant reminder to cherish the French ideal of celebrating life’s beauty, as expressed in nature, art, fashion, and the joy of sharing food and wine at the table. Au revoir Bordeaux, and merci beaucoup. 🍷

Visit [Bordeaux-Tourisme.com](https://www.bordeaux-tourisme.com) to learn more or start planning your trip.



The real local color emerged during our visit with Les Kellen at his art gallery, antique car collection, and well-stocked wine shop, La Petite Cave. “There are two kinds of wine in the world,” he declared. “French and the others.”

We happily tested that theory again and again.

SAINT-ÉMILION

Have you really visited Bordeaux without seeing Saint-Émilion? This medieval city and surrounding vineyards boast a winemaking history dating to Roman times. Saint-Émilion is renowned for its merlot, cabernet franc, and cabernet sauvignon grapes, which are cultivated in clay and limestone soils, producing elegant wines with rich, complex flavors and smooth tannins.

A special visit to Château Cheval Blanc for tastings of their newly released vintage provided a masterclass in professional winemaking. As with any farming, the weather can be friend or foe, and heavy rains in 2024 took their toll on the vineyards. Only 66 percent of the harvest was bottled, a sacrifice to ensure that the Cheval Blanc wines shared with the world met only the highest standards.



This page, top to bottom:

Isabelle Pochat (*center*) leads Bordeaux a Dream Food Tours.

Bread is a fine art in Bordeaux.

Cheese tasting in Capucins market

Opposite, top to bottom:

Left: River views in Bordeaux

Right: Cite de Vins wine museum

Seafood stars in southwest France

Bistros and bars abound in Bordeaux.