



tgtgNewsletter PRINT VERSION

1st Quarter/Jan '05

Globetrotting through America's Western mountains, Robert and Morrison first headed to *chichi* Aspen high on the Colorado Rockies, then to the southern Cascades to view beautiful Crater Lake. Fortuitously, the autumn season's first snowfall graced this former volcano the morning of arrival. One couldn't ask for a more prosaic setting – not to mention the delicious berry pies. Then it was back to Asia in November, where we hosted a successful Mekong Feasts & Festivals tour to four countries.

Our next Asian food tour begins on 2 October '05, starting in Singapore and ending in Thailand. This is a fully escorted, small-group deluxe tour – maximum 15 persons – including most meals, special cooking classes and market visits throughout. Whether you love food, beaches or just shopping, this is the tour that includes it all. Singaporeans live to eat, with a delicious blend of Chinese, Malay and Indian influences. Likewise, the sweet, sour, hot yet fresh blend of Thai dishes will literally blow you away. We include three nights in the Lion City, plus another two on the tropical island of Koh Samui in southern Thailand. Gracing the luxurious Gulf of Siam, this area was unscathed by the recent tsunami, and we're including some delicious offerings in the line up. Then we fly to Bangkok, the far northern city of Chiang Mai, and the 800 year old historical monuments of Sukhothai. We finish up again in Bangkok for a gala dinner on the Chao Phraya River. You will be personally accompanied by cookbook writer Robert Carmack (author of *Thai Home Cooking, Vietnamese Home Cooking, Fondue and Desserts with Spirit!*) and textile authority Morrison Polkinghorne, with private coach, local guide and some of the best hotels around!

Day by day itinerary available on www.asianfoodtours.com

Immediately afterwards, we're offering a second tour, a 10 day sampler of Isan and Lao cultures. This is one for the more intrepid traveller – although you can still expect our unique focus on food and same great luxury hotel standards. Organized personally by Robert and Morrison, we've delegated tour guides to accompany you through the area. This schedule allows you more time for independent exploration, and meals and cooking classes are included where noted, plus daily breakfast throughout. These are some of our personal favorite destinations, and well off the beaten path – having explored this area last year during Awk Phansaa or Buddhist Lent, and the colourful spectacle of Nakhorn Phanom's fireboats. Also included are boat races along the Mekong in Laos' laid back capitol Vientiane; flights to Luang Prabang, Lao's former imperial capital tucked in the hinterlands along the Mekong; and return flight to Bangkok.

Day by day itinerary available on www.asianfoodtours.com

2005 Tour dates are as follows:

2-5 Oct. Singapore - 5 days/4 nights

2-8 Oct. Singapore & Koh Samui – 7 days/6 nights

2-16 Oct. Singapore & Thailand – 16 days/15 nights

7-16 Oct Thailand – 10 days/9 nights

16-25 Oct Laos – 10 days/9 nights

Join us on both the 16 day Singapore & Thailand tour, plus the 10 day Laos sampler and receive 10% off the total tour price! Email us for more details. Plus, for every subscription, we will make a donation to a non-profit cooking and hotel school for disadvantaged youth in Cambodia.

For those heading to England, until August there is an extraordinary collection of avant-garde Soviet revolutionary porcelain at the Hermitage Rooms in Somerset. Entitled "Circling the Square," these strident propaganda designs in Futurist and Cubist style, depict themes such as agrarian reform, industrialization, even the Red Army. (A Tea service seems to stand at attention!). While the imperial factory ran from 1744 to 1917, the glory days of this revolutionary style stopped by 1924. www.hermitagerooms.com or www.somerset-house.org.uk We're always keen to explore European influences on Asia, so we were even more excited to hear London's Victoria & Albert museum exploring Asia's influence on the West. "This is the first time there was a real world trade," co-curator Amin Jaffer boasts, perhaps forgetting the ancient Spice Road. "This was the first globalisation." Alas, trade here deals preponderantly on India, China and Japan with the West, while Southeast Asia rates relatively little. For those who missed "Encounters" which closed in early December, there is a book to accompany the exhibit: *Encounters the meeting of Asia and Europe 1500-1800*. Edited by Jaffer and Anna Jackson, we were able to locate it both on the V&A website, and more cheaply through Amazon.

Transitions: *Time* magazine's Asia edition profiled the "Best of Asia" in late November. We were delighted to see Singapore's 1929 ranking as "Best Budget Hotel", which we profiled last year. Remember, you read it here first! Alas, manager Mariana Tan has since left the hotel, after bringing it to such high standards. Likewise, we bemoan the upcoming departure this month of Vittorio Bertini of the Sofitel Central Plaza hotel in Bangkok. Vittorio presides over the largest array of foreign chefs in Thailand, which is a tribute to his own expertise. We'll keep you posted on both of their movements... Guests on our Mekong Feasts & Festivals tour last November also indulged in another *Time* Best of Asia listing: *Bia Lao*, or Laotian beer. Our group visited the old imperial capital of Luang Prabang – a Unesco heritage site, and sipped this most refreshing of brews along the mighty Mekong river. As Alex Perry writes "It's an arresting crisp brew and also the universal accompaniment to the local cuisine – a cooking style that blends the raw textures of Vietnamese food with the piquancy of Thai spices. There's no stinting on quality..."

Globetrotting along America's old "National Park-to-Park Highway" – originally a 1920s circular route passing through 11 Western states linking 12 national parks -- we chanced upon a nostalgic book: *The Playground Trail*, by Lee and Jane Whiteley. The tome is rich in pictures of 1920 travel: Dirt ruts, Model Ts mired in mud, and tent-side accommodation connected America's West in this roaring decade. We especially chuckled over the description of chicken dinners served across the Pacific Northwest. "One of the fixed ideas of American hospitality is that no greater honor can be paid a guest than to serve him with fried chicken, properly browned. For two or three days you revel in the privilege of fried chicken. Then it begins to wear down your spirit and cloy your appetite. And when three towns in a single day, set the choice dish before you even a hardened hungry motor tourist cannot refrain from shuddering."

Touring southern Oregon was one of the unexpected highlights this past autumn, while we conducted cooking classes at the very new and swish The Willows in the Ashland-Medford area. Run by Sandy and Joe Dowling, classes are held in a purpose-built demonstration kitchen of the restored mansion's carriage house. We prepared Vietnamese appetizers and salads, then on day two tackled Thai curry pastes. We've been invited back, when Morrison will conduct a separate trimmings and tassels seminar as well.

www.thewillowsbedandbreakfast.com

This region is a great spot to visit, not only for its wealth of restored turn-of-the-century mansions, but also the delicious produce (it's home to *Harry and David* fruit fame), and the nearby Shakespeare festival. The village of Jacksonville is a former transcontinental railway terminus, and its restoration well worth a detour. Not surprisingly, its main street is oft used as a film set for period Westerns. Also within an hour's drive, or so, are the glories of Crater Lake – incandescent blue waters nestled in an extinct volcano; the Oregon Caves; and mammoth Redwoods. We also fell in love with the Valley View "pure native wine" Cabernet Sauvignon 2000 with its commemorative 25th anniversary label. www.valleyviewwinery.com

Making our trip even more fulfilling (literally) was the road-side Beckie's Cafe, at Union Creek Resort en route from Medford up to Crater Lake on Hwy 62. The menu groans with hearty two-crust pies filled, variously, with huckleberries (a wild mountain blueberry), marrionberry (an Oregon hybrid, combining boysen- and blackberry), raspberry and "Very Berry." This last pie is not unique to Beckie's, as we chanced upon it elsewhere. It's a great combo (and price saver, if adding strawberries) for those mixing the punnets. Also on the menu are meringue cream pies, and all baked on the premises!

Obviously, a small roadside diner can't possibly bake all these pies daily, so we asked how they manage: Bake ahead and freeze, or prepare and freeze, then bake later? Being two crust pies, blind baking of the bottom shell is not an option. The advice: bake and freeze, although preparing and freezing uncooked also has its advocates. The trick is to mostly thaw the pie prior to slow baking. Otherwise, the outside crust cooks before the inside. (That might be a good trick to try with frozen store-bought pies!) Do not thaw totally, however, lest the pastry dry and the contents make the bottom soggy. Just as importantly, add the sugar almost immediately prior to putting in the shell. That way the juices are not drawn from the fruit.

We can't say that Beckie's pies are perfect: although the huckleberry was golden crusty and delicious, the "Very Berry" pastry looked anaemic, and the marionberry filling was positively gluggy. But considering that home-cooked roadside dining is becoming ever rarer in the US, this place is well worth a detour. (Tel: 541-560-3563)

On the same trip, we were also impressed with the pie selection at both the Vida Café and Mom's Pies also in Vida, near Oregon's McKenzie River, plus a perennial favorite, St. Martin's Hot Springs, in the little town of Carson on the Columbia River Gorge in Washington state. Vida Café: (541-896-3298); Mom's (541-896-0017) St. Martin Hotel Springs (509-427-8292).

Nothing prepared us for the lack of baking nous in sky-high Aspen. Although leavened baking is notoriously difficult above 1000 metres/3000 feet, Aspen's 2135 metres/7000 ft/ elevation seems too much for two of that cities more well known breakfast stops. A misshaped pecan roll served at Main Street Bakery & Cafe was positively doughy, to which the waitress replied: "It's supposed to be like that." Raw? Likewise, at popular Poppycock's, we reluctantly picked at the gluey porridge-like interior of their oatmeal buttermilk pancakes. "We're famous for our pancakes" huffed the waitress. Poppycock's: 665 E. Cooper (Tel 970-925-1245) Main Street Bakery & Cafe: 201 E. Main. Tel (970-925-6446). We had better luck at the Saturday street markets, which alas, do not run in the winter months. Here, we chanced upon delicious apple cider, colourful hens' eggs, and gorgeous, giant zinnias in full bloom.

On the press front, Robert was featured in Angela Allen's column in the *Vancouver Columbian*. Robert's book, *Vietnamese Home Cooking* is reviewed by Lisa Messinger in her US national syndicated column. The verdict: "Make this your official notification to try the perfectly balanced pungent/mild cuisine with influences from both France and China." Robert also rounded out an extremely busy weekend in southern Oregon by filming a series of five-minute cooking demonstrations for *West Coast Flavors* on KTVL News 10 with Michael Thornicroft. Our visit to Cambodia in November was also profiled in the latest Paul DuBrule newsletter. This is a not for profit hotel and cooking school, providing job skills to disadvantaged and at risk Khmer youths. We are proud to make a donation to the Paul duBrule school with each reservation made on our next food tour in October.
www.catgen.com/ecolepauldubrule

Finally, thank you to all our concerned friends who wrote to us following the disastrous tsunami on Boxing Day, 26 December. We remained safe and secure in Sydney throughout the ordeal, although we do have many friends in the affected areas, especially Phuket. Our prayers and affirmations go out not only to them, but to the entire region. If you wish to help, we have links to various charities on our homepage www.globetrottinggourmet.com. After the initial clean up, you can continue aiding most by visiting these countries. In Thailand, for example, there are concerns that 70% of the nation's tourist guides risk losing their jobs.

Cheers,
Robert & Morrison