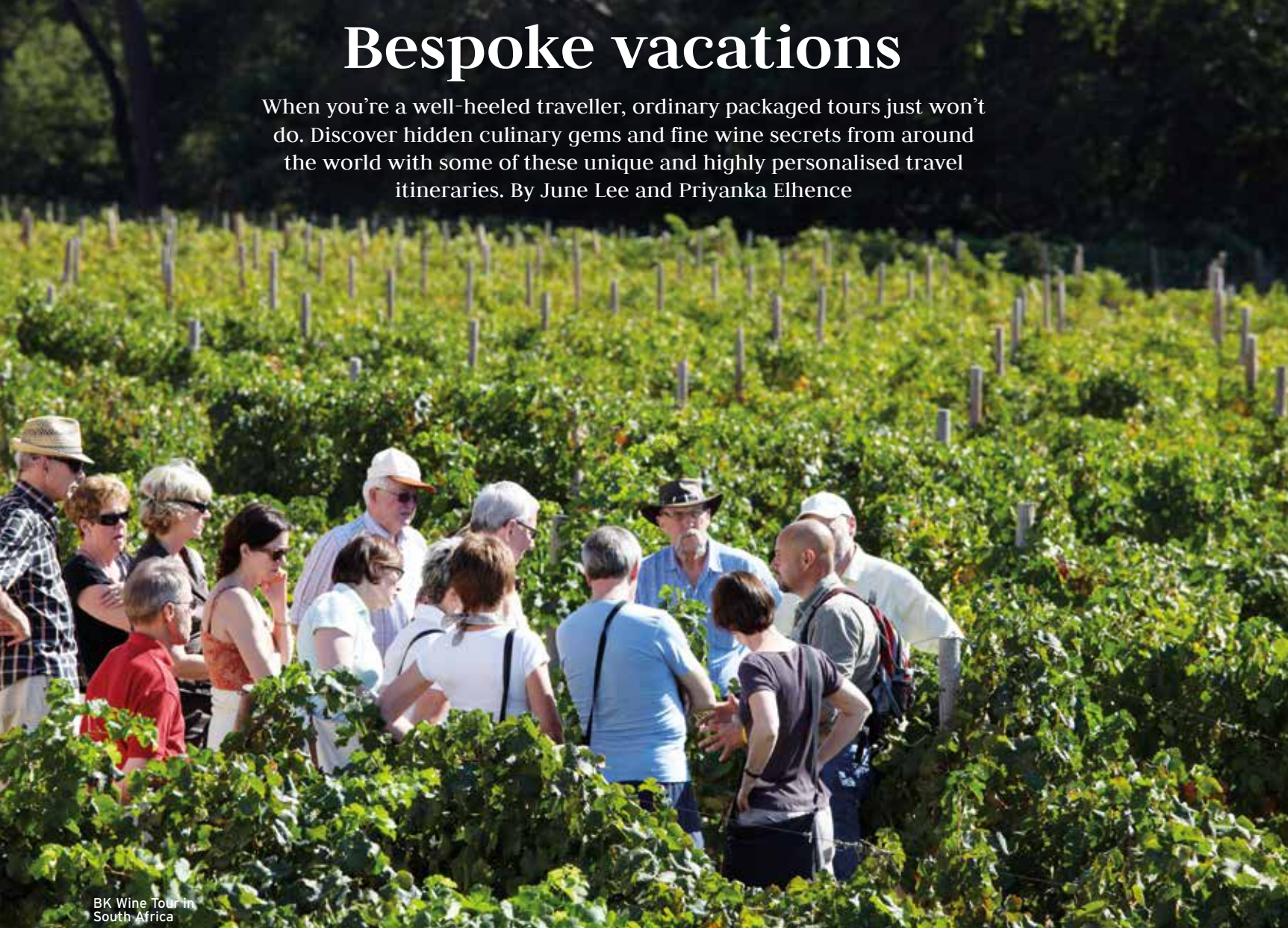


Bespoke vacations

When you're a well-heeled traveller, ordinary packaged tours just won't do. Discover hidden culinary gems and fine wine secrets from around the world with some of these unique and highly personalised travel itineraries. By June Lee and Priyanka Elhence



BK Wine Tour in South Africa

There's much to be said about being able to map your own route when you want to unearth the best a region has to offer. From foraging local produce on sustainable farms, unearthing foodie hotspots and dining at exclusive Michelin-starred restaurants, to making your own wine and meeting the winemakers in their cellars, here's a look at what your next bespoke culinary vacation could look like.

When planning a wine tour, you might think that the most important thing is to taste great wines – but think again. Per Karlsson, co-founder of **BK Wine Tours** (bkwinetours.com), explains, "What will make it a tour of a lifetime is the people whom you meet, talking to the winemakers in the cellars and

listening to them explaining their secrets, and walking in the vineyards with the wine growers." While the vino plays a vital role, it is insider access that BK Wine Tours is known for. Karlsson and wife Britt personally visit some 200 wineries a year, and have been running tours for over 15 years. They offer about 30 scheduled tours a year, alongside customised private tours that attract even wine journalists and trade professionals. Karlsson iterates, "Wine travel is not like other kinds of tourism. It takes very special skills and knowledge to make a great wine tour."

For the first-time wine traveller, Karlsson recommends more classic wine regions with familiar names such as Bordeaux with its famous chateaux, Champagne with the world

renowned sparkling wines, and Piedmont with Barolo and white truffle. For those who have covered these regions, tours to Portugal or South Africa offer plenty for the connoisseur. "We have just returned from South Africa. Today, there is a wealth of new-generation winemakers and new wine regions, which makes this one of the most exciting wine countries to travel in. You can, of course, find excellent Cabernet and Chardonnay, outstanding Pinot Noir and even Riesling on the cooler south coast, and magnificent Rhone Valley-style wines in the much hotter (and trendy) Swartland up north."

If you're looking to get your hands dirty and walk away with your personal production of wine at the end of the day, **Vines of Mendoza** (vinesofmendoza.com) combines all of that alongside laidback luxury at the foothills of the Andes. Starting out in 2005,



Vines of Mendoza's wine owners



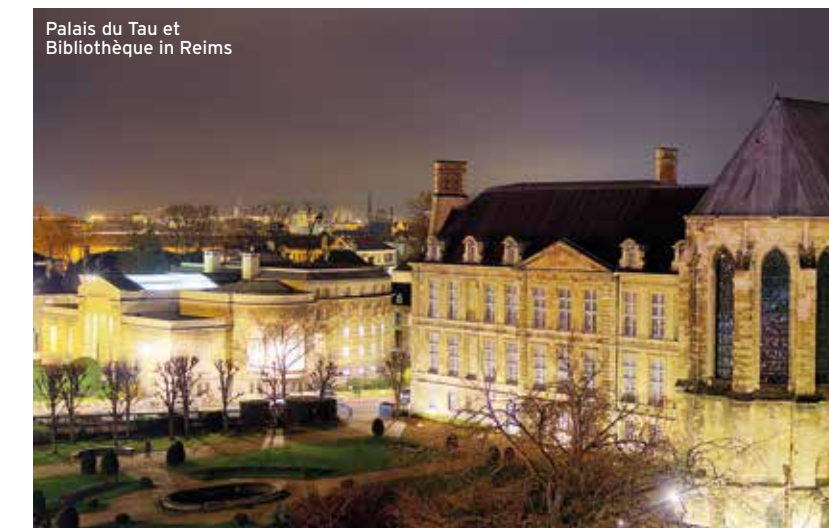
Harvesting at Vines of Mendoza

the private vineyard company has helped 160 parcel owners from around the world make their own wine. They can't go wrong with the renowned Malbec and Torrontes varieties of that region, but there are 25 other grapes such as Merlot, Syrah and Grenache to work with for the final blend.

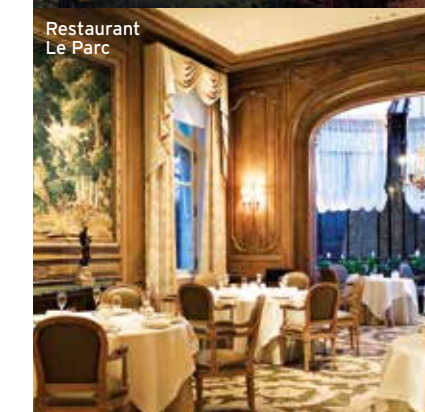
Consulting winemaker Santiago Achaval from top-rated Achaval-Ferrer winery in Mendoza works with the Vines of Mendoza's in-house winemaker, Pablo Martorell, who also produces the company's own *Recuerdo* wines. If all that sounds like a lot of work, you can also unwind and observe the action at adjoining The Vines Resort & Spa, a Leading Hotels of the World property with 22 lavish villas.

Specialising in France's most exclusive gourmet and wine

destinations, Anke Wright of **Delika Tours** (delikatours.com) is your passport to exquisite locations and well-kept secrets in the famed Champagne region. Anke specialises in only certain regions to maintain the high quality and exclusivity of her tours, and personally visits each recommended attraction before including that in a tailor-made program. Explore contrasts between the large, globally renowned Champagne houses and the regions' smaller local producers who make outstanding Champagnes. Attend blind-tasting seminars and learn to distinguish the differences between Chardonnay- and Pinot-dominated cuvées. Choose from a selection of Michelin-starred restaurants in Reims to dine at, such as the two Michelin-starred Le Parc, famous for its langoustine creations. Enjoy a private visit to the renowned Taittinger house, exploring cellars from the 4th and 18th centuries while sipping the house's prestige cuvée Comte de Champagne. Likewise, visit the private cellars of Dom Pérignon and sample rare vintages before setting out for a driving tour in your own vintage Citroen 2CV to the vineyards of the Mountain of Reims to sample the offerings of a small local Champagne producer.



Palais du Tau et Bibliothèque in Reims



Restaurant Le Parc



Maison Taittinger® Carmen Moya 2012

PHOTOS PER KARLSSON, BKWINE PHOTOGRAPHY



Dining terrace at Rekondo Market cheeses

For a truly memorable time in the Basque Country and Rioja in Spain, the well-connected Gabriella Ranelli of **Tenedor Tours** (tenedortours.com) is who you should engage. Lauded as one of the top food guides in the world, she is an expert in putting together bespoke itineraries. Dine at San Sebastián's legendary Rekondo restaurant, home to one of Spain's most famous wine cellars, or savour a hilltop dinner at the eminent three Michelin-starred Arzak. Drive down to Oiartzun, an ancient village in the area and feast at the one Michelin-starred Zuberoa, or head to Igeldo for the three Michelin-starred Akelarre, well-regarded for its local seafood creations. From San Sebastián, set sail to the quaint hamlet of Getaria to visit a txakoli winery for a special tour of how to make this local sparkling, very dry white wine and spend an evening enjoying a guided pintxos crawl in the old town.

If you crave the extraordinary in regional Italy, culinary vacation and gourmet cooking tour boffins **Active Gourmet Holidays** (activegourmetholidays.com) specialise in tailor-made adventures for the Amalfi Coast and Tuscany. Founder Jo-Ann Gaidosz's passion for fine cuisine, internationally renowned wines and exploring different cultures can be experienced through her detail-oriented and specially curated tours. Highlights include guided visits to Amalfi Coast's small, untouched villages, making Mozzarella di Bufala Campana at a family-owned mozzarella cheese factory, and dinner at a two Michelin-starred restaurant in the tiny village of Nerano. The next day, sail to Capri for lunch at a Michelin-starred establishment flaunting stunning views of the Gulf of Naples, or don your apron for a personalised cooking class and gourmet lunch at Marina del Cantone, the one Michelin-starred restaurant located on the enchanting Salerno Gulf. Sample Italy's best pasta



Amalfi Coast



Villa Castello di Panzano

Duomo e Campanile

Florence's oldest open-air food market, to procure ingredients for a private cooking class. Then spend a day in the enchanting Chianti area and visit the historic cellars of Castello di Ama (a 12th century castle, home to one of Chianti's best wineries). What will get truffle lovers excited is the chance to head to the

in the renowned village of Gagnano and churn out authentic Italian ice cream in one of Sorrento's most famous ice cream factories. In Positano, dubbed the pearl of the Amalfi Coast, explore centuries-old vineyards and villages, where time seems to have stood still.

Unearth Tuscany's culinary gems starting in Florence. Join five-star Relais Santa Croce's executive chef for a visit to Mercato Centrale,



Castello di Panzano in Tuscany

woods for a private truffle hunt, with the *tartufaio* and his master truffle dog. For a luxurious sleep, nothing beats the Castello Banfi, a medieval castle surrounded by vineyards and olive groves.

To explore unique epicurean experiences in New Zealand, hit up Singaporean-based **Antipodean Luxury Travel** (antipodean.nz). "We are a full service travel planner, designing our trips from consultation till the point of return back to Singapore," says founder and CEO Alexandra Stewart. "Our concierge service offers exclusive activities such as helicopter rides and private access to local UNESCO sites." For instance, stay at the luxurious Eichardt's Private Hotel in Queenstown and fly via chopper to an exclusive Wild Food Experience at an altitude of 2000 ft on the otherwise inaccessible Tutoko glacier before swopping down to Milford Sound to dive for fresh fish and crayfish, For more culinary adventures, fly to



Al fresco dining at Huka Lodge



Depot Eatery oysters



Eichardt's Penthouse Terrace

the historic luxury lodge Otahuna in Christchurch to harvest seasonal porcini mushrooms from the roots of oak trees; or drive to the Waipara North Canterbury wine region to hunt for truffles and forage at local farms with award-winning chef Tina Duncan, followed by a special cooking class. End with a helicopter tour over Mt. Tauhara's natural thermal springs, with stunning aerial views of the Craters of the Moon, Lake Taupo's northern shores and the magnificent Maori Rock Carvings. **e**