JANUARY+FEBRUARY 2006

Oregon

The AAA Traveler's Companion

Great Winter Getaways

Santa Barbara, Calif., Utah's Sundance Film Festival Ashland, Idaho's Silver Valley Fus Portland's Cultural District The Space Needle

> Stroll hand in hand through Santa Barbara's Chase Palm Park.

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Ashland

Spend a few days in this southern Oregon arts hub and you'll come away convinced: Parting *is* sweet sorrow. **BY MICHAEL MCRAE**





At Out of the Blue: vintage mah-jongg tiles, agate spheres, and betel nuts.

Jamie North, conjure up outstanding Dungeness crab cakes, wood-grilled ribeye steak with angel-hair pommes frites, and North's unbelievably satisfying warm chocolate truffle cake with homemade coffee ice cream. If all you need is a quick lunch, Allyson's, on East Main Street less than a block from the Shakespeare fest's complex of theaters, is a gourmet deli tucked into a high-end cookware shop.

Next door is Out of the Blue, perhaps the most unusual shop in Ashland. Owner Kathleen Kuzmitz travels the world collecting rare beads, tribal masks, fabrics, geological specimens, and such extraordinary furniture as an antique Nigerian birthing chair. For my wife's 20th anniversary gift, Kuzmitz strung together a necklace of vintage gold beads from India, one of them studded with rubies.

Like Kuzmitz, my wife and I travel internationally for our work, and it's always a relief when our homeward flights skim the crest of Mount Ashland and drop into the valley. Some years after moving here, I wrote a book about the hidden valley in the Tibetan Himalayas that inspired the legend of Shangri-La. Circumstances prevented me from reaching that spot, and a Buddhist friend attributed my failure to bad karma. Actually, I like to think it's because I'd already attained my earthly paradise.

MICHAEL MERAE is a contributing editor for National Geographic Adventure and author of The Siege of Shangri-La.

If you're going .

Pick up AAA's Oregon & Washington TourBook and map. For more information, contact the Ashland Chamber of Commerce at (541) 482-3486 or visit www.ashlandchamber .com. Area code is 541 unless noted.

TO DO AND SEE

Oregon Shakespeare Festival See "Plays to see in 2006" on the facing page. First Friday Art Walk A walking tour of downtown galleries on the first Friday of each month, some serving wine and hors d'oeuvres. (877) 752-6278. Lithia Park Woodland Trail Guidebooks are \$2 at the chamber of commerce office, 110 E. Main St., 482-3486. Mt. Ashland Ski Area Twenty-three trails. 482-2897, www.mtashland.com.

Oregon Cabaret Theatre First and Hargadine streets, 488-2902, www.oregoncabaret.com. Rogue Valley Symphony On the Southern Oregon University campus, 552-6398, www.rvsymphony.org.

EATS

Allyson's Soups, salads, and generous sandwiches. 115 E. Main St., 482-2884. Amuse French-Pacific Northwest cuisine. 15 N. First St., 488-9000. New Sammy's Cowboy Bistro Acclaimed restaurant just outside of town. Opens Feb. 14; book well in advance. 2210 S. Pacific Hwy, 535-2779. Pilaf Vegetarian dishes from the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and India. 18 Calle Guanajuato, 488-7898.

SLEEPS

Rates listed here range from the lowest-price room in low season



Partly manicured, partly wild, Lithia Park covers 93 acres on Ashland's edge.

(winter) to the highest-price room in high season (summer). Ashland Creek Inn \$125-\$300. Luxurious B&B on the creek, a block from the plaza. Seven suites, all with kitchens and decks; some with fireplaces. 70 Water St., 482-3315, www.ashlandcreekinn.com. Ashland Springs Hotel \$69-\$199. On-site restaurant and 70 rooms. 212 E. Main St., (888) 795-4545, www.ashlandspringshotel.com. Peerless Hotel and Restaurant \$74-\$242. Restored 1900 brick boardinghouse in the Railroad District with four rooms and two suites. 243 Fourth St., (800) 460-8758, www.peerlesshotel.com. Winchester Inn \$129-\$239. Full restaurant, wine bar, and 19 rooms and suites in two cottages and two Victorian homes. 35 S. Second St., (800) 972-4991, www.winchesterinn.com. IN 1988, WHEN MY WHEE AND I announced that we were moving from Marin County, Calif., to Ashland, Ore., our friends reacted with understanding and sympathy. One, a feature writer for the San Francisco Chronicle, made examples of us in an article deploring the fact that the Bay Area's stratospheric cost of living was causing a "brain drain"—a flight of writers, artists, software engineers, filmmakers, and so on. Being mentioned in such creative company was flattering but also unsettling because the story's subtext was that we were forsaking the



was flattering but also unsettling because the Downhill shiers can check out trails named Romeo, Juliet, and Tempest.

tarragon-scented broth. Charlene, her

very Olympus of culture and culinary arts for a dreary life in the provinces.

Now, i8 years after our move, two major revelations about culture and cuisine in Ashland come fondly to mind, ironically both involving refugees. The first occurred shortly after we arrived, at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's performance of Janusz Glowacki's *Hunting Cockroaches*, a riotous farce about two Polish émigrés living in a crummy apartment on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Watching the play—superbly acted and staged in the most intimate of the festival's three venues—I realized that our fears of cultural deprivation had been sorely misplaced. Glowacki's acclaimed comedy had opened only a year earlier in New York, and here it was playing five minutes away from our new doorstep.

An edgy, contemporary play at a Shakespeare festival? "Our name can be misleading for people who don't know what we are," says festival spokesperson Amy Richard. "We are not just two weeks of Shakespeare in the summer. It's a real festival expehusband, Vernon, and then baby boy, Sammy, were also Northern California refugees, having abandoned their celebrated but failing restaurant in Boonville. They had recently opened New Sammy's Cowboy Bistro just north of town in a renovated shack of a building that was once a gas station. Today it still has only six tables and no sign out front except for a blinking arrow. Vernon's wine cellar has grown, however—to 18,000 bottles—and the odds on snagging a last-minute reservation are only slightly better than on winning the Oregon lottery.

Lately our little town seems to have acquired a glossy reputation as the "next Napa," partly on the strength of its cul-

> tural offerings and Victorian charm but also due to the recent boom in wine touring in the surrounding Rogue Valley. Other assets include the vital downtown plaza and the lovely walking trails in Ashland's crown jewel, Lithia Park, a grassy 93-acre woodland that stretches along Ashland Creek up into the foothills of the Siskiyou Mountains. Our Mediterranean climate with long, sunbaked summers is

rience, with lectures, backstage tours, classes, music, and dance." This year, the festival's 71st, the eightmonth season opens with previews on February 17 and the final curtain doesn't descend until October 29. Only four of the 11 plays are Shakespeare's. (See page 18 for a full schedule.)

My next epiphany about Ashland struck when I sampled Charlene Rollins's Copper River salmon in



Buckingham and Richard III reveled in evil schemes during the 2005 season.

JANUARY+FEBRUARY 2006 17

Best cultural feast greatgetawaysgreatgetawa

a big draw, too. But I prefer the brief, mild winter and verdant springs. Snow piles up at Mount Ashland's ski area, and as spring draws near, crocuses and tiny snowdrops appear in the valley. There's parking downtown, no waiting for tables at restaurants, and "value season" prices for festival tickets. The Rogue Valley Symphony and Oregon Cabaret Theatre keep us musically entertained. And for eye candy, we have intriguing shops downtown and more than three dozen art galleries, display spaces, and working studios.

A word of caution: A few of the galleries lean toward the cosmic-wozmic (with paintings that feature rainbows,

Plays to see in 2006

For more information, call (541) 482-4331 or visit www.osfashland.org.

ANOUS BOWMER THEATHE

Feb. 17-Oct. 29 The Winter's Tale by William Shakespeare Feb. 19-Oct. 29 The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde Feb. 18-July 9 The Diary of Anne Frank by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett (newly adapted by Wendy Kesselman) Apr. 18-Oct. 28 Intimate Apparel by Lynn Nottage July 26-Oct. 28 Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by David Edgar (based on the novel by Robert Louis Stevenson)

NEW TREATRE

Feb. 23-June 23 UP by Bridget Carpenter Mar. 29-Oct. 29 Bus Stop by William Inge July 4-Oct. 29 King John by William Shakespeare

ELIZABETHAN STAGE/ALLEN PAVILION

June 6-Oct. 6 The Merry Wives of Windsor by William Shakespeare June 7-Oct. 7 Cyrano de Bergerac by Edmond Rostand (translated by Anthony Burgess)

June 8-Oct. 8 The Two Gentlemen of Verone by William Shakespeare crystals, and dolphins all in one). Others routinely keep me captive for an hour. At the Hanson Howard Gallery near the plaza, for example, I always dwell on Margaret Garrington's evocative pastels of local landscapes and the oddly grotesque clay figurines of Virginia artist Aggie Zed, whose miniature animalheaded humans are downright weird. In

the Railroad District, a nascent gallery ghetto along A Street, I've stopped at the Davis & Cline Galleries to gingerly inspect a \$180,000 optical glass sculpture by Christopher Rics called *Mountain Flower* and a spellbinding 10-piece set by Dale Chihuly from his Persian series that looks like yellow squash blossoms frozen in glass.

To the northwest, in a new ap corrugated-steel building at A and Pioneer streets, stands the Gathering Glass Studio, where you can watch glass being blown or take lessons yourself. Who knows? Maybe you're the next Chihuly: At the Ashland Art Works cooperative at Oak and A streets, 11 artists now work and display their ceramics, paintings, jewelry, sculpture, and prints in four venerable wooden buildings that were moved onto the site. Oak Street takes you back to the plaza and the heart of Ashland for browsing at the American Trails & Best of Oregon, featuring Native American arts and crafts, and at the Web-sters, specializing in wearable art such as jewelry, dyed silk, and handwoven clothing.

Snow piles up at Mount Ashland's ski area, and as spring draws near, crocuses and tiny snowdrops appear in the valley.

> I'm a regular at Pilaf, a restaurant in the rear of the plaza's renovated Masonic Lodge that features polyethnic vegetarian cuisine, microbrews, and a sunny secondfloor balcony overlooking Ashland Creek. Downtown's best restaurant is Amuse, where co-chefs Erik Brown and his wife,



New Sammy's Cowboy Bistro has just six tables – and a tight reservation list.