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Wining and Dining with Nobility

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Talking about the cuisine and countryside of France can be interesting. But if you want fascinating, listen to passionate Francophile and Washingtonian Patricia Ravenscroft.

Her love affair with France began in childhood as she listened to stories about her great-great-grandfather, the renowned Thomas P. Rositer. A member of the Hudson River school of painting, he lived and painting in Paris in the 1850s. Her great-aunt owned a magnificent family portrait he painted which received a medal during the Paris exposition in 1855. The painting now hangs in a place of honor in the Ravenscroft's home.

Ravenscroft dreamed of going to France from the age of eight, but not until she had reached 16 was that dream to materialize. She had the good fortune to live with a French family in Normandy—and there, in the château kitchen alongside Madame Guichard, her culinary adventure began.

In November 2004, Patricia Ravenscroft became one of very few Washingtonians to become a Knight of the National Order of Agricultural Merit awarded by the French government for “making dreams come true.” The *Mérite Agricole*, as the French know it, dates to 1883 and is France's oldest civil award. Bestowed upon those who have made significant contributions to French agriculture, it has been a high honor given to winemakers, farmers, and chefs for more than a century.

For the past decade, Ravenscroft has been organizing trips to France (and more recently to Morocco and Canada as well) with small groups of food lovers. These adventures, in intimate groups of eight to ten like-minded travelers, include cooking classes and dining with outstanding and often Michelin-starred chefs. In addition to luxurious accommodations, excursions to market and wineries, and invitations to private home, the trips offer behind-the-scenes cultural experiences not available to other visitors.

All of this began when Ravenscroft and her family took a one-year sabbatical in France. During this time, she worked with French chefs in their kitchens, eating in restaurants and making lists of other French chefs she wanted to work with, and traveled to the countryside to meet cheese-makers, wine-makers and others who worked the land and made quality products.

The connections she made during that year as she traveled the country, pursuing her passion for French food and wine, formed the basis of her wittily-named business, *Les Liaisons Délicieuses*. Today it's a thriving and expanding business. To date she has taken 55 groups to 11 parts of France, Morocco, and French Canada, and soon she's to add Vietnam to the growing list.

“Every time I go on [Ravenscroft's] trips, I think that it can't possibly be better than the last, but it always is better,” said Tom M. of Washington, who has gone on four of Ravenscroft's trips. “Morocco [was] perfect—the cooking classes, the cultural forays, and the splendidly interesting people. I can't wait for my next trip.”