

Cognoscenti

magazine

Because life is short

Le Cagnard Cagnes-sur-Mer

Le Cagnard, a Relais & Chateaux establishment, is literally perched on the heights of the old city in Cagnes-sur-Mer. To reach the hotel, guests arriving in large cars are advised to leave their vehicles in a parking area below, thence to be shuttled to the hotel by a driver in a mini-car. The arrangement is a bit awkward, but it's well worth the trouble: the nearly vehicle-free character of this special enclave makes exploring it on foot so much more pleasant than exploring other French towns (where pedestrians may well find themselves flattened against the walls by cars careening through narrow streets).



Spacious rooms in a rustic style

Other medieval fortresses in the south of France sometimes tend to feel more like tourist enclaves than towns, but Vieux Cagnes is a place where people actually *live*. Here, lush flowers and vines grow on ancient stone walls, with paths and staircases leading beneath arches through intriguingly dark alleys and tunnels. During their recent visit, **Cognoscenti Magazine** editors delighted at exploring the maze of streets, walking from Le Cagnard to the nearby Grimaldi Chateau Museum, where a branch of Monaco's most famous family once lived. A free shuttle runs between the center of Cagnes proper and Cagnes-sur-Mer every 15 minutes, for those who aren't keen to make the short but exceedingly steep walk.

In the early 20th century it was Foujita, Modigliani, Soutine and Renoir who fell under the spell of Cagnes-sur-Mer. Simone de Beauvoir wrote "Les Mandarins" while staying in Le Cagnard's famous blue room (room #8). Today artsy touches are still much in evidence

around town—some residents even paint their mailboxes in their own, personal forms of expression!

"People who adore lovely and ancient things have been coming to my house for many years," says Le Cagnard's longtime owner, Mr. Barel, who charms guests with his courtly manner. The hotel's striking logo—a drawing of Adonis with a flowing mane of vines, leaves, and birds—was executed by a local artist after a conception by Mr. Barel himself.

From the balcony of our upper-floor suite, we were able to gaze out a landscape bathed in soft Mediterranean light, taking in the pretty houses as well as distant sea views. The suite was spacious and cheery, with a large, rustic wooden table and couch dominating the sitting room. The décor was rather plain, with the bare walls much in need of prints and the wooden ceiling equally in need of varnish. The

charms of the place are such that one can easily overlook such things, however.

Downstairs, guests can dine in baronial splendor in what was (in the 13th century) a castle guard-room, or they can eat in a room that's made beautiful by a lovely coffered ceiling covered by dozens of finely hand-painted panels in Renaissance patterns. Part of the ceiling ingeniously slides open on summer evenings, making it possible to dine *al fresco*.

In the restaurant, Chefs Didier Anies and Jean-Yves Johany serve up some impressive dishes. In *chaud-froid de foie gras de canard au vieux porto*, the foie gras was thick yet buttery in texture. Fresh mango, grapefruit, and white asparagus creatively showcased the tender shellfish in *langouste royale aux asperges blanches et huile d'agrumes*.

In *canon d'agneau aux fines herbes*, the lamb was served with a beautifully reduced sauce in which tarragon, anise and coriander added subtle notes of spice. In *pigeon fermier désossé doré en cocotte et ses beaux légumes du marché*, the bird was fully deboned and then reconstituted—an impressive preparation, although its texture was still a bit gamy.

From a strong wine card with 350 references, our sommelier recommended a knockout: the 1995 *Domaine Leroy Volnay-Santenots*. Opening beautifully after an hour's decanting, this decadently rich wine showed tangy cranberry, cherry and cinnamon notes along with supple tannins that led into an impressively long finish.

The restaurant's chefs pay proper attention to the aesthetic appearance of the dishes they serve—a focus that is evident in desserts like the divine white chocolate pyramid.

This article was written by Jeffrey Riggs, Senior Contributing Editor to *Cognoscenti Magazine*.

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Such dishes as *langouste royale* (above) and deboned *pigeon* (below) have made **Le Cagnard** a culinary haven.



Le Cagnard

Haut de Cagnes

06800 Cagnes-sur-Mer

France

Ph: 33 (0)4-93-20-73-22

Web: www.le-cagnard.com

Email: cagnard@relaischateaux.com