

# Cognoscenti

## magazine

Because life is short

DOMAINE DES HAUTS-DE-LOIRE  
ONZAIN, FRANCE

“If travelers come from overseas to taste French cuisine, they should not be disappointed,” says Pierre-Alain Bonnigal, **Domaine des Hauts de Loire’s** proprietor. During a recent visit, two traveling editors from **Cognoscenti Magazine** were anything but disappointed at the sophisticated pleasures on offer at this Relais & Chateaux country hotel and restaurant. No detail is overlooked in this third-generation family-owned and operated business.

“People come to taste the French *art-de-vivre, bien-être* without artifice. It’s about authenticity and quality. Our place allows them to discover the Val de Loire.” Over the years, Domaine des Hauts de Loire has built a loyal following amongst international travelers and gourmets. “We rely on word-of-mouth,” adds Mme. Bonnigal, who shares the challenges of the running the property with her husband.

Chef Rémy Giraud’s cuisine, which has held two Michelin stars since 1992, is surely one of the premier attractions. But no visit is complete without a stay in one of the hotel’s attractive and spacious guest rooms, or a stroll through its 70 hectares of lush woods, gardens and trails. Although the Loire’s castles

beckon, it’s possible to stay quite happily for 2 or 3 days without even leaving the hotel grounds: “Our clients tell us, ‘we come here as if it were our second home, our vacation home’,” notes Mme. Bonnigal.



*The salon at Domaine  
des Hauts-de-Loire*

Before moving to the dining room, we enjoyed an *aperitif* in the salon, seeing woods on one side and the manor house on the other. There’s wood paneling, heavy curtains and brass lamps, and a trio of blue China vases adorn the windowsills.

The dining room itself exudes country style elegance and comfort, with exposed wooden ceiling beams, wicker chairs, wood floors, flower-patterned curtains, and small paintings of wooded rural landscapes adding splashes of green against the pale wall. Tablecloths are a

rich, creamy yellow. From every window, long expanses of lawn and forest are visible.

We began with a tasty *salade tiède de pommes de terres a languille croustillante, vinaigrette d’ échalotes*, or warm potato salad with crunchy eels in shallot vinaigrette. Then we tried *marinade de Saint-Jacques, salade de mâche aux croutons de tartuffon*, the scallops were sliced thin (carpaccio-style) and a little too heavily doused with hazelnut oil.

The *sandre tori au caramel de vin rouge et crème de celery* was for us the finest dish on the tasting menu. A perfectly-roasted fish filet was artfully accompanied by splashes of densely reduced, unctuous red wine sauce and celery cream. Served over leaves of swiss chard that lent a sharp acid contrast, this dish was quite simply spectacular.

The wines were on par with the food: sommelier Franck Bernard, who has been at Hauts-de-Loire since 1994, said, “You can find very good producers in the Loire, but the challenge remains to produce quality with consistency.” We tasted a fine Loire white and an excellent Burgundy red. Mineral and earth tones showed in a 1997 *Marc Brédif Vigne Blanche, Réserve Privée*, (Vouvray). The elixir-like 1999 *Joseph Drouhin “Clos des Mouches”* (Beaune) was outstanding, its garnet-ruby depths offering up deep strains of pleasure. In this as in the best Burgundies, one’s sensory apparatus is challenged to take in *all* of the complexity of the wine.

On the back of the restaurant’s menu, there’s a Charles Peguy poem. Roughly translated, its final lines provide a fine summary of the experience of staying at Domaine des Hauts de Loire: “In the soft grass on a hilltop, not far from the Loire, a chateau is in bloom.”



**M. and Mme. Bonnigal**

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