

Cognoscenti

magazine

Because life is short

CHATEAU BELMONT - JEAN BARDET
TOURS, FRANCE

You know you've come to the right place when you see the shiny black Rolls parked by the entrance—the one in which Sophie Bardet, the *grande dame* of **Château Belmont - Jean Bardet**, arrives each day.

Visiting the Bardets' gracious, Napoleon III-style hotel in the Loire Valley, **Cognoscenti Magazine** visitors checked into a suite decorated in warm shades. Wall-to-wall blue carpeting and Asian-themed artworks adorning the walls set a stylish tone, while out the windows, views were equally pleasing: a garden with gushing fountains, statues, and flowers already budding in the early spring. But all this was a mere stage for our true aim: a taste of Chef Jean Bardet's famous cuisine.

As soon as you are seated in Bardet's spacious dining room, you'll feel it: this is more a temple of Epicureanism than a casual eatery—this is a place where the culinary experience is taken very seriously indeed. "The diner should be receptive, willing to be impregnated by the poetry of the food," Jean Bardet told us in an exclusive interview. "The senses are not ornaments but rather, measures to gauge technique."

No music plays in the background that could distract diners—all the attention is focused (as it should be) on the cuisine. The generous spacing between tables, as well as the size of the tables themselves—two diners are seated a table large enough for four or five—adds to the formal elegance. The service staff is a well-managed team of professionals, doing what they know best, efficiently and without flashiness.

Flutes of 1996 Vranken Champagne Cuvée Demoiselle showed truffle and pear on the nose along with a hint of harshness on the palate.



*A classical setting for
Jean Bardet's cuisine*

In the appetizer, *carpaccio de homard, vinaigrette balsamique* showed sweet and bitter flavors nicely combined, with vanilla playing off a mild vinegar. Mr. Bardet said of this dish, "Lobster is suave and blends well with vanilla and well with vinegar. The vinegar gives it verticality—like someone disagreeing in a conversation. This dish is best matched with a fat wine, a non-acidic wine."

In *coquilles Sans Jacques cloutées de mandarine confite, jus d'agrumes aux perles du Japon*, the scallops speared with mandarin and citrus juice, were spectacular. A playful, candied fruit sauce was recalled by twists of mandarin zest piercing the scallops.

Global influences surfaced again in the *Le Homard Grillé Thai: Riz sauvage, chutney d'ananas à la coriandre*, or grilled lobster with wild rice and curry. The plate was daring, exhibiting a superb piquancy, with the lobster nearly smoked, and coconut and curry used in impeccable Thai style—Chef Bardet once worked at Bangkok's famous Oriental Hotel. "I try to avoid gastronomical racism," he says. "Produce from other cultures do not impoverish the palate, they enrich it." The dish is served on a bright blue plate as if to recall the warm South-east Asian waters of Thailand itself.



Asian-themed artwork in the suite

Mid-way through the meal, Madame Sophie Bardet, very much in *grande damemode*, sweeps through the dining room, greeting each table in turn, her pet dog in tow (the dog's presence is "forbidden," she notes coyly).

Pigeon de Saint-Paterne Racan, mi-fumé à la réglisse, figue noire confite, was a lovely play of somber winter colors, with yam and fig contributing rich tones of yellow and brown.

A groaning cheese trolley next arrives; the table captain gently presses his fork down on the cheeses to show their texture—a gesture we liked. The St. Felicien is so rich as to be literally melting on the plate, even at room temperature—more an oil than a dairy product!

Our criticisms? They are relatively minor: Two dishes—especially the soups that we tasted during our visit—reached the table not quite hot. Breads were a little hard on two occasions.

To Chef Bardet, food and wine are inextricably connected. "The wine is a personality that is not so flexible—but dishes are. So, dishes must adapt to wines!" He works with his Chef Sommelier Thierry Nerisson to match his dishes to local wines: of the restaurant's 20,000 bottle cellar, about 60% are Loire Valley wines, and 22 wineries do special "Jean Bardet cuvées." At

Sommelier Nerisson's suggestion, we tasted several Loire Valley wines. A 1999 *Domaine des Baumard* "Clos du Papillon" Savennières was akin to a simple white burgundy, closed in the nose and supple on the palate with vanilla, silky honey and mineral tones. A red 1996 *Pierre-Jacques Druet* "Grand Mont" Bourgueil Val de Loire was very supple with a buttery nose, a ruby-garnet color, and solid tannins, but it finished quickly. A red 1982 *Jean Nau* Bourgueil showed a sweet cherry nose. Light-bodied, it showed no signs of browning but had not acquired any additional complexity with age either: nuances of raspberries and licorice in the mid-palate.

Joining us over snifters of Groperrin Cognac 1954 rich with peat, orange, and vanilla tones, we gradually discovered that Jean Bardet is himself a subtle drama. He takes an intelligent and rational attitude to cooking, but leavens this otherwise rigorous approach with deftly delivered touches of more robust sensuality. "I adore life," he says, "and to be alive is to bite into life—happiness is like picking flowers on the new day." Bardet's aim? "To cultivate in our clients a receptive frame of mind. To remove their ideas and abstractions—to give them the space to sigh, and then smile."

Yes, by this time, we were sighing and smiling, too.

This article was written by Nicole Medvecky-Riggs,
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