

Cognoscenti magazine

Because life is short

La Bonne Étape Chateau-Arnoux

The magic continues at **La Bonne Étape! Cognoscenti Magazine** first brought this special property to the attention of our readers in 2002; in 2003 our editors returned and found that La Bonne Étape remains a true haven of culinary style and lodging elegance in Haute-Provence.

Walk into La Bonne Étape around lunch- or dinner- time, and the fragrant smells wafting from the kitchen—lamb, lavender, and spice—reach your nose with delicious temptation. Once you're been seated at table (your mouth already watering), you're handed a menu with a line written on it which aptly expresses the graciousness found throughout this establishment: "Madam, Sir, Miss, Allow us to wish you, first and foremost, the best appetite in the world."

Thanks to the presence of waxed-paper lamps, the entire dining room is bathed in a warm, yellowy glow that lends things a happy tone. At first you sense an overall impression of great style; it is only later that you begin to notice the many individual touches that go into creating that impression. There are, for example, a number of exceptional pewter accessories, like



Chef Jany Gleize keeps the magic alive at La Bonne Étape



the pewter birds adorning each of table, or a beautiful pewter wine bucket in the shape of swimming fish. Presentation is elegant: Each dish is rolled up to table on a wooden trolley covered with a tablecloth; on it, china plates rest on a pewter tray, with small floral arrangements adding to the loveliness. The only mildly pedestrian touches are the glasses of uniform size—seemingly used for both wine and water—with "La Bonne Étape" stenciled on their sides.

We began with flutes of 1996 *Pommery* champagne with a *bergamote* nose—very clean and clearly delineated and delivering an elegant finish of great persistence.

During our first meal, a splendid assortment of amuse-bouches arrived at table, including a very fine caviar *aubergine*, rabbit, and stuffed zucchini flowers.

We chose the *Menu Haute Provence et Méditerranée* and began with *calmars farcis*

aux herbes vertes et aux pignons de pin, sauce de tomates cuites ensemble, montée à l'huile d'olive vierge, or calamari with spinach and pine nuts. The calamari is cooked tenderly in the tomato purée, to which is added mayonnaise and olive oil. A heavenly creation. In the *gâteau de brandade de morue, sauce à la truffe noire et truffe blanche*, Chef Gleize showed his ability to highlight the “meatiness” of truffles. The *ris d'agneau et noisettes d'agneau, sauce à la truffe* was prepared with delicacy, the tastes kept vivid and perfectly recognizable.

For wine, we had a 1999 *Denis Mortet* Gevrey-Chambertin. Red meat and herbs were impressively displayed in this burgundy along with exotic Asian spice and just a trace of herbaceousness in the finish.

Next morning, we ventured out to explore this little-known part of Provence, La Bonne Étape's gracious staff providing the advice and maps. We took a hike from the village of Ganagobie through the mountains to a secluded monastery, a lovely 2-hour circuit with dramatic views of the Durance valley.

After relaxing in our suite, which consisted of a tastefully decorated sitting room and bedroom connected by a gracefully domed foyer, and a swim in the hotel's lovely swimming pool, we passed into the restaurant for a second evening's pleasures. It was time to explore the à la carte portion of the menu.

For the fish course, we had *poisson poêlé (loup) à l'huile d'olive vierge et ravioli farci au vert, tartine de poutargue*, and for the meat course we had the *carré d'agneau de côtes découvertes*. Chef Gleize is an absolute master with lamb, sourcing the best produce from nearby Sisteron and preparing it with sauces that are focused and power-

ful without being subjected to excessive reduction. There's a purity about Jany Gleize's cooking that is nowhere more evident than in his lamb dishes; he respects the characteristic flavor of each ingredient, yet manages to extract plenty of flavor from them.



Lovely country elegance at La Bonne Étape

Worthy of special mention is Chef Gleize's *jambon cru d'agneau*. As he explained in an exclusive interview with Cognoscenti Magazine, this marvelous “ham” began as a challenge: some time back he met up with some friends in the Alps and happened to enjoy a ham of *chamois* with them (*chamois* is a tender venison from the Southern Alps). He couldn't resist adding, “Oh at our place, we have cured ham of lamb.” By the time his friends arrived for a visit a few months later, he'd refined the technique. The meat is dried,

cured, and kept in ashes to seal the flavor, and it remains marvelous for 1-2 years, aromatic and delicate, vaguely reminiscent of a Serrano ham only far leaner: a labor-intensive, high-luxury creation. “Cooking is a language,” says Chef Gleize, “and Provence is my accent.”

An impressive range of cheese offerings is presented to diners on an antique cheese trolley. Each cheese—and there are dozens, including a comprehensive selection of goat cheeses—is charmingly labeled with a hand-written wooden signpost. In the house signature dessert, which features a lovely miniature house made of sugar, lavender honey makes a spectacular appearance.

The second night's wines included a 1974 *Chateau Rayas* Chateaufort-du-Pape personally recommended by Chef Gleize. The color of refined gold, with a heady and complex nose of caramel, petrol and peat, it showed kumquat, white peach, and truffle in the mouth along with just a slight sour bite before passing over to a lingering finish. In the reds, we tried a rather heavily oaked 1998 *Jamet Côte Rôtie*, ruby-black

in color with prune with a bouquet of roasted fruits, red meat, and leather, and characteristic *garrigue* notes in the palate. This promising youngster has tannins that will likely resolve themselves nicely in the years to come.

Another memorable line written on the menu was not only poetic, but very apt for our condition by the end of the meal: “*Par le baiser du vin s’ouvre le rêve.*” – “Kissed by wine, I enter the realm of dreams.” And so we did shortly thereafter!

Beyond the elegant and comfortable style of its rooms and the subtle and refined pleasures of its kitchen, La Bonne Étape remains a favorite retreat of the *cognoscenti*. The menu features a relatively small number of dishes, but we have yet to taste even one that has not been very well rendered. La Bonne Étape is highly recommended for the authentic experience of French *haute cuisine* and leisured lodging.

This article was written by Nicole Medvecky and Jeffrey Riggs, Contributing editors to *Cognoscenti Magazine*.

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