

# Cognoscenti magazine

Because life is short

## Oustau de Baumanière Les Baux de Provence

At the luxury hotel and restaurant **Oustau de Baumanière**, modernity and tradition co-exist remarkably. Built up around an original 14<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse, the property is sensitively integrated with the dramatic rock cliffs of the immediately surrounding landscape.

Visiting **Cognoscenti Magazine** editors stayed in a very spacious corner room made cheery by bright plaid curtains in red, orange, and green. Its huge, private patio offered spectacular 360-degree views of the splendid landscape, with the fortified medieval town of Les-Baux-de-Provence dominating the hillside in front.

Three stunning new suites have just been added at the hotel. Decorated in an ultra-modern style by interior designer Stéphane Plassier, they incorporate a number of state-of-the-art design notions, including the centering of the room around a stand-alone bed with the mini-bar and closet area placed *behind* the headboard.

The salon where aperitifs are served is decorated in a subdued play of charcoal and dark green. Here, modernist themes found throughout the hotel are echoed in the low, square candle holders and Japanese-style tables.

Jean-André Charial, who studied with such culinary greats as Troisgros and Bocuse, today carries forth the traditions inherited from his grandfather (who acquired the property in 1945). Yet Mr. Charial does not shy away from taking the restaurant in exciting new gastronomic directions. “In cuisine,” he says, “the key is to keep your roots and be real French. But that



*A visit to Les Baux de Provence is not complete without a stop at the fabulous Oustau de Baumanière*

doesn't mean you're a museum!" His à la carte menu contains some daring ideas, but because it was our first experience at this famous restaurant, we chose “La Ballade des Baux,” the classic tasting menu which showcases the kitchen's signature dishes.

In the beautiful dining room, the aesthetics of culinary and decorative tension are fully developed. As Maître d'Hôtel Sergio Meloni notes, there certainly is “une ambiance ici”—one fostered by a creative contrast between the traditional and the modern, between the sobriety of the ancient vaulted ceilings and bursts of red color in the modern paintings that adorn the walls, between the austerity of stone and the lushly full curtains covering the windows, between the contrasting tastes and textures in the dishes themselves.

Fine restaurants first announce themselves to diners through the excellence of their amuse-bouches, and Oustau de Baumanière is no exception. Here we

sampled a trio that included *jarret de veau en gelée, velouté poivron-gingembre*, and *salade de morues et st-jacques, vinaigrette truffes*—the silky ginger-carrot velouté is worthy of special note.

In *St. Jacques poêlées, croute de sarrasin, artichauds poivrade*, the subtle flavors of artichoke hearts contrasted beautifully with the spiced buckwheat. The *raviolis de truffes aux poireaux* were perhaps 30 seconds short of being fully cooked, even by *al dente* standards. Next came perfectly cooked *filets de rouget au basilic*, served on a bed of tomato *confites*.

Looking resplendent in a short-cut jacket with black leather apron beneath, Sommelier Gilles Ozzello made some spectacular wine recommendations. Mr. Ozzello has managed the restaurant's remarkable 2,500 title, 80,000 bottle collection for 20 years, and he knows it well.

We began with a 1995 *Bernard Morey Meursault-Genevrières*. Tart and closed when first poured, it opened dramatically over an hour's time to release subtly perfumed aromas. Scintillating, chewy, and beautifully structured, this wine had "all the honey of a Meursault and all the mint of a Genevrières," as M. Ozzello aptly phrased it.

Even more spectacular than the white Burgundy was the 1989 *Louis Jadot Bonnes Mares*. Still youthful (although a slight pinkishness now showed around the rim) its impeccably rich nose led to palate tones of leather, herb, cocoa, and coffee before finishing on powerfully lingering stewed prune notes. Its "silky, subtle tannins match well with the lamb," noted M. Ozzello.

The lamb in question was none other than the restaurant's famous *canon d'agneau en croûte*. We asked for it pink, and after slicing open a whole *filet d'agneau* at our table, the table captain showed us the meat: it was beautifully and tenderly pink. Served with tapenade beneath the *croûte*, the rich lamb juices were collected and spooned over our plates.

The tableware here is worthy of mention: it is different for each course, delicate and every lovely. The ser-

vice staff was beautifully sensitive to pacing, intuitively slowing down the course progression as we lingered over the vintage wines.

The exceptional cheese tray contained a wide selection of pungent local cheeses; we adored the *buchette de crau, fleur d'olivier* (chevre with tapenade). A superb dessert plate—actually two full trolleys of desserts—was appealing in the extreme, and we didn't hold back! From the *chariot de pâtisseries* we selected a lovely chocolate duo—chocolate banana and chocolate blanc with *Cointreau* and *vervaine*. A second *chariot* of-



A truly exceptional cheese tray

fered sorbets and ice creams along with heaping baskets of fresh red fruits. We tried the smooth rhubarb sorbet, one of several different flavors kept well-iced in silver tins riding on the trolley.

The sommelier served us a fine 2002 *Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise des Richards* with dessert, while a rich, raisiny *Burmeister* Port from the outstanding 1970 vintage (bottled in 1973) wrapped up the stellar wine service. Highly recommended.

This article was written by Nicole Medvecky-Riggs, Contributing Editor to *Cognoscenti Magazine*.

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### Oustau de Baumanière

13520 Les Baux de Provence

France

Ph: 33 (0)4-90-54-33-07

Email: [oustau@relaischateaux.fr](mailto:oustau@relaischateaux.fr)

Web: [www.oustaudebaumaniere.com](http://www.oustaudebaumaniere.com)