

## In Lake Placid: French cuisine, Adirondack decor

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 24, 2011



Paradox Lodge in Lake Placid is original and intimate. Decorated partly in "Adirondack eclectic," the inn includes rustic furniture made by the owner, who also is the chef. The food is classic French.

**Photograph by:** Jake Sporn Photography, Paradox Lodge

In a world of cookie-cutter hotels and formulaic dinner menus, Paradox Lodge in Lake Placid is an original.

Even many Lake Placid habitués don't know about this insiders' secret, an unusual and intimate French gourmet restaurant and Adirondack inn that is dedicated to a lost art: the pursuit of quality.

Paradox Lodge is a quirky spruce-green cottage that dates from 1899 and glows with historic charm and character. The house, which has a view of majestic Whiteface Mountain, is a few blocks from Lake Placid's Main St. Out back is a lawn that stretches down to Paradox Bay, a tiny tranquil inlet of Lake Placid.

It sounds quite conventional, but that is because you might not know Moses (Red) LaFontaine, Paradox's owner and a gifted chef who runs the inn with his wife, Nan. LaFontaine's great-great-grandparents were from Normandy, and the family eventually moved to Quebec, and then to upstate New York. He learned to cook "tethered to his mother's apron strings" in her dinner-and-dancing roadhouse in Saranac Lake. Creative and uninhibited, Red became a passionate cook, landscape artist, furniture maker and charismatic personality known around town for his unreserved opinions on any controversy, including the Tour de France, iceberg lettuce and politics. He also is an ardent Francophile who has made pilgrimages to at least 10 Michelin three-starred restaurants in France.

“France and French cuisine are my soul,” says LaFontaine, who surrounds himself with memorabilia. The patterned blue and yellow china recalls Provence, the music is Piaf and Aznavour and the stacks of cookbooks draw on the gastronomy of French luminaries like Paul Bocuse, Roger Vergé and les frères Troisgros.

“The rest I call Adirondack eclectic,” says Nan. The decor features a gentle jumble of collectibles like school pennants, cocktail shakers, corkscrews and vintage photographs. What gives the place its fundamental style is the twig and branch furniture, including an armoire with birchbark appliqués and tables with legs fashioned from tree trunks. A lot of it is hand-carved by LaFontaine in his workshop, when he is not food prepping.

Paradox’s warm and intimate dining room seats only about 20, with room for more on the porch in summer. If you’re dining à deux, I recommend the two bar stools, which offer a strategic view of the kitchen and some of the delectable ingredients: aromatic basil and rosemary in wicker baskets, and heaps of vegetables. Here at the bar, you will be in the line of fire in case LaFontaine feels contrary, but you can watch him and his sous-chefs braising quail with port and cranberries, rolling hunks of filet mignon in peppercorns, tossing lobster and Andouille sausage with pasta or searing venison with lingonberries. Pay close attention, because from time to time there are specials like lobster bisque, Ahi tuna, elk loin, wild salmon, duck confit or wild-boar sausage.

LaFontaine calls his food classic French fare, but the portions are generous and the presentations are unfussy, so it bears his own signature. The platings make a fascinating show. In a blur of activity, the chefs’ line creates artful presentations with the meat or fish surrounded by a bountiful, colourful harvest of perfectly cooked carrots, thin French green beans, snowy cauliflower and tiny roasted blue potatoes. Then come the sauces: au poivre, Bordelaise, cognac and cream, wild mushroom or tomato and basil. Et voilà.

On the accommodation side, Paradox is equally distinctive and inviting – but all-American. The inn has eight unique Adirondack-style guest accommodations with hand-crafted furniture, hooked rugs and art and accessories with woody bear and moose motifs. You’ll be snug, warm and supremely cozy, coddled atop a featherbed and smothered in soft flannel sheets, quilts and heavy comforters.

The main building, Paradox Lodge, has four comfy, folksy rooms on the second floor, above the dining room. The adjacent Cedar Lodge houses four newer, more deluxe suites, decked out with fireplaces, knotty wood walls, king-sized beds with layers of plush comfort and fancy bathrooms with modern sinks inset into rustic slabs of wood. Some of the suites have ceilings hand-painted with a pretty sky- and-clouds motif. That’s the chef at work at one of his other creative endeavours.

LaFontaine is just as buoyant at breakfast-time. He scoffs at a weight-watchers’ dream of cereal and scrambled egg whites. With whisk and spatula flying, he prepares a perfect, delicate omelette with fresh herbs – with no inhibitions about butter, cheese or bacon.

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## **IF YOU GO**

Lake Placid is a two-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 15 south to the U.S. border and New York Highway 87 to Exit 34.

Paradox Lodge: 877-743-9078, 518-523-9078; paradoxlodge.com; 2169 Saranac Ave., Lake Placid; open to guests ages 13 and over, unless a family takes the entire inn or dining room.

Price: Including gourmet breakfast, wireless Internet, bicycle or ski storage, and summer use of kayaks and canoes: Paradox

Main Building: \$145 U.S.-\$175 for two, per night; Cedar Lodge, \$210-\$255 U.S. Dinner, \$40-\$65 p.p., without wine.

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