

Relais & Chateaux inns set the standard for luxury

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE APRIL 5, 2012 6:02 PM



Twin Farms in Barnard, Vt. (left) elevates the all-inclusive formula to a superlative stratum.

Photograph by: Kathleen Landwehrle, Twin Farms

One of the truly singular pleasures for Montreal's elite travellers and gastronomes is that we have more Relais & Châteaux within weekend distance than any city except New York and Paris. These small hotels set the standard with their original decor, haute cuisine, personal service and dedication to local culture.

Here at home, we have fabulous French-inspired Quebec gastronomy and our own unique charm. Across the border in the U.S., there is an exciting, different vibe generated by U.S. history, culture and cuisine.

At Auberge Saint-Antoine in Quebec City, dinner and a show takes on a dazzling new meaning. The province's only urban Relais & Châteaux, owned by the prominent Price family, is an exquisite boutique property that blends sleek contemporary decor with a precious display of 400-year-old archeological artifacts of Old Quebec.

But there is countryside news. The new executive chef, Julien Dumas, formerly an associate of Alain Ducasse in Paris, will take over Saint-Antoine's gastronomic Panache Restaurant this month. But Dumas also will pitch his tent at two outdoor locations, part of the new "pop-up" trend in casual dining. The Saint-Antoine's al fresco eateries, both called Panache Mobile, will be glorified truck stops,

charming outdoor bistros with a canopied terrace and a temporary kitchen.

The principal Panache Mobile will operate on the verdant grounds of the Vignoble de Sainte-Pétronille on Île d'Orléans. With some produce coming from the Prices' own farm, the lunchtime menus will feature such gourmet comfort food as bison burgers and the signature "guedille" with lobster, a Québécois cousin of the lobster roll. The after-dark pièce de résistance will be dinner on certain evenings, to coincide with a fireworks extravaganza, l'International des Feux Loto-Québec. A second Panache Mobile, in Ste. Foy, also will have a picturesque riverfront setting – and Dumas's gourmet creations.

In Charlevoix, La Pinsonnière is a deluxe country hotel with a breathtaking location overlooking the St. Lawrence River. An outdoorsy new package, River and Mountains, will feature whale-watching cruises and hiking adventures in two spectacular wilderness parks, the Parcs des Grands Jardins or the Parc des Hautes Gorges de la Rivière Malbaie. Take either route and you'll be famished. Executive chef Simon Bouchard will spoil you when you get back to the inn with his new menu of lobster from Îles de la Madeleine.

Twin Farms in Barnard, Vt., the latest hotel within weekend distance of Montreal to join Relais & Châteaux, elevates the all-inclusive formula to a superlative stratum. At this remarkable hilltop estate, you'll be treated like royalty, albeit at princely prices. Still, the tab might be justifiable because of the 20 unparalleled accommodations ranging from sumptuous suites to unique private villas. Plus, you can have almost anything you want – simple treats like warm chocolate chip cookies or chilled Champagne à volonté. Services range from such uncommon conveniences as free laundry and worldwide phone calls, to five-star gourmet meals with organic ingredients. For a grand entrance, there even is a helicopter pad – but you have to have your own helicopter.

Twin Farms, built around a farmhouse dating from the late-1700s, once was the home of author Sinclair Lewis, the United States's first Nobel laureate for literature. The art collection includes rare folk crafts and the works of such contemporary masters as David Hockney, Frank Stella, Roy Lichtenstein and Cy Twombly. Always distinctive, the Out of the Woods spa offers custom-blended massage oils blended from such exotic products as cypress, juniper, frankincense, sandalwood and ylang-ylang.

Guests can join a Morel Gathering, May 19-20, or a Wellness & Kripalu Yoga Retreat, May 25-28, with exercise, meditation and a spa menu.

On the Maine coast, The White Barn Inn is a temple of indulgence revolving around 27 lavish rooms and suites, spa life and the renowned cuisine of executive chef Jonathan Cartwright, a Grand Chef of Relais & Châteaux. You can expect such luxuries as baths with rose petals, facials that use diamond particles, epicurean meals of pheasant and venison, plus Cartwright's dreamy signature dish, steamed lobster with fettuccine and coral butter sauce.

The hotel's new Lifestyle Retreat, June 14 to 16, will balance that lofty living with wellness immersion including talks by dietitian Marissa Lippert, author of the buzzed-about Cheater's Diet; and Jenn Falik, a style expert who expounds regularly on The Today Show and The View.

White Barn's restaurant, the only countryside hotel in the northeast to be rated five-star by the

gold-standard Forbes Travel Service, will feature guest chef Howard Kalachnikoff from Gramercy Tavern, a top Manhattan dining spot. (May 3-5). And yes, the dining room really is in a barn, complete with a hayloft and antique farm implements.

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If You Go

Auberge Saint-Antoine, Quebec City, & Panache Mobile, Île d'Orelans & Ste. Foy; 888-692-2211, saint-antoine.com; rooms and suites start at \$189 for two

or \$429 with gourmet breakfast and dinner. Packages available with massages, museum visits, river cruises and Madonna concert on the Plains of Abraham in September.

La Pinsonnière, La Malbaie, Charlevoix: 800-387-4431, lapinsonniere.com; with gourmet breakfast, dinner, indoor pool, sauna, walking trails, \$375- \$615, per night for two until May 31. River and Mountains Package (from June 1) starts at \$1,575 for two, for three nights with meals, whale cruises and park access. Massages are extra.

Twin Farms, Barnard, Vt. (reopening May 4): 800-894-6327, 802- 234-9999, twinfarms.com; rates include gastronomic meals, afternoon tea, wine and spirits, fitness facilities, cycling, tennis, canoeing. Suites, \$1,260-\$1,900; cottages, \$1,900-\$3,100, all per night, for two. Spa treatments and reserve wines are extra. Children under 18 welcome during family week, July 30-Aug. 3.

White Barn Inn & Spa, Kennebunk Beach, Maine: 207-967 2321, whitebarninn.com. Until May 25, from \$360-\$825 for two, per night (Sun.-Thurs.) or \$380-\$825 (Fri-Sat.) incl. breakfast, afternoon tea. Prix fixe dinners, \$104-155. Two-night Lifestyle Retreat, \$772 pp, double occ. (\$386 per night), or \$1,186 for singles (\$593 per night).

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