

Le Baluchon, in Mauricie, has a style all its own

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE APRIL 13, 2012



The new rooms at Auberge Le Baluchon sport a striking mix of modern and rustic design.

Photograph by: Michel Julien

Auberge Le Baluchon, a resort in the rolling farmland of Mauricie, is bursting with new features, including a Nordic spa, renovated accommodations and a talented chef direct from Old Montreal.

I visited Le Baluchon several years ago and I thought it was a captivating destination, a getaway unlike other resorts in Quebec, or anywhere else, for that matter. It is a picturesque, 1,000-acre domain with dining rooms, a spa and lodging in separate pavilions, all connected by narrow carriage roads, footpaths through the trees and wooden bridges that cross the rushing Rivière du Loup. With most of the buildings built of dark-red clapboard with white verandas, Le Baluchon looks like a great agricultural estate or a seigneurie of Old Quebec.

Now open 21 years, Le Baluchon always has been a leader in resort life. It was eco-conscious before most other hotels, using regionally made furniture and textiles, and adopting green operating systems. It also focused on local cuisine, right from the get-go. And it was an early proponent of spa life, bringing an indoor pool and body treatments to farming country.

This unusual place is the vision of two men who hail from the next-door village of St. Paulin. Louis Lessard, a biologist, and Yves Savard, a graphic artist, wanted to create a getaway that blends good food, wellness and a close encounter with the great outdoors.

“You have heard of the ‘slow food’ movement,” said Lessard. “We also are moving toward ‘slow design’ in our redecoration with organic materials like metal, glass and stone. And we want to continue to be surrounded by our heritage and our landscape.

“We’re also hoping that when guests come here, they will say ‘you don’t see that everywhere.’ ”

With its sprawling size and magnificent grounds, Le Baluchon is self-contained. Have a hankering for a micro-brew? In the mood for an exhilarating gallop across the fields? Dying for a nibble of duck confit? There is no need to leave the property.

Le Baluchon is in the first phase of a seven-year,

\$40-million upgrade. Approximately 20 of Le Baluchon’s 90 rooms and suites now are sporting a striking mix of modern and rustic design. The furniture is built of birchbark and raw timber, a contrast to the dazzling glass bathrooms and smart LED lighting.

Plans include an artists’ retreat and galleries that will open this summer. And to supply their kitchens, the resort recently partnered with two neighbouring farms, La Ferme du Canton which raises Highland beef, Chantecler chickens and Icelandic sheep, and the adorable, zany La Certaine Ferme Galerie, which produces vegetables and eggs.

There is a distinctly original style percolating at Baluchon with two recent arrivals – food and beverage manager Bernard Beauchemin, who used to be general manager of the Mount Stephen Club, and executive chef Yan Gabriel Gauthier, who manned the kitchens at S in the St. Sulpice Hotel and at the Intercontinental, both in Old Montreal. In the rather formal dining room, Gauthier has kept classics like chateaubriand, Caesar salad and beef tartare. However he is introducing inventive cuisine and contemporary presentations in such dishes as rack of lamb with a side of grilled blue cheese; shrimp with lemon and a hint of chocolate; salmon laced with vermouth and sorrel; and scallops with shiitake mushrooms. Gauthier even is toying with sous-vide and raw cuisine.

More casual, Le Baluchon’s Eco Café Au Bout du Monde is one of the most exciting hotel bistros I have experienced. Pine-panelled and rustic in a stylish way, it is cleverly decorated with pieces of heavy machinery and the tools of a sawmill – giant round blades, belts and pulleys – that reflect the forestry heritage of the Mauricie region. The menu blends hearty après-sports fare with modern touches in such dishes as a club sandwich stacked with duck confit, salad with smoked venison, a Highland burger with local mustard and platters of cheeses with white port jelly.

If you liked what you have eaten, you can buy such regional gourmet products as artisan chocolates by the Samson Chocolaterie in Trois-Rivières, honey from Miellerie de Champlain a little farther east, and exotic spices from Canada’s north packaged by the company d’Origina in Lac Saint Jean.

The Spa Santé’s latest is Baluchon de la Rivière, a compact Nordic spa with hot and cold pools and a sauna, all built to connect with the indoor swimming pool. New treatments include the Archipelago Isles Massage, in which the masseur uses his forearms for extra pressure; the Four-Hands Massage, with two people working on everything from your scalp to your feet; and the Therapeutic Leg Massage, which promotes circulation and is especially good for athletes. Le Baluchon also plans yoga and

stretching classes and outdoor massages on a platform built over the river.

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If You Go

St. Paulin is a 90-minute to two-hour drive from Montreal. Take Highway 40 east to Exit 166 for Louiseville and Route 349 north.

Le Baluchon: 800-789-5968, 819-268-2555, baluchon.com, 3550 chemin des Trembles, St. Paulin. Gluten-free and other special cuisines are available.

Price: (valid until July 14): A sample package for one night includes, breakfast, three-course dinner, use of indoor pool, hot tub, sauna, fitness room, walking/cross-country and snowshoe trails, incl. equipment: approximately \$145 pp — \$195 pp for rooms; \$245 pp for suites, all double occupancy, Sun. to Fri., depending on the room. Add \$35 pp for Saturday night, which includes Sunday brunch. The new Nordic Spa is open to guests who take spa treatments.

Extras include spa treatments (\$40-99), horseback riding and carriage rides, and French-language summer theatre (June-Aug.). Watch for spa deals on the Internet and last-minute discounts upon check-in for treatments.

Spa: One-night Health Spa Retreat includes breakfast, dinner, Swedish massage, leg therapy, and starts at \$255 pp, per night, double occ.

In summer, there are canoes and kayaks, bikes, tennis and extensive walking trails.

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