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Country Roads: Chez Octave at the centre of the action in Montmagny

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



The historic Auberge-Restaurant Chez Octave was recently named best inn in its category by Quebec Tourism. The lively bistro is at the heart of the inn, and features an expansive and charming cobblestone terrace.

Photograph by: Tourisme Chaudière-Appalaches

Auberge-Restaurant Chez Octave is at the centre of the action in downtown Montmagny, a historic town on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River, about 300 kilometres east of Montreal.

Run by Maripier Boutin and her partner, chef Sébastien Nègre, Chez Octave is a hot spot for lunch, casual dinners and a bar scene, both indoors in the chic bistro and outdoors on the charming cobblestone terrace. Plus, with her finger on the pulse of local happenings, Boutin gets her guests involved in local activities, mainly shopping, tastings of fine local food products and cruises along the St. Lawrence River. She also orchestrates wildly popular jazz nights on Fridays.

Quebec Tourism recently named Chez Octave the best inn of 2011 in its category, in the Chaudière-Appalaches region, and Boutin took time off from the celebrations to show me around.

The seven-room Chez Octave operates in a historic stone manor house, circa 1850, at the heart of

Old Montmagny. The house was built to please and built to last by a government minister named Octave Beaubien. It is architecture, par excellence. The casements have deep ledges and indoor shutters, so there's a feeling of extra space added to already spacious rooms. Walls of exposed stone and lots of antiques create a period atmosphere. When they want to simply relax, guests can settle down on a balcony or in two small salons.

Boutin has a well-developed sense of what makes a satisfying guest experience. She has equipped all the rooms with flat-screen televisions, bathrobes, bottled water, coffee-makers and private bathrooms. The beds are draped in heavy duvets with fresh white cotton covers and colourful quilts folded at the end, European-style. Among my favourites was No. 14, decorated in canary yellow with an unusual arched ceiling, white-painted furniture and precious original lamps of the 1800s with floral designs.

The bistro is the heart of the inn. After extensive renovations, it has emerged as what Boutin calls "rococo-glamorous." The lounge section is framed by tall banquettes of turquoise tufted leather and the bar is topped with a collection of artistic white porcelain plates signed by showbiz vedettes who have raised a glass here, including singer Pierre Lapointe, cellist Jorane and folk writer-musician Fred Pellerin.

Chef Nègre uses Quebec ingredients wherever possible for an inventive dinner menu that is inspired by European and American cuisine, including: escargots with portobello mushrooms, blood pudding, Louisiana seafood gumbo, sturgeon poached with maple, pork osso bucco, braised lamb, shepherd's pie with confit of duck, rabbit stew, risotto with truffle oil and porcini mushrooms, pasta with pancetta and pine nuts. For folks who want something simpler, he also does a lot on the grill, such as Angus beef or salmon.

Chez Octave's Girls' Night Out is a fashion frenzy with a stylist visiting Montmagny's boutiques, including Au Coin de la Gare, Double Pas and Myco Anna. Even Montreal's well-shopped fashionistas might find a few treasures. I spotted a down-filled jacket at half-price and lots of summery dresses, perfect for party girls.

"The Girls' Night Out is like Sex and the City," says Boutin, "all for women, but it is Montmagny, not Manhattan."

Octave sports the logo of Bienvenue Cyclists, which means that the inn is equipped to assist riders with a pump for tires, a secure shelter, transportation and laundry service and even special rates. On one visit to Montmagny, I rode along the shoulder of Route 132, part of La Route Verte for about 15 kilometres east, stopping at such villages as Cap St. Ignace, l'Islet sur Mer and St. Jean Port Joli. It was a super ride, breezy and picturesque, with glimpses of the St. Lawrence River and a lunch stop at a grocery store along the way. Most important, the cycling section of this shared road is more than a metre wide and the drivers were, for the most part, respectful.

Montmagny and nearby Berthier sur mer are ports for Croisières Lachance, the riverboat company that runs tours through the archipelago of Île aux Grues. These islands and the Montmagny shore

are among the most popular stops for the Greater Snow Goose, particularly in May and October, because the birds seek out the local food. The confluence of salt and fresh waters in the St. Lawrence River creates ideal growing conditions for bulrushes whose roots are a favourite delicacy of the intrepid long-distance fliers.

Still, Boutin says Chez Octave's most popular package is the Lachance cruise to Grosse Île and the Irish National Historic Site of Canada, where immigrants were quarantined in the mid-1800s.

rochelle@rochellelash.com

IF YOU GO

Montmagny is a three-hour drive from Montreal via south shore Highway 20 East and Exit 376.

Auberge-Restaurant Chez Octave: 418-248-3373, chezoctave.com; 100 rue St-Jean-Baptiste E., Montmagny. Open daily for lunch and dinner and for breakfast on Saturdays and Sundays.

Price: including breakfast, \$119-\$139-\$159 for two; or \$99-\$129-\$149 for one. Add approximately \$40 p.p. for dinner package. The Cyclists Package with lodging, bike shelter and breakfast starts at \$49.50 p.p., double occ. Discounts for children 5-12 (bed and breakfast, \$15, and with dinner, \$25); under 5 stay for free. Prices will decrease Oct. 1, except for holidays.

Packages are available with golf, massages, Croisières Lachance, food and wine tours, summer theatre (in French), Girls' Night Out Shopping.

Croisières Lachance: 888-476-7734, www.croisiereslachance.ca; Cruises with land tours depart from Berthier sur Mer, \$43-47. Some ornithology cruises depart from Montmagny. For other birding tours, www.ornitour.net.

Information Montmagny: 800-463-5643, www.cotedusud.ca. Tourisme Chaudière-Appalaches: 888-831-4411, www.chaudiere-appalaches.com

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