

# Country charm is in converted school's curriculum

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE    OCTOBER 26, 2012



A little red schoolhouse is now the five-sun B&B Gîte l'École buissonnière, in the Eastern Townships near the U.S. border.

**Photograph by:** Handout, Prestige Air Photo

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It's rare, but I do stumble on a surprise every now and then.

I recently visited Gîte l'École buissonnière, a B&B on the edge of the Wine Route in the Eastern Townships. It was a revelation on a small scale, both the rather unsung region and the little red schoolhouse that has been transformed into a top-drawer "five-sun" B&B on Quebec Tourism's scale.

I have crossed the border to Vermont countless times, but never looked left or right at the flashing lights along Highway 133 around Philipsburg. My bad.

This time, I turned east, heading for the École in a tranquil area once called Pigeon Hill, but now part of St-Armand. I drove over rolling hills and past beautiful farmland with herds of dairy cows sharing their pasture with flocks of wild turkeys. Yet, looking at a map, I realized I was on the southwest tip of the Wine Route, not too far from Dunham and Sutton, as the crow flies. I simply hadn't come through the Townships.

L'École buissonnière translates as "truants' school," and the B&B actually was a tiny 1950s country school. It's blocky and sturdy on the outside, but owner André Lapointe gutted the interiors, undertook a massive renovation and added country charm and a few modern comforts. He also prettied up the exterior with a large garden, including patio furniture and a barbecue pit, so it is all rather like a homey cottage with high clipped cedars in front and neighbours' cornfields all around. Peaceful, private and pastoral.

Before innkeeping, Lapointe was a curator of antiques and an interior decorator. He brought his passion and expertise to his own little inn, so there are scads of collectibles — a personal mix of everything he fell in love with over the years.

Lapointe also got lucky with the high ceilings and huge windows of the former schoolhouse. His kitchen is big, open and bright. The library has large tables loaded with magazines and books, with a cushy black leather sofa facing a fireplace. The breakfast room is a formal space with Hepplewhite, Chippendale and art-deco furniture.

The school's classrooms have been turned into four guest rooms, each with its own bathroom. La Classe des Filles has coral decor and a carved Victorian headboard. La Classe des Garçons is more masculine, with lots of blues and wood trim. La Classe d'Histoire is rococo-style with hand-done collage art on the walls. La Classe de Botanique, all yellow and green, is a large contemporary loft-style space with a kitchenette. Lapointe, a caring host and a detail man, has equipped the beds with hypo-allergenic mattresses and pillow-tops.

Gîte l'École buissonnière is not terribly fancy or luxurious, but it fulfils the requirements of a five-sun rating, which include an attractive location and landscaping, high-quality decor and good food.

Lapointe has changed hats enthusiastically from decorator to breakfast chef. He serves juice, fruit with yogurt, cereal, multi-grain bread and filtered coffee, tea or tisane and such main courses as french toast or thin crêpes with maple syrup; omelettes with mushrooms and cheddar cheese; or baked eggs with tarragon, goat cheese and crème fraîche.

This region is easily do-able on a day trip, but it's such untouched territory that it's worth staying overnight to try something new and explore. Lapointe creates packages with four country dining rooms, all BYOB, and he supplies his guests with a bottle of wine from his neighbours, the Domaine du Ridge.

Lapointe is so keen on the rich harvest of regionally produced food and wine that he opened a shop, Les Halles du Quai, on a jetty facing Lake Champlain. Here he sells hundreds of products, including goodies like truffle-flower honey from Ferme Carole et Pierre Pettigrew in Frelighsburg, caramel spread from La Chocolaterie du Vieux Beloeil and maple sugar from Érablière Le Murmure du Printemps in Dunham. Most of the products are all-natural, including the vegan-friendly shampoos and soaps from Oneka Elements, based in Frelighsburg.

Lapointe's neighbour on the jetty, Bistro-Traiteur Le 8e Ciel, an adorable country bistro, is perfect for lunch or dinner, with the attraction of the view of Lake Champlain. Yellow walls give it a Mediterranean look, crisp white paper on the tables add a modern flair and large mirrors cleverly reflect the lake. Chef Jerome Bouilly is from Chantilly, France; he stays true to his roots and cooks with a lot of cream in such dishes as fish amandine, braised lamb forestière and pasta Marseillaise with shrimp and pastis. There are more delicacies à la français, like Toulouse sausages, cassoulet of mussels, duck confit, steak-frites and croque monsieur.

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## IF YOU GO:

Saint-Armand and Pigeon Hill are a one-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 15 south to Exit 22 and Highways 35 and 133 south.

Gîte l'École buissonnière: 450-248-0260, [www.giteecolebuissonniere.com](http://www.giteecolebuissonniere.com); 1685 chemin Saint-Armand, Saint-Armand/Pigeon Hill.

Price: with breakfast, \$140-\$155 for two, with a 25-per-cent discount on additional nights. Includes DVD library, gym, kitchenette and bicycle loaners.

The Détente et Gastronomie package is a two-night deal (from \$183 per person) with a welcome cocktail, breakfast, multi-course dinner at a local restaurant and a bottle of wine. Participating restaurants are Alyce in Saint-Sébastien, La Girondine in Frelighsburg, Le Fumet in Farnham, Le Nid de poule in Dunham and Table d'hôte de Tony Statz in Saint-Armand.

Bistro-Traiteur Le 8e Ciel: 450-248-0412, [www.le8iemeciel.com](http://www.le8iemeciel.com); 193 Champlain Ave., Saint-Armand/Philipsburg; breakfast Sat. and Sun. \$8-\$14; lunch Thurs. to Sun. \$10-\$18; dinner Thurs.-Sat. \$15-30.

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