

Country Roads: Manoir Bécancourt is a testament to fine inn-keeping

Antique decor, excellent cuisine

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE MARCH 10, 2013



The Black and White room in Manoir Bécancourt, a charming inn and dining spot in a 100-year-old house.

Photograph by: Rochelle Lash

Jasmine Hébert and Mario Vianni, owners of Manoir Bécancourt, are pros.

In the world of hospitality, that is a very good thing. There is no substitute for professional standards when it comes to housekeeping, training staff and preparing food.

I make a point of saying this because a lot of country inn-keeping is done by well-meaning people with no formal background. The results are varied. In the 1980s TV sitcom *Newhart*, amateur owners led to cute hijinks, adorable mishaps and a wholesome, hilarious good time. But in the harsher high-resolution LCD light of 2013, stumblers might end up on Gordon Ramsay's *Hotel Hell*. Not so at Manoir Bécancourt.

“Clean rooms and good service, that’s all that counts,” Hébert said.

Well, not quite all. Add interesting decor and fine food, courtesy of executive chef Mario, and that pretty well describes the Manoir. The 100-year-old stone house is in the town of Bécancour, but the inn uses an old-Quebec spelling, adding a “t”.

Hébert's parents owned the inn and she grew up there, so she knows every corner of the 1912 building and the business. She eventually studied hotel management, took a sommelier course and got big-city hotel experience in Vancouver and London, where she met Mario, who was a hotel food and beverage manager originally from Rome. There was symbiotic strength in the twosome and the couple eventually came to Quebec and bought the Manoir, adding energy and a modern flair.

Under their direction, Manoir Bécancourt evolved from a quaint Quebec auberge into a European-style inn with a busy dining room that's clearly the place to be in these parts. The office of Tourisme Centre-du-Québec invited me to visit and I pounced.

The Manoir is an appealing mélange of antique styles. Hébert has designed and commissioned whimsical furniture that looks like baroque, empire and French provincial. Guests enter into an art deco lounge with Victorian settees, all updated with black lacquer. Vintage photographs cover one wall, adding to the period atmosphere. Soft jazz plays. Drinks are served. And it's onto dinner.

Manoir Bécancourt's best-known commodity is its dining room, a series of inter-connected, intimate spaces with a formal look created by green and gold walls, white tables and tasselled curtains. Professionalism shines through here, too. Gianni's cuisine is excellent, robust and lively. His calls it Mediterranean with a Sicilian accent and uses Quebec ingredients. Some of his specialties are grilled shrimp with goat cheese and salsa, seared foie gras with whisky marmalade, beef carpaccio, venison stuffed with pheasant mousse, rack of lamb and risotto with wild mushrooms and white truffle oil. One of his favourite dishes is something he brought from Rome: cacio e pepe, pasta simply dressed with pepper and pecorino cheese.

The Manoir has two very different sections of lodging: four charming rooms on the second floor of its original building, all with queen beds and private bathrooms, and four newer, more elaborate suites in a recent extension. The Black and White room in the older wing is my pick, because of its pretty French look and the view of the Bécancour River.

Hébert and Gianni leave nothing to chance. All of the rooms are equipped with the works — individual climate control, bathrobes, flat-screen televisions, pod coffee machines, hair dryers, radios with iPod docks and Play Station consoles for movies and gaming. Particularly for business travellers, each room also has a computer printer and free telephone calls throughout North America. And a nice bonus is the line of toiletries by Judith Jackson, all-natural shampoos and lotions distilled, free of parabens and made in Canada. Even more local is the lavender soap from La Savonnerie Carpe Diem, made just down the road in Bécancour especially for the Manoir.

Gianni has yielded to an irrepressible urge to express another side of inn-keeping — inexpensive and informal. If Manoir Bécancourt has a European accent and a feminine style, the handsome new Pub au Cochon Fumé is a very Quebec sports bar with a masculine feel and an affordable, copious menu of steak, fish 'n' chips and smoked chicken. Gianni doesn't stint on the heavy stuff. The barbecue burger is topped with bacon and Provolone and the Miss Piggy is a heart-stopping platter of wings, nachos, smoked meat and ribs. Balancing the tavern fare are healthier salmon burgers, salads and a

kids' menu.

The Pub au Cochon Fumé has TVs for the big games, polished wood and leather decor and vintage movie posters. It also has 20 kinds of beer and a huge and rather sophisticated drinks menu that includes single-malt Macallan Scotch, premium Hornitos tequila from the agave plant, muddled cocktails like the Hemingway Daiquiri and the playful Apple Pie with vodka and juice.

The town of Bécancour seems too quiet for all this merrymaking, but it is home to one of Quebec's largest industrial parks with companies like Alcoa and Olin from the United States, and Cepsa, an oil and chemical company from Spain, so there is a built-in, well-travelled clientele. Also nearby is the Réserve de la biosphère du Lac St-Pierre, the migration stop of the greater snow goose in May and October.

If you go

Bécancour is a two-hour drive from Montreal. Take Highway 20 east toward Quebec City and Routes 55 north and 30 east; or take Highway 40 east and Route 55 south to 30 east.

Manoir Bécancourt: 877-994-9068, 819-294-9068, www.manoirbecancourt.com; 3255 Nicolas Perrot Ave., Bécancour.

Price: \$115-150 for two, including small gym, hot tub. Packages are available with meals, massages, snowmobile, and in summer golf and cycling.

Pub au Cochon Fumé: 819-294-9068; 1625 Ave. Nicolas Perrot, Bécancour.

Tourism Info: 888-233-4676; www.tourismebecancour.com; 888-816-4007, www.tourismecentreduquebec.com.

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