

Checking In: Auberge du Chemin Faisant draws foodies

Guests book six months in advance for special dinner

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE SEPTEMBER 18, 2013



The epicurean Auberge du Chemin Faisant will present 10-course gourmet dinners this autumn.

Photograph by: Auberge du Chemin Faisant

Auberge du Chemin Faisant has an eclectic mélange of decor throughout its lodging section, but it has one single style in the kitchen and dining room. It's epicurean all the way.

This surprise destination is a 45-minute drive from Rivière-du-Loup east through the Bas-Saint-Laurent region of Quebec toward the New Brunswick border. Looking on a map, it lies in what appears to be a no man's land between Rivière-du-Loup and Edmundston, N.B. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is situated on a residential street in the village of Cabano about a half-kilometre from the shore of Lac Témiscouata. There is life in such neighbouring communities as Cabano, Notre-Dame-du-Lac and St-Louis-du-Ha!-Ha!, whose name means "something unexpected" in a First Nations language. And Chemin Faisant itself is a big draw, wildly popular with gastronomes in the know. The inn attracts a steady stream of gourmet guests who make room in their calendars as much as six months in advance for an opportunity to enjoy a special, theatrical dinner.

Hugues Massey and his wife, Liette Fortin, harbour an unwavering dedication to food and drink. They are both former hotel administrators but he eventually followed his father's example and became a

chef and she trained as a sommelière. They serve gastronomic dinners on Saturdays nights (and throughout the week during summer), but their pièces de résistance are their spring and fall extravaganzas, the Festival de la mer (seafood) in May and June and the Festival du gibier (meat, mostly exotic), which is coming up in October and November. These are four-hour feasts with 10 elaborate courses and wine pairings.

Auberge du Chemin Faisant operates in a converted manor house that once belonged to the local mayor. Built in the 1950s, it was a creation of Swiss-born architect Robert Blatter, who became known in Quebec for his Art Deco style. Chemin Faisant's dining room is the house's Deco highlight, blessed with distinctive curved corners, oval shapes swirling in the ceiling and a glamorous, romantic black velvet banquette. The mayor also happened to have owned a lumber mill, so the inn is rich with fancy walls, floors, shelves and decorative trim in various woods.

It's all a formal backdrop to the formal cuisine. The music, loungey and jazzy, streams from Piaf to Krall, with riffs by pianist Stephan Moccio. White tablecloths contrast against dark tapestry-covered chairs. Rows of flatware are placed perfectly, first course to last, from the outside in, with cutlery rests for propriety. The multitude of glassware stands ready for apéritifs, wine and port.

"We change themes every season, but we usually begin by choosing the wine," said Massey. "It inspires me to create dishes around the flavours. In May, the seafood festival had a Loire accent, with 10 different wines."

And what will the focus be for the Festival du gibier that takes place next month, I wondered. I have insider information about kidney, liver, "viandes sauvages" like bison, venison or wapiti, and such exotics as emu and kangaroo, but we'll have to sit tight for the details because Massey keeps his menus secret until his guests are seated for dinner. Then everyone is presented with a scrolled menu listing the delicacies of the night and the wines and liqueurs, complete with a chart outlining producer, vintage, colour and bouquet.

As a guest house, Chemin Faisant is a three-star establishment out of a maximum of five on Quebec Tourism's rating scale. Indoors, it is a gallery of art and sculpture by Quebec artists. Outdoors, it has a large garden with a hot tub and a Nordic shower. Upstairs, it has six rooms, all different and all loaded with collectibles, lace curtains, Tiffany-style lamps and Victorian fixtures dripping with crystals. A riot of wallpaper — florals, stripes and braided patterns — gives each room its own character. I liked La Champêtre, a cosy, tranquil space with soothing moss-hued decor and leafy wallpaper in a hunting motif.

The region is full of good food, and you can buy some of the products that Chemin Faisant serves. Nearby, Domaine Acer in Auclair transforms maple into sugar, jellies, syrup and especially liqueur, and also gives tours of its cellars and the mini-museum dedicated to maple syrup. Its specialty is a liqueur made from fermented maple, which is the base for some of Fortin's tantalizing pre-dinner apéritifs and cocktails. Down the road, Fromagerie Le Détour in Notre-Dame-du-Lac sells artisanal cheeses and regional food products. You can also buy some of these goodies at Jean-Talon Market.

You'll need some exercise after all of these indulgences. There are bicycles for rent in the town of Cabano, and Chemin Faisant is two blocks from the scenic Parc linéaire interprovincial Le Petit Témis, a 135-km route through the countryside and along the lakeshore. And Parc national du Lac-Témiscouata, the newest of the vast outdoor network of Sépaq (la Société des établissements de plein air du Québec), opened this summer. It's a treasure of hiking trails, kayaking and canoeing, wildlife observation and excursions on a rabaska, a super-sized canoe.

IF YOU GO

Témiscouata-sur-le-Lac is a five-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 20 east to Route 132 east to Rivière-du-Loup, and then Routes 85 and 185 south.

Auberge du Chemin Faisant: 877-954-9342, 418-854-9342, cheminfaisant.qc.ca

12 rue du Vieux-Chemin, Témiscouata-sur-le-Lac / Cabano sector. Open year-round, except for Dec. 20-Jan. 5.

Price: Rooms cost \$105-\$150 for two people, incl. breakfast and use of exterior hot tub and Nordic shower. The guest rooms operate daily. Open for eight-course dinners on Saturday nights, year-round, \$50 plus \$35 for wine pairings. From June-Sept. 1, dinner is served Tues-Sun. Packages available with dinner and wine, cycling shuttle and golf.

Festival du Gibier: 10-course dinners will be served on Saturdays, Oct. 19, 26 and Nov. 2, 9, 16, 23, 30; \$60 p.p. plus \$55 for wine. Festival de la mer: Fridays and Saturdays, May-June, 2014:

Tourisme Bas-Saint-Laurent: 800-563-5268, bassaintlaurent.ca.

The writer was a guest of the inn. The inn did not review or approve the story.

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