

Country Roads: Auberge La Fontanella

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



Tourism Ste. Agathe

Editor's note: Some of the details might have changed since the original publication date. Please check with the establishment before heading out!

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You've heard of B&Bs. Well, Lorenzo Gurreri runs what might be called a B&TIC - bed and terrific Italian cuisine.

Gurreri owns Il Vigneto, a popular Italian restaurant that gives Ste. Agathe des Monts a little slice of la dolce vita. And he recently opened a tiny, darling inn upstairs - Auberge La Fontanella.

It's hard to imagine a surprise in the long-established tourism industry of Ste. Agathe, where the first accommodations for visitors opened more than 100 years ago. However, Auberge La Fontanella is a surprise, and a totally pleasant one. With only four rooms, it's an appealing little getaway. It's quiet, air-conditioned and so subtly attractive that it rates three stars out of five from Quebec Tourism, even though it has no hotel facilities, pool or grounds. It does have heart, though, and it's a true mom-and-pop operation.

Maria, Gurreri's wife of 43 years, handled the inn's decor - modern, cool and serene. A reading area

has a Zen-style indoor rock garden fountain, whose gurgling provides relaxing background music. The rooms, simple and comfortable, are decorated in shades of soft grey and beige, with old pine armoires and wheat-coloured duvets. Each has a shiny new white porcelain bathroom. Two rooms have private terrasses overlooking the main street, and the other two share a terrasse. The Gurreris put out coffee and juice in the morning, but they direct guests to neighbouring restaurants for breakfast. Classic Italian cuisine is their forte. After their four children and three grandchildren, Il Vigneto is their baby.

The restaurant, an inviting spot with a cluster of red sidewalk umbrellas, is one of the top lunch and dinner spots in Ste. Agathe. Grab a noontime table on the terrasse and indulge in a glass of Chianti and a thin-crust pizza baked in a wood-fired oven. The big seller is No. 19, La Richesse, laden with sliced spicy Italian sausage and pepperoni. Gurreri's favourite is No. 20, Il Pasticcio, a tasty treat with grilled veggies, pancetta and cheese.

Locals gather on the terrasse during the afternoon with tart, sparkling Campari-and-sodas and antipasti like bruschetta, carpaccio or mussels marinara. At night, Il Vigneto's second terrasse, off the street, becomes a romantic hideaway behind trellises of ivy and hanging pots of pink geraniums. On tape, Dean Martin croons his love song That's Amore. Specialties include osso bucco, scaloppine Marsala and a reserve wine list of Barolo and Brunello di Montalcino at good prices. Tiramisu and café Il Vigneto, spiked with Frangelico, make a delectable finish.

"Don't ask me about secret ingredients," said Sicilian-born Gurreri, who started working in a restaurant as an after-school job when he was 12. "I don't use any measurements or recipe books. It's all according to taste, and it's all made at the minute of ordering."

One of the Gurreris' sons, Ross, has followed his father into the world of Italian cuisine, but in a more modern style. He has manned the fires at Cavalli on Peel St. and currently works at the chic eatery Bice on Sherbrooke St.

Lac des Sables is the heart of summer fun in Ste. Agathe. You can frolic on three beaches, rent windsurf boards, sailboats or canoes and cruise on the beloved Alouette, a 55-passenger sightseeing boat. The P'tit Train du Nord linear park runs through Ste. Agathe; one of its prettiest sections is the seven-kilometre journey to Val David along the Rivière du Nord.

Ste. Agathe's Place Lagny, a municipal park with an outdoor stage facing Lac des Sables, is hopping all summer. Friday Nights at the Pav is a series of happenings geared toward teens. The Thursday for Kids morning shows feature puppets, magicians and music. The eclectic lineup for the Shows on the Lake series includes a concert of traditional Jewish music, Shalom! Hello! Ste. Agathe (Thursday, 7:30 p.m.), and Latin dance lessons (Aug. 10, 7 p.m.).

Auberge La Fontanella is good value and, with a location at the centre of town, is easy to get to even if you don't have a car. Galland Bus offers tour trips a day, with a few stops between downtown Montreal and Ste. Agathe, and arrives within a block of the inn. Galland also accepts bicycles for a modest extra fee.

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