



The blue and white auberge, inspired by Victorian decor, is a three-star establishment that is more about country charm and basic comfort than luxury. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF AUBERGE DES VIGNOBLES

A CHARMING AUBERGE IN THE HEART OF EASTERN TOWNSHIPS' WINE COUNTRY



ROCHELLE LASH
Checking In

The good times roll heartily at Auberge des Vignobles in Dunham, at the heart of the convivial wine route in the Eastern Townships.

I visited on a beautiful late-summer afternoon, and the pastoral, tranquil countryside was hopping with visitors having lunch with wine, tasting wine and buying wine.

Dare I say that a sojourn here is as alluring as a voyage to vineyards in Burgundy or Napa Valley? The Brome-Missisquoi Valley — a patchwork of hills, meadows, farmers' fields and apple orchards — is resplendent. City folk flock to farm stands brimming with the week's harvest of fresh berries and vegetables. And eating lunch on a sun-dappled terrace adjacent to a vineyard is hard to beat.

Within a few kilometres of about 10 vineyards — many in

Dunham and a few others down the road in Bedford, Bingham and Frelighsburg — the Auberge is owned by Chantal Mercier, who is also the innkeeper-in-chief and the mother of 11 children (only one still lives at home).

Awed by these two of her many accomplishments, I expected to meet an exhausted hausfrau. Not at all. Mercier is an energetic dynamo who wears high heels almost day and night, whether she's cooking breakfast, pitching in with housekeeping or guiding her guests around La Route des Vins.

The rambling blue and white house is inspired by Victorian decor, with a gabled roof, turrets and a white latticework veranda. It looks like a period piece, but it was built 20 years ago, so it combines old-fashioned ambience with modern comforts like air conditioning, soundproofing and large, inviting windows. It's a three-star establishment, more about country charm and basic comfort than luxury.

The living room is serene and lovely. Fringed lamps and tapestry settees give it the look of an 1890s parlour. Beyond the salon, there is more space for lounging, this time outside. French doors

open onto a wide veranda and an expansive garden. There are swings, trees that offer shade and a fire pit for nighttime relaxation.

The eight guest rooms are decorated in soothing colours of nature: lavender, amber, rose, sky blue and moss, with lots of white trim to keep it light and fresh. There are gilt-edged miniatures on the walls, cosy patterned comforters over king, queen or twin beds, and private bathrooms throughout.

For breakfast, Mercier's hearty specialty — which almost everyone orders — is a crêpe, French toast and ham-and-cheese omelette trio. You can also customize it with eggs of any style and add toast with homemade jam.

Just down the road, La Table Fermière and its pub partner, Brasserie Dunham, are star attractions along Principale Street. Chef Luc Pinard, a young and talented innovator and locavore, dishes up seasonal fare such as strawberry gazpacho, and classy cuisine that includes black cod with miso and bok choy, sweetbreads seared in butter with kohlrabi purée, and guinea fowl with black tea and licorice sauce.

Brasserie Dunham has been

honoured by RateBeer, a widely recognized international website, as the best microbrewery in Quebec. Specials here include locally inspired pizza and burgers, and a bevy of brews ranging from a hoppy, farmhouse-style beer to an IPA brewed with Earl Grey tea and guava.

Dunham is at the heart of La Route des Vins, and it's easy to map out a tour of a few of the 22 regional vineyards. There is a tourism information office at the centre of town. Auberge des Vignobles accommodates a lot of wedding parties and also organizes discounts for visits to the wine centres around Dunham.

Among them is the distinguished l'Orpailleur Vineyard, marking its 35th year in 2017. L'Orpailleur produces an impressive 200,000 bottles a year of 10 different wines, including l'Orpailleur Blanc, a perky white for \$16; the l'Orpailleur Ice Wine at \$30; and the bubbly l'Orpailleur Brut at \$27.

Le Tire-Bouchon (The Cork-screw) is the restaurant at l'Orpailleur, and its patio is as pretty as a picture. The menu features salmon tartare, pasta, artisan sausages, Brome Lake duck or pork with apples — accompanied

IF YOU GO

Dunham is an hour's drive from Montreal via Highway 10. Take exit 68 towards Highway 139 South, then turn onto Highway 202 towards Dunham. Auberge des Vignobles is at 110 Collège St. in Dunham. For more information, call 450-295-2476 or visit aubergedesvignobles.com. A room for two costs \$130 to \$150 and includes breakfast, a mini-fridge and Wi-Fi. Packages are available to include Route des Vins tours and an in-house table d'hôte dinner — about \$35 to \$40 per person. Bring your own wine.

La Table Fermière is open as of 11:30 a.m. from Thursday to Sunday for lunch and supper. For more information, call 450-814-1500 or visit brasserie-dunham.com. Brasserie Dunham is open daily from 12 p.m. for lunch and supper, until October. For more information, call 450-284-0516.

L'Orpailleur Vineyard is at 1086 Bruce St. in Dunham. For more information, call 450-295-2763 or visit orpailleur.ca. The boutique is open daily, year-round. Guided tours are three times a day until Oct. 31 and cost \$10, including tasting six wines plus a gift.

Le Tire-Bouchon is open for lunch daily from 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. until Oct. 10. For more information, call 450-295-3335.

For more information on local tourism, contact Eastern Townships tourism at 800-355-5755 or eastertownships.org. For information about the wine route, visit laroutedesvins.ca.

by l'Orpailleur's wines, of course, all available by the glass (for \$5 to \$7) or by the bottle.

Dunham has a significant historical aspect as well. Founded by American Loyalists who settled in the area after the Revolutionary War, Dunham was Lower Canada's first township. It was registered in 1796, well before our nation was formally created in 1867, a celebratory 150 years ago. There is still a strong Anglo influence in the community, including the All Saints Anglican Church on Principale Street, which dates back to the 1820s.

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