

HOTEL INTEL

STONEHAVEN NOW A RELAIS & CHÂTEAUX PROPERTY

Historic Ste-Agathe estate joins prestigious international group of one-of-a-kind hotels



ROCHELLE LASH

Due to the pandemic, spa access is on hold and dining is in-room.

The team at StoneHaven Le Manoir had good reason to celebrate with Dom Pérignon in December: the splendid Ste-Agathe-des-Monts inn had joined Relais & Châteaux, the prestigious international group of haute-cuisine restaurants and one-of-a-kind hotels.

It had been about a decade since a Quebec establishment last made the cut for this exclusive club, whose nearly 600 members are known for gastronomy, exceptional interiors, expression of local culture and thoughtful service. StoneHaven's key players are ecstatic about the honour.

"Que du bonheur — nothing but joy," said Eric Gonzalez, StoneHaven's stellar executive chef, who was schooled in Nice, France, and has led Hôtel Le St-James in Old Montreal and L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon at the Casino de Montréal.

"Everyone is focused on a new way of thinking," said Gonzalez. "We're seeking perfection." They're also following COVID rules, which means Gonzalez's exquisite cuisine is now being served in-room — a romantic adventure.

StoneHaven's co-owners, Georges Coulombe and Guylaine Brault, are developers specializing in heritage projects. They

have spared no expense modernizing the manor's operations, restoring its 1908 architectural features and outfitting it with a fabulous mélange of antique furniture and chandeliers, including Chippendale, Biedermeier, Louis Philippe and Tiffany. You'll get frissons from the hand-painted ceilings, classical statuettes and ornate wall mouldings.

A vast, tree-covered estate high on a hill overlooking Lac des Sables, StoneHaven has been a monastery, a hunting lodge and a country club. I visited two years ago when it reopened as a fine inn, and I returned just before Quebec's dining rooms closed in December to see how it transitioned to a Relais & Châteaux.

The scene: StoneHaven operates 34 sumptuous rooms and suites with opulent decor, marvellous pastoral views and all-new bathrooms with heated floors. Guests enjoy lavishly appointed spaces for every mood, including a fireplace-equipped foyer, a library, a piano lounge, a wine-tasting corner, reading nooks, and salons for cards or chess. Seventeen more rooms are scheduled for May in the former nunnery, which is being gutted and rebuilt.

Outdoors, there are porches and porticos, terraces and colonnades. In summer, there are formal Italian gardens the likes of which have not been seen in Ste-Agathe.

"It's all about passion," said general manager Marie-Josée Denis. "We continually are refining StoneHaven to reach the pinnacle of hospitality."

New features: I arrived on a snowy afternoon, just in time for



StoneHaven Le Manoir is a historic estate overlooking Lac des Sables in Ste-Agathe-des-Monts. It is part of Relais & Châteaux, the prestigious international group of one-of-a-kind hotels. STONEHAVEN LE MANOIR

the new Sunday traditional high tea (on hold for now). I eased into StoneHaven's refined mood, sipping Darjeeling and sampling raspberry tarts while pianist Guy Beauchamps played.

Another highlight is the growing wine cellar, blooming with private imports and biodynamic vintages from Canada and the rest of the world. The food and wine pairings are sensuous symphonies, complete with notes of berries, peaches, olives, herbs and flowers.

Also new is StoneHaven's sensational Nordic-style wellness experience (on hold for now, in line with pandemic rules). Guests can tiptoe outside along heated pathways to a hot tub, a sauna in a private pavilion and a steam room cleverly built into the side of a mountain, which was once the monks' vegetable larder.

Cuisine: Gonzalez's epicurean achievements are outstanding even by Relais & Châteaux standards. He embellishes dishes with lacy crisps, dainty specks of chlorophyll, saffron foam and quail eggs. And he loves to surprise his guests — maybe with an amuse-bouche, a breakfast smoothie or his signature: a dish sprinkled with tiny silver or gold flakes.

"My cuisine is inspired by emotion," said Gonzalez, one of Canada's most accomplished chefs. "It is a harmony of taste, aroma and visual pleasure."

His fare is delicate and subtle, but so exquisitely presented that it leaves a powerful impression. He makes magic with foie gras, partridge, duck with figs, tender beef from Prince Edward Island and Gaspé cod and salmon. Even everyday veggies — butternut squash, beets, potatoes and

IF YOU GO

Relais & Châteaux (relaischateaux.com) has 12 members in Canada.

StoneHaven Le Manoir: 844-774-1991, 819-774-1991; stonehavenlemanoir.com; 40 Lac-des-Sables Rd., Ste-Agathe-des-Monts. Accessible. Pet-friendly, \$75 per stay. Closed Sun.-Mon.

Price: Winter weekdays, \$260 up to \$525 for the panoramic suite; weekends, holidays and summer are higher. Including in-room Nespresso, Molton Brown toiletries, bedding by Marie l'Oie, bathrobes, fitness room. Children's bed, \$50.

Dining (in-room; hours subject to change): Breakfast, lunch, bar menu, dinner; from Tuesday afternoon to Sunday morning. Three-course dinner, \$95; five-course dégustation, \$130; wine pairings are extra.

Ste-Agathe-des-Monts tourism: ville.sainte-agathe-des-monts.qc.ca. Laurentian tourism: 800-561-6673, laurentides.com.

mushrooms — have been blessed with tinselled new lives.

What to do: StoneHaven has partnered with adventure companies for heli-sightseeing (heli-tremblant.com), zip-lining (tyroparc.com), horseback riding (kanatha-aki.com) and fat-biking (technolodge.ca).

On site, there is a new crazy-carpet winter slide — even grown-ups love this little thrill — as well as scenic trails through the woods for walking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. For history fans, StoneHaven offers a guided tour of its antique treasures. rochelle@rochellelash.com

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