

A Taste
of the
Caribbean

Global GETAWAY

NEW GOURMET HEIGHTS SAINT BARTH



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When the season opened in November 2019 on the Caribbean island of Saint Barthélemy it was a time of celebration. The Gault & Millau guide to gastronomic dining in the West Indies – French Guiana launched its second edition with a grand reception at the gorgeous reconstructed Le Barthélemy Hotel & Spa, doling out awards to the islands' restaurants. Eight esteemed French chefs flew in for the 6th Saint Barth Gourmet Festival cooking up a storm from November 6 – 10. And the last of the five star hotels badly damaged by hurricane Irma in 2017, Eden Rock, had completed its rebuilding and was about to reopen on the 20th.

Talk about new beginnings. Two years ago, in early September, Irma, a Category 5 hurricane the size of France, had engulfed the 25 square kilometre island causing catastrophic damage. Winds of 285 km/hour gutted houses and hotels, violent seas ripped resorts from their foundations and much of the island's infrastructure was destroyed leaving most of the population without water, electricity or phone service.

One of the awards Gault & Millau presented was to Marc Dobbels, General Manager of Le Barthélemy, for "Entrepreneur of the Year". His saga best exemplified the spirit of resilience and the fortitude of the people of Saint Barth. He opened Le Barthélemy on October 28, 2016. The next season it was wiped off the map by Hurricane Irma.

Containers of debris had to be shipped off the island and all construction material shipped in – the hotel reopened on October 28, 2018. At a cost of 50 million Euros (about 75 million CDN dollars), the hotel was restored with great beauty and design throughout the property. Readers of Condé Nast Traveler named it the number one resort in Saint Barth that year and again in 2019 and number one in the Caribbean in 2018. It was also recognized as the 25th best resort in the world by the magazine.

Dobbels, a Michelin-starred chef in his own right, has always focused his career on luxury and tourism. (He has worked in Cannes in France, Tahiti, Bora Bora, Bermuda and Mexico.) As he calmly told me the story of Le Barthélemy, I could only

“Eight esteemed French chefs flew in for the 6th Saint Barth Gourmet Festival.”

marvel how he has taken it all in stride.

I was on the island with my husband for the 6th “annual” Festival (there was no festival in 2017) and the place was abuzz with excitement. Almost every hotel on the island closes during the hurricane season (end of August to end of October), so on November 6, they were just waking up from their seasonal slumber. Hotel staff, most of them contract workers, had come in from France (Saint Barth is an Overseas Collectivity of France with a semi-autonomous status) and other European countries. The island’s many excellent chefs were back in their kitchens and tourists were starting to arrive.

At the opening night ceremony of the Festival, held at the eco-chic Manapany, I spied Chef Jarad McCarroll from Le Toiny at the bar. He had just won Chef of the Year, the night before at the Gault & Millau presentations. McCarroll, a native of South Africa, trained in Switzerland, joined the Ritz in London and then went on to work at two Michelin starred houses. His final stop before joining hotel Le Toiny in October 2107 was as Chef at M Restaurant in Threadneedle where he won Harpers Restaurant of the Year Award.

He had a wealth of experience, so I asked him what his biggest challenge was as a chef on Saint Barth. The answer really wasn’t much of a surprise. Procurement of produce is a constant difficulty on this island. The place is so arid that here’s virtually no agriculture and most all must come in by ship or plane. Other more fertile and verdant Caribbean islands provide some of fruits, vegetables and meats while wines, butter, bottled water, caviar, foie gras and other specialty items come from Europe. At times the seas are too choppy to dock in Gustavia the island’s capital, a situation that can continue for weeks.

“At our hotel, we’ve had to fly in food when the seas are too rough – even recently” Dobbels told me as did McCarroll.

This makes the menu items at the top resorts eye popping expensive. Thankfully it’s a situation made palatable by the quality of the dishes.

It’s often been said that Saint Barth has the best dining in the Caribbean. Certainly with over 70 restaurants there’s lots of choice ranging from gastronomic white



Opening party at Manapany

tablecloth dining, to feet-in-the-sand beach side grills and tasty ethnic cuisine such as Creole and Thai. This being a French island there are boulangeries serving the best pastries and baguettes and take out spots offering gourmet sandwiches for a beach picnic.

We were here for the gourmet dining and opted to go to two. The first we attended was at Le Sereno, a five star beach side resort with an Italian connection – its sister hotel is in Lake Como. Most of the staff were Italian and so was the Executive Chef Raffaele Lenzi. On Le Sereno’s regular menu I found excellent Italian specialties such as pastas, cacciucco (fish stew) and vitello tonnato.

The open air dining room was casual chic, overlooking the bay Grand-Cul-de-Sac with constant cooling trade wind breezes. For the Gourmet Festival menu (105 Euros), created with Chef Guillaume Goupil of the one star Michelin l’hôtel Burgundy in Paris, dishes were fancied up. We had local fish delicately marinated in vanilla oil, a tartar of beef crowned with Krystal Caviar, then grilled langouste on fresh corn pasta and a main of rack of veal. Wrapping up this visually gorgeous and most tasty meal was chocolate tart with mango and passion fruit sorbet.

Our other gourmet meal was at Aux Amis restaurant in Le Barthélemy, four minutes down the road on the same bay. Executive chef William Girard was working alongside Jean-Denis Rieubland of Le Royal, a sister hotel in Champagne, France. The 95 Euro per person menu was haute French – each plate as much art as food. The dining room was partially open air, yet elegantly so, with chicly dressed staff.

The starter for this meal was crab and mango flavoured with kumbawa (kaffir lime) and citrus marmalade, followed by seared seabass with a fish tartar on top and a main of sliced beef tenderloin crowned with a

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generous mound of caviar and surrounded by tiny chanterelles and caramelized baby onions. Dessert was a creamy mango mousse with yuzu sorbet on a buttery, crispy biscuit.

These gourmet meals were delightful but equally so in another fashion was our lunch one day at Le Grain de Sel, an open air eatery close to the spectacular Saline Beach that regulars to the island highly recommended. Chef Eddy Coquin had just won Gault Millau's Chef Peyi (country chef) of the year and was renowned for his Creole cooking. We tried an order of his beignets, rumoured to be the best on the island, a stuffed local crab and goat stew. Portions were generous, prices were half those of the five star resorts and all was lip-smacking tasty. If we were staying longer we would return here again and again.

The Gourmet Festival was the draw that brought us to Saint Barth but what we discovered was much more: an island with resilience and culture where despite the obstacles, fine food was a way of life.

HOW TO GET THERE. Fly to St. Maarten's Princess Juliana airport (SXM) and take a short 12 minute shuttle plane from there or a ferry from either Dutch St. Maarten or the French Saint Martin side. The

crossing can take 45 minutes to 90 minutes depending upon the ferry and point of departure. If you fly in, you'll find the landing on Saint Barth is a thrill. Planes have to swoop down over a hill and then break fast enough on the tiny air strip that's just 650 metres long or end up in the sea. Many cruise ships stop for the day in Gustavia, St. Barth's tiny capital that's brimming with duty-free boutiques and cozy eateries offering views over the harbour. Such an experience can give you a taste of the island and help you decide if you want to come back for more.

If you get totally hooked on the place, visit www.lebarthvillas.com for a list of over 150 villas for rent. 



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