



st barths appétit

ON THE ISLAND THAT BLENDS THE STYLE OF ST TROPEZ WITH THE ENERGY OF SOUTH BEACH, THE CHEFS ARE THE REAL ROCK STARS

IN HOLLYWOOD, IT'S THE ACTORS; IN ITALY, IT'S THE DESIGNERS; IN ENGLAND, IT'S THE WRITERS; AND IN BRAZIL, THE FOOTBALLERS. Every culture celebrates artists, craftsmen and sports stars who excel in their society's national passion. In France, it's the chefs.

From the moment you land at Gustavia, one of the world's scariest airports—a steep hill at one end of the short runway, the sea at the other—you know you're in France. You may be only a short hop from Antigua, Nevis or San Juan via the delightfully efficient Tradewind eight-seater Pilatus, but the ambience on Saint Barthélemy, to give it its proper name, is essentially Gallic.

Any culinary tour of the island has to start at Eden Rock, where Michelin-starred Master Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten commands the stage. Perched above the bay of St Jean, On the Rocks is an homage to fine dining.

To misquote Renée Zellweger in *Jerry Maguire*, Jean-Georges “had me at the amuse-bouche”—it was love at first bite. His royale of foie gras in a port wine reduction with a Parmesan mousse is seduction in a glass.

Jean-Georges offers classic French cuisine with an occasional Japanese twist. Caviar, lobster, truffles and foie gras are presented with fruit infusions and oriental flavouring—my sake-caramelised black cod



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE On the Rocks' salmon sashimi with avocado, shitake and yuzu vinaigrette; Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten; Eden Rock in St Jean Bay; On the Rocks' placement



with yuzu turnip on the side being a perfect example. The beef tenderloin with poached daikon, mustard essence and crackling kale goes down a storm with American guests, who make up 75 per cent of the establishment's clientele.

This may be haute cuisine but the waiters are young, knowledgeable and friendly, with the atmosphere, aided by a jazzy Place des Vosges-style music mix, convivial, and the view down to the floodlit reef below, patrolled by six-foot tarpon and mahi, mesmerising. The whole mise-en-scène is reassuringly expensive, but if you're on island for just one night, On the Rocks is not to be missed.





THIS IS GASTRONOMIC HEAVEN. L'ESPRIT IS THE RESTAURANT OTHER RESTAURATEURS AND HOTELIERS COME TO DINE AT ON THEIR DAYS OFF. IT'S THAT GOOD.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT ABOVE Cheval Blanc's Chef Yann Vinsot; La Case de l'Isle; the art of hospitality; Gustavia port; L'Esprit; Bonito's wahoo and truffle ceviche with sweet potatoes, canchas corn and fresh cilantro



The other grande dame of the five-star hotels is the 40-key Cheval Blanc. The one-time Isle de France is now owned by LVMH, the Dior to Dom Pérignon luxury group, but habitués will find that change has been incremental and exceptionally stylish. Maison colours are now blush pink and taupe, the spa is Guerlain.

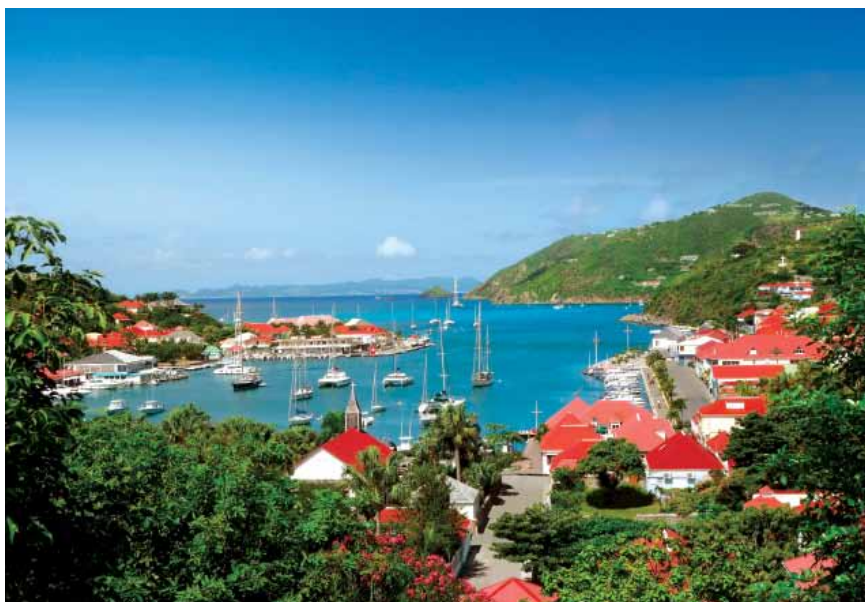
Topping the bill is Chef Yann Vinsot from Brittany. His love of the sea, an intoxicating list of over 200 fine wines, and the very best ingredients flown in from around the world ensure that dinner in La Case de l'Isle is invariably memorable. The Chilean sea bass marinated in miso, with sweet ginger purée and shaved pears; and, on a meatier note, the Limousin lamb with Moroccan spices, reminiscent of Marrakech, are cooked with confidence and flair.

But my lunchtime favourite at the sandy-foot chic Cabane de l'Isle, the hotel's beach bar, is the cheese and ham toasty, or to be more precise, the black truffle croque monsieur. I know it's a classic crowd-pleaser, but seated with one's toes in the sand, watching the pounding surf on Flamands Bay, with a glass of Provençal rosé to hand, well, life doesn't get any finer.

The third of the island's rock star French chefs is Jean-Claude Dufour, patron of L'Esprit, opposite the salt pond at Les Salines. In common with his illustrious colleagues, this long-time Eden Rock chef has a relatively short, if ever-changing, menu, the better to perfect every detail.

L'Esprit has an unassuming garden décor and the dashing Jean-Claude spends money on the food, not the frills. "It's French with an international touch," he says, and shrugs. But don't be deceived—this is gastronomic heaven. L'Esprit is the restaurant other restaurateurs and hoteliers come to dine at on their days off. It's that good.

My squid stuffed with peanut, ginger, Espelette peppers from south-west France, and rice noodles, mixed flavours like Miles Davis fused sounds—complicated ingredients, simple result. And the wine list is spectacular. If you're hankering after a vintage Pauillac, this is the place; while the house digestif, a ganache, vodka and Amaretto confection, is positively libidinous.



ITALIAN CUISINE IS ALL ABOUT STRONGLY FLAVOURED FRESH INGREDIENTS. ALEX, WHO REFINED HIS OEUVRE AT LONDON'S ARTS CLUB, UNDERSTANDS THIS AND SCOURS THE WORLD FOR HIS CREATIONS



Until recently, Le Sereno at Grand Cul de Sac was best known for Christian Liaigre's award-winning minimalist design, and the celebrities who stay there. But the new chef, Alex Simone from Varese near Lake Como, is out to change all that. His menu is in French and English, but his heart is in Italy.

To start, I'd recommend the unbelievably fresh Burrata with grilled zucchinis and Iberico ham; the yellowtail carpaccio, marinated in soy, ginger and balsamic dressing with black lemon caviar; and a simple beetroot and goat cheese salad. Italian cuisine is all about strongly flavoured fresh ingredients. Alex, who refined his oeuvre at London's Arts Club, understands this and scours the world for his creations.

To follow, the risotto with red Sicilian prawns, cooked al dente, was perfection. My wife Cheryl loved the unctuous slabs of Pluma Iberica in a Canario sauce sitting on a bed of creamy potato, piquillos (peppers) and apple chutney. The veal Milanese was delicate and juicy.

I may have been a tad distracted by the Victoria's Secret shoot going on around the pool—Le Sereno is the brand's favourite film location—but after a tarte citron meringue et compote de framboises, I felt no pain.

The following day was Cheryl's birthday, so where to celebrate? Good food, a buzzy atmosphere, inventive cocktails and a view of the sun setting over the superyachts in Gustavia harbour were the order of the day. Bonito ticks all those boxes, and then some.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT ABOVE Le Sereno's scallops and langoustine cannelloni; service at Le Sereno; Chef Alex Simone; yellowtail carpaccio with black lemon caviar; Le Sereno dining; a day at the pool





PETER SWAIN

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Happy Birthday;
Bonito's lounge; Bonito dining

CHEF LAURENT CANTINEAUX HAILS FROM PARIS, BUT THE VIBE HERE IS MORE SALSA THAN CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES. THE RESTAURANT HAS DIFFERENT AREAS: THE CEVICHE BAR, A SMOKING LOUNGE, AND A DINING ROOM ON THE TERRACE, WITH THE STAFF WORKING VERY HARD TO MAKE EVERYTHING APPEAR VERY CHILLED

Chef Laurent Cantineaux hails from Paris, but the vibe here is more salsa than Champs-Élysées. The restaurant has different areas: the Ceviche Bar, a smoking lounge, and a dining room on the terrace, with the staff working very hard to make everything appear very chilled. In terms of looks and energetic technique, the bartender runs Tom Cruise in *Cocktail* pretty close, while an über-cool DJ cranks up the party mood.

My Pisco “Mixto” Ceviche, featuring scallops, salmon and octopus in a pisco sour “spuma,” is typical of the Latin-influenced menu. My wife practically inhaled the heavenly truffle-laden green salad. The milk-fed pork confit, slow cooked in duck fat, served with oriental sauerkraut and a shitake sweet and sour sauce, was a classic French affair with an oriental twist.

A sparkling birthday cake, which tasted as good as it looked, was delivered with aplomb—we were actually the third table of the night to receive a similar comestible celebration, demonstrating that Bonito is indeed a favourite venue at which to mark special occasions.

St Barths has a panache that’s perfect for a gourmet break. In peak season, it may be a little ostentatious for some, but the beaches are many and varied, the shopping truly international, and the cuisine exceptional. With chefs like Jean-Georges, Yann, Jean-Claude, Alex and Laurent at the top of the food chain, this modish island is currently riding high in the Caribbean’s epicurean charts. M



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