

Beirut, often called the Paris of the Middle East, hasn't been atop tourist destinations in recent years, but that may be about to change. "After more than 30 years of civil war, invasion and occupation, Lebanon is prospering again, and the downtown area of Beirut, the capital, has risen from the rubble," reports Florence Fabricant in *The New York Times*. "Among more than 400 projects are a new waterfront area, parks, world-class hotels, high-end shops and restored monuments, churches, mosques and even the synagogue." Of particular interest, she writes, are the restau-

rants. Top chefs from Paris and New York like Joël Robuchon and Yannick Alléno are opening shop in the city, though they may need to adapt to local tastes. "But while some Lebanese might dare to try Mr. Robuchon's eel with foie gras, when it comes to their own cuisine, tradition rules. You'll find croissants seasoned with the spice blend zataar in bakeries, but that's about as far as most chefs dare to innovate. A few restaurants are adding Asian or Mexican dishes to Lebanese menus, but generally it's hands-off when it comes to classics like hummus." *Weekend Post*

Rest, relax & relais

What inclusion in an elite French hotel association means for a lucky guest



AMY ROSEN
*The View From
Langdon Hall*

Usually when I arrive for an interview, my subject finds me a two-legged stool to sit on and, if I'm really lucky, a glass of room temperature tap water. Not so at Langdon Hall Country House Hotel & Spa, a Relais & Chateaux property in Cambridge, Ont.

Instead, here I am, after taking my ease on a bench at a table under a linen umbrella, sharing a chilled bottle of Huff Estates sparkling wine and crabmeat and caviar canapés with owners William Bennett and Mary Beaton. An extra pillow is placed behind my back to ensure I'm at my peak of comfort, and my glass of water is refilled every few moments, seemingly by an invisible breeze. It's this sort of hospitality that gets me wondering what the Relais & Chateaux designation really means.

Before I came for my weekend visit, my editor thought membership in Relais & Chateaux was about the food, while a friend of mine thought it had something to do with the wine. I thought it was all about the recognition that a property met certain international deluxe standards — and in a way, we are all exactly right — and we were all exactly wrong.

"Relais & Chateaux was well known in Europe, but when we started here [20 years ago] there were only eight properties in North America," William Bennett says. Now there are 80, all part of a collection of 475 of the world's finest hotels and restaurants spanning 55 countries. "The basis of Relais & Chateaux are the five Cs," he further explains, "Character, calm, comfort, charm and cuisine. And those, basically, are the quality standards that you have to meet in order to be a member."

Bennett says that it's not like the AAA, where you have a numerical rating, and there's a big binder of quality standards and checklists to be met. Instead, "it's about the welcome you receive, and the generosity you feel." It seems to be more akin to inn-keeping than being an hotelier. And it's about a sense of place above all else. "Some of it is emotional, some of it is the setting, the views. It's not on a checklist."

The cuisine is another big draw. Chef Jonathan Gushue, whose kitchen at Langdon Hall recently made the list of *Restaurant* magazine's Top 100 restaurants in the world, tells me:

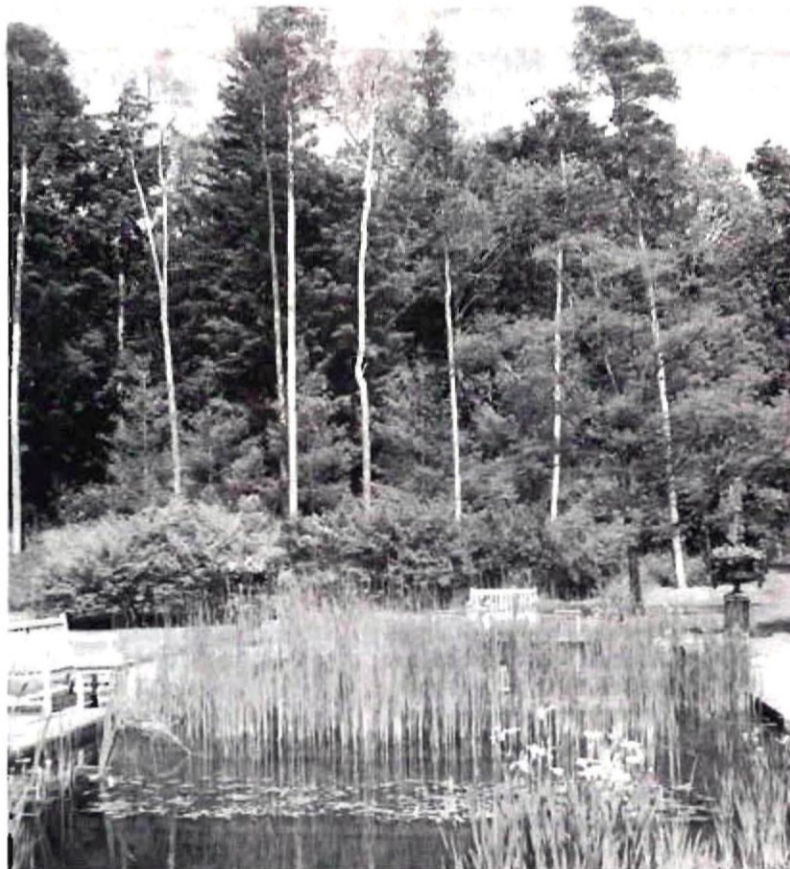
"I think the idea is that it's a group of very individual properties that meet a certain standard." I tell him I've stayed at several Canadian R&C properties, including the Wedgewood Hotel and Spa in Vancouver, Tofino's Wickanninnish Inn and the Inn at Manitou (which, sadly, just closed its doors) and have enjoyed each immensely, yet for different reasons. "I think that's exactly what I find most impressive about the membership," Gushue says. "They encourage people to be different. Each property has its own personality, which I think is really rare."

I am at Langdon Hall on a co-birthday weekend with my friend



AMY ROSEN

Langdon Hall is full of quiet moments inside and by the frog pond, and don't forget about the fantastic food.



TOP FIVE LANGDON HALL EXPERIENCES

1. Get dressed in your whites and hit the croquet green for an afternoon match.
2. Order a picnic lunch and set forth on one of the four trails on the property.
3. Book an 85-minute Hot Stem Thai massage, a blend of Lomi Lomi, acupressure, Thai yoga massage and herb-filled hot stems (\$185).
4. Take in a Sunday cooking demonstration.
5. Read a trashy novel by the pool.

IF YOU GO

I recommend one of the newly renovated Cloister rooms, with their contemporary English country charm done up in creamy plaids and prints, a wood-burning fireplace and feather-top bed. Book a blind tasting menu for dinner: À la carte is for suckers. Weekend rates for rooms start at \$329. Weekend packages start at \$535.

■ For more information, call 1-800-268-1898 or visit langdonhall.ca.

Tamara. After a full afternoon tea service in our room, some light reading by the pool and massages at the spa, we sit down to a blind tasting menu in the restaurant — blind because we are entirely in Gushue's hands. Around us there are tables of honeymooners and anniversary celebrants, plus larger groups getting together for weekend fun. I see \$400 jeans and \$1,000 suits, along with breezy summer dresses.

Earlier, the chef had told me, "the property dictates the menu to me," as it is based on what surrounds him: "The morels, black walnuts, the apple orchards. Wild leeks, ginger and garlic. The wild flowers and the herbs."

And they all find their way into our unforgettable dinner, which Tamara rates as the best she's ever had. (It's definitely in my top five as well.)

The food is creative without being unwieldy — nose-to-tail without being scary. Chilled white asparagus gets a pine mushroom crumble. Atlantic lobster is poached in Langdon's own butter, the plate scattered with earthy bites of ramps, cocoa and even cockscombs. Another course boasts wild asparagus, fiddleheads, confit duck gizzard and asparagus velouté. Never had a smoked bone marrow beignet? Well, then you don't know what you're missing. Every plate looks like a gift and tastes like a dream.

Next day, I pull open the curtains, swing the windows wide and morning greets me with searing sunshine and birdsong. Tamara, an early riser, wanders back into the room. "I went down to grab a coffee and read the paper," she tells me. "I sat near the front of the main building, where a nice silver coffee tray was set up. But then the maitre d' came over and asked me, 'Can I interest you in the perfect spot to read your paper?'"

He took Tamara over to the conservatory, which is full of natural light and overlooks the lovely frog pond. And then he said, "If I had a little extra time, this is where I would read."

Weekend Post