

Eating on St. Barts In The Caribbean Is Akin To Eating On The French Riviera



John Mariani Contributor ⓘ

I cover the world's best hotels, restaurants and wine.



The Annual Gastronomic Festival invited French and Swiss chefs to St. Barts: Eduoard Loubet, Cedric Bechade, Nicolas Sale, serge Labrosse, Pierre Auge and Virginie Basselot. MICHAEL GRAMM

It is no stretch to say that St. Barts has the best restaurants in the Caribbean for obvious reasons. For starters, it's a French island, and Air France (as well as Alitalia and KLM) have several flights per week, through St. Maarten, flying in European tourists and second-homers. And since the not-quite-ten-square mile island has no real agriculture with virtually no indigenous food culture, all ingredients must be brought in from Europe. Last, the island's very affluent clientele expects to pay high prices at restaurants that try to replicate the best of French cuisine—not something you'll easily find in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Barbados or Jamaica.

In the wake of 2017's devastating Hurricane Irma, St. Barts rebuilt at an astonishing rate and high cost to get the island back close to what it was, and a grand gesture to show its gastronomic resilience, the annual St. Barth Culinary Festival was restored last November, for which Michelin-starred chefs were flown in (along with their ingredients) to cook gala dinners at the various re-opened resorts. Each prepared a four-course menu at 95 euros and an eight-course menu at 130 euros. (One should consider that at some of their restaurants back in France a single dish can cost more than 100 euros.)



Virginie Basselot of Le Negresco in Nice made a cod silky filet of cod with Japanese peas and a lemon balm butter. JOHN MARIANI

The chefs this year were Nicolas Sale of [La Table de L'Éspadon](#) at the [Ritz Hotel in Paris](#); Cédric Béchade of La Table de l'Auberge Basque, Saint-Pée sur Nivelle; [Virginie Basselot](#) of [Le Negresco Hotel](#), Nice; Édouard Loubet of Domaine de Capelongue, Bonnieux; Pierre Augé of La Maison de Petit Pierre, Béziers; and Serge Labrosse of La Chaumière, Troinex, Switzerland. All dinners were sold out.

I attended three chefs' dinners while there and was impressed by how well the chefs' cuisine translated into a Caribbean idiom, with help from the resorts' own chefs. At Hotel Christopher's brightly lit Cristo restaurant, Virginie Basselot, the first woman ever to win the prestigious Meilleur Ouvrier de France, served sophisticated renditions of celery-stuffed ravioli with a sauce of wild herbs; silky filet of cod with Japanese peas and a lemon balm butter; squab with fresh foie gras and a peppery olive sauce; and a dessert of salted butter caramel and mousse.



Cédric Béchade, from the Basque country, served a marmitako seafood stew with tomato water. JOHN MARIANI

At the renovated Le Tamarin, set within a shadowy garden near Saline Beach, Cédric Béchade did beautifully composed dishes like marinated trout in a smoky broth with roasted rice; a Basque-inspired *marmitako* seafood stew with tomato water; succulent roasted pork; and a tamarind tart.

I also had a chance to dine at Le Toiny, a resort of 22 luxury suites set on the hillside on the wilder, leeward side of the island, where Edouard Loubet did an innovative dish of carrots stuffed with lobster tartare; red snapper simply dressed with caviar and eggplant; a rack of lamb with smoked thyme, leeks and as potato gratin; and “lemon caviar,” made of black chocolate bits flavored with ginger and coffee.



Le Tony's restaurant is but feet from the leeward side of the sea. LE TONY



William Girard, chef at Hotel Barthémely, made a dessert of classic a dark chocolate soufflé with vanilla ice cream. JOHN MARIANI

While on the island I also had a chance to dine at the newest resort, Le Barthélmy, which, after the hurricane, grew out of a smaller hotel to become a luxury resort that now extends along the Grand Cul de Sac bay, with a state-of-the-art holistic hydrotherapy center, the very popular WTF Rooftop Bar, and the wind-blown Aux Amis restaurant, headed by Chef William Girard. I chose from a fine, wide-ranging menu that began with a carpaccio of pig's foot with herbs, and a dish of poached egg "*meurette*," in red wine sauce, with bacon and mushrooms. Main courses included a traditional *blanquette* of veal cheek cooked with carrots and onions, and a juicy, spiced Caribbean grilled lobster. Desserts, too, were classic—a Parisian flan with rum and cinnamon; a dark chocolate soufflé with vanilla ice cream; and a rich baba au rhum with tropical fruits.



Nikki on the beach is a very casual, always jammed spot for lunch and dinner.

I had lunch one day at the always-packed Nikki Beach in St. Jean, with fourteen branches around the world (the first, in 1998, founded by Jack Penrod, was in Miami), all sharing an open-air, very casual beach club style and similar buffet menus. While there I enjoyed everything from sushi and sashimi, an array of shellfish, mozzarella *di bufala*, charcuterie and cheeses and an assortment of very good four different pizzas. Parties, fashion shows, bikinis and chair dancing are encouraged.



My happiest find in St. Barts, located in the principal town of Gustavia, is brand new this year. Fish Corner is a small enchantment run by Johnny Laplace and Nicholas Lebon, who have the great advantage of owning a fishing boat, so what's on the day's menu come from the day's catch—I actually admired their saying they'd run out early of a particular species—which also keeps prices very moderate for high-end St. Barts. It's a tiny room, very casual, and both owners are the servers.

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At Fish Corner the lobster is seasoned, grilled and served with olive oil. JOHN MARIANI

I was delighted with a carpaccio of tender octopus with a sauce *vierge* of olive oil, tomato and basil; the best roast lobster (priced by the gram) I had that week, with a potato puree; a *baliste* royale à la meunière (25 euros) and a light rosé wine from Provence.

If you're hungry for Italian food, Le Repaire, in Gustavia since 1991, should satisfy your pasta deprivation. I had a very good, very generous *tagliatelle* with langoustines. It's also good to know Le Repaire is open daily, year-round, serves breakfast at 7 AM and stays open till midnight. It's got a very thorough wine list and prices for both food and wine are reasonable.