

MARIANI'S

Virtual Gourmet

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NEWSLETTER

DINING OUT IN ST. BARTS

By John Mariani



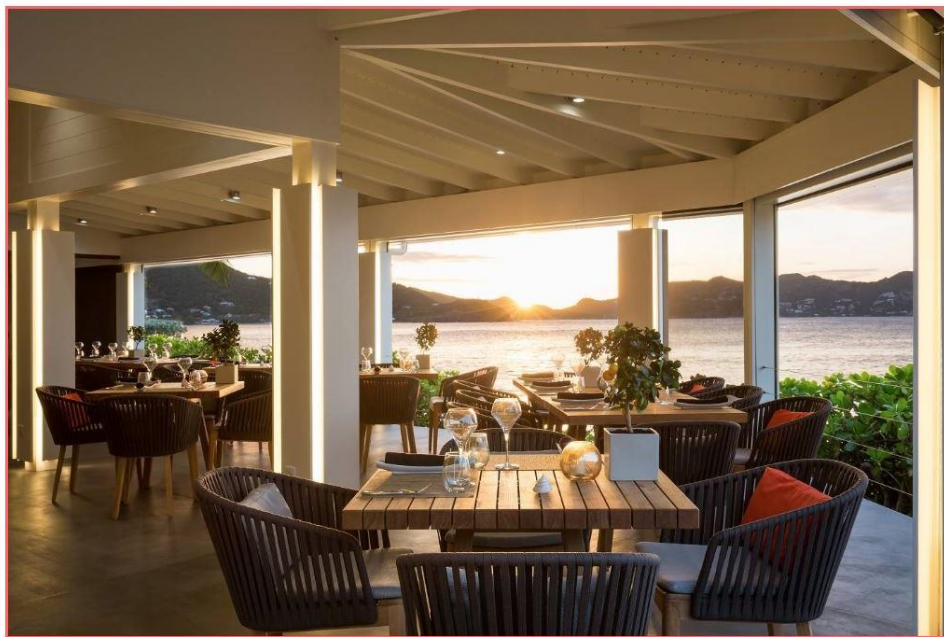
The Annual Gastronomic Festival invited French and Swiss chefs to St. Barts: Édouard Loubet, Cédric Béchade, Nicolas Sale, Serge Labrosse, Pierre Augé and Virginie Basselot.

Photo: Michael Gramm

It is no stretch to say that the island of Saint Barthélemy--popularly known as 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 indigenous food culture or agriculture to speak of, 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 Gourmet 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.)



The participating chefs were Nicolas Sale of La Table de L'Épauon 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 and a lunch 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 (*left*), 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.

At the renovated **Le Tamarin**, set within a shadowy garden near Saline Beach, 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 (*right*).



I also had a chance to dine at **Le Toiny** (*left*), a resort of 22 luxury suites set on a hillside on the wilder, leeward side of the island, where 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 a potato gratin; and for dessert "lemon caviar," made with black chocolate bits flavored with ginger and coffee.

While on the island I also had a chance to dine at the



newest resort, **Le Barthrmrly**, which, after the hurricane, grew out of a smaller hotel to become a luxury resort that now extends along 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 traditional 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 (20 euros). Main courses included a traditional *blanquette* of veal cheek cooked with carrots and onions (32 euros), and a juicy, spiced Caribbean grilled lobster (market price). Desserts, too, were classic—a Parisian flan with rum and cinnamon; a chocolate soufflé with vanilla ice cream; and a rich baba au rhum with tropical fruits.

I had lunch one day at the always-packed **Nikki Beach** (below) at 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 an array of sushi and sashimi, an array of shellfish, mozzarella *di bufala*, charcuterie and cheeses and an assortment of four very good pizzas. Parties, fashion shows, bikinis and chair dancing are encouraged.



My happiest find in St. Barts, located in the principal town of Gustavia, was brand new. **Fish Corner** is a small enchantment run by Johnny Laplace (left) and Nicholas Lebon, who have the great advantage of owning a fishing boat, so what’s on the day’s menu comes 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.

I was delighted with a carpaccio of tender octopus with a sauce *vierge* of olive oil, tomato and basil (20 euros); the best roasted lobster (market price) I had that week, with a potato puree; a *baliste 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 starting at 7 a.m. and stays open till midnight. It’s got a very thorough wine list and prices for both food and wine are reasonable.