

CULTURE / TRAVEL

When the World's Best Chefs Cook and Party in Paradise — Inside the Saint Barth Gourmet Festival

Ultra Luxury Island Becomes a Foodie's Dreamland

BY GEORGIE FERRELL // 12.01.19



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The famous Nikki Beach offered a rare private dinner service for the festival guests

S AINT BARTHÉLEMY — Culinary cognoscenti from around the globe gathered on the ocean-front terrace of Hotel Manapany on this evening when champagne and fine wines flowed, mounds of caviar were consumed and eight extraordinary French chefs each prepared a delectable hors d'oeuvre in a delicious introduction to the Saint Barth Gourmet Festival.

The air was filled with fragrant perfume from the perfectly coiffed French elite that mingled throughout the room with stylish discerning diners hailing from around the globe as the opening ceremony kicked off the yearly attraction for international foodies who descended upon the illustrious island most commonly referred to as St Barts.

Each November, this jet setter playground plays hosts to Michelin-starred chefs who partner with top local chefs to create a series of extraordinary gastronomic indulgences.

This sixth installment of the festival attracted some 300 très chic gastronomes, who stepped out each of the four dine-around evenings for chef-driven dinners held beneath the Michelin starlit skies in dreamy oceanside caravansaries and restaurants in this slice of surreal paradise. This year's focus was on French Gastronomy, featuring acclaimed chefs to showcase their interpretation of St. Bart's cuisine with influence from their highly lauded signature French cuisines, all with the help from their talented local partners including some of St Bart's swankiest hotels and restaurants such as Le Barthélemy, Le Toiny, Tamarin and Nikki Beach.

"Gastronomy is an integral part of St. Bart's culture and our tourism industry," says Nils DuFau, president of the Territorial Tourism Committee of St. Bart's. "St. Bart's is synonymous with world-class cuisine and we look forward to reaffirming our position as the culinary capital of the Caribbean with our signature event."

The festival is a delicious reminder of the long standing tradition of culinary excellence the island so proudly touts.

St. Bart's is one of the Caribbean's most upscale islands with a collection of world-class, five-star hotels boasting spas, fine dining restaurants and a wide choice of leisure activities.

Everything on the island evokes the quintessential European chic. Even the hospitable hotel and restaurant staff, so chic they could easily be stolen away for a career in modeling, are eager to offer greetings in their suave French accents.

At eight square miles, the island is adorned with bays of soft white sand and charming small town streets that provide a breathtaking backdrop for a dream trip.

St. Bart's Food Magic

The eight chefs who stepped away from their award winning restaurants in France for the festival in paradise took the time to get a true sense of the ingredients and flavors of the island before they finalized their menus. The true artistic craft of these chefs was evident by the level of feeling they put into their plans to merge their signature dishes with inventive fusions from the island.

Many incorporated ingredients they weren't used to working with and adapted French classics with island treasures including mango, locally grown vegetables, and of course freshly caught seafood such as lobster and mahi mahi.



Caviar was a luxurious accompaniment to many of the festival's featured dishes.

This year's patron chef of the festival was Arnaud Faye, acclaimed with the prestigious title of Meilleur Ouvrier de France, and two-starred Michelin chef of the famous La Chèvre d'Or on the shores of the French Riviera. Faye led the charge of coordinating a "Dream Team" of seven other star chefs to guarantee that no matter where festival goers chose for their four nights of dining, each would be an impeccable experience. Each year, choosing a favorite menu is inevitably a challenge.

The dapper 32-year old Chef Guillaume Goupil of the Michelin-starred Le Baudelaire of the stylish Hotel Burgundy in Paris, known for working with high quality seasonal products, joined Italian chef Raffaele Lenzi of the Le Sereno Hotel.

The chefs dazzled diners with five courses of French cuisine, beginning with local catch marinated in vanilla oil topped with toasted buckwheat seeds, followed by a jaw dropping beef tartare with Krystal Caviar atop lemon zested potato cream. Courses of simply grilled fresh corn pasta with a foamy ginger broth accented with fresh lobster and a rack of savory veal paired with Jerusalem artichokes and a coffee mousseline solidified the brilliant run. And of course, a dark chocolate tart provided the perfect end to the decadence.

Nikki Beach took a break from its famous day party brunches filled with famous DJs and champagne showers and opened their doors for a rare evening service. Up and coming Chef Taku Sekine charmed guests starting with a lobster tartare served with a light cauliflower lime cream sauce followed by a uniquely exquisite pan-fried foie gras served with beluga lentils in a kaffir lemon dashi broth and then by a course of roast duck accompanied by fall chestnuts and a tamarind sauce.



Chef Taki Sekine, an up and coming chef with two celebrity filled restaurants in Paris, created lots of buzz with his innovative menu during his first ever visit to St Barts.

The accompanying wine pairings were perfectly curated to bring out the inventive flavor combinations. As guests dined on a caramelized apple crisp with buckwheat ice cream to close the meal, Chef Taku came out to charm guests in perfectly spoken French peppered with his native Japanese accent. Although he was the only chef of this year's festival without a Michelin star, his celebrity filled restaurants Dersou and Cheval d'Or back in Paris prove his renowned talent.

Aside from Patron Chef Faye, another chef with two Michelin stars participating in the festival was Stéphane Buron, chef de cuisine of Le Chabichou in the French Alps, who transformed the kitchen at the Hotel Manapany to display his rich menu highlighting a Mahi Tartare paired with pillowy ricotta gnocchi and two more courses of creamy and inventive fondue dishes.

At the chic Aux Amis restaurant in the Le Barthélemy Hotel, Chef Jean-Denis Rieubland from the Royal Champagne Hotel in the French wine country took a classic approach to his menu starting with a lime infused crab cake with citrus marmalade and tartare perched atop pan-fried sea bass. The filet mignon wrapped in nori with a heaping pile of osetra caviar was a slam dunk before a finale of sweet citrus flavors.

The many partners of the festival, including Caviar Ultreaia, Burnier fine wines of Russia, and Champagne Barons de Rothschild, helped catapult each course to another level.

Chefs Unplugged

During the daytime hours of the festival, the chefs took a break from their nightly gigs manning the kitchens to participate in events to support the local food talent that makes the island such a notable dining destination.

A hilarious Cafe waiters' race involving local servers racing down the main street with trays filled with glasses and bottles set the tone for jovial competition. The guest chefs took time to mentor the local talent with a cocktail contest for local bartenders with influence by sponsor Martell Cognac and even worked with aspiring culinary masters aged 15 and younger at the Petites Toques Amateur Pastry Competition.

After all of the festival activities and dinners, the chefs and guests celebrated the 70th anniversary of the famous island dive bar Le Select and mingled around the buzz worthy Le Ti Cabaret, where if you're not rocking a fun accessory from the bar's costume closet, you're underdressed.

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Throughout the festival, many of the chefs spoke of their craft and their industry as cuisine is an international language. The Saint Barth Gourmet Festival is the quintessential convergence of industry leaders and foodies from around the globe which proves that food has no borders and neither does the hospitality and luxury of Saint Barthélemy.