



Fine dining, fine hotels

Rachel Roberts samples a trio of Michelin-starred properties in France and finds luxury, fine dining and the warmest hospitality

Haute cuisine can feel intimidating, often served with a side order of self-importance that can spoil the appetite. So it was with a soupçon of apprehension that I joined a gastronomic tour in the French Périgord – one of the heartlands of fine dining – encompassing Limoges, Dordogne and its neighbour, the Lot.

But any worries vanished following our first feast, courtesy of chef Gilles Dudognon at his restaurant, housed in the four-star La Chapelle Saint Martin, Nieul, near Limoges. Gilles is being celebrated in 2026 after holding his Michelin star for 40 years, and his menu – devised with son Henri, who is carving out his own reputation and commands the kitchen during our service – showcases his love of the local terroir. The

white asparagus, served with the delicate flavour of orange blossom, offset with the tang of grapefruit and capers, tastes divine, and the carnivores in our group rhapsodise about the signature Limousin rack of veal and truffle juice.

La Chapelle Saint Martin joined the Relais & Châteaux stable in 1973, and the former 19th-century maker's house, set in 35 acres of stunning countryside, is owned and managed by the charismatic Gilles and his wife, Aud. They make quite the power couple and are wonderful hosts, with Aud recalling when First Lady Hillary Clinton was a guest in 1998 – “you would not believe the number of special agents that arrived to scope everything out” – and telling us with pride that her husband is responsible for the Maison Bourgeoise aesthetic throughout the hotel, which features 14 bedrooms. Ms



Chateau de Castelnaud, main; food fit for a king, above

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We gingerly descend the stone stairs to a chilly cave

Clinton retired to Bleu du Four, while I stay in Biscuit (a nod to the unglazed porcelain technique). With its elegant red chinoiserie-style wall coverings and glass doors that open out onto the grounds, it's also VIP-worthy.

The culinary journey continues the next day with a visit to La Maison du Fromage in Limoges – also owned by Gilles – where we gingerly descend the stone stairs to a chilly cave, flickering candlelight dancing across an assortment of cheeses kept at 10 degrees, the optimum temperature for ageing. Limoges has a network of around 500

caves running beneath the city, many of which functioned as wine cellars or safe refuges during wartime, but La Maison du Fromage is a unique offering. We sample a selection of cheeses, including Rocamadour, a creamy goat variety. Later, we visit its namesake close by in the Lot, a stupendous Unesco-listed medieval village hewn into a sheer limestone cliff, renowned as a centuries-old pilgrimage site.

The religious theme continues with lunch at La Table du Couvent, a converted 12th-century convent canteen in Limoges. Another outpost of La Chapelle Saint Martin, we have front-row seats by the grand stone fireplace, where head chef Bruno prepares and cooks your choice of Limousin beef cuts. While foie gras is also on the menu (this is the land of the delicacy after all), and may give some diners the collywobbles, the fire-grilled scallops served with sublime potato dauphinoise will live long in my memory. Gilles joins us, exemplifying the hands-on approach taken by the owners of all three Relais & Châteaux properties.

Our drive to the next hotel evokes peak Dordogne vibes. Some 1,000 châteaux overlook France's second-longest river (the Loire Valley's count is just over 300), and when Château de La Treyne, complete with its turret, appears around the bend, it is a bona fide fairytale moment. This 14th-century castle near Lacave has been lovingly restored into a five-star establishment over more than 40 years by Philippe Gombert and wife Stéphanie, who joins us for aperitifs in the Downton-esque drawing room.

Head Chef Stéphane Andrieux has helmed the one-Michelin-starred gastronomic restaurant here since 1998, using local Périgord and Quercy ingredients, alongside fresh produce from the hotel's organic vegetable garden.

Dinner is served in the regal Louis XIII salon, classified as a historical monument due to its 17th-century architectural heritage (guests can also stay in the Louis XIII suite for a full royal experience). The atmosphere is more formal than at La Chapelle Saint Martin, with shiny silver cloches removed with a dramatic flourish and served in perfect synchrony. The highlight for me is the dessert – a chocolate and coffee creation that is both sensational on the palate and a feast for the eyes.

My room for the night is "Dordogne", a former wine cellar transformed into a symphony of zesty greens and creams, one of 18 uniquely styled accommodations. As the only room on the lower ground floor, it offers serious privacy and boasts a wraparound terrace that delivers staggering views of the famous river.

Beyond fine dining, visitors flock to the area for its gorgeous landscapes and water-based

activities such as kayaking. We squeeze in a memorable visit to Gouffre de Padirac, a natural limestone chasm, and descend 103 metres underground to a cavernous subterranean world of stalactites, carved over millions of years. It's well worth putting on your itinerary.

Our final stop before flying home from Bergerac airport (Limoges is also an option) is the five-star Le Vieux Logis, near Trémolat. Set in a stone-built 17th-century priory, surrounded by manicured gardens and architectural linden trees, it has echoes of Le Manoir aux Quat Saisons and is très charmant. Head Chef Vincent Arnould regained the restaurant's Michelin star in 2005, and we enjoy his excellent, classic French menu in the light-filled former tobacco drying barn. I retire to one of the 25 rooms, suites and villas that serve historic-meets-rustic-chic.

Co-owner Estelle Lepers describes the boutique hotel as "small enough, big enough" and, as we've come to expect from Relais & Châteaux, she extends yet another big-hearted welcome. She also has quite the remarkable story, having started as the hotel's receptionist 25 years ago, before the owner, Monsieur Giraudel, left the property to Estelle and three other long-term staff members in 2019. It's quite the responsibility, but with her sunny disposition, Estelle was clearly born for the front-of-house role. Renovations and upgrades display the commitment of the ownership team, with a framed black and white image of Giraudel as a young boy kept "to keep an eye on things". We're sure he is nothing but proud.

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The real jewel of the Cotswolds

Anna Pointer visits a hidden gem amid the celeb-strewn Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

The Cotswolds have long been synonymous with celebs – everyone from the Beckhams to Simon Cowell and Kate Moss have homes in the area, and Oasis singer Liam Gallagher is the most recent to have snapped up a multimillion-pound bolthole within its 800 square-mile expanse of rolling hills and honey-stoned beauty.

But while many visitors head straight for influencer-heavy hotspots such as Bibury, Burford and Bourton-on-the-Water, the village of Broadway is a little more low-key. Dubbed "the Jewel of the Cotswolds," its location on the Worcestershire border makes it a haven for those seeking independent shops, cafés and restaurants, but with fewer of the selfie-seeking hordes.

Yet Broadway is still ridiculously

picturesque. It began as an ancient settlement lying handily en route from Worcester to London, dubbed "the Broad Way" on account of its extravagantly wide main street. Today, many glorious sandy-coloured homes built by wealthy medieval merchants remain, perfect for an impromptu game of "If we win the Lottery..."

Also intact is the gorgeous Lygon Arms Hotel, smack-bang in the centre of the main drag. Formerly a Tudor coaching inn and first recorded in 1377 as The White Hart, Charles I stayed here in the 1640s, often meeting his Cavalier supporters in a suite named in his honour. Amazingly for history buffs, in September 1651 the inn even hosted Oliver Cromwell on the eve of victory in the Battle of Worcester – which brought the English Civil War to its bloody end. In more recent

years, the hotel's guestbook has been peppered with the names of politicians and luminaries from stage and screen, including Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, who holed up here in 1963 while embroiled in the scandal of their affair. Other Hollywood greats followed, with the likes of Sophia Loren, Vivien Leigh and Cary Grant checking in.

After a lavish makeover in 2015, the Lygon has 86 guestroom suites, individually furnished and celebrating its hallmark period features and antiques while weaving in Ralph Lauren-inspired twists.

There are three acres of garden and a pretty courtyard, plus an indoor pool, gym and spa – with a soothing full-body massage helps ease a pesky niggles in the neck.

Stepping out into the village buzz on a sunny spring morning, the Broadway Deli opposite is famed for its wackily coloured frontage and quality produce, while the museum and art gallery houses an eclectic range of paintings and memorabilia reflecting the work of local artists and writers, including John Singer Sergeant, JM Barrie and AA Milne.

Meanwhile, a scenic hike along the Cotswold Way to Broadway Tower is a must, with knock-



Relais & Châteaux hotels offer fine dining without the snobbery