



## **Domaine de la Baume Perched in the Provençal Sky**

*By Carlyne Kauser-Abbott*

*Images courtesy of Domaine de la Baume*

Jean-Louis Sibuet was exposed to the demanding hospitality business when his parents purchased Le Fer à Cheval Hotel in Megève. Jean-Louis and his wife, Jocelyne, have turned those early lessons into a French boutique hospitality chain consisting of eight hotels and 13 restaurants. The couple continues to build on their shared philosophy of respect for the environment. The result is that each property embodies sustainability with authentic design, marrying the best of traditions with contemporary comforts.

*Baume* is a French word with several meanings including a small hill, a grotto or a rock shelter. The interpretation that seems most appropriate for *Domaine de la Baume* is a remote, secret, hiding place for valuables. Nestled between the Mediterranean's coastal shores and the cobalt Provençal sky, *Domaine de la Baume* is the newest addition to the Sibuet hotels. Situated on the side of an escarpment, this 99-acre resort, barely visible from either road entrance, is a unique property complete with 800 olives trees, a natural waterfall and horse paddocks. It is a treasure.



The midnight blue outlines of Massif des Maures, Massif de Sainte-Baume and even Cezanne's mountain Mont Sainte-Victoire stretch across the entire horizon, occupying the valley view as far as the eye can see. As the chanting of the cicadas faded in the hazy autumn light, the only sounds that registered were the cascade of water at the grotto and the gentle bubbling of the decorative fountains. We had been forewarned at check-in that the mountain silhouettes are magical in the evening. There was no question as we sipped our chilled rosé on the shaded terrace that this hotel is a corner of paradise.

During the 16th century, the location was a *bergerie* or sheep shelter, likely chosen for its available water source. According to historical records, a stately private residence was built in 1751 for the Renom family, who were Provençal bourgeoisie active in regional politics. The property continued to be occupied by members of this notable family for almost two centuries.

It was only once the Sartor family bought the property in the 1930s that it was converted into a luxurious homestead. They added a crystal-blue pool, a chapel, a guardian's house, a tennis court, created Versailles-style tiered gardens and added other support buildings.

In 1982, a brutal forest fire ravaged the area destroying some 9884 acres; although the main house and most of the buildings were salvaged the Sartor family was distraught that their gem had been tarnished. Bernard Buffet, a French painter and sculptor, purchased the site and lived there for 20 years, until his death in 1999. Buffet found his inspiration in the same sublime views that we enjoyed.





The Sibuet family, with their proven eye for unique locations, acquired the property.

Domaine de la Baume opened in July 2013 with eight rooms including two suites. The dilapidated homestead was gutted and renovated in a six-month period. The conversion of well-worn art deco finishes to a design in keeping with that of a noble 17th century Provençal home was completed to receive summer guests. Fall and winter projects have added another seven rooms for the 2014 season, for a total of 11 rooms, and four suites, with opening day planned for April 18th. The final phase will top up accommodation to a maximum of 23 guest rooms, by converting outer buildings such as the former chicken coop and *pigeonnier*, or dovecote, into private accommodation.

The exterior of this stately home with its wrought-iron balconies has not been altered. Existing interiors finishes have been fully replaced including new parquet wood flooring in the dining area and pentagonal ceramic tile in the intimate lounge areas. Chandeliers and table lamps provide a subdued romantic glow. A wood-paneled honor bar beckons visitors for a pre-dinner drink or a nightcap. The study shelves are lined with beautiful books, inviting you to lose a couple hours sucked into the embrace of an armchair.

Guest bedrooms at the Domaine are of generous proportions. White washed ceilings with crown moldings and large windows provide airy volume. The heritage-styled wall coverings and matching floor-to-ceiling draperies create a warm envelope. Modern comforts include king size beds, cozy duvets and an embarrassment of plush pillows. The bathrooms are dreamy with claw-tooth bathtubs and spacious showers with rain head fixtures.





An opportunity that many chefs would not dream of is one that chef François Martin is living, in the kitchen at Domaine de la Baume. What was at one time the *lavoir*, or laundry area, has been enclosed and converted into a professional kitchen. The chef was able to participate in the design, selection of equipment and most importantly handpick his team. Trained in Paris, where he worked for 13 years, chef Martin is happy to be settled in the Var exploring the local cuisine and seasonal ingredients of Provence.

Each morning, early risers and dozy dreamers, are greeted by wafting aromas of fresh, buttery, French baking, from the hotel's ovens. The pastry chef arrives well before guests stir, to make the flaky *viennoiseries* treats for breakfast baskets. Weather permitting, breakfast is served on the east side of the house, where the bright sun licks the tables. Breakfast is served at a leisurely pace. We sipped steaming *café au lait* out of oversized mugs and indulged in the fresh baking with sides of homemade jam. Our only disappointment was the morning we discovered that the melon and vanilla bean jam was finished, a fleeting moment quickly resolved by a pot of mixed red fruit jam.

Chef Martin treats guests to creations envisioned by the culinary team and inspired by what is fresh from the kitchen garden. When we visited in August, the veggie plot was groaning with ripe tomatoes, zucchinis and eggplants, the key ingredients for Provençal style ratatouille. Paris may be a foodie capital, but according to the chef nothing can match picking savory herbs directly from the garden outside the kitchen doors. A point he stressed while he chopped vegetables into impossibly tiny dices during our cooking class.

A little like the Goldilocks fairy tale, the hotel size feels just right. Small indoor and outdoor seating areas are perfectly arranged for intimate interaction. Customer service training and staff selection received top marks in my books; we found the hotel staff was friendly, attentive and authentic.

After a day of touring the region, we read our books on the garden terrace. Our late afternoon sweet cravings were satisfied with a glass of fresh fruit juice, lemon macrons and chocolate truffles. Small enjoyable bites that filled the void until it was time for the cocktail hour.



Domaine de la Baume is located on a section of land with an agricultural designation, Jean-Louis is clear he wants the property to retain its traditional focus as it is both historically relevant and regionally important. In 2013, the grounds staff replanted 300 olive trees. The goal is eventually to have 2,000 trees on the property.

In the fall, ripe olives are cold-pressed at the local mill in Tourtour for the extra virgin oil. The heart healthy oil is served with fresh bread and charcuterie for guests to sample during the cocktail hour with a glass of chilled *Bastide de Marie* rosé. It took a decade to perfect the *cuvées* of well-balanced wines that are served at the tables, from the vineyards of *Bastide de Marie*. Once the blending and quality are perfected for the olive oil, the long-term intent is to supply this hotel and others within the group.

Dinner tables are set between the enormous plane trees. The large trunks that are now hundred years of years old provide discrete privacy between guests' tables. We sampled the first bites of our entrees of fresh sea bass ceviche and local goat cheese tarts as the setting sun cast its shadows on the mountains in the distance. In our few nights at the property, we continued to be impressed with the quality of the dishes, the beautiful presentation and the creative twists on regional recipes.



Our days at Domaine de la Baume passed quickly as we toured the picturesque neighboring villages, and visited the aqua-blue waters of the reservoir known as Lac Sainte-Croix. We were happy at the end of each day to return to the property with its terraced gardens that butt up against the almost untamed wilderness of pines, oaks, blackberry bushes and olive trees. The whole experience lulled us into a state of relaxation, in my case, aided by a massage in the outdoor cabin while being serenaded by the sound of the waterfall.

For more information on Domaine de la Baume, [click here](#).