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The Stuff of Fairy Tales

Parisian tastemakers are reinvigorating an old-fashioned corner of Normandy, adding modern flourishes to a rural French idyll. BY REBECCA ROSE PHOTOGRAPHS BY CÉLINE CLANET

One of the newly built suites at Le Domaine d'Ablon.





The herb garden at Le Domaine d'Ablon.

THE SUN HAD JUST slipped down between the apple trees, silhouetting a group of Normande cows against an orange-purple sky, as I foraged around a vegetable garden on my hands and knees. Yanking out a couple of radishes to add to my pannier of organic produce—turnips, broccoli, brussels sprouts, and celeriac—I felt gratifyingly like a peasant in a Millet painting. Smoke from the chimney of La Petite Chaumière, the 16th-century thatched cottage we were staying in, mingled

with fresh scents from the herb garden, where, alongside varieties of thyme, mint, and sage, sat plants with even more-poetic-sounding labels: SARRIETTE, PIMPRENELLE, and MÉLISSE. Beyond them, a moss-flanked path led to a latched front door, behind which a crackling fireplace glowed. The only thing missing was the Three Bears.

The Three Bears, however, didn't sauté their vegetables in high-end cookware on a six-burner range, watch *The Amazing Spider-Man* on a giant flat-screen TV, or wallow in an Italian tub filled with

Bulgari bubbles. Nor were they able to dial up a room-service *tarte aux pommes* and have it delivered on a tray by the cottage's owner, Christophe Delaune. This was a children's-book fantasy, with bells on.

Delaune, 46, is the effervescent creator of Le Domaine d'Ablon, a group of new luxury *demeures*, or residences, in Normandy's Pays d'Auge. This undulating region, traditionally associated with cider, Calvados, and Camembert, is home to the well-heeled seaside town of Deauville—to which Parisians have had easy access since the capital's >>

Gare St.-Lazare opened in the mid 19th century. Deauville and its equally picturesque neighbor, Honfleur, are now established tourist honeypots (the latter attracts 3.5 million visitors per year) and, as is often the case with such places, have acquired something of a reputation for resting on their laurels.

Which is why Delaune, whose ambitious project is just a short drive from both towns by car, has set out to reinvigorate the area with his relaxed, modern take on hospitality. Guests are often surprised to see their host carrying luggage and delivering their morning *pain au chocolat*—especially when they discover that Delaune was, until recently, the president of a multimillion-dollar firm specializing in print management for retailers. After cashing out in 2011, Delaune wanted a change from his relentless 24/7 schedule, which had not provided enough time for him to indulge his real weakness: gardening. “Gardening is a dangerous passion for me. There are no limits,” he said, with an infectious laugh. He went on to recount how when he lived in Aix-en-Provence, he spent \$11 million on his 37-acre garden, which in turn inspired him to host a Chelsea Flower Show–style event that drew 25,000 visitors in three days.

The concept for Le Domaine d’Ablon came to Delaune gradually, partly as a result of staying in luxury hotels while traveling for business, but also out of a desire to return home to his beloved Normandy (he grew up in Le Havre). La Petite Chaumière—a traditional Norman two-bedroom farmer’s cottage that originally served as his country bolt-hole—was the obvious place to build on. So he and his wife left their penthouse in Paris’s St.-Germain-des-Prés and drew up plans to construct, from scratch, two more traditional Norman houses on their five acres, adding a new home for themselves and a further two guest suites to the site of the original 16th-century building. The resulting new buildings, with their immaculately thatched roofs and oak beams, are virtually indistinguishable from the original cottage.

The idea is for guests to have their own private living space and garden—quite a departure from the typical high-end hotel experience in France, which

can be formal to the point of stuffiness. “Many people staying in five-star hotels don’t like to mix with others,” Delaune said. “They don’t want to be surrounded.” With a capacity for only eight guests so far, the atmosphere is resoundingly peaceful—no chance of being snapped by an iPhone here.

Guests are encouraged to help themselves to produce from the *potager* (kitchen garden), but can also order from the property’s room-service menu, a non-dietetic repertoire of creamy Norman dishes prepared by chef-pâtissier Jérôme Billochon.

Delaune said he recently hosted a group of CEOs from Paris who delighted in picking their own vegetables and a Parisian family who foraged for their own chestnuts to roast on the fire. “The more successful and busy you are, the more you look for the simple things in life.”

Delaune has grand plans for the Domaine. He aims to build a “typical Norman village” of 12 houses, all in the local style. A village, that is, with extras: a 65-by-20-foot indoor pool is planned for 2017, followed by an orangery, a business center, and a restaurant by 2020. It is quite a project—and a boon for this rural corner of Normandy, without doubt.

He isn’t the only one shaking things up in the area. Down in Deauville, on a drizzly off-season Thursday lunchtime, there was a buzz under the awnings of Charlo, a newfangled butcher/roisserie that opened last summer. The *patron* is Charles Agniel, a smiley former lawyer from

Paris who, like so many Parisians, has been week-ending in Deauville for years. His concept is as fresh as the free-range meat behind the counter inside: a butcher offering meat from humanely treated animals—Angus beef, chicken from Landes—combined with a rotisserie restaurant, serving the same meat cooked with sides of home-cut *frites*, *gratin dauphinois*, and *ratatouille*, all made on site from fresh, seasonal ingredients.

Agniel was inspired by the market in neighboring Trouville, where fishmongers serve customers *sur place* with oysters and a glass of chilled champagne. The ambience at Charlo is modern and masculine—upbeat music, counter seating, and a bar and >>



A bathroom in one of the Grange suites at Le Domaine d’Ablon.

smoking room for private parties. It is a little bit of Paris, and a pleasing contrast to the region's typical *brasserie/crêperie* fare. Agniel plans to open branches across France, and in Dubai and South America.

Just across Deauville's central Place de Morny is another markedly modern establishment: a beautifully presented *boulangerie-pâtisserie* called Yvonne. Just as Ladurée reinvented the *macaron*, Yvonne has breathed life into that most overlooked of French pastries, the *éclair*. Under vintage, cloche-hat-style lampshades was an artful display of creations in more than a dozen different *parfums*, from white chocolate and passion fruit to salted caramel.



Yvonne looks like it belongs in the Seventh Arrondissement, rather than downtown Deauville.

Despite these green shoots of regeneration, it would be misleading to suggest that Normandy's pleasures are solely to be found in the new. The region has long been known as horse country, thanks to the prestigious races at Deauville, along with a number of internationally famous stud farms. The Deauville yearling auctions—the sale of thoroughbred year-old horses—always attract a glitzy crowd, and one of the activities Christophe Delaune has secured for his guests at the Domaine is a private visit to an *haras*, or stud farm—an experience usually off-limits to visitors.

Haras du Hoguenet, a family-owned farm nestled in verdant horse *terroir* 50 minutes from the Domaine, currently houses four famous stallions. We were given a sneaky tour by the stud manager, Anthony Baudouin, a tall, patrician Frenchman who once raced horses himself. Montmartre, a resplendent 10-year-old gray Grand Prix de Paris winner, now retired, was brought out to meet us. There was

a ripple of excitement among our group as he was walked around the courtyard; not only is Montmartre a prizewinning thoroughbred but he has mated with an astonishing 186 mares this year, and fathered a total of four champion racehorses.

This exclusive equine world is usually the preserve of buyers, breeders, trainers, and racers, so it was thrilling to be taken for a ride along the vast sands of Deauville beach by a former racehorse. Not that I saddled up—I was sitting safely behind in what's known as a sulky, an old-fashioned horse cart, driven by an expert handler. In a group of four horses and sulkies, we sped, clattering, down the



FROM LEFT: Trouville's Villa Gypsy coffee shop, another innovative business to open in the area; the lighthouse in Trouville.

two-mile sandy beach, darting in and out of the low tide, while our drivers bellowed instructions against the wind. It was an exhilarating hint at the potential of these beautiful creatures, and one that didn't require any expertise on my part. I stepped out of the stirrups invigorated, lungs filled with sea air.

Back at the Domaine that evening, I discussed the state of the nation with Delaune, in his cathedral-ceilinged library filled with thousands of books. France, he reminded me, is the most visited country in the world, with over 80 million tourists arriving each year—yet the French hotel industry, in his view, is frozen in time. Too much formality, not enough thought or creativity. He, on the other hand, is thinking big. “Imagine creating a typical village like this in each region of France, with each different cuisine, culture, and architecture,” he said. “France is sitting on a pot of gold!” If all goes according to plan, Delaune may yet find himself conveniently positioned at the end of the rainbow. ☺

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