

Press File



HOSTELLERIE DE L'ABBAYE DE LA CELLE

Hostellerie de l'Abbaye de La Celle
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A page of history

The story of the **H**ostellerie de l'**A**bbaye de **L**a **C**elle is something of a legend: a blend of glory, decline, simplicity and grandeur.

This enchanting residence — a member of “Châteaux & Hôtels Collection” — is adjacent to a 12th century Benedictine Royal Abbey which inspires peace and tranquillity in the heart of a jealously protected wine-producing village in the Var. Since the 5th century, the Abbaye de La Celle has been host to a string of great names in French History: Gersende de Sabran, mother of the Comte de Provence Raymond Bérenger, retired there in 1225. During the 16th century, Reine Claude de France, wife of François 1^{er}, stayed thrice at La Celle. The Brignoles region became famous at that time thanks to the juicy Reine Claude greengage plums. Many aristocrats from the area were frequent guests at La Celle. Général de Gaulle wrote part of his memoirs there during the 1960s.

Enormous financial problems arose because of the increasing number of nuns in the 13th century. However, during the 15th century, the number was decreased to twenty-four. The Abbaye later gained a reputation for housing libertine nuns... a situation arising from their licentious behaviour during a period of new-found prosperity. In the huge courtyard, they built private pavilions that looked more like princely palaces than nuns' cells! On the 27th January 1660, Louis XIV evicted the nuns and closed the Abbaye that then fell into disuse. This roman-style Benedictine convent has been a *monument historique* (listed building) since 1886.

It wasn't until the 20th century that the site was given a new lease of life when Sylvia Fournier — the wealthy owner of the Iles de Porquerolles — purchased it. Within just a few months, this extraordinary woman rebuilt the almost completely derelict monastery buildings and turned them into the first 4-star hotel in the Var. Proud of the 300 000 trees she planted during her lifetime, Sylvia Fournier will forever be 'La Grande Dame de La Celle'. After her death in 1971, it took until the end of the century to witness the site being reborn once again.

In 1997, the *Conseil Général du Var* (regional council), under the presidency of Hubert Falco, announced it was looking for candidates capable of reviving this historic site's former glory and prestige. Alain Ducasse and his friend Clément Bruno from Lorgues — “Les Chefs Associés” famous for their love of Provence and its flavours — took up the challenge: To make the Abbaye into a cosy and tasty hotel whilst respecting its past and remarkable setting. In order to regain its 18th century Provençal cachet, the Hostellerie de l'Abbaye de La Celle was restored and renovated by skilled local craftsmen under the watchful eye of Robert Michel, a Brignoles architect (Cabinet Arc'h) chosen by the *Conseil Général du Var*. For the grounds, a landscape gardener was chosen by the chief architect from the *monuments historiques* department; Francesco Flavigny, a connoisseur of the spirit of Provence, took the utmost care to preserve the 17th century trees covering the three-hectare property.

It was thus that this unique royal residence started its second life.

“The place’s calming serenity...”

Général de Gaulle’s comments about
the **H**ostellerie de l’**A**bbaye de **L**a **C**elle

From the very first time you set your eyes on it, the Hostellerie de l’Abbaye de La Celle bewitches visitors by its natural charm enhanced with a thousand hues and aromas.

Built on the shady Hôtel de Ville square, opposite the Café du Midi, this residence lives according to the tranquil rhythm of the small village of La Celle. Taking its strength from the countryside of the Haut-Var, it is surrounded by a park planted with plane trees, chestnut trees, mulberry trees and majestic well-established cypresses. The traditional wrought-iron gates protect jealously this prestigious abode and its 200-year-old trees. Adjacent to the old Abbaye Royale and the Maison des Vins des Coteaux Varois, this luxurious inn is bathed in a very special ambience combining mysticism and traditional wine-making.

The **H**ostellerie de l’**A**bbaye de **L**a **C**elle, boasting ten bedrooms, has several ‘living spaces’ to fulfil the clients’ every need. Pascal Budor, the perfect host, makes sure — discretely and efficiently — that each client is completely satisfied.

In the historic building, the restored Benedictine chapter house (77m²) can be reserved for private functions.

The main building, an 18th century mansion, is a haven of conviviality.

The ground floor houses the reception, kitchen, patisserie and the three dining-rooms, managed by Eric Adam. The wood-panelled room appreciated for its warmth, the white room exuding elegance, and the lovers’ room for tête-à-tête wining and dining.

On the first floor, two bedrooms with clear views across the park are forever linked to the History of France. The “Général de Gaulle” suite boasts a large main room and a vast dressing room. The 18th century Provençal decor, featuring a huge fireplace next to the architect’s bureau, gives the impression of being in a time warp. Next-door, the spacious and dignified “Marie-Antoinette” room features an 18th century Dutch bureau, heavy linen and cotton damask drapes, an impressive fireplace, walnut furniture and a bourgeois bathroom. Almost like a wink to these two illustrious figures, the rooms can communicate.

The second story attic rooms are all of different sizes and afford views over the market place. The “Eucalyptus” room is refreshingly simple whereas the beige and brown hues in the “Marronnier” room add a touch of warmth and serenity. With its bright red and yellow colors and bed tucked away like a secret garden in an alcove, the “Cèdre” room gives guests the impression of being in a sun-kissed universe.

A short distance from the main house, the Beguine convent offers greater privacy. Each room opens out onto the Coteaux Varois vineyard and has a small private lawn so that guests can make the most of their independence. Three particularly cosy rooms boast a mezzanine and sitting room: the flowery “Roseraie” and “Glycine” rooms, and the “Fontaine” room with its pastel decoration. The “Mûrier” room features a comfortable pastoral decor. Finally, the “Rolle” room, named after a fruity variety of grape, is suitable for disabled guests and exudes a feeling of well-being.

All the bedrooms have top quality equipment: Air conditioning, telephone, fax, television and video, hi-fi, hair-dryer, safe and mini-bar.

Lastly, an exquisite tribute to the art of *dolce vita*... the shady terrace and the gentle sounds of the breeze teasing the leaves of the chestnut trees; out of this harmonious atmosphere comes a feeling of calm and peacefulness reminiscent of the mysteries of the past...

“Just like a miracle... unbelievable”

From *Harvest* by Jean Giono

The entire team at the **H**ostellerie de l'**A**bbaye de **L**a **C**elle digs deep into the Var's horn of plenty in order to offer you fabulous gourmet dishes.

Starting with the vegetable garden... this little corner of paradise is even more special when guests are taken on a guided tour by the gardener Gilbert Bonhomme. One discovers a huge variety of brightly colored tomatoes with very poetic names: *noire de Crimée*, *rose de Berne*, *cœur de bœuf*, *green zebra*, *Saint-Pierre*, and *cerise rouge pépé*... In addition to the tomatoes, there are white, pink and purple eggplants, green, yellow and red peppers, orange, green and yellow chards, onions, beetroot, spinach, peas, salads, long and round zucchini, and aromatic herbs. It is not unusual for a lone stroller to give into temptation and taste some of this delectable produce!

The Mediterranean Sea with its wealth of tasty treasures is not far away. Depending on what was caught in the morning... cod, bar and red mullet can appear on the menu.

Lastly, the produce from the earth of Provence and the sea are combined to give a touch of sun to all the authentic recipes prepared skillfully by chef Benoît Witz. From one season to another, he travels to the markets and, each month, comes up with a different menu in harmony with nature; a tender risotto with zucchini flowers and flakes of crunchy bacon in the spring; a farandole of brightly colored fruit such as cherries, or small stuffed vegetables served with crunchy garden salad in the summer; an unusual pressée de canard and foie gras in the autumn; and terrific truffles in winter. And just the right wines... the “Coteaux Varois” is an absolute must as is the silky Château Trians Rouge with its purplish-blue shimmer, and blackcurrant and griotte cherry taste, and of course there is also the fruity Château Margillière Blanc.

To complete this delicious image, guests can watch the meals being prepared; a feast for the eyes... the five senses are wide awake in the kitchens of the **H**ostellerie de l'**A**bbaye de **L**a **C**elle.

La Celle and nearby

The charm of the **H**ostellerie de l'Abbaye de **La Celle** is also due to its ideal situation in the very heart of the Var. The dynamism of this region, its cultural heritage and traditions, as well as numerous curiosities, can be enjoyed all year long.

Each village is a hymn to Provence. Each new month is a pretext for discovering a myriad of new flavors: The Christening of the Coteaux Varois, the Olive Festival, and the trade fair specializing in local produce and wines that are the region's daily bread. Moreover, the **H**ostellerie de l'Abbaye de **La Celle** is eager to share the local culinary treasures: “The Wine Routes of Provence” — a three-day guided visit with vineyard owners, including three nights and gastronomic wining and dining at “Châteaux & Hôtels Collection” establishments — calls in at La Celle.

In addition to the charming walks through the narrow streets with their many fountains, or along the banks of the Caramy, La Celle is renowned for its festival of classical music in the sacred setting of the Abbaye Royale, and the possibility of learning the rudiments of œnology at the Maison des Vins de Coteaux Varois. In Brignoles, 3 kilometers from La Celle, the 12th century Eglise Saint-Sauveur and the Porte des Templiers bear witness to a glorious past. In the town center, the Saturday morning market is very popular.

The roman ruins in Fréjus — aqueduct, amphitheater, roman theatre, and arena — are the perfect setting for a stroll through the heart of Western history.

The 16th century château in Entrecasteaux is an absolute must... nestling in a little valley along the River Bresque, it offers the chance of a journey through medieval times. Another must is the nearby splendid Cistercian Abbaye de Thoronet.

In Mazaugues, the ingeniousness of man has foiled the hazards of nature; until the end of the 19th century, the ice-houses of Fontfrège were used as natural refrigeration and the winter's ice was stored in great stone cylinders for the cities of Marseilles and Toulon.

To fill a day with pleasure and leisure, the Var offers a myriad of sporting activities: Rock-climbing near to the lake at Carcès, canoe trips down the Argens leaving from Correns or Montfort, fantastic horse riding through Provence, and renowned golf courses at Barbaroux and Nans-les-Pins....

After these cultural visits and sports activities, a well-earned rest by the side of the pool or in the shade of the chestnut trees is most welcome.

The shop sells a range of products chosen carefully by Alain Ducasse: Foodstuffs, house linen and, notably, the gorgeous cotton shirt and collection of faïence tableware decorated by Florine Asch.

Don't look any further afield... this is where you'll feel good.