

Auberge in the Auvergne

10 Sep 2009 by Nick Lander/FT although this is longer

Auberge de Chassignolles, set in the tiny village of Chassignolles 1,000 m above sea level in the Auvergne, central France, has belonged to chef/proprietor Harry Lester and Ali Johnson for the past three years. They now live in this tiny village with their small children - and all because Lester called into Leila's, a well-known food shop in the City of London.

Ahead of him was Sally Potter, a British film producer with a holiday home in Chassignolles, who was asking the shopkeeper whether she knew of any chefs keen to come and live in such splendid isolation and breathe new life into the auberge. Lester overheard the conversation and, somewhat disillusioned with London life, decided to visit. Just €160,000 later the restaurant with six bedrooms pictured here.

Lester had undergone the necessary culinary training for cooking the simple French provincial dishes that the word auberge suggests. His professional career had begun at The Eagle in Farringdon Road, which set the gastro-pub movement rolling, and he then went on to open the Anchor & Hope near Waterloo, which subsequently became a magnet for many professional chefs on their night off.

His dinner menu would therefore look at home in any good French restaurant on either side of the Channel, although this being France, they offer five courses for €24: more for less than in the UK.

An aperitif [Vaquer's extraordinary Roussillon white 2002 from an admirable and stimulating wine list - JR] on the terrace overlooking the square and the church included radishes so fresh that they would have delighted any rabbit and two sorts of small tomatoes to be dipped into a mild anchovy cream. The choice was then a fresh skate terrine or a wooden board laden with six different types of duck and pork charcuterie they had cured themselves; chicken, raised for 120 days Lester told me with pride, alongside Swiss chard in a creamy béchamel; a blanquette of veal; or tripe. Then came haricots verts tossed in a green sauce distilled from half a dozen fresh herbs; five different cheeses including Stichelton from the UK, which Randolph Hodgson of Neal's Yard Dairy had delivered the week before while staying as a guest; then a soufflé from blackberries picked at 5 pm from a nearby hedgerow, or peach Melba.

But it is breakfast, the meal that Lester had not been used to serving, which shows how well they have adapted to the role of innkeepers. The excellent baguettes, which Ali collects from a bakery 20 minutes' drive away; a range of stunning home-made jams; the freshest yoghurts; and, perhaps the supreme luxury of being in British hands in the remote French countryside, good-quality tea properly made in a teapot.

Lester speaks passionately of what has been the principal professional attraction for him of this isolated area, once popular with Parisians and Marsellaises escaping the heat of the summer, and that is the proximity of so much good produce: chickens, lamb, venison and cheeses as well as abundant soft fruit. And he looked very disappointed when he heard that while he was playing with his children the afternoon we arrived he had missed the visit of the first vendor of this season's wild mushrooms.

The bedrooms are simple but comfortable, as is perhaps suggested by the Auberge's logo featured above left. The surrounding countryside is stunning and the food now good enough to attract and delight those who live nearby. The Auvergnais are lucky to have this particular Anglo-Saxon invasion.

Auberge de Chassignolles, 43440 Chassignolles, Haut Loire, France, www.aubergedechassignolles.com tel 04 71 76 32 36

Open mid-May to mid-October. Dinner Tue-Sun.