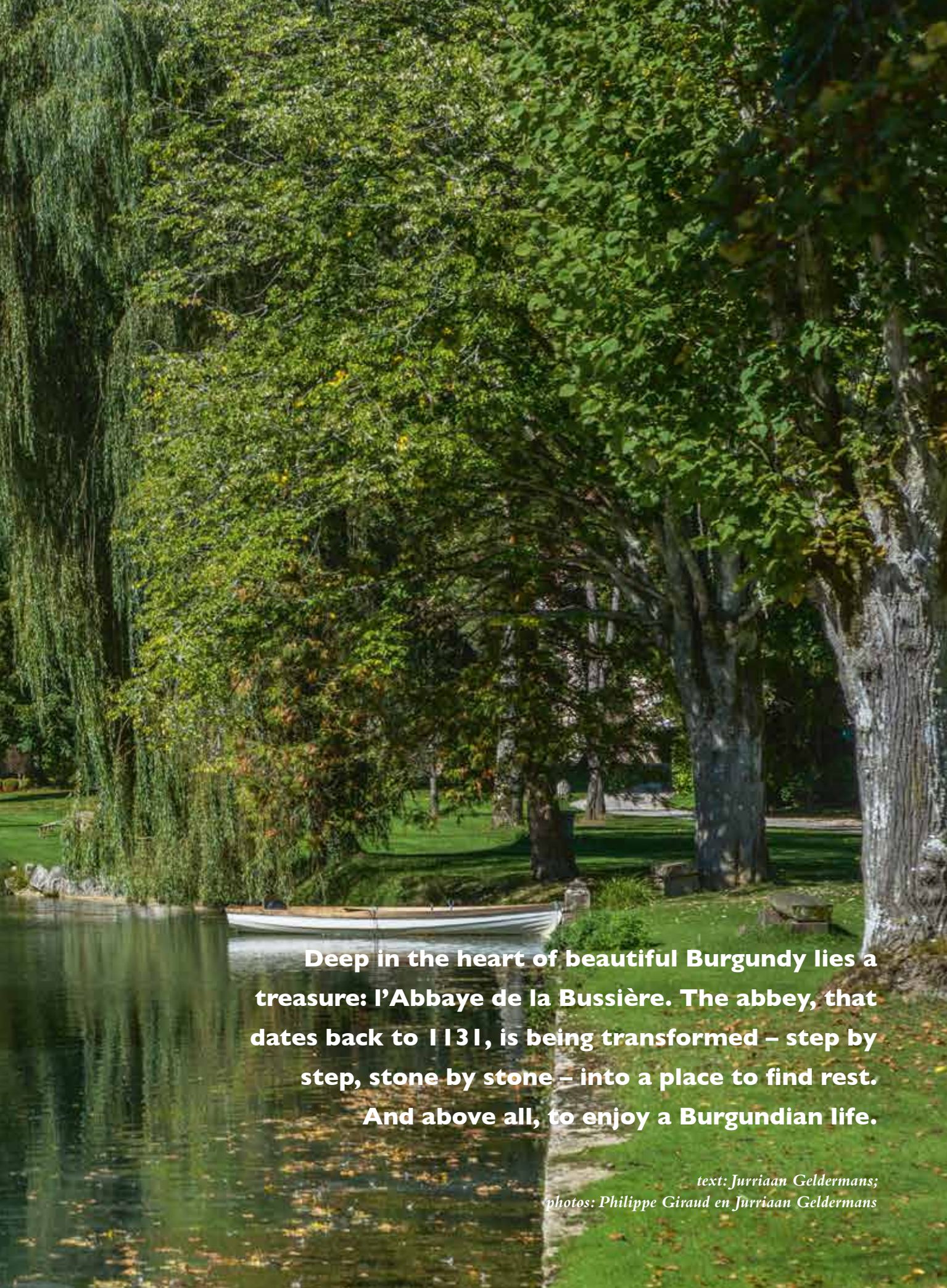


L'ABBAYE DE LA BUSSIÈRE

Monks labour

A serene landscape photograph of a riverbank in Burgundy, France. The scene is dominated by lush green trees, including a prominent weeping willow on the left and several large, mature trees on the right. A small white boat is moored on the water in the foreground. The water reflects the surrounding greenery. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and idyllic.

Deep in the heart of beautiful Burgundy lies a treasure: l'Abbaye de la Bussière. The abbey, that dates back to 1131, is being transformed – step by step, stone by stone – into a place to find rest. And above all, to enjoy a Burgundian life.

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photos: Philippe Giraud en Jurriaan Geldermans*





Chef Emmanuel Hébrard

'I don't pray', Clive Cummings says when he steps out of the small crypt next to the abbey. And yet, in a way he's like a monk: he's blessed with an angel's patience, he is honest ('my father taught me to pay all my taxes properly, otherwise they'll get you one day'), friendly and actually rather introverted. Until you mention the love of his life: La Bussière. 'Sometimes I feel like an artist. I put everything I have into my passion. Hoping that I'll get paid back one day.'

Belief doesn't come easily to the monk. Just like the abbey surrendered only slowly to Clive Cummings. The wealthy English family – father Martin and his wife Joy started off with a pub and worked themselves up to being the owners of the prestigious Amberley Castle in West-Sussex – thus, this family was looking for a sister 'chateau' on the Continent. Clive: 'My wife Tanith and I had managed the Amberley Castle for over six years and wanted something of our own. We found Château de l'Oizerolle, not far from here, that was owned by four sisters and their brother. The problem was that the last one didn't want to sell. Yes, he sold the furniture of the castle and tracts of land just to stay alive. To keep his sisters happy he put the property on the market every three or four years, just to withdraw the sale as soon as it got serious.'



Clive Cummings in the cave of his abbey

With Clive Cummings he'd mistaken his man: there was a purchase contract and part of the sum had already been paid. So when the owner tried to cancel the whole affair, the Englishman went to court. Which would take years and years. 'Actually we'd forgotten the whole affair when a befriended French stockbroker called me up in 2006. With the message that the bishop of Dijon wanted to sell his abbey. Tanith and I travelled to La Bussière-sur-Ouche the next day, fell in love and bought the property.' What followed was a renovation that cost millions of euro's, until l'Abbaye de la Bussière opened its doors in 2007 as a five star hotel and de luxe restaurant. In that very same year – the second part of the renovation had just begun – there was a message from the court of Dijon: the Cummings had won their case. 'All of a sudden we were the proprietors of an ancient fortress in England, an abbey in France and a chateau a bit further away?!

But let's go back to l'Abbaye de la Bussière, with its history of richness and robbery, peace and plague. And every time the monks did their utmost to rebuild parts of the abbey that were demolished by fire or violence. They cultivated their land, pressed their grapes, grew their crayfish underneath the pigeon tower, where they fed on the dove's dung. A pious and peaceful life, in surroundings



that rivalled the wealth of the nobles. Just until the French Revolution, when not only the buildings of l'Abbaye de la Bussière were overpowered in the madness and sadness of hate, but the monks themselves as well.

The bishop's estate came into the hands of the people, fell into decay once more and eventually, in the 1970's, the old refectory, with its eighteenth century peristyle, served as a cafeteria where the people from the village enjoyed a simple menu for the price of fifty French francs. In that very same hall where the monks used to eat, dinner is served nowadays. And sculptured faces of jesters and knights, bishops and devils, Gauls and dames, squires and exactly one old spintster look down on the guests.

They should have had a cook among them, because this is Emmanuel Hébrard's domain. The young chef creates heavenly dishes: in the first year the abbey was open, the restaurant got its Michelin star. Thanks to Hébrard's classic creations, which he presents in a very modern way, making sure that the different flavours of his ingredients – found in the very gastronomic 'Les Halles' in Dijon – are always recognizable. Surely the menu degustation with its nine to twelve courses is every foodies fattest fantasy, but at noon Emmanuel serves a wonderful lunch for let's say 30 euro's as well. A splendid occasion to get to know his cuisine plus the wine cellar of sommelier Freddy Jaugey.

Speaking of wine cellars: not far from the main buildings of the abbey stands an edifice that looks like a church. But where a house of worship would show the pipes of an organ, this space shows the pipes of a fourteenth century wine press. 'The juice of the grapes runs through the pipes to the wine cellar below, where it goes straight into the barrels. We still have to restore this ancient cave, that indeed looks like another crypt, after which we'll organize wine tastings for our guests', says Cummings. And his eyes twinkle, because of all the beauty that surrounds him, this dusty cellar is his favourite place.

And there's more work to be done. Clive wants to build a Spa-centre on the premises, the pigeon tower has to be renovated, the potager needs to be restored, the nineteenth century greenhouse should be rebuilt, the entrance building is to be transformed into a conference centre, another sixteen hotel rooms are planned and the personnel lack a proper building to live in. It is all a monks labour.

What did Clive say again when he stepped out of the crypt? 'I don't pray.' And he murmured something else: 'Maybe I should.' ❀

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