

# Burgundy

## BON VIVEUR

*A not-to-be-missed stop on the Relais & Châteaux epicurean tour de France, Abbaye de la Buissiere offers secluded isolation and Michelin-starred savoir faire. By Laura Henderson*

To say that the task of fostering *entente cordiale* relations with new neighbours could be likened to crushing grapes with a molten Camembert, has more than a ring of truth to it for chef turned hotelier Clive Cummings. Embarking on a new life chapter in deepest, rural France back in 2005; the initial bedding-in period was, to say the least, characterised by its fair share of Anglo-French feuds. Fast forward to present day however, and life couldn't be rosier for Clive, wife Tanith and their extended family including daughters Georgia and Bethany and Bernese mountain dog Newkie.

Putting down roots in the heart of Burgundy's Côte d'Or region, the British family who originally hail from London, have achieved nothing short of a miracle, transforming a 12-century Cistercian monastery – a national historic monument – into a country-manor haven. Cummings purchased Abbaye de la Buissiere on a day visit to France. The estate was up for sale for the first time in centuries

– the seller was none other than the Archbishop of Dijon.

Set in the verdant folds of the Vallée de l'Ouche, close to the Route de Grand Vin with a pick and mix of the major wine houses within a 30-minute drive, the property certainly packs a punch for pastoral bliss. The monks have long flown the celestial coup, but the estate and 17 acres of mature parkland still retains an air of calm contemplation.

Cummings is no stranger to the world of *haute gamme* hospitality. He worked alongside his parents Joy and Martin, helping to convert Amberley Castle in West Sussex into a luxury hotel and restaurant in 1987, while training to be a chef at Westminster College in London. Years later, and a chance conversation was to take his life in a whole new direction. "I was told that an old abbey in Burgundy had come up for sale, owned by the church. It needed a great deal of work doing, but that didn't put us off. We travelled over to France and signed the sale agreement that same day."

The ensuing years brought their fair share of challenges,



including resistance from locals, not to mention a slew of administrative red tape to obtain planning consent for the restoration work needed across the estate. "It's a totally different way of life and of doing business here," Clive adds. "Perhaps the biggest hurdle was actually convincing churchly powers of the benefits of repurposing the abbey from a monastic dwelling to a luxury hotel."

From an original nine rooms, the hotel now boasts 20 rooms and suites, each of which are named after local Cistercian monasteries and vary in size and design. Some are finished with ornate baroque-style flourishes, others with pared-back, minimalist accents. All eight suites have bathrooms fitted with whirlpool tubs and look out onto rolling parkland or country-style gardens. The more recent suites carved into the beams and arches of the old hermitage building, sport views over the park and lake.

Beautifully decorated common areas with antique furniture from the owner's personal collection, restored frescoes and lofty stained-glass windows lend the hotel a lived-in grandiosity. High-relief sculptures by artist, Paul Day – a friend of the owners who lives nearby – provide talking point landmarks for exploring the estate's out buildings.

Incorporating a tasteful coterie of French-style nuances has certainly paid off. The Abbey's candelabra and stain glass decked Restaurant Le 1131, has won many culinary accolades, including a Michelin star. In 2017, chef Guillaume Royer a passionate lover of his Burgundian terroir, won a Gault de Millau 'Great Chef of Tomorrow' (Grands de Demain) award. The restaurant space is striking under



vaulted arches with columns, sculpted capitals and high-arched windows. Signature dishes celebrate local delicacies including woodland mushrooms morels, chanterelles and cèpes; pumpkins and Jerusalem artichokes, with roebuck and plump pigeon and organic trout from the Yonne. The decadent 'Le Signature du Chef' set menu is a showcase of French culinary prowess – fashionably finished with Signature dressings and frothing emulsions.

As expected, wine is taken seriously: bought by the barrel at the regional Vente des Vins and bottled at its optimum, with resident sommelier Freddy Jaugey on hand to advise on the appropriate crus. The Abbaye's alternative restaurant, Bistrot Des Moines, serves up pared-back French classics in a more casual setting. In summer, brunch spills onto the outdoor terrace.

Activities and attentive service are perfectly crafted for a lazy weekend escape – peche liqueur and home-made blackcurrant cake await guests on arrival in their rooms, bikes can be borrowed to explore the nearby villages, with an equestrian centre up the road and plenty of shady sun loungers in the grounds to relax with a good book.

Still very much hands on, both Clive and Tanith show no signs of slowing down. Indeed, their enthusiasm is clear to see with expansionary plans for a natural spa and additional accommodation in the grounds in the fullness of time. Adds Clive: "The Abbaye has been awarded the prestigious distinction of 'Hideaway of the Year', with a high repeat guest ratio. We love welcoming guests back each year. Long may it continue."

[www.abbayedelabuissiere.fr](http://www.abbayedelabuissiere.fr)