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The Islands Issue



Savoring Saint Bart's

Food meets fashion on the Caribbean's most glamorous island.

BY ELAINE GLUSAC



Hotel Le Toiny's truffle macaroons with foie gras.

LIKE THE SUPERMODELS IT DRAWS, THE French island of Saint-Barthélemy, aka Saint Bart's, seemingly has it all: unblemished beaches popular for fashion shoots, chic shopping that is the resort rival of Paris' Faubourg Saint-Honoré, little poverty, and even less crime.

Moreover, this beauty has eats. With just eight square miles and 7,400 residents (and only ten minutes by plane from Sint Maarten), the island boasts more than 70 restaurants, making it one of the most food-centric in the Caribbean.

While there are myriad reasons to visit the Caribbean, food is generally not one of them. Sun, sand, rum – yes. Indulgent spas, lush resorts, and those infinite shades of aquamarine – certainly.

Eating, though essential, is often an afterthought.

Giving myself four days and 11 meals of food for thought, I hopped a nine-seater jet in November, landing inches from blond Saint Jean Beach. Across the road at a patisserie, the croissants – meal one – remained defiantly crisp and flaky despite the hair-curling humidity.

That aviation thrill ride is required of anyone who wants to get to the island expediently (a 75-minute ferry is another alternative). Legendary pilot Rémy de Haenen landed the first plane on Saint Bart's in 1946 in a grassy valley that is now the site of one of the Caribbean's shortest runways.

Within its view, de Haenen built a house atop a 33-foot-tall beachfront headland, now home to

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WANDERLUST GLOBAL GOURMET

Eden Rock resort, where I dine at On the Rocks restaurant my first night. The restaurant's reputation as a celebrity hive (reports place Penelope Cruz, Steven Spielberg, and Tom Hanks here on a single high-season night) is like a paparazzo's flashbulb, temporarily blinding diners to the cheese soufflé, veal carpaccio, and artichoke-sauced monkfish. To the good fortune of guests dazed by the food and the fabulous, the tables are less than a minute's stroll to the resort's rooms, a flight above my own beachfront villa, which I will cede to Yankees star Derek Jeter, who is checking in tomorrow.

Sunrise on Saint Bart's finds islanders up and working off the Camembert on the beach. Beach-bagging – checking one after another off the list of coastal beauty spots – is sport here, though the rugged coral terrain interrupts any truly expansive strands. Instead, the island is scalloped with two dozen pocket beaches that lure renters of Mini Coopers, the island's car of choice, from idyll to idyll, few more than a ten-minute drive. Only one, Colombier Beach, is inaccessible to motorists, making it the best place to burn the Brie on a vigorous 20-minute hike to complete seclusion.

A spoonful of history helps bridge the outdoor and kitchen cultures here. First spied by Christopher Columbus in 1493 and named for his brother Bartolomeo, Saint Bart's became French in the eighteenth century when King Louis XVI sent a group of impoverished Bretons and Normans to the island, where they were promised a better life, which



never quite panned out. Though the island was traded to the Swedes for 94 intervening years, returning under the French flag in 1878, the original settlers, eking out their livings weaving palms on an island too dry to participate in the region's cane economy, remained true to the motherland.

Inhibited by lack of infrastructure, tourism arrived fashionably late. Eden Rock, for example, only changed hands and expanded to become the popular hotel it is today in 1995. Those who found Saint Bart's relatively untouched championed the privacy.

"As the island began to develop for tourism in the 1980s and '90s, many of the hotels and restaurants were owned by newcomers from metropolitan France," says Ellen Lampert-Greaux, a local writer and one of the founders of the St. Barth Film Festival (held April 12-17 this year). "And what is France best known for? Superb food. Added to the strong Creole influence on the island, the end result is a great fusion of flavors and cultures."

That blending is best showcased in the capital of Gustavia, its name an echo of the Swedish reign. Though the streets of the tidy harbor town are lined with shops by Hermès, Chanel, and the like, all manner of food, from trendy to street, is dished here. Gustavia's most celebrated dive, the thronged Le Select, slings Saint Bart's version of a Happy Meal, which purportedly inspired singer Jimmy Buffett's "Cheeseburger in Paradise." I take a quieter seat



Le Restaurant des Pêcheurs'
Rubik's Cube of fruit.

Chef Jean-Luc Grabowski of Le Restaurant des Pêcheurs.



— and meal five — in the laid-back garden at Eddy's, which refines regional Creole food, serving spice-redolent pumpkin soup and peppery curried goat to a soca soundtrack.

If Creole is an accent here, French remains the mother tongue. And many chefs here boast Michelin-worthy credentials. Chef Jean-Luc Grabowski at Le Restaurant des Pêcheurs formerly cooked for Monaco's royal family before arriving on the island several years ago. His lunch crowd plays in the calm bay that laps Grand Cul de Sac Beach until dishes such as salt-crusted whole sea bass arrive at tables set in the sand. A dessert of precisely diced squares of kiwi, mango, pineapple, and other vivid fruits assembled in exactly the same shape as a Rubik's Cube is nearly too beautiful to deconstruct. Nearly.

"If a restaurant isn't good," declares my island-born cabbie, ferrying me back to Gustavia, "it won't last for the season." He ticks off Maya's, The Hideaway, and Wall House among recommendations. "Word gets around. People here won't eat bad food."

To test his theory, I have meal eight spontaneously, in an unheralded restaurant off the beaten path. Opposite a salt pond, a three-minute walk from the ankle-deep sands of undeveloped Saline Beach, Le Grain de Sel resides in a cottage tucked behind the sea grapes, serving seared tuna tataki with spicy Asian greens in the sort of location where you might expect no more than a *croque monsieur*, if not a hot dog.

Nothing like a spot of shopping before lunch.



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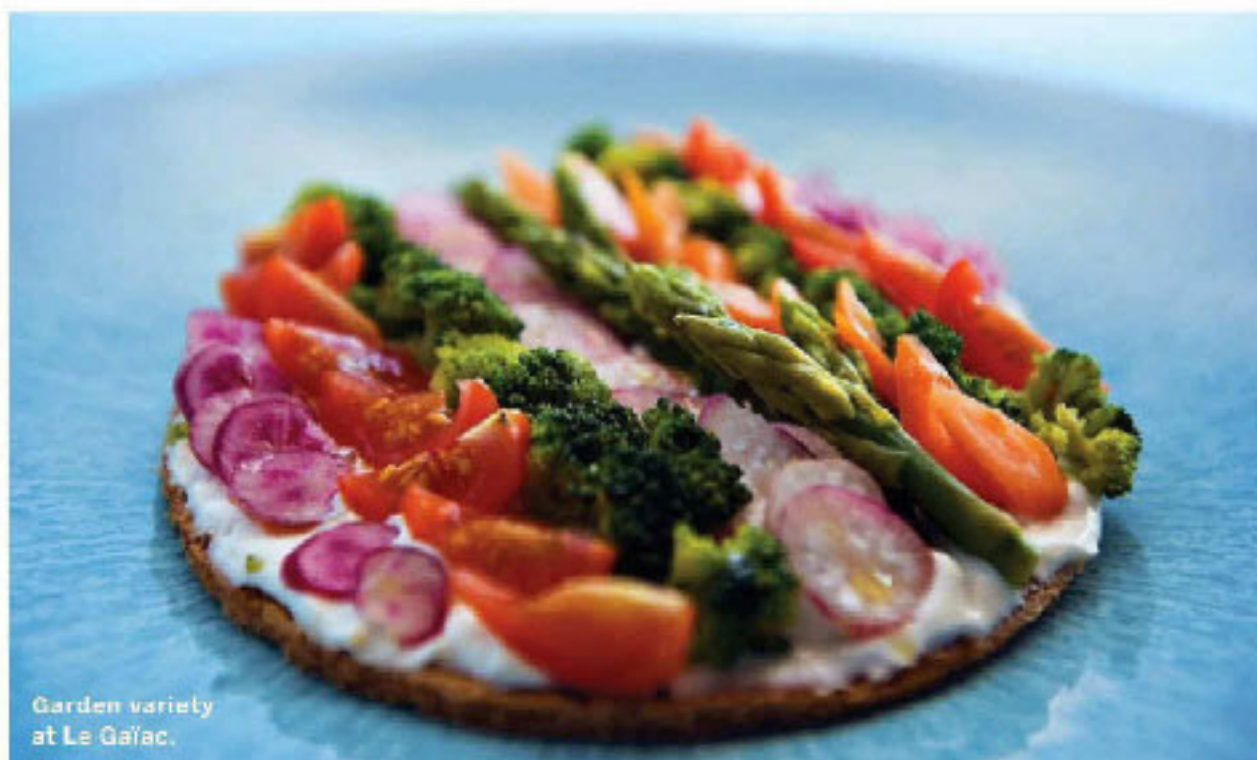
WANDERLUST GLOBAL GOURMET

Advancing the food culture on Saint Bart's, one resort aims to do what bedeviled the island's earliest settlers: farm it. Le Gaïac, Hôtel Le Toiny's celebrated restaurant on the southeastern fringe of the island's Côte Sauvage, or Wild Coast, loads its menu with imported luxuries like oysters but also seeds it with the property's

ADVISOR TIP

"Go in November; the weather is wonderful, with no crowds at the hotels or restaurants, and the rates are good – just before high season. If you're on a cruise that calls on Gustavia, take an island tour and then have lunch at Le Toiny. Bonus: They allow lunch guests to use their pool!"

– Denise Coburn



Garden variety at Le Gaïac.

CARIBBEAN CHIC

Sleeping and dining on Saint Bart's.

STAY Thirty-four rooms and villas scale a headland and spill over onto Saint Jean Beach at **Eden Rock**. On the Rocks, its signature restaurant and bar, is a good place to try the island's popular ti' punch (rum, sugar, and lime) before dinner. *Doubles from \$656, including breakfast daily and a bottle of Champagne with canapés.*

Renowned for its restaurant Le Gaïac, the 15-bungalow **Hôtel Le Toiny** grows much of its own food and recently added a spa cottage and exercise room. Hiking trails lead to some of Saint Bart's most beautiful countryside. *Doubles from \$1,380, including breakfast daily and a \$100 food and beverage credit.*

The 39-room **Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France**, located on Flamands Beach, one of the island's best strands, recently debuted two new three-bedroom villas, each with its own fitness and screening rooms. Its French

restaurant, La Case de l'Isle, overlooks the bay. *Doubles from \$602, including breakfast daily and a bottle of Champagne.*

The island's largest resort, **Hôtel Guanahani & Spa**, recently renovated its 68 guest rooms. Its gastronomic prowess rests on Le Bartolomé, serving Mediterranean specialties on candlelit tables indoors and out, as well as its annual six-week culinary festival (November 1). *Doubles from \$510, including breakfast daily, one lunch for two at the restaurant, and a bottle of Champagne.*

A popular island with second-home owners, Saint Bart's is renowned for its rich stock of plush villas available to rent. **St. Barth Properties** lets 155 of these free-standing houses. Newcomers to its portfolio include the two-bedroom Villa Lili, overlooking Saint Jean Beach, and the five-bedroom Villa L'Estancia, a reassembled seventeenth-century French manor. *Villas from \$1,320.*

DINE Fashionable **Dô Brazil** serves salads and ceviche on Shell Beach. 590-590/290-666; www.dobrazil.com.

Eddy's serves Creole and Asian fare a block behind Gustavia's harbor. 590-590/275-417.

Just steps from Saline Beach, popular **Le Grain de Sel** offers fresh fish and salads. 590-590/524-605.

Beachcombers stock up on take-out from breakfast croissants to

baguette sandwiches at **Maya's To Go**. 590-590/298-370; www.mayastogo.com.

On Grand Cul de Sac Beach, **Le Restaurant des Pêcheurs** serves sophisticated seafood, including Friday's special bouillabaisse. 590-590/298-300; www.lesereno.com.

Wall House on Gustavia's harbor specializes in rotisserie meats and has an extravagant dessert trolley. 590-590/277-183; www.wallhouserestaurant.com.



Hôtel Guanahani & Spa.

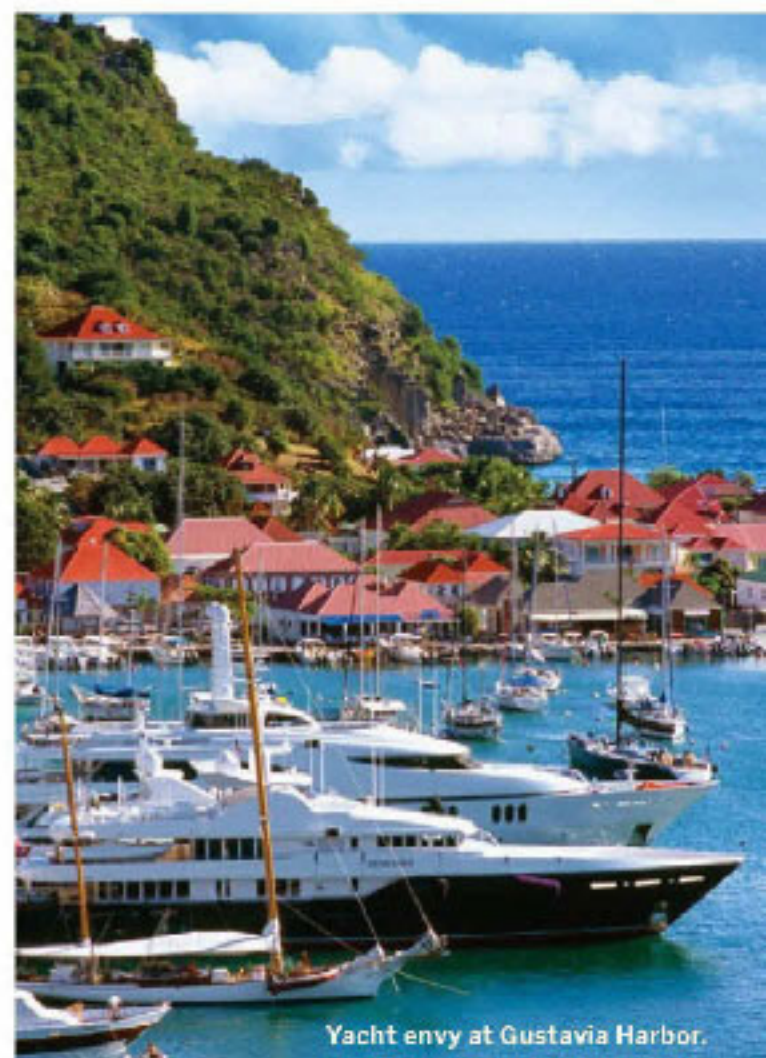


Beachcombers' favorite: Maya's To Go.

own produce. The 15-cottage resort is the first to bring farm-to-table dining to Saint Bart's by erecting three greenhouses on this rocky, desert island with little topsoil. The project recently expanded threefold. "This way," explains French chef Stéphane Mazières, "we can ensure we have good-tasting red tomatoes."

From the intense red pepper tart and olive crème brûlée amuse-bouche through bonbonlike truffle macaroons sandwiching foie gras, and smoky squab with pistachio confit legs, Mazières' dishes excel as both visual and flavorful delights, perfectly paired with the hillside setting where polished waiters quickly replenish glasses of rosé bubbly, the surf churns below, and couples softly clink Champagne flutes.

Departing the next morning via the sleepy village of Grand Fond, in front of its sole grocery I spy a sandwich board advertising foie gras and 16-euro Burgundy. You might not come to the Caribbean solely for the food, but on Saint Bart's you'll remember it - high, low, and to-go. VI.



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