



The Napoleon



BARGE GOURMET IN BURGUNDY

A foodie-focused cruise along the Saone River leads to an exquisite tour of Michelin starred restaurants

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Cruising into Lyon



La Côte Saint Jacques



Chef Graeme



It was the trip of a lifetime, especially for foodies like my husband Bill and me. This August we floated down the Saone River in Burgundy stopping to dine in a Michelin starred restaurant every day. Some were world renowned, such as

Paul Bocuse and Georges Blanc, named after their famous chefs. Back home in Canada their cookbooks are treasures in our culinary library. In France their recipes came to life on our plates, all as wonderful to look at as they were to eat.

Our "Epicurean Burgundy: A 12-Star Cruise" organized by Belmond Afloat in France, ultra luxury from start to finish, did add up to a dozen stars. The Michelin Guides, published for more than a century by the French tire company, awards one to three stars for excellence. In the 2020 guide to France, out of 628 restaurants awarded stars, only 29 received three and 86 two. Three designates exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey; two, excellent cooking worth a detour; with one indicating a very good restaurant in its category.

Our trip started on a Sunday with a private transfer from our hotel in Paris to the two-Michelin-starred La Côte Saint-Jacques in Joigny for lunch. I had eaten there many years ago when it had three stars and recalled that meal as one of the best in my life. Chef Jean-Michel Lorain was still at the helm of his kitchen and every bite of our multicourse lunch was exquisite. Back in 2000 the restaurant lost a star when it underwent extensive renovations, won it back three years later and then lost it again in 2015. Perhaps there was a napkin out of place.

Our appetizer for this memorable lunch was Kristal caviar floating on egg white mousse, black garlic jelly and horseradish cream. The fish course was brill (a flat fish in

the turbot family) with chanterelles, fresh fava beans and almonds. The meat was from the famed white cow of Burgundy, the Charolais, pan-fried and confit with artichokes and baby beetroot topped with a Burgundy wine/blackcurrant sauce. Then came the cheese course followed by the chef's signature dessert of mille-feuille with three custards. Fine organic Burgundy wines were paired with each course.

After this spectacular start to our trip we were driven to our barge, The Napoleon, to settle in and meet the staff, of which there were six to look after us: be the captain of the boat, Ellie the matelot (deckhand), Louise the guide, Graeme the chef and Carrie and Chami the hostesses. They utterly spoiled us. Chef asked what we wanted to eat and drink while on board and I requested pigeon, rabbit, local cheeses, salads, burgundy wines and pastis while my husband asked for caviar, foie gras, whisky and mezcal. The chef delivered on all that and more, presenting the rabbit cooked two ways, the caviar on homemade blinis with smoked salmon and so on. At every stop Louise or Graeme would go hunting for items we requested as the days went by.

Life on board was every bit as good as the fine meals on land. Champagne flowed all day along with great wines and an open, well-stocked bar. We cruised down the River Saone at a leisurely pace passing through five locks in the six days. Ship movement was never an issue, as the river was calm, and the barge moored at night.

On the second day, we alit from the barge at Seurre to go for lunch at the three-starred Lameloise in the town of Chagny. There were several choices on our tasting menu and I went for the langoustines in a chardonnay sauce with caviar, sweetbreads in a quinoa crust and a peach-based dessert. Of course, there were several 'amuses' to begin, a cheese course, a couple of 'pre-desserts', mignardises (bite-size post desserts) and lots of burgundy wines in the four hour bacchanalian feast.

Tuesday, we moored at Chalon-sur-Saone and were taken to the beautiful town of Beaune, the wine capital of Burgundy for a tour of the Hôtel-Dieu. Louise told us about some of the treasures in the place, including 17th-century murals and the history of this 500-year-old hospital for the poor. Then we had an intriguing tour of the underground cellars of Joseph Drouhin, located under the very cobblestone streets of Beaune, followed by a tutored wine tasting.

Dinner at night was at the charming one-star L'Amaryllis, a former water mill. We dined on the terrace, the temperature perfect for comfort, and the setting romantic. It happened to be our 19th wedding anniversary and we couldn't have picked a better spot to celebrate.

Every dish of chef Cédric Burtin's tasting menu was delicious. We started with an amuse of beef tartare on jellied beef broth, followed by a signature dish featuring large pieces of seared foie gras in a warm basil-vinegar and onion-flavoured foie gras emulsion. The fish dish was trout with roasted fennel and the meat an aged black Angus beef. The pre-dessert was a honey and apple creation and the dessert poached peach with verbena sorbet.

On Wednesday we lunched on board as we cruised to Tournus, our stop for the night. I went with Louise to do some exploring and shopping in the picturesque town. Dinner was at the one-star Aux Terrasses, a short walk from the barge. The staff there weren't as polished as in the other places, but the meal created by chef Jean-Michel Carrette was tasty indeed. We had crispy fish, foie gras topped with thinly sliced cauliflower, trout with caper flowers, langoustines in a lemon sauce, mushroom tortellini, pigeon and more.

On Thursday we visited Vonnas and Village Blanc, an entire village of restaurants, hotels, spa, gardens and retail outlets created in the name of chef Georges Blanc. We dined in his three-star restaurant and the chef, though retired from kitchen duties, welcomed us. (His son, chef Frederic Blanc is now in charge.) This was another extraordinary meal: caviar atop crab with fennel sauce, trout in saffron sauce, frogs legs, red mullet in a marine essence, blue lobster with vegetable ravioli, sweetbreads with clams and girolles, pre-desserts and a coffee/chartreuse ice cream dessert. Most courses were paired with wines from the Blanc vineyards.

The final day's treat was Paul Bocuse in Collonges-au-Mont-d'Or. This was our favourite of all. Gilles Reinhardt has been steering the kitchen since 2010 as executive chef. (Paul Bocuse died in 2018 and the restaurant lost one of its three stars after 55 years in 2020, a most controversial and unpopular decision by Michelin.)

The staff moved in harmony as if they were in an artfully orchestrated dance. After our amuse, we dined on foie gras terrine, lobster in an iced lemongrass flavoured bouillon topped with caviar Tradition Elite, sole with mushrooms and cream sauce, Bresse chicken laced with truffles, foie gras and morels cooked inside a pig's bladder, local cheeses and a raspberry sorbet and mousse dessert.



Aux Terrasses foie gras topped with thinly sliced cauliflower, flower petals

One of my friends following me on social media remarked, “how will you ever come back down to earth after this trip?” Indeed. How?

Belmond Afloat in France, part of the LVMH empire, operates one of the finest fleets of boutique barges on the French rivers and canals. Our vessel, the 129 foot long Napoleon, accommodates 12 guests in six cabins each with their own ensuite. The six day 12 Star Michelin Epicurean trips are usually only offered once a year. For more information, visit belmond.com/boats/europe/france/belmond-afloat-in-france.



Paul Bocuse raspberry delight