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describes a unique hotel in Beaune that offers a rare mix of historic charm, world-class wine and Michelin-starred cuisine

Le Cep: A Historic Gem in Beaune

This wasn't just a place to sleep; it was a rare gem, a place that celebrates both the region's rich heritage and its world-class wines

During a recent trip to Beaune, the wine capital of Burgundy, I discovered Le Cep, a delightful hotel that offered a refreshing escape from the typical gleaming, efficient, yet impersonal modern hotels. This hotel, steeped in history and bursting with personality, effortlessly blends the old with the new, creating an atmosphere that made me feel like I was stepping into a storybook, much like Alice in Wonderland. What made this hotel even more special was its extraordinary wine collection – an exceptional selection of the best Burgundy has to offer. This wasn't just a place to sleep; it was a rare gem, a place that celebrates both the region's rich heritage and its world-class wines.

Of course, establishments with a wine focus are not uncommon in Beaune. They dot every street corner in Beaune, offering a wide array of wine and food, including local specialties. I made it my business to explore those too, with pleasing results.

Le Cep, however, was a historic 15th-century jigsaw puzzle of a hotel – it took things to the next level. Its sole specialization was wine with a large dollop of Burgundy's history thrown into the mix.

The hotel was not built as a single structure. Much like an interlocking puzzle, its various wings and suites were added piece by piece, and today it boasts 70 rooms, surrounded by several parlours, nooks and crannies. Ancient stairways and underground cellars add to its sense of mystery. It

is very easy to lose yourself – literally – as I often did.

The rooms include 17 'Grand Cru' suites and one large suite where, according to legend, King Louis XIV preferred to sleep during his visit to Beaune in 1658, rather than at the Hospices de Beaune – allegedly due to a fear of germs. Each room and suite boasts unique décor and is named after Burgundy appellations, including Santenay, Vosne-Romanée, St-Romain, Chambolle, Corton and more. The hotel also features a cigar lounge and a beautifully landscaped Jardin à la Française (French-style garden). Its dining options include an Ayurvedic vegetarian restaurant and the Michelin-starred gourmet restaurant, Loiseau des Vignes, by nouvelle cuisine pioneering chef Bernard Loiseau.

The hotel also boasts three courtyards including an interior courtyard dating back to 1547, which was part of a mansion owned by the Brunet de Monthelie family. Their descendants served as administrators of the famous Hospices de Beaune, located close by.

Owner Jean-Claude Bernard gave me a tour of the establishment pointing out various areas of interest. It was fascinating, especially the presence of the 1,000-square-metre luxury Ayurvedic spa, Marie de Bourgogne, complete with an entire team from Kerala to administer various therapies. The hotel is often booked weeks in advance because of this. "We are not a

hotel you come to just sleep in," Bernard said.

This is true. However, for me, the most interesting offerings were the four wine bars or caves, as Bernard called them. Named Caveau Saint Felix, Caveau des Remparts, Caveau Gaspard and Caveau Madon, each serves a different purpose – from ageing the hotel's impressive inventory of superb Burgundies to hosting intimate parties for a bunch of wine connoisseurs. As for the prices, Bernard explained, "Our wine list offers 1,200 references of Burgundy appellations, and we have 20,000 bottles... with vintages starting from 1920, and prices beginning from €30 to €30,000 per bottle."

The range of wines encompasses everything from village-level to rare vintages of Burgundy Grand Crus. In fact, Bernard has one of the most comprehensive collections of Grand Cru Burgundies to be found, a mind-boggling array of famous names. I asked him how he managed to obtain the wines, many of which are known for their minuscule allocations and heart-stopping prices. He shrugged, "Direct allocations, mostly. We buy entire cellars if the wine's quality, provenance and storage is perfect. We also buy at auctions, of course."

The auction in question is the emblematic Hospices de Beaune charity auction, held every November, when barrels of the vintage are auctioned to high-profile buyers and celebrities who throng the small town. Indeed, in Bernard's cellar, pride of place is given to the iconic Pièce des Présidents barrel sold in 2019, a Corton Grand Cru 2016 Bressandes, alongside jeroboams and magnums featuring renowned names from the Côte d'Or.

I sat down with Bernard in one of the cellars where he uncorked a Hospices de Beaune Pouilly-Fuissé 2017, bottled specially for the hotel. This was served alongside airy, cheese-filled gougères and the local delicacy, escargots de Bourgogne, cooked in garlic, butter and herbs. As we sipped, he explained that many of his guests



One of the four wine 'caves' at Le Cep where tastings and intimate parties are held

preferred private wine tastings. "For this, we serve anything from canapés and a simple lunch of mâchon bourguignon, or a Burgundy dish to curated multi-course Michelin-starred repasts. All paired with iconic vintages of Burgundy to create memories of a lifetime."

Themed masterclasses are another popular event. "These are always for a limited number of guests, and we try to curate them to provide participants with the tasting of their lives." On 19th July 2024, on the eve of the Olympics, the hotel held a special dinner featuring seven rare Chartreuses, paired with dishes created by Chef Alexandre Dutat from Loiseau des Vignes.

Similarly, another sold-out masterclass featured a range of whiskies by pioneering French whisky producer, Michel Couvreur. "The next one will be dedicated to the eight grands crus of Vosne-Romanée including Romanée-Conti," he told me.

Bernard's guests often fly in for one of these evenings of indulgence in fine wine and food, but hotel guests are also welcome to join. And if you would like to buy a wine from his stash to carry home, he is happy to oblige.

As the last drop of Pouilly-Fuissé slid down my throat, I asked Bernard what drove him every day. "I just want to share my passion for Burgundy," he says, "Honestly, that is not a difficult job." ♦

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