

NEW YORK CORNER

by John Mariani

Le Château

Route 35 (near Route 123)

South Salem, NY

www.lechateauny.com

Le Château just makes the cut as a “New York” restaurant, because if you miss it by a country mile on Route 35, you’ll be in Connecticut.

And Le Château is a place you don’t want to miss if you are: 1) enamored of a style of grand French cuisine and service rare anywhere these days, 2) fascinated by grand old historic architecture in impeccable shape, or 3) simply meandering through the beautiful northeast territory of Westchester County this fall and get hungry. Like some auberge in Provence, Le Château is both a destination and a charming surprise for newcomers, as if Hansel and Gretel stumbled on an extravagant mansion in the woods instead of a cottage.

The mansion’s pedigree is impressive: Built in 1907 by J. Pierpont Morgan by architects Atterbury & Atterbury as a home for the rector of Manhattan’s St. George’s Episcopal Church, the Tudor-style house was called Savin Rock. It sprawls over the 32 acres of rolling, landscaped hills, and within are majestic expanses of oak, cherry, and chestnut woods, a grand staircase, plenty of stone fireplaces, coffered ceilings, and beautifully designed windows looking out over thick green lawns that have seen thousands of weddings take place since the mansion became a restaurant in 1973, opened by Yves Lozach; it is now in the hands of the same family, Monique Jaffre Lozach, who has maintained (at great cost) this huge enterprise. Perhaps the only compromise to the original architecture is the obtrusive soundproof ceiling in the main dining room, which look very much out of place. (As do many men who arrive in shirtsleeves, sitting with their wives and girlfriends who have happily dressed up so nicely or the evening.)



The service, by veteran captains and sommeliers in tuxedos and a staff that reminds you what the word gentility means, moves deftly through the large public rooms, carving, filleting, saucing, dressing, decanting, and making pretty all that you eat and drink here. Tablesettings, from linens to glassware, are first-rate. Chef André Molle has brought the once-dated menu into more modern focus without losing respect for the classic refinement that underpins all fine cuisine. There is nothing on the menu that would raise the eyebrows of anyone who dined here 30 years ago, and there are still highly traditional dishes here like French onion soup, sails with garlic butter, and Grand Marnier soufflé.

On a recent autumn evening, we sat down to “Les Préambles Froids et Chauds” like excellent duck foie gras terrine with a sprightly ginger-onion confit. Warm duck salad on mesclun greens with a mustard balsamic vinaigrette was perfectly rendered, the meat, acids, sweets, and hot flavors all sumptuously balanced. A special of the night, a bland warm tomato bisque, reminded me that we’re tomato season is sadly over. My favorite starter was large, tender raviolo stuffed with vegetables, scented with thyme and splashed with a celery broth—a very

very good and subtle dish.

Roast rack of lamb, cooked medium-rare as ordered, was crusted with mustard and herbs in a thyme jus, as classic a dish as they come and not, as so often happens, overpowered by the herb crust. A fat pork chop, succulent throughout, was a big hit at our table, and we thoroughly enjoyed a crisply roasted breast and braised leg of duck done, not as you might expect with the clichés of orange or cherry sauce, but with a honey-preserved lemon sauce. Our only disappointment was an overcooked striped bass of questionable freshness, in a light Champagne sauce.

Desserts, by pâtissier Remy Deyglun, stay within the traditional forms, including those multi-flavored soufflés (left), and a fine crème brûlée.

Le Château's winelist has been building for a long time, so there are some treasures in the cellar, including most of the Premier Crus, along with a judicious selection of California and international bottlings, most at reasonable mark-ups, including some selections at \$35. The Château Mouton Rothschild 1998 here runs \$550, which would be tough to find for under \$350 in a winestore. And the price for a three-course meal here--\$42 and \$46--is really quite amazing.

That places like Le Château are great rarities these days is obvious, but to find out that an established retreat like this, whose beauty is attraction enough for banquets and weddings, also puts such sincere effort into its nightly menus and service is something uniquely satisfying.

Le Château is open for dinner Tues.-Sun., for brunch on Sun. Prix fixe dinner available at \$42 or \$46 on Fri. & Sat. À la carte, appetizers run \$7.50-\$17, main courses \$29-\$35.

