

DORDOGNE



DREAMING

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A TAMPA COUPLE TURNS THEIR PASSION
FOR FOOD AND TRAVEL INTO A DELICIOUS NEW CAREER
LEADING INTIMATE EUROPEAN TOURS.



In the Dordogne, images pop up around every turn, like snippets from a romantic movie, so perfect they are almost cliché. Arched bridges span winding rivers, bright yellow sunflowers bask in the heat, and medieval castles and beleaguered windmills perch over ancient villages and twisting cobbled streets.

It is fitting, then, that in this fairytale region of southwestern France, Steve and Laura Schmalhorst have launched a dream of their own to do what they do best: feed the dreams of others.

Vagabond Gourmet, the Schmalhorsts' new venture, offers a private room in a luxurious villa and a week of unique and stimulating itineraries custom-designed to discover the best of a local region. But the main focus of any Vagabond tour is the food. Laura spends her days shopping the local markets and creating delicious meals. Intimate groups, usually no

more than 20, enjoy breakfast, lunch and dinner in a relaxed and easy environment that's more dinner-with-friends than formal hotel dining. Top it all off with some local wine, dazzling scenery, and a dash of Steve's witty stories, and Vagabond Gourmet exceeds expectations.

The Schmalhorsts spend nine months a year in Tampa, catering and doing charity work, then take off for their Vagabond summers. Last year, Steve and Laura offered two tours, one in France, one in Italy; this summer, they've doubled the offerings in each location and spiced up itineraries with guest chefs and local experts.

"Vagabond Gourmet is the best of both worlds — creative cooking but in far-away places," says Laura. "I want people to have the experience they have always imagined."

And she's no stranger to launching dreams. Laura was the youngest female chef at Boston's landmark restaurant The Harvest, in 1976, and she learned to cook under the tutelage of well-known chef Lydia Shire. After moving to Tampa in 1982, Laura started A La Carte catering and spent nearly two decades feeding Floridians at openings, benefits and countless weddings.

"You learn a lot about creating dreams when you work with brides," she laughs.

A fairy-tale of her own began when she met Steve. Their pairing a success, the couple teamed with Outback Steakhouse in 2000 as joint partners in A La

Le Prieuré au Château Biron offers elegant private suites and apartments for Vagabond Gourmet guests. Opposite: Steve and Laura Schmalhorst in the kitchen; Laura's berries in chantilly cream; and scenes from the village outside the gates of Le Prieuré.





Carte Pavillion.

While they both loved the work, they also loved to travel and to cook (and eat) good food. For years they had mused about combining their two loves in a business, and they finally took the leap in 2004.

Last summer, the first Vagabond Gourmet guests walked through the doors of Le Prieuré au Chateau Biron, a 500-year-old priory in France, and the Schmalhorsts' dream was reality.

LE PRIEURÉ

Steve and Laura found the American-owned priory turned *pied-à-terre* online. Le Prieuré sits in the center of Biron, a small village literally in the shadow of the largest castle in the region. (Rumor has it there are underground tunnels linking the castle and the priory.) Originally built in 1515 for the priors of the region by the first Duke Gontaut-Biron, Le Prieuré today is a perfect balance of history and modern elegance. The original stone staircase leads to six completely renovated suites and apartments, with names like *Rêve* (dream) and *Ciel* (sky).

On a sultry summer evening, Laura bounds from the kitchen. “I need parsley,” she says, and makes a beeline for the vegetable garden behind the well, where she snips a few sprigs before retreating inside.

The vista from the back terrace is picturesque, and Laura has dressed the outdoor table with a blue-and-yellow tablecloth and a vase of hydrangeas and sunflowers. Tampa residents Kathy and Henry Redmon are holding hands in the garden, while Carlen Bardin and Steve sit under a shade tree, sipping wine from nearby Bergerac. Above them, the sky is cloudless and almost the same blue as the wooden shutters on the stone house.

The Redmonds and Bardin are Vagabond Gourmet’s first guests — and also old friends of the Schmalhorsts. “We love to travel, so we gladly offered to be their guinea pigs,” Cathy says with a laugh.

Henry, a plastic surgeon back home in New Tampa, is barefoot, snapping photos of the old church in the distance. Bardin and Steve reminisce about past trips to this part of France, when the foursome often deviated from major roads to discover the hidden gems that now form Vagabond tours.

“Anyone can do what we do,” Steve says. “But we feel we do it better because we have spent the time and done the legwork to really research the best of everything.”

And they have Laura in the kitchen.

The door opens again, and this time Jeff appears, wearing a black apron covered with little white roosters. “It’s ready,” he announces. The group rises and, after a few rooster quips, heads toward the dining room. Jeff enjoys the kitchen, and spends most of his time as Laura’s sous-chef, helping prepare meals with fellow guest Sue Lyons.

Laura welcomes anyone to join her in the kitchen for instruction or simply to watch. But she

Guests enjoy wine and hors d'oeuvres on the shade-dappled terrace. Opposite: The sights and tastes of Biron infuse the Vagabond Gourmet experience.





cautions that Vagabond Gourmet is not a formal cooking-school vacation tour in the traditional sense. In fact, while there's plenty to do, there is nothing overly structured about a Bagabond Gourmet trip. "Whether someone wants to spend a day sightseeing, or in the garden with a book, or in the kitchen learning to cook, we will bend over backwards to make it happen," Laura says.

"We want this to be two steps above a self-catered house, and a million miles away from your typical motorbus tour," Steve adds.

This summer, the Schmalhorsts bring a great menu to the table. In mid-June, their second season launches in Tuscany. Guests will enjoy amazing cuisine for a week and be treated to tours of nearby Florence and smaller villages, a visit to a local pasta maker and butcher, and a truffle-tasting evening at a Tuscan villa.

The trip also kicks off Vagabond Gourmet's "Chefs on the Loose" series, with Tampa's Rand Packer, former

partner chef at Roy's, and Kevin Kruszewski, of Pane Rustica Bakery, who will stay at the villa and prepare meals with Laura each day.

Two weeks later, Tampa-based personal chef and caterer Guillaume Alinat returns home to his native Provence, where he and Laura will treat a new round of guests to a week of regional specialties: bouillabaisse, aioli monstre, and leg of lam and tian, to name a few. "I want to show 'off the beaten path' Provence, the true roots of the region, not the Monte Carlo or the Cote d'Azur siade, but the *terroir*," Alinat says.

When guests aren't relaxing around the pool at the luxurious "le petit miracle" in the picturesque Provencal village of Oppede-le Vieux, they'll be hot-air ballooning over author Alphonse Daudet's fabled land, touring the factory of local chocolatier Joel Durand, and visiting nearby Aix-en-Provence and Avignon for the annual celebrations of Cezanne. "We want people to immerse themselves in an experience," Steve says.

But the real focus of each Vagabond Gourmet tour is the kitchen, and with that in mind, the only mandatory event is eating well.

EXQUISITE ALCHEMY

Back in Dordogne, the inaugural guests have filled their week with a visit to the 13th-century chateau in Beynac and a leisurely *pique-nique*, prepared by Laura, on the banks of the Dordogne River. They strolled through a market in Sarlat. They tasted wine at the Chateau de Tiregan, and they celebrated Bastille Day just outside the priory front door, in a traditional fete du village.

The nights in Dordogne are all about Laura's cooking, which is served on a

A quiet moment in the courtyard of Le Prieuré au Château Biron. Opposite: Dinner in Dordogne; the medieval charm of Biron.



long, country-style wooden banquet table overlooking the back garden. Laura brings more than three decades of experience to her guests, and a love of food that is contagious. Her guests can't help but anticipate the chanterelle mushrooms she tenaciously hunted down at the open-air market in the medieval village of Sarlat. "I found them, and a truffle, too," she beams, shaking the white plastic bag.

Laura's menus vary, but the four-course meal is always worthy of a Michelin star. She is a true alchemist of flavors, and surprises palates with dishes of grilled white peaches and foie gras, pomegranate glaze, grilled duck breast with walnut liqueur, coq au vin, and duck confit. Her desserts are prepared from the freshest ingredients, whether berries with chantilly cream, or a lavender crème brûlée that Jeff describes as "like taking a bath and eating dessert at the same time."

Whatever the plan, wherever the destination, whatever the menu, a common thread exists. Steve raises his glass and toasts his guests: "Live, love, laugh, eat."

He should add "dream" to the list. □

