

LA BELLE FRANCE

THE SOPHISTICATED



GUIDE TO FRANCE®

The Great Southwest

The Hostellerie de Plaisance in Saint-Emilion

Jean-Marie Amat in Lormont

The Saint-James in Boulliac

The Southwest is hot and for wine lovers, Saint-Emilion is the hottest spot on the map right now. The wines are reclassified every ten years which keeps the excitement level high. Saint-Emilion winemakers should be used to the pressure – they’ve been rated by experts ever since 1199 – but there’s still a Merlot-scented whiff of backbiting and controversy in the air. With its graceful bell tower, monolithic church and honey-colored ramparts, hilltop Saint-Emilion is also the most photogenic wine site in the Bordelais area. Compare it to the Medoc flatlands and those dreary châteaux that look like they were built from deluxe Lego sets. No contest.

Saint-Emilion’s sensational scenery and easy-to-love wines have made its vineyards the ultimate trophy purchase. LVMH’s CEO Bernard Arnault holds the reins of Cheval Blanc, Dassault aeronautic heirs added La Fleur to their *grand cru* Château Dassault in 2002, appliance magnate Jean-François Quenin owns the Château de Pressac... the list goes on and on. These deep-pocketed owners have poured cash into their prizes. Ex-supermarket mogul Gérard Perse – who also owns the Hostellerie de Plaisance – has drawn the most headlines with his Monbousquet, Pavie Decesse and Pavie vineyards.

Château Pavie picked up Parker’s sacrosanct 100/100 score for the 2000

and 2003 vintages, setting off major drama in the decanter set. Anti-Parkerian Jancis Robinson calls it a “stupid wine” but another prominent critic, Bernard Burtschy, recently gave Pavie his highest rating of 93-94 citing its “exceptional density”. The only drawback to making your own personal taste test? Prime bottles of Pavie are likely to cost over 400€ in any of the area’s restaurants.

Happily, Saint-Emilion is user-friendly for budget connoisseurs too. Naturally, this UNESCO heritage site draws tons of tourists, but the upside is a plethora of competitive wine shops. Easy access to the producers is the biggest treat of all. For instance, the famous *grand cru* vineyards of Château Beauséjour are just a five-minute walk outside of

town. A superb bottle of 1997, which probably should be drunk no later than next week, only costs 40€ in the winemaker’s front office, roughly 13€ less than the price in a local retail store. (Can you guess what it costs in a restaurant?) Build up your own cellar by investing in 2005 Beauséjour for only 88€/bottle at the winery.

We’ve chosen a trio of the area’s most vogue-ish restaurants. The incestuous thread running between them is purely coincidental. Nevertheless, it’s worth noting that Philippe Etchebest, who currently holds two stars at the Hostellerie de Plaisance, previously worked for Dominique Toulousy in Toulouse, a job



Twilight on the Terrace - Hostellerie de Plaisance

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photo by Arnaud Frich

that was subsequently taken by Michel Portos, who now directs the one-star kitchen at the Saint-James, which came to culinary prominence in the 90s under Jean-Marie Amat, who opened his own one-starred Bordelais restaurant last year. (Whew!)

The Hostellerie de Plaisance

The building that houses the Hostellerie de Plaisance started out as a monastery and was transformed into a *guinguette* cabaret for dancing and drinking after the Revolution. It didn't become a hotel until the Roaring Twenties. If you knew the Hostellerie ten years ago, when it still retained traces of its monastic/dancehall past, you may be hard put to recognize anything but the exterior walls.

The public rooms were entirely reshuffled in the 2007 renovation that gave the guestrooms their pampered Relais & Châteaux cachet... with prices to match. The former bar is now a luxurious wood-paneled backdrop for the restaurant where the affable Philippe Etchebest, one of the



Chef Philippe Etchebest



rare French chefs to start his career on a rugby field, won two Michelin stars last March.

Back in 2002, rooms rates at the Hostellerie varied between 144€ and 305€. Today, they start at 310€, but the good news is that you don't need to book the biggest suite, 620€, to have the finest experience. The Pavie room, 420€, the hotel's *only room* with windows on three sides, is pure magic. Besides terrific views of the town, vineyards and the bell tower, there's a queen-sized bed, an adjustable flat screen television mounted on the wall, an extra-large bathtub in a black marble surround, and a separate walk-in shower.

The only possible caveat concerns insomniacs who go to bed very early with all the windows open in hot weather. (One of the windows looks down the outdoor dining terrace below.) Amenities include state-of-the-art air-conditioning, excellent lighting, Ferragamo toiletries, and a handy Nespresso machine. Our only quibble? The water pressure in the shower could be a bit stronger. (For accommodations with lower rates, see below.)

Whether or not you stay at the Hostellerie, you will

The LA BELLE FRANCE Rating System

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|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 20 - Perfect; As Fine As It Gets | 17 - Very Good |
| 19 - Extraordinary; Nearly Flawless | 16 - Above Average |
| 18 - Excellent; At Times Memorable | 15 - Average; Uninspired |
| 14 and below - Varying Degrees of Dissatisfaction | |



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certainly want to dine here. It's very popular, so reserve the table as soon as possible. When you get to the restaurant, take the time to relax with a 12€ glass of *Abeille de Fieuzel 2007*, the château's second wine, preferably on the stone patio, while you study the menu. If you opt for the fixed price menus at 55€, 95€ or 120€, your work is done.

If you want to try the *à la carte* selections, you'll need your imagination. Unlike chefs from the Pierre Gagnaire school who write existential novels about each *entrée*, ex-rugby man Philippe Etchebest is enigmatically laconic. *Oeuf de poule* ("chicken egg") does very little to suggest the majesty of one of his exceptional starters. Yes, there's a slow-poached hen's egg... but the parmesan crumble, the slivers of prestige jambugo ham, the judicious touches of Aquitaine caviar and wasabi mustard, turn this dish into something that's as stylishly powerful as an All Black haka.

He's also a master of meat. *Agneau princier* is another understatement. This lamb is fit for an intergalactic emperor. It's not just about being perfectly cooked... it's the superbly inventive garnishes. Red peppers stuffed with pomelos. The slightest trace of soy. And an olive tapenade that goes otherworldly with a haunting hint of licorice. The designer *pigeonneau*, in two spectacular services, proved equally brilliant.

Thus said, there was one dish we didn't like at all. The asparagus starter failed on several levels. The thin film of (slightly slimy) transparent pasta got in the way of the veggies. The dark, soy-ish sauce squashed the flavors of the morel mushrooms instead of enhancing them. Sadly, this was a 41€ disappointment

Yet... as so often happens in this area... a fine Saint-Emilion wine induces euphoria and overcomes everything. Query: Should you forfeit your child's college education for the wine that wowed Parker? That's your decision. However, remember that Monbousquet - with a reputation that's rising with a bullet - is also a house wine. A truly memorable 2003 will cost 130€... and be worth every centime. We're sorry not to have any notes about the 32€ breakfast. After such an overwhelmingly flash dinner, we ended up having a croissant at the local internet café.

The Hostellerie de Plaisance. 5 Place du Clocher, 33330 Saint-Emilion. Tel: 05.57.55.07.55. Fax: 05.57.74.41.11. www.hostelleriedeplaisance.com Twenty-five rooms and suites from 310€ to 650€. Breakfast: 32€. Elevator available. Closed December 14 to February 10; Restaurant closed Wednesday lunch, Thursday lunch, Sunday and Monday. All major credit cards.

Restaurant	Cuisine	Decor	Service	Wine List	Value	Total
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The Hostellerie de Plaisance	18	18	18	19	18	91
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Martin Wine Shop

Saint-Emilion Hotel Alternatives

"Martin" (25 rue Guadet) is one of the most prestigious wine shops in town and its commercial director, Mr. Benoît Gaillard, is fountain of expert knowledge and vineyard gossip. (His shop also has invested in the special license which permits direct shipment to all 50 states.) Here's the scoop: *There's a brand-new apartment on top of the shop which is available for rental!* We are probably the first American paper to publish news about the **Demeure des Girondins**. The spacious modern apartment, decorated in beige textiles and blond wood, has air conditioning, tech goodies (WiFi, DVD, two plasma TV screens), a bathroom with massage shower and twin sinks, ironing board, hairdryer... plus a fully equipped kitchen! (Note that you have to walk up two flights of stairs to get to it.)

The budget hotel that wins our vote is **Au Logis des Remparts** thanks to its central location, air-conditioning, outdoor swimming pool and its private, enclosed parking lot... a real bonus in a crowded medieval towns like Saint-Emilion. (Parking is free for all but the lowest-priced



Demeure des Girondins



Au Logis des Remparts pool & garden

rooms. Guests in shower-only rooms, 78€, must pay a 15€ surcharge per night.)

The **Hôtel Château Grand Barrail** – a large, turreted castle on the outskirts of town that lapsed into receivership – has just been purchased by the Emeraude Hotel group. Francis Garcia, the chef who previously won one star at Bordeaux’s rococo *Chapon Fin* restaurant, has been appointed to supervise the kitchen. We’ll keep you advised as we hear more news.

Demeure des Girondins. 9 rue des Girondins, 33330 Saint-Emilion. Tel: 05.57.74.43.44. Fax: 05.57.74.12.74. www.demeuredesgirondins.com One apartment from 130€/night. All major credit cards.

Au Logis des Remparts. 18 rue Guadet, 33330 Saint-Emilion. Tel: 05.57.24.70.43. Fax: 05.57.74.47.44. www.logisdesremparts.com Seventeen rooms and suites from 78€ to 200€ (low season) and 98€ to 250€ (high season). Breakfast: 13€. No elevator. All major credit cards.

Château Grand Barrail. Route de Libourne, 33330 Saint-Emilion. Tel: 05.57.55.37.00.

Restaurant Jean-Marie Amat

It’s not been easy to keep track of Jean-Marie Amat since he left the Saint-James in 2002. He surfaced briefly at *Bon*, a posh brunch-ish enclave in Paris’s sixteenth *arrondissement* for a while, but disappeared back into the nether-regions of myth shortly afterwards. When the buzz started a few years ago that he’d be making his re-entry at the *Château du Prince Noir* outside Bordeaux, it seemed oddly appropriate. Amat has developed a mystical, Black Prince-ish reputation over the years.

So, while we expected to dine at Hogwarts, reality was more 21st century. Well... not quite. Someone has cast a Spell of Un-Findable-Ness on Amat’s new restaurant. No GPS on earth can locate it. All we can say is this: If you can find your way to the Lidl Supermarket – not too difficult

as it’s one of the major landmarks in the village of Lormont – you can get out and walk.

That said, the whole Prince Noir thing is a bit of a bust too. We did see a somewhat Disney-ish castle, surrounded by bulldozers, but it’s not going to be part of a glorious Amat

Empire. Instead, it’s destined to be a conference center. Amat’s new venue is an unprepossessing modern building a few feet south of an ugly construction zone. Think, however, of Prince Charming cutting through the briars to get to Sleeping Beauty. It’s worth the effort.

The joy of Amat is that he’s effortlessly modern. No fancy foam, no tongue-twisting spices. As a reward for people who find him, he’s offering a 30€ lunch. We tried it: a simple chicken curry appetizer, followed by fish wrapped in cabbage and a wonderful coconut-flavored rice pudding. The *à la carte* menu is not designed to shock. Good food, expertly prepared. The vegetable salad is a marvel: crisp peas, fava beans, asparagus, sautéed girolle mushrooms, plus a few stands of *boccatini* pasta... divine. *Rouget!* The mullet is perfectly cooked with a touch of black olive, in the time-honored Provençal way that has never been bested.

After you succeed in finding the restaurant, reward yourself with a 2005 Smith Haut-Lafitte, 45€ and enjoy



Restaurant Jean-Marie Amat



Restaurant Jean-Marie Amat

the view. The dining room's poured concrete floors, steel accents and white Corian tables are sleek but self-effacing. You can't help noticing the giant photo of Mick Jagger in the first dining room, but most of the visual charm is focused on the forest just outside the picture windows.

Restaurant Jean-Marie Amat. Château du Prince Noir, 26 bis rue Raymond Lys, 33310 Lormont. Tel: 05.56.06.12.52. Fax: 05.56.74.77.89. www.jm-amat.com Closed Sunday and Monday; July 14 to August 15; December 23 to January 2. All major credit cards.

Restaurant	Cuisine	Decor	Service	Wine List	Value	Total
Restaurant Jean-Marie Amat	17	18	17	16	19	87

Le Saint-James

Architect Jean Nouvel, who won the Pritzker Prize in 2008, is the media darling these days. However, back in the 1980s, it took some courage to ask him to design a luxury hotel. The result, perched in hillside vineyard overlooking Bordeaux and the Garonne River, looked like nothing else in the Relais & Château guidebook. Nouvel created four pavilions, inspired by tobacco drying sheds, out of rust-colored metal. Metallic grids covered most windows.

Twenty years have passed and the Saint-James has aged very well. As the exterior walls were pre-rusted, it's no surprise that they look good as new. However, it is surprising that the furnishings and glossy, rag-painted walls look equally fresh. The Saint-James is an architectural contradiction. It's very 1989, but without a drop of the glitzy kitsch that characterized the period. (The exception is the Harley-Davidson suite, 380€, which features a real motorcycle.) The floor-hugging twin beds in an all-white Hauterive double like number 16, 250€, may be too close to the ground for some tastes, but the overall ambience is comfortable and pleasingly uncluttered.



Chef Michel Portos

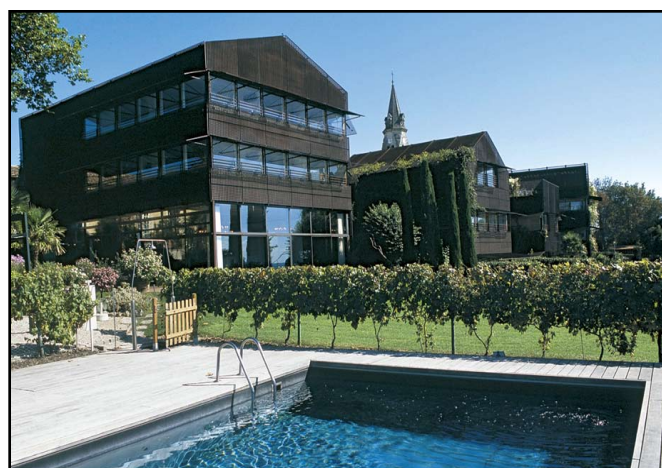


Le Saint-James

Chef Michel Portos favors local produce but he gives it a very exotic spin at his glass-sided, one star dining room. The *foie gras* is prepared with North African condiments and the frog legs are doused with Cajun spices. Blue-gray Gironde caviar gets a lift from cauliflower cream in one of Portos's more sedate creations. Chicken, on the other hand, shows a strong Asian inspiration. Marinated for 48 hours in soy and oriental seasonings before being braised and covered with slivers of red pepper, mango and peanuts, this dish is presented with sticky rice and chopsticks. It seemed to be made for the fine Saint-Julien which the sommelier helped us choose.

Obviously, Chef Portos is putting the Saint-James's wine list, greatly praised by wine professionals for its vision and moderate prices, through its paces. The 1982 Margaux, 2,500€, is available but so are many, many of the great second wines from top châteaux like the 2000 La Réserve de Léoville-Barton, 90€, and the 2000 Alter Ego from Château Palmer, 160€. On Wednesday nights, the restaurant lets guests bring their own bottles. The chef and sommelier work together to create a dinner that suits the wine.

The Saint-James has a 30€ weekday lunch menu, and



The pool at Le Saint-James

additional fixed price meals at 59€, 90€, and 125€. For less formal meals, the Saint-James operates two bistros. The Côté Cour, situated in a glass hangar on the front lawn, puts the emphasis on fish with 19€ and 26€ menus. The Café de l'Espérance is a casual rotisserie with a shaded terrace that serves a wide variety of grilled meats with country fries and salads for 12€ to 18€.

Le Saint-James. 3 Place Camille Holstein, 33270 Bouliac. Tel: 05.57.97.06.00. Fax: 05.56.20.92.58. www.saintjames-bouliac.com Eighteen rooms and suites from 185€ to 400€ (low season) and 210€ to 430€ (high season). Breakfast: 23€. Elevator available but staircases only to some rooms. Closed April 21 to May 1, October 27 to November 5, January 1 to 15; Restaurant closed Sunday and Monday. All major credit cards.

Restaurant	Cuisine	Decor	Service	Wine List	Value	Total
Le Saint-James	18	18	18	19	19	92
Restaurant	Cuisine	Decor	Service	Wine List	Value	Total
Café de l'Espérance	16	17	17	15	20	85

Getting There: Non-stop TGV trains from Paris's Gare Montparnasse to Bordeaux's Gare Saint-Jean take three hours. A roundtrip ticket costs approximately 200€ in first class and between 130€ and 160€ in second class. It is possible to transfer to Saint-Emilion, roughly forty kilometers east, but you may prefer to drive (toward Libourne on the A89 highway) if you want to tour the vineyards. Bouliac is a 15 minute drive from central Bordeaux.

The Regent Grand Hotel Bordeaux

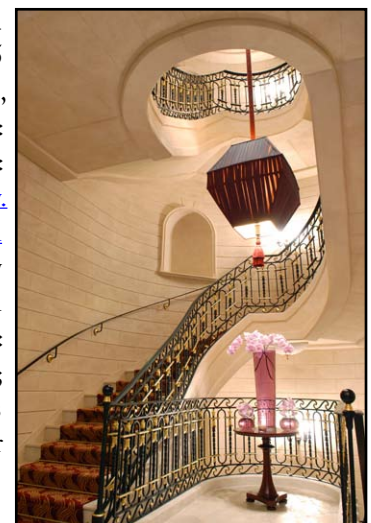
Bordeaux finally has the luxury hotel it deserves. In 1999, architect Michel Pétauud-Létang began linking eight buildings that stood behind the Neo-Classical façade that mirrors the Grand Théâtre on the opposite side of the Place de la Comédie. (Both buildings were originally designed by Victor Louis in 1776.) Jacques Garcia supervised the interior decoration of the sprawling 23,000 square meter complex that comprises 150 guestrooms, a brasserie, a bar, a gourmet restaurant, a winter garden and a shopping gallery. The duplex spa and private nightclub are expected to open soon.

Jacques Garcia has given the hotel corridors a theatrical note with wall treatments that mimic red velvet curtains. The guestroom color palette runs from turquoise to lilac to fuchsia to crimson to chocolate...and all in the same room. Most beds have dramatically draped headboards. The velvet-upholstered furniture takes its

inspiration from the 18th century. Where there's a place to put one silk tassel... expect to find six of them. The Grand Hotel is a tribute to the "More is More" aesthetic.

The hotel already has a busy brasserie (serving excellent wood-fired pizza, salads, and *plats du jour*) and an extremely attractive winter garden bar/restaurant serving a very limited menu. Right now, however, big hopes are pinned on the gourmet restaurant that opened last month in the kind of dining room that makes Versailles look homespun. While Bordeaux has very good restaurants outside town, its *intra muros* Michelin-stars have dwindled alarmingly in the past few years. The *Pressoir d'Argent* serves a 70€ lunch and more expansive *prix fixe* meals for 120€ and 180€. The user-friendly wine list is categorized by price, not region, and the simplest wines start at 30€. We'll give you a report on our next trip to Bordeaux.

The Regent Grand Hotel Bordeaux. 2-5 Place de la Comédie, 33000 Bordeaux. Tel: 05.57.30.44.44. Fax: 05.57.30.44.45. www.theregentbordeaux.com One hundred and fifty rooms and suites from 390€ to 810€. Breakfast: 26€. Elevator available; stairs required to access some rooms. All major credit cards.



Paris — Restaurants

Le Télégraphe. It's good to be hungry around the Musée d'Orsay again. On May 10, the glamorous Art Nouveau landmark *Le Télégraphe*, famous for its on again/off again calling as a restaurant, re-opened its doors. Built in 1905 as a dormitory for Paris's burgeoning population of female telephone operators, the upstairs was a warren of 111 bedrooms whose tenants shared three bathrooms.

By contrast, the ground floor refectory was palatial: marble mosaic floors, stained glass fanlight windows and 15-foot ceilings. Freshened up with brand-new wenge wood armchairs upholstered in silvery tones (and judicious touches of raspberry and celadon paint), the restaurant looks better than ever. The secluded garden, with teak tables and Japanese-style landscaping, is once again the oasis it was designed to be.

The Télégraphe's present incarnation is open for lunch (and Sunday brunch) only. Jean-Paul Berthiot and Arnaud Ballard, the young entrepreneurs who are putting it back on the map, are positioning the site for conferences and private



parties. They have hired a competent chef, Cambodian-born Ming Wang, who until now has been running the kitchen at *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*, one of the Flo Group's better brasseries.

The 29€ three-course lunch - which could be channeling the canteen dinners served to the bygone telecom staff - sticks to brasserie basics: salads (with slightly heavy-handed vinaigrettes), salmon with mashed potatoes, duck with a pleasant blend of carrot/yam purée. Crème brûlée, flamed at the table, is the most dramatic item on the menu. There's a 1997 Ausone for 525€ but the 2006 Brouilly, 32€, is more representative of the cellar. Four wines are available by the glass, 5€, or carafe, 22€.

Le Télégraphe. 41 rue de Lille, 75007. Tel: 01.58.62.10.08. Fax: 01.58.62.10.09. www.restaurantletelegraphe.com
Open daily for lunch. All major credit cards.

Restaurant	Cuisine	Decor	Service	Wine List	Value	Total
Le Télégraphe	15	20	16	15	17	83

Paris — Hotels

L'Empire Paris. The four-star Empire Paris, a boutique inn that opened a block away from the Louvre in February 2007, mixes Empire and contemporary style behind its 18th century façade. The forty-two rooms vary greatly in size, but all share the same understated luxe formula: king-size beds, dark parquet floors, white walls and chocolate/beige striped curtains. Amenities include mini-bars equipped with small sinks, Pascal Morabito toiletries, air conditioning and flat-screen televisions with 1,000 channels. A duplex suite like Beauharnais, 598 €, with private terrace and a large salon, can sleep four comfortably. The public rooms comprise a fireplace lounge and a cozy restaurant, currently serving snack-



meals (club sandwiches and salmon tartare), which will develop a more expanded menu in the near future. Nevertheless, the breakfast buffet already wins high marks. Note that room rates vary considerably with seasons and availability.

L'Empire Paris. 48 rue de l'Arbre Sec, 75001 Paris. Tel: 01.40.15.06.06. Fax: 01.40.15.06.70. www.lempire-paris.com Forty-two rooms and suites from 250€ to 1,180€. Breakfast: 25€. Elevator available. All major credit cards.



Summer 2008 Culture Briefs

EURO-CULTURE: In honor of its presidency of the European Union, France inaugurates a six-month *Saison culturelle européenne* on July 1. French artists will be touring throughout Europe and France will welcome artists from other nations. Paris's *Théâtre de Ranelagh*, for instance, will host Bratislava's leading marionette company from July 2 to 6. The larger part of the program (opera co-productions; museum shows) gets underway in fall but details are already available at www.ue2008.fr/saison-culturelle-europeenne.

PARIS – CHEAP CULTURE THRILLS: From July 15 to August 17, the *Cinéma en plein air* projects free movies on the Triangle Lawn at the Parc de la Villette. *Ninotchka*, *Casino*, *Loulou*, *Rashomon*, *Volver*, *Basic Instinct* and *Gilda* are on this year's crowd-pleasing program. www.cinema.arbo.com or www.villette.com

More free movies... but with an exclusively European edge (Almodovar, Wenders, Forman) ... at the *Cinéma au clair de lune* festival, August 6 to 24, in sites like Trocadéro Gardens and the Place des Vosges. Details: www.forumdesimages.net

The **Paris Jazz Festival** in the Parc Floral at the Parc de Vincennes is a weekend treat through July 27. Bring a picnic and groove to Ousman Danedjo (July 12) or Dianne Reeves (July 20). Entry: 5 €. www.parisjazzfestival2008.com And don't ignore *Les Arènes de Jazz* in at Sacré Coeur in Montmartre from July 20 to 25. www.adacparis.com

Enjoy *capoeira* demonstrations (July 5), an outdoor

concert of the *Asian Bamboo Orchestra* (July 18) or Haka dance lessons (July 26 & August 23) at the **Musée Branly** this summer. Check www.quaibrantly.fr for the full schedule of free events.

The **Quartier d'Été** festival blends top artists, low-cost tickets, and unusual Paris venues from July 14th to August 15th. The Cour d'Orléans at the **Palais Royal** hosts the *Ballet du Rhin* (July 16 to 19) and Trisha Brown (July 23 to 26). Tickets: 12 to 15 €. www.quartierdete.com

LAST MINUTE MUSEUM SHOWS

PARIS. Petit Palais. *Flamenco & Art (1865-1936)*. July 5 to August 31. **Musée Branly:** *Polynesian Art and Divinity (1760-1860)*. Through September 14.

Also **Musée de Grenoble:** *Wolfgang Laib*. July 5 to September 28. **Musée de Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux:** *Cheval: The Liberty of Humor*. Through September 21. **Fondation Maeght (Saint-Paul):** *Hans Hartung*. July 3 to November 16.

Maison Européenne de la Photographie. *Annie Leibovitz, A Photographer's Life (1990-2005)*. Through September 14.

Musée Réattu (Arles): *Christian Lacroix*. Through October 31. **Musée Dior (Granville):** *Dandyism 1808-2008*. Through September 21. And – at the newly-refurbished **Musée National Fernand Léger** in Biot – *Fernand Léger et Ses Amis Photographes*. Through September 29.

Fondation Cartier. *César*. July 8 to October 26.

Coming in the Months Ahead: Arles: *L'Hôtel Particulier, L'Atelier de Jean-Luc Rabanel & Le Cilantro*;
Antibes: *Le Figuier de Saint-Esprit*; Saint-Martin-de-Ré: *Hotel de Toiras et La Maison Douce*
Paris: *Il Vino, Breizh Café, La Bigarrade, Le Pur' Grill, Le Juteux, Hotel Jules . . . and much more.*