

## IN THE WORKSHOP WITH RÉGIS PÉAN AND DAVID VARON ON THE ART OF HOSPITALITY





I drove out of Paris in the early morning, the congested streets and tops of buildings disappearing in the rearview mirror. As I drove south through France, I passed towns and villages, cutting across green hills and vineyards. I stopped in the beautiful village of Beaune, in Burgundy, for a spell, where I stretched my legs by going for a wander. Back on the highway, I still

later in the week. When I saw him at breakfast the next morning, I raved about the restaurant and how much I enjoyed it. He replied that it's one of their favorites, but he hadn't wanted to send me there with expectations – he wanted me to discover it on my own. Set amongst olive trees, jasmine, lavender and tranquil gardens, Domaine les Martins is a beloved guesthouse, located in the “golden

**The exquisite hospitality that imbues Domaine les Martins captured me from the first moment I arrived and shaped my entire experience in the Luberon.**

had a long drive ahead, and I wanted to reach the Luberon valley before it was dark. What would I do about dinner? I hadn't made a reservation because I was unsure when I would arrive, and I was feeling ravenous. When I finally pulled onto the gravel drive, it was nearly dusk. The scent of lavender in the evening air greeted me, followed by my host, Régis Péan, who offered to carry my luggage. As he led me to my suite, he mentioned he had made a reservation for me at Le Mas, a family-run Michelin restaurant up the road. “I knew you would have a long day's drive and would arrive tired and hungry,” he said. I was touched by such a thoughtful and generous gesture. And what a splendid meal it was, so much so that I made another reservation for

triangle” between the historic villages of Gordes, Ménerbes and Lacoste. I have had the pleasure of staying here twice and, on both occasions, I have enjoyed extraordinary service, above and beyond what I normally experience during my frequent travels around the world.

What sets Domaine les Martins apart from other fantastic B & B's and boutique hotels is the level of personalized service. The proprietors, Régis Péan and David Varon, have certainly mastered the art of hospitality. I was curious to learn more about their approach, and they were happy to take the time to chat with me. As we sat down in the garden alongside the roses, birdsong filled the warm afternoon air throughout the entirety of our conversation. Domaine les Martins is indeed a slice of heaven.



# AN INTERESTING BACKGROUND

Péan, from Vienna, and Varon, from Turkey, met and lived in New York City for 20 years. Varon had a career in fashion, running a company that licensed celebrity brands, where he was involved in creating, producing and distributing approximately 25 brands at any given time. His company was one of the pioneers in that field. A trained architect, Péan launched his career in New York at Peter Marino Architecture, which became THE institution for retail architecture. Before long he was head-hunted for director of store design for MAC Cosmetics, which had just acquired by Estee Lauder in 1999. The brand was hot and wanted to expand internationally, so he was placed in the role of taking the brand to 65 countries, including opening 1300 stores in only 6 years. "It was crazy and creatively demanding," recalls Péan. "I created concepts which I rolled out and adapted in many

different countries and cultures. Trying to understand the different customers and the psychology behind customer behavior in each country and market was very interesting. We always needed to find ways to surprise our customers." He eventually went out on his own, doing retail branding with a plethora of other clients and companies. "I had Interesting clients who had heard of my past and wanted to dig into that retail experience, as there were few people who were really specialized in that. I was developing the stores, the concept, the entire consumer experience, really diving into understanding how someone shops, how someone sees the product and how it is presented. I translated the complete brand idea into a three-dimensional experience. I ended up teaching this at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn."



Both men travelled extensively for work. When they had free time, they took great pleasure in entertaining. Their apartment in the city was a hub for their friends, a place they hosted dinner parties and holiday gatherings. They also owned a beach house on Fire Island, where everyone in their social circle always came to stay on weekends.

“Most of our friends liked to come to our house because we loved inviting people over and creating big gatherings around the dinner table. We loved hosting.”

Out of those experiences came the idea of doing it professionally. Varon and Péan came to a point in life where they questioned if what they were doing was still on track with their expectations and life goals.



WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO LEAVE NEW YORK AND OPEN A GUEST HOUSE?

**Varon:** “I really loved what I was doing and enjoyed my job. I didn’t think I was ready to move on or make any changes but, when you think that everything is going ok, life often has surprises for you. I developed a health problem.

From our discussions, we decided life had become just work. And, even though I enjoyed what I was doing, it didn’t leave us much time for anything else. At that point, we decided to make changes to our lives, and we considered moving somewhere else to explore a new opportunity.”

Early on, and because they have family in Europe, they thought they might return someday. They considered finding a little house and taking a break for 6 months to a year to reflect on what they might do next.

Péan suggested Varon go to Europe for a couple of weeks to see if there was a place they might like. So off he went. To France.

They knew they did not want to end up in a big city in Europe. There was no point in exchanging life in New York for another metropolis. They did not want another stressful life, having to start from scratch. They decided that, if they were going to make a change, it should be a drastic change, something completely new and adventurous. But they were concerned the countryside might not offer many opportunities for their background; not having a network in the fashion or architecture industries meant they needed to come up with something new and interesting.

Varon had attended college in France. Returning awakened his love for the country. He reflected, “Every weekend our Fire Island

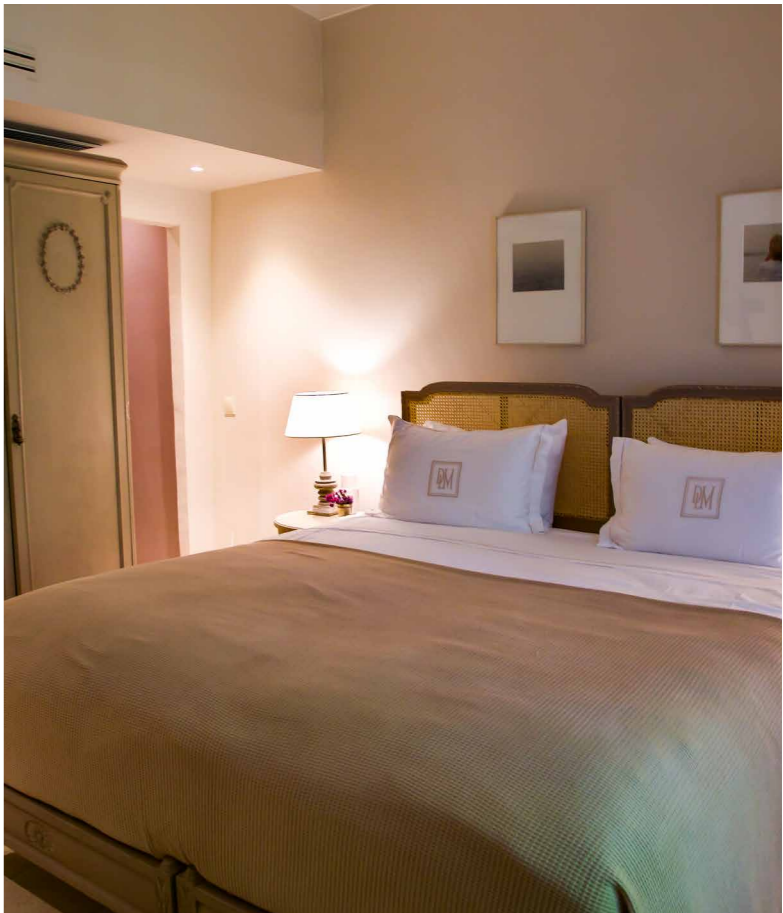
beach house was full of our friends. They would make fun of us, saying, ‘You’re going to be that old couple that runs a B & B for retirement.’ That joke started resonating with us.”

**Péan:** “When David was in Europe looking at real estate, he realized we could afford a larger house. He said, ‘I can draft a business plan and maybe we can make this idea work.’ We thought, ‘Ooh, this could be an interesting life proposal, way apart from what we’ve been doing, but it could be so much fun to actually do what we do in private on weekends, having people over, and doing it every day, and actually make a living from it. This could be so much fun!’ David started putting numbers together and we felt we could make it happen. The search became more focused.

WHY THE LUBERON?

They landed in the Luberon purely by coincidence. Varon had scoured the entire southern French coast from Biarritz to Monaco. At one point, friends asked them, “Have you been to the Luberon?” to which they replied, “The Luber-what?” Their friends told them they really ought to check out the region, pointing out that quite a number of Parisians spend time there, it’s very international and social. Furthermore, it’s really beautiful and special, as the region is a protected natural park.

Subsequently, they drove up to the Luberon from Nice for a visit. Péan recalls, “One night under a huge full moon, it hit me that this place is beautiful! It’s perfect!” They explored and started to fall in the love with the area. They made several return visits. One day, Varon picked up Péan in Avignon, upon his arrival from New York, upon which he declared, “I feel like I’m coming home.”





The location is ideal and accessible via the TGV (high speed train) from Paris in a mere 2 hours and 40 minutes, or by plane at Marseille and Nice airports. The three main hubs in France tourists tend to visit are Paris, the Côte d'Azur and Provence. The Luberon is known as the Coeur de la Provence (heart of Provence).

## TELL ME ABOUT THE PROPERTY WHEN YOU FOUND IT

**Péan:** “When we found it, after two years of searching, it was a private home in derelict condition. At that point the occupants were only using the actual house. All the other rooms and buildings were sitting empty for 20 years. There was a mangled concrete tennis court from the 70's and a broken swimming pool. Shutters were hanging off windows, the façade consisted of broken tiles and half-destroyed stucco, and the plumbing and sewage was in complete disrepair.” Renovation took 9-1/2 months.

## IS IT CONSIDERED A BED & BREAKFAST OR A BOUTIQUE HOTEL?

**Péan:** “It is a hybrid, a guest house, because we have our private home and our guests have their own rooms separated among several buildings, which are linked together. So, it is officially one structure, but with privacy for us and for our guests. We want it to be a very personalized experience where we can hang out and have dinner together, which we do in the summer. But if you don't care for that, it can be like a hotel where it is very private, you are on your own and we never see you. So, you can have both.”

There are 7 units, including 3 fully equipped apartments (with kitchens, dining and living rooms), 3 suites with living areas and 1 bedroom. The property includes beautifully landscaped grounds and gardens with various seating areas for relaxing, poolside lounging, a fire to gather around and a pétanque court.

## MANY HOTELS OFFER WONDERFUL SERVICE. WHAT SETS DOMAINES LES MARTINS APART?

**Péan:** “We want an upscale experience. A lot of guest houses we know are very mediocre. We can't compete with 5-star hotels because there is no fitness room or spa, and we don't have staff,

other than a housekeeper. But what is real luxury? Totally personalized service which, truthfully, has fallen off the wagon. In the last 20 years everything has become self-serve, self-do, self-everything. If you want luxury you want to be pampered. You want someone who remembers your name, takes you by the hand & does everything for you.

“We want to provide a guest experience that makes you feel like you'll be taken care of. We want to help you make the most of your stay, like we would do if we had friends come. If we have friends visit for the first time, we want them to have the BEST experience. We will show them the BEST restaurants. We will guide them where to go and the top things to do, in our opinion. We share our knowledge in the hopes that our guests have the best experience possible. I don't think that even a 5-star hotel has this ambition at their heart. There may be a concierge who can sort out an itinerary for you to see, go and do, and restaurants to enjoy, but I don't think they truly aim that you have the most amazing experience the way we really want you to have that. “Our aim is for you to have this experience where you feel you are really being pampered. We share this old Provençal structure and try to make it as comfortable and luxurious as we can, with our means and vision.



From the moment you arrive until the moment you depart, you can decide how much you want to be involved with us. The more you get involved with us the better the experience we can create for you. We treat you as if you were our friends, even if we don't know you.

Our guiding principle is How would we make the experience for a friend or for our family? Our approach is never strategic in hopes for a good review. The leading question is, how can we make this friend feel good in our home? We ask ourselves, what can we do for tonight, how can we make it great and what can we do to surprise them? It's the way we do things."

**WHAT MAKE AN IDEAL GUEST? WHAT DO YOU APPRECIATE IN A GUEST?**

**Varon:** "Have an open mind. Be open to take some guidance. If a guest comes for 3 days, that is a very short time, and they simply can't do everything. Be open to the idea of perhaps experiencing a slow pace of life, rather than run around to all the villages. Maybe see a few towns, then take time to slow down and enjoy the

property. They don't need to see everything."

**Péan:** "We have ideas they may not necessarily come up with. For example, we have guests who we help organize a picnic in the lavender fields and they return and exclaim "It was the most amazing day!"

**WHAT SERVES AS YOUR INSPIRATION?**

**Varon:** "We were both lucky that our former lives allowed us to travel tremendously and we were paid enough to stay in the best, most luxurious hotels. We travel often during the off-season when we are closed, and we have a critical eye.

We always know what is missing, what isn't easy for us and how it could be better. We have tried to translate that knowledge into this venture on a small scale. Of course, we can't compete with the big hotels, but what we're missing when we stay at other hotels, we've tried to complete here."

In a region that draws artists who paint the picturesque Provençal landscapes, Péan and Varon have become masters of their own craft: Painting experiences and memories for their guests.



*Long after my stay at Domaine les Martins I daydream about my enchanting experience in the Luberon. I recall the sun shining on the honey-colored villages, the fragrance of jasmine wafting through the air in the evening, the taste of an amazing meal on my tongue, the sound of birds chattering and the warm breeze blowing my hair as I drive along a country lane past fields of lavender. I remember the comforting feeling of returning "home" to Domaine les Martins each day, to these convivial hosts, who truly care that my experience in this beautiful pocket of Provence is unforgettable.*

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