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They're frogs," she tells me, "but people get them confused all the time." Frogs that sound like crickets? Now I know I've truly entered another world. The drive up to *Plein Soleil* should have been my first indication of this. The restaurant, like the hotel that shares its name, is perched high in the hills above the town of François. The clutch sticks and the tires spin on rain-soaked gravel and dirt as we drive uphill in the dark, squinting through the windows for signs indicating we're nearing our destination. But there are none. There is only our car, the creaking of the frogs, and nowhere to go but up. Finally, at the peak of the hill, the *Hôtel Plein Soleil* appears: an intimate compound of private villas and pathways, with the restaurant nestled on the right. Our waiter greets us with a warm *bonsoir* and an invitation, in English, to follow him to our table. But I can't help lingering behind in the front of the restaurant. It's as if someone actually lived here and made this airy space into his salon, decorating with family heirlooms and art picked up over a lifetime of world travels. The elegant velvet settees say Paris, the oil portrait of a turbaned man echoes India, and the verdant palm frond, in a giant pottery vase, is a reminder that the French Caribbean is where all these cultures meet. Around the corner, a dining room opens out onto the dark hills, where the frogs are providing the only soundtrack necessary. There are tiny white lights everywhere, draped across the beach-white woodwork and in the delicate leafless trees around a koi pond. A thousand glowing reflections shimmer in the water, and suddenly the whole restaurant looks filled with stars. With a bottle of Loire

## HAUTE CUISINE IN THE HILLS OF FRANÇOIS

MARTINIQUE MUST HAVE SOME POWERHOUSE LOCAL CRICKETS, I DECIDE AS I WALK INTO THE RESTAURANT PLEIN SOLEIL. ALL AROUND ME THERE ARE UNSEEN CREATURES CHIRPING AND ALMOST COOING, AS IF THE SOUNDS OF A BACKYARD SUMMER NIGHT WERE AMPLIFIED AND WIRED FOR SURROUND SOUND. BUT MY DINING COMPANION, A NATIVE OF THIS FRENCH-CARIBBEAN ISLAND, GIGGLES WHEN I MENTION IT.

By Jessica Quandt

> *Plein Soleil* seen here is but one of Martinique's fine tables

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Valley white on ice beside the table, we feast on bowls of creamy lobster bisque with star anise, cassava-crusting scallops and duck cannelloni, plates of delicate gnocchi and fresh greens over sweet potato puree, a chocolate moelleux cake topped with a dark-chocolate-coated sphere that bursts with passion fruit sorbet when I bite into it. Chef Nathanael Ducteil may be very young, but he knows what he's doing. Combining tropical flavors with haute cuisine techniques, he rewards those adventurous enough to find this place with a meal worthy of their efforts. After dinner, we slowly coast back down the hill to town, the sound of frogs softening in the distance. Maybe it's the wine, or the lingering taste of chocolate on my tongue, but suddenly the once-treacherous drive seems downright divine, even from my passenger seat. Dipping back down into the real world feels easier when you know what's waiting up among the clouds.

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> **LE PLEIN SOLEIL**  
Pointe Thalemont - 97240 Le François  
Tel: (596) 596 38 07 77 / Fax: (596) 596 65 58 13  
[info@hotelpleinsoleil.fr](mailto:info@hotelpleinsoleil.fr) - [www.hotelpleinsoleil.fr/](http://www.hotelpleinsoleil.fr/)