

GULFSHORE LIFE™

PASSING THE TORCH

By Jennifer V. Cole, Gulfshore Life, April 2024

*The elder Cariots laid the foundation for a wine-centric stalwart in the heart of Naples.
The next generation continues to refine it.*



Photography by Anna Nguyen

When Jacques and Lysielle Cariot created their alluring Bleu Provence in Naples in 1999, the French natives opened a portal direct from the Florida shores to the sun-kissed South of France. What began as a rather humble homage to their roots has evolved into a legacy restaurant where gastronomes go to lose themselves in a grand culinary voyage that renders geography irrelevant.

The restaurant, awash in crisp white and vibrant blue hues, exudes casual-chic—a French trademark—where the service is attentive without being overbearing or pretentious. And the voluptuous menu highlights a veritable roll call of classics that instantly transport the palate. From herbaceous pistou to plump pan-grilled mussels kissed with bright citrus to provençal fish soup accented with rouille, the signature garlic-saffron-breadcrumb emulsion that accompanies seafood throughout Southern France.

Perhaps even more luminous than the food is the wine program. The selection has become a beacon for oenophiles the world over. When the banner Naples Winter Wine Festival (NWWF)—one of the world’s most illustrious wine auctions—comes to town, the global best-in-class sommeliers and vintners that descend on the Gulf for the festival usually end up at Bleu Provence.

When the restaurant opened, the list contained a mere 30 selections, all from France. Over the years, partially due to guest preferences and partially due to the family’s outright obsession with wine, the list has evolved to include a staggering 5,000 selections and 40,000 bottles from practically every classic wine region in the world. The wine experience at Bleu Provence has earned the team the highly coveted Grand Award from Wine Spectator every year since 2015. The restaurant is one of only 93 in the world and one of four in Florida to hold that honor.

Last year, the couple announced they would be stepping back from day-to-day operations and passing the reins to their sons, Clément, an Advanced Sommelier from the Court of Master Sommeliers (one of about three Advanced Somms in Naples), and Kevin, the restaurant's general manager, who also helps with the massive undertaking of cataloging the wine inventory. The parents are ready to devote their time to their farm, The Sanctuary, located 45 minutes outside of Naples, where the couple cultivates vegetables, fruit trees, and flocks of chickens and turkeys.

But, rest assured, the restaurant and prestigious wine program are in excellent hands. "Wine was always part of our culture," Clément says. Meals at his grandmother's home in Grans, a speck of a village in Provence, were punctuated by bottles lovingly shared by his parents, aunts and uncles. He spent his childhood playing in the family's small wine cellar, captivated by the old bottles. His first wine memory was at age 7. "I remember one Sunday having a big family dinner, a bottle was being shared, and I was running around the table. Jacques stopped me and said, 'Stop, you need to respect this.' So I tried it. It was a Château Lafite Rothschild," he says of the prestigious, centuries-old producer, known for crafting some of the finest and most expensive reds in the world.

Ever since Bleu Provence opened when Clément was 17, he has had his hands in the family business, working every position on the floor. At age 24, while he was a server, a guest at the bar beckoned him over and said, "Here, don't taste this, just smell it—tell me what it is." Clément had never done a blind tasting before. "I said it was a Côte-Rôtie, which was correct. He asked me to name the producer. It was familiar, a wine I had drunk before. I said René Rostaing. And I was right."

The experience was a watershed moment. Clément started getting more serious about wine. By 2007, he had taken over the wine program. Under his direction, the wine program has doubled—to the point that the family has had to procure off-site storage for the surplus of their battalion of bottles. The restaurant cellar has also grown alongside the collection. At first, Clément recalls, the wines all reached eye level and shared space with an office for the team. Over time, bottles overtook the office, every square inch of wall, and eventually, the next-door space, making for the handsome, wood-clad, 1,300-square-foot masterpiece.

Now, the mere organization of the stock requires savant-level clarity. "We gave every spot where we store the wine a geographic location number. On the list, every wine has a 6-digit number next to it. And we use that to go and locate the wine immediately in the cellar. We have it divided by area, rows, and columns. It's become like a game of Battleship," Clément says.

Of course, you'll find examples of some of the great wines of the world across the list. White Burgundy, the ultimate French chardonnay, is Clément's personal favorite, and the Big Boys are all present, from Domaine Leroy Corton-Charlemagne to Roulot to Raveneau. But the inherent beauty of this modern collection lies in the surprises, such as the dedication to lower-alcohol wines, natural wines, and a deep roster of lesser-sung expressions and appellations, such as red Sancerre, idiosyncratic pours of France's Jura region, and European-style California vinifications, like Ceritas chardonnay and pinot noir. "I'm very proud of all the Provence wine we have," Clément adds. "One of my favorites is Château Simone. Each of their wines brings you a piece of the flavors of Provence: garrigue, lavender, peaches, apricots, a bit of black olive. It really tastes like Provence."

Great restaurants strive to transport guests, to exude a sense of place. And the Cariot family manages that feat seemingly effortlessly. No passport required.