

Luxury Reigns

at Loire Valley Look-Alike ...

By: Patrice Dickey

If a luxurious European spa retreat is on your dream list but you don't relish the downside-international airport checkpoints, devalued dollars and jet lag-welcome to wine country and Château Élan.

You may honestly believe you've been transported to France.

Rising above lush vineyards just off the fast track of I-85, only 40 minutes north of Atlanta (and 55 from the airport) reigns the Château Élan Winery & Resort, a 3,500-acre playground sure to please even the most persnickety palate.

Centerpiece of this sweeping panorama in the north Georgia foothills near Braselton (the town movie star and Georgia native Kim Basinger bought and sold again, in the 1990s) is a 16th century style French château, surrounded by acres of evenly flowing, lush Vinifera and French Hybrid grapes, including Chardonnay, Cabernet, Pinot and Merlot.

All this handy grape means that your spa treatments, golf, bicycling, tennis or equestrian outings, rambles on the forested nature trails, swims in the pools or spins around the motorsports race track may be followed by a wine tasting.

Don't hesitate-these grapes lack no social graces!

Discovery of the humble native-growing sweet muscadine made founders Don and Nancy Panoz aware that more refined grapes also might be cultivated in Georgia's red clay. Now the world has taken notice of this "upstart" winery, which many scoffed at its inception.

Don Panoz, an international entrepreneur who made a fortune in pharmaceuticals as pioneer of the nicotine patch, has never been one to hear that something can't be done. These wines are proof.

Since the release of its first vintages in 1984, wine connoisseurs have honored Château Élan wines with more

than 280 national and international awards. Its full-production winery, the largest in Georgia, turns out 20,000-25,000 cases of wine annually.

Old World Cultivation

The soothing environment features sweeping greenswards including 63 holes of championship golf on four courses. Cultivating the female golfer, the resort offers free golf for women on Sunday afternoons and weekdays, mid-November through mid-March.

Manicured shrubbery, gardens that bloom year-round (Georgia's mild winters support a profusion of pansies, snapdragons and more) and sheltering hardwood forests are the perfect prelude to what awaits within.

The Château Élan Spa setting is as serene as a Cezanne painting of a lazy summer afternoon, as delightful as the Debussy reverie that lilts through the hallways. The atmosphere is aromatically enhanced with a soothing blend of essential oils, Tranquility Blend by Jurlique.

In the grand European tradition, complimentary afternoon tea is served in the atrium of Fleur-de-Lis, the Spa's dining room. Dainty almond teacakes, scones and tiny fruit tarts tempt even the most health-conscious guests, who can be assured that the Spa Chef prepares nutritious gourmet cuisine with each item analyzed for fat, cholesterol, sodium and calorie content.

The Spa, a sumptuous 33,000 square foot mansion which recently experienced \$2 million in improvements, houses fourteen guest rooms, all imaginatively themed to suit a variety of fancies. Each room openly views a large reflecting pond with gracefully spraying fountain, colorful garden and white gazebo near the forest canopy.

The Oriental, a popular choice for mother/daughter pairs or good friends, features two comfortable double beds, gorgeous lacquered screens and statuary, and a deep, Asian-style whirlpool for up-to-the-neck immersion in the bath.

From Foxhunt to Country French to Excalibur, from Bacchanalian to classic Greek to Geek (well, hi-tech, actually), each room's theme is exhibited artfully. Most have whirlpool baths and all have that sure indicator of old world civilization, the bidet. An Overall Civilized Experience Speaking of civilization, at the Spa, children under 18 are not allowed.

"We respect the privacy of our guests and their desire for intimate get-

aways," said assistant spa director Graeme Harper, a British expatriate, and one of many international staff members. "At times it's helpful to relax without the children."

Children are definitely welcome at Chateau Élan's 276 room Four Star, Four Diamond Inn. A large playground, volleyball and basketball, indoor and outdoor pools are some of many entertainments for old and young, corporate or carefree. The hi-tech conference center's 11 venues can handle from 30 to 700 attendees. Festivals and special events highlight every season.

Seven restaurants on the property range from casual bistro-style dining at Café Élan in the Winery atrium, to

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Château Élan Winery and Spa