

Friendly Ottawa Valley B&B offers horseback riding

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE AUGUST 13, 2012



McAlpine Equestrian Centre & Farm allow s children – and adults – to experience rural life.

Photograph by: Imagesmado@gmail.com, McAlpine Equestrian Centre & Farm

Can you feel the love?

The McAlpine Equestrian Centre & Farm vacations in the Lower Ottawa Valley runs country vacations with horseback riding, offering a chance for city slickers to see a different side of life.

McAlpine just might be the friendliest place I've ever been. It's a fun menagerie where anything goes and everyone gets along. The free-run chickens roost atop the sheep. The dogs nuzzle the cats, and the cats like it. Lily the llama seems to understand she has to go along and get along. The baby rabbit, Easter, is just starting to hop around, safe from harassment. Nearly 20 horses gambol and frolic in the fields. And all of these creatures appear to love people.

That's the warm and hospitable atmosphere nurtured by McAlpine's owners, Blanche Renard (Samme) Putzel and Phil Arber, two alumni of the counterculture of the '60s and '70s. She is an equestrienne and riding coach who also runs the B&B, paints, plays the fiddle and piano and has

written two novels. He handles maintenance; the organic growing of vegetables, soybeans and buckwheat; raising the livestock; and also is an antique dealer and community events organizer.

Horses and ponies are the spirit of McAlpine. Putzel has spent her life in all three English riding disciplines – the exacting ring work of dressage, thrilling show-jumping and perilous cross-country eventing. She believes in “balanced horsemanship” – bonding with the animal by grooming it and gradually trying to understanding its body language.

The latter probably takes forever so, meanwhile, people who sign up for riding lessons work on getting comfortable at the walk, trot and canter, and possibly graduating to trail rides.

Riding is only part of McAlpine’s mini-vacation.

“Our farm visit is ideal for people who want to sample a different lifestyle,” said Putzel. “Most of our guests are urban, and many are regulars. We have had people coming with their children for the past 10 years.”

Those kids have helped with feeding chickens and horses, and haying and gardening. There is never a dull moment. I arrived a day after the shearing of about 80 Suffolk and Dorset sheep that yielded about 250 kilograms of wool. Then we were all waiting for ewes to give birth – and within a few days, nearly 40 lambs were born. I helped to gather eggs and took home a dozen, complete with a feather in the carton.

“We want people to have a better understanding of food, where it comes from and the work that goes into putting it on the table,” said Arber.

Friendly to the max,

McAlpine also is one of the most unlikely guest experiences imaginable.

The farm is named for the Irish immigrants who built their stone home in the 1830s, and today, it looks every one of its years. As a guest house, it has three bedrooms upstairs, which are plain and tidy, with basic furniture and beds covered in homemade patchwork quilts and red woollen blankets. Livable, but definitely not fancy.

The rest of the house is a jumble of – well, simply everything. The living room, an eclectic collection of faded chairs and sofas, sculptures and other antique pieces, is tiny, cosy and very lived-in. A lot of the furniture is good-quality Canadiana, built and bought in Eastern Ontario, but it’s hard to see its beauty. And the kitchen is clean, but sometimes chaotic. A table for six is wedged between a wood-burning stove and a pile of papers and pottery, the fruits of Arber’s collecting. Even Putzel calls this inn “unconventional.”

Somehow, the couple manages to serve great breakfasts of homemade bread, farm-fresh eggs and buckwheat pancakes, grilled on the stovetop.

When guests come for a Gourmet Horse Lovers Weekend, long-time associate Mara Horner comes in

to help. The getaways, for four to six people, usually parents and kids, run Thursdays to Sundays and include riding lessons, trail rides, picnics and dinners of such homegrown and home-cooked food as leg of lamb or stuffed chicken, with vegetables from McAlpine's certified organic garden.

McAlpine is a member of the Ontario Farm and Country Accommodations Association, a group of about 20 rural getaways throughout the province. The other two in the Vankleek neighbourhood are Stone House, a B&B on a dairy farm, and Doris Haven Farm B&B.

Vankleek Hill isn't all haystacks and horses. The town is home to its own micro-brewery, a vineyard, an enormous gift shop and a Farmers' Market selling food and crafts every Saturday.

The climax of the harvest season will be the Festival of Flavours, on Sunday, Sept. 23, during which 70 food producers and farmers will sell their goods, people buy lunch and then eat at a 100-metre table in the middle of the town's main street. More than 6,000 visitors are expected for this down-home al fresco feast.

Beau's All-Natural Brewing Company will be there with its signature Lug Tread Lagered Ale and several other pours. And so will Vankleek Vineyards, which produces three labels, Yellow Cow, Pink Cow and Purple Cow, for white, rosé and red wines. They sell for \$15 to \$20 a bottle and tastings are \$1.

You gotta' love vintners Marty and Laura Kral, who attribute the Ottawa Valley's delicate micro-climate to the "hot air rushing in from Parliament Hill."

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If you go:

Vankleek Hill, Ont., is a one-hour, 15-minute drive from Montreal via Highway 40 west to exit 17

McAlpine Equestrian Centre & Farm: 613-678-2873, mcalpineequestriancentre.com; 110 County Road 20; R.R. #2, Vankleek Hill, Ont.

Price: \$80 for two, incl. breakfast. Children 5-12 pay \$40. Dinner is extra. Riding lessons, approximately \$50 for one to two hours.

Ontario Farm and Country Accommodations Association: countryhosts.com

Local tourism: vankleekhill.ca; Vineyard: vankleekhillvineyard.ca; Beau's Brewery: beaus.ca.

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