

Country Roads: New England B&B perfect for culinary weekend

Guests enjoy farm tours, cooking classes and dining in fine French restaurant

BY ROCHELLE LASH, THE GAZETTE MARCH 15, 2013



The Lilac Inn in Brandon, Vt., a yellow clapboard manor house, was built in 1909 by a banker as a grand summer home.

Photograph by: The Lilac Inn, The Gazette

The Lilac Inn and Café Provence make an irresistible lodging and dining team in the darling town of Brandon, Vt., about an hour's drive south of Burlington.

The historic New England B&B and the lively French restaurant collaborate on Vermont Culinary Weekends, which are getaways for couples with a passion for food and a desire to learn about farm-to-table prep. Innkeepers Doug and Shelly Sawyer and master chef Robert Barral invited me to see what's cooking in Brandon.

Don't expect kitchen drudgery. The two-night program is a fun-filled weekend with a welcome reception, sociable lunches and dinners, and tours of Blue Ledge farm, which produces goat cheese, and Spotted Dog family farm, which raises grass-fed beef. Oh yes. And the cooking classes.

Your professor will be Robert Barral, one-time executive chef of the Boston Four Seasons Hotel, the New England Culinary Institute and the Montreal Four Seasons.

Spatulas, whisks and butter knives in hand, participants will conquer a four-course, gourmet Vermont-French meal of warm goat cheese cakes with lemon herb dressing and balsamic reduction, Barral's version of bouillabaisse, cassoulet with braised lamb shanks, and a chocolate desert with apple-caramel sauce and Ben & Jerry's ice cream.

Guests will prepare the feast on Saturday morning, add the final touches in the afternoon and then sit down to enjoy their own creations. Same formula for Sunday brunch, featuring eggs Benedict with wilted spinach and hollandaise sauce and French toast Grand Marnier.

Even if you are not heading for a cooking class, you'll want to dine at Café Provence. Barral's French classics include onion soup, coq-au-vin, escargots Provençale and mussels marinière, and his all-American menu features steaks and burgers. His bakery and boutique, Gourmet Provence, is also a must-stop for all things French, including croissants, tableware and private-label wine.

Other terrific shops along Brandon's main street are home (spelled with stylized all-lower case letters), Vermont Kitchen Supply and 4 Conant Interiors, a collectors' dream of antiques and unique accessories.

The elegant Lilac Inn is the host hotel for the Culinary Weekends. It isn't just any quaint Vermont B&B. It operates in a home built in 1909 by a big-time bank chairman, so it is grand. Terribly grand. It is a pastel yellow clapboard manor house with smart black shutters in a posh residential neighbourhood about two blocks from Brandon's main street.

Built around a courtyard, beautiful gardens and a copse of 20 varieties of lilac trees, Lilac was designed for livin' large. It has six fireplaces, a ballroom for weddings, a library, floor-to-ceiling windows and an inviting breakfast room in an airy conservatory. The butler's pantry holds glassware for 200 people, the ceilings are high and the corridors are wide enough for ladies navigating with crinolines, as was the style a century ago.

Within minutes of checking into Lilac, I was lounging in the library on a chintz sofa, lulled to daydream state by the crackling fireplace. Moose, Lilac's large, friendly Labrador retriever, lay at my feet.

Owners Shelly and Doug Sawyer want their guests to live as well as did the house's Gilded Age predecessors, so they have equipped the nine bedrooms with all the comforts of a grand home, and then some: private bathrooms, individual thermostats, sizable flat-screen televisions and fragrant toiletries from the English company Gilchrist & Soames. Some rooms have fireplaces or whirlpool tubs.

The rooms are big and comfortable, with rather bold and colourful decor and a gentle clutter of collectibles atop mantels and tables.

"Doug and I love to antique shop and we really indulged during our time in England," Shelly said.

"We want to make Lilac Inn homey."

Their irrepressible urges have led to clusters of fascinating French posters of the 1800s, vintage maple syrup tins, Portuguese tableware and statuettes of monkeys and elephants. Doug's prize is an antique map of England from the 1600s.

Shelly and Doug Sawyer run the Lilac Inn as a bed and breakfast, with dinner available by a private

chef for groups or weddings. She does breakfasts that include fruit, muffins or scones, and omelettes or pancakes with bacon, sausage or ham.

If You Go

Brandon, Vt., is a three-hour drive from Montreal via Highway 10 east, Exit 22 to Routes 35 and 133 south and Vermont Highway 89 south to Exit 13 and Route 7 south.

Lilac Inn: 800-221-0720, 802-247-5463, www.lilacinn.com; 53 Park St., Brandon, Vt. Pet-friendly, \$40 per visit.

Price: including breakfast, coffee corner. Sun.-Thurs., \$145-\$275 U.S. for two; Fri-Sat., \$175-\$335. Fourth night free, Sun.-Thurs., during certain periods. During foliage season, Sept. 13 to Oct. 13, \$215-\$365 per night.

Lilac Elopement Package: from \$599 per night, on a two-night stay, Sun.-Thurs., or \$699 per night on a two-night stay, Fri. & Sat., incl. ceremony with official, wedding cake, champagne or wine, flowers, chocolates, breakfast each morning and dinner on one night.

Café Provence: 802-247-9997, www.cafeprovincevt.com, 11 Center St., Brandon, Vt. Open Tues.-Sat. for lunch, afternoon bistro menu and dinner; on Sundays, it's brunch, bistro menu and dinner with a free children's menu. Closed Mondays until May 27.

Culinary Retreats: for three to six couples; two nights at Lilac Inn with breakfast, plus cooking classes, farm visits, a welcome reception, dinners at Café Provence, Saturday lunch at Gourmet Provence, Sunday brunch, a gift apron, approx. \$995 for two. The Cooking Class is a one-night deal, Sun. or Mon., \$200-\$220 per night, for two, incl. breakfast but not dinner. March 22-24, April 5-7 & 19-21, May 3-5, June 7-9, July 19-21, Aug 23-25, Oct. 19-21.

Local info: www.brandon.org, 802.247.6401.

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