

BUSINESS

Colonial Farm Inn

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Natalie and Rich Brown, owners of the Colonial Farm Inn

Who knew roasted beets could taste this fantastic? Roasted beet is the soup of the day at the Colonial Farm Inn in New London; the dark maroon soup is served in a white cup with a dollop of white sour cream and a touch of green dill. It's a nice presentation, and it's so surprisingly good that a diner, who isn't really a fan of beets, enjoys it.

Soup is just one of the ways inn owners Rich and Natalie Brown are taking the 499 Andover Road historical farmstead into the 21st century. A lunch menu, launched in early 2006, has proved to be a popular choice for business meetings, tourists and local residents. There's some carryover from the dinner menu, such as the popular crab appetiz-

er made into a larger portion for a lunch entree, but new items like salmon served over fettuccine — colorful with julienne green beans, carrots and red pepper — have developed a following of their own.

"I don't know why, but every day at 12:15 p.m., everyone arrives at once," says Natalie. Groups of two and four are seated at tables, each adorned with vase of fresh daisies, ferns and red berries. Water glasses are quickly filled, menus provided and diners chat as the bright midday light shines through the slats of the white shutters. Natalie surveys the dining room, which seats 40. "With the hurricane lamps lit for dinner and the fireplace going, it's an entirely different atmosphere at dinner," she says.

Rich, a Florida-based lawyer specializing in business and commercial litigation, grew up in Sunapee. “My grandparents bought land here in the 1940s,” he says. “My mom grew up here. My sister and I spent all our summer vacations here. It always felt like home.”

So when it came time to plan their wedding in 1996, Rich and Natalie chose the Colonial Farm Inn. “We visited all the country inns in the area, and fell in love with this inn,” says Natalie.

The Browns — both with successful careers in Vero Beach, Fla. — were looking to expand their entrepreneurial portfolio, which included Natalie’s interior design business, Cottage Design by Natalie. In 2005, Bob and Catherine Joseph, owners of the Colonial Farm Inn since 1993, put the inn up for sale. Rich’s sister Karen, a realtor with Country Houses Real Estate in New London, let them know. The Colonial Farm Inn fit their needs: New London was a great place to raise their 5-year-old daughter, Rich was interested in the inn as a business venture and there was room on the property — an adjacent shop that sold antiques — for Natalie’s business. The sale was complete in June 2005.

200 Years of History

Three brothers — Eliphalet, Seth and William Gay — moved to New London from Attleboro, Mass., in the 1780s. According to Jim Perkins at the New London Historical Society, “the brothers all seem to have purchased land in the Low Plain/Elkins/Wilnot Flat area and, as their children built homes, it became known as the ‘Gay corner.’ ”

There is some discrepancy over who built the house in 1836: Eliphalet or his daughter Mary. Mary and her husband Elbridge C. Fiske resided in New London for only a short time, and after the birth of their daughter Mary Josephine, moved to New York by the end of 1836. Eliphalet and his first wife Anna may have lived in the house, but it is documented that he and second wife Mahala resided in the home. Relatives remember Aunt Mahala using “the fireplace and brick oven for cooking. Potatoes and other vegetables were

boiled in a kettle hung on a crane over the fire; biscuits baked in a ‘dutch oven,’ which was a tin container, set on the floor of the fireplace with one side lifted and open toward the fire.”

In 1866, Levi Sanborn moved in to take care of his Great Aunt Mahala. Eliphalet died in 1872; Mahala in 1891. She left the property to Levi as a reward for his faithfulness. Levi is described in the *History of New London*: “Quiet, and somewhat reserved in temperament, his is a gentle, kindly nature, one which bears good will to all and enmity to none. His farm and buildings are the models of trimness, and he has the ‘knack’ of raising the earliest and best



Roasted beet soup with sour cream and dill is a favorite among patrons.



The Colonial Inn is famous for their profiteroles, a three-story dessert with fresh whipped cream and homemade chocolate sauce.

vegetables to be found.” He married Maria Gay in 1892, and “their home is the embodiment of comfort and plenty.”

The home was passed down through the Sanborn family, inherited by William C. Sanborn in the early 1900s. Will was a house painter — one of three in the growing and expanding community of New London. Documents filed with the Merrimack Register of Deeds show that Will and his wife Bessie divided and sold off land for \$1 to Jesse Wiggins in 1927 and for another \$1 to Catherine Sugden in 1939.

Percy H. Lash, Jr. — born in Virginia in 1907 — bought the house for \$10,000 in the 1951 from the Sanborn estate. “Lash apparently resided at least part time in New London from 1951 to 1995. He is listed as ‘military officer, antique dealer.’ He graduated from West Point in 1931 and served in World War II and Korea,” says Perkins. Colonel Lash added the one-story antique shop to the property and his wife Margaret Shemwell established the Mad Eagle Antique Shop.

Lash owned the farmstead until 1993, when he sold the house and the remaining three acres to the Bob and Kathryn Joseph. As soon as the papers were signed, the Josephs hired a building crew to bring the colonial building up to the modern standards of living. “We lifted up the house, removed the granite foundation and poured a new foundation,” says Bob. “We saved the shell of the building — the post and beam structure — then added wiring and electrical systems from scratch, new plumbing and a heating system. Everything was brought up to fire code.”

Whenever they could, the Josephs saved the plank floors. They also kept the authentic center chimney. Soon after the renovations were complete, a member of the Sanborn family, now living in Maine, stopped by. Bob and Kathryn gave them a tour, and learned what had changed. “In the 1880s, there was an extension from the main house that ran to the barn. It was used as work space,” says Bob. “Old Route 11 used to run right by the front door; it was a lot closer then, maybe 20 feet away.”

Bob and Kathryn converted the home into a full-service country inn and continued to improve it, working nonstop as on-site innkeepers. But a decade later it was time to do something different. “We did love the house. A lot of money and love and attention went into it,” Bob says. “It’s a beautiful home now, and hopefully it will be there for another 200 years.”

Fine dining

Property may look the same from Andover Road, but there have been a few changes. The Browns added a back porch, with a full-service bar, and a brick patio to provide guests with a relaxing option before dinner. The kitchen was renovated. Air conditioning was added to all six guest rooms, and Natalie used her interior design talents to redecorate each room, one at a time.

The Browns hired a staff, including a full-time innkeeper, and trained them on service, wine presentation, napkin placement — everything about fine dining. The team meets weekly for training sessions. “Making sure the staff is trained only helps our guests,” says Rich.

Robert Steele, a chef trained at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., came on board as executive chef and the Colonial Farm Inn restaurant opened second week in August with a creative, seasonal dinner menu. In the spring, you might order a tomato (fresh from Spring Ledge Farms in New London) and fennel salad with Vermont goat cheese. In the fall, you could select a grilled pumpkin soup with black chili bean paste and, in the winter, a lobster dish with pasta, a request from Natalie.

“This would be our favorite restaurant if we didn’t own it,” says Natalie. “Chef makes all the desserts from scratch, every day. Last year we had pumpkin pie ice cream made with real pumpkin pie. We’ve had good success with things people don’t see often.”



Chef Robert Steele is always in motion in the kitchen.

Two desserts have remained on the menu for nine years: The bread pudding and the profiteroles. Chef Steele changed the presentation slightly, for example, the bread pudding now made with croissants. And the profiteroles are a conversation stopper. As the dessert plate is brought to a table, all eyes turn to get a look at the three-story — two pastry and one ice cream — concoction with fresh whipped cream and chocolate sauce. “It’s huge. You’ll say, ‘I can’t eat another bite’ — but you will,” says Natalie.

Rich and Natalie have also developed an exclusive wine list, selecting wines from small, family-owned wineries all over the world. There’s a Firesteed Pinot Noir from Oregon, a medium bodied red wine with cherry and berry fruit flavors and aromas, and Angel Tears from South Africa, a smooth white wine that can accompany many different types of foods. “Some of the wines are exclusive to our restaurant; you can’t go buy them at a store,” says Rich.

Lunch was introduced in early 2006, and a Sunday brunch, which started in April, offers an omelet bar with different flavorings — from Southwest chicken to bacon and ham — to add to your eggs each week.

One year later, the Colonial Farm

Inn has seen a steady business, despite the lack of snow this past winter. Colby-Sawyer College in New London recommends the inn to research professors and visiting lecturers, as does Andover’s Proctor Academy and Hanover’s Dartmouth College. Special events — like family functions, weddings and reunions — are held upon request. “You can have the place for the entire evening, and we are glad to do that,” says Rich, who commutes four days a week to his law practice in Vero Beach. “This is a fun business; you can make people happy.”

It also makes Rich happy to be spending his summers in New London. “I learned to swim in Lake Sunapee and now my daughter can learn there, too,” says Rich. “It’s a great feeling, and a great family legacy for us.”

Laura Jean Whitcomb has been eating well — almost too well — at restaurants in the Kearsarge/Lake Sunapee area. She lives in Grantham.

Jon Gilbert Fox has been a professional photographer for over 30 years. His book of photographs, Intimate Vermont, was published in 2005. His next book, New Hampshire Patterns, will feature essays by Ernest Hebert.