

A True Deutsch Treat in Danbury

BY *Phyllis Ring*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Marty McAuliff*



It has been quite a year for the Graf family. Their calendar is packed with happenings you don't see in the average household, such as sharing space with new strangers each week or with old friends from around the world.

There's also the three-day Oktoberfest each September that turns the Alphorn Bistro of their Inn at Danbury into a mini Munich. That's when Chef Bob Graf, who prepares savory German cuisine year round, really piles on the wurst and schnitzel and the good German beer flows while the oompah music plays. It's a festival of fun with competitions to test attendees' yodeling, potato pancake eating and beer stein-wielding skills.

But however unique the events, the Grafts never imagined that their "adventures in hospitality" would land them on television, much less on the ABC reality show called "Wife Swap."

The Danbury couple thought twice about taking part in the swap that would send Alex to join a Long Island family whose parents were described as "dedicating their lives to fulfilling their children's dreams" while Bob and the Graf kids welcomed a city-sophisticate mom to rural New Hampshire.



Chef Bob Graf serves a meal at the Alhorn Bistro at the Inn at Danbury on a Sunday evening.

The show played up the Graf children's work at the inn, casting their parents as virtual slave drivers capitalizing on child labor. "And no matter which household I was connected with, the show definitely made me out to be the bad guy," says Alex.

But for all of "Wife Swap's" exaggerated drama and hype, the reality of the Graf's story is that the six of them know how to pull together to make their unique business work—and to make it fun for both the guests and themselves as they do.

And when their latest challenge—a fire in the barn that contains their living quarters—struck in August, they demonstrated that their spirit of pulling together always benefits others

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beyond themselves. The Grafts not only had their business up and running again with surprisingly minimal delay, but when a second fire broke out in town less than a month later, they honored their standing agreement with the Granite Chapter of the American Red Cross and provided immediate shelter for the homeowner and her dog.

Herzliche Willkommen: their home is your home

Neither Bob nor Alex Graf had inn or restaurant experience when they and their four kids and various pets moved to New Hampshire from Utah in 2002. Alex, 47, a former flight attendant who had grown up in the Netherlands, first came to the United States as an exchange student in 1977. She met Bob nine years later during a beginners' ski class, was voted Mrs. Salt Lake City in 2001, and was a volunteer for the Dutch team during the 2002 Olympics.

World-traveler Bob, 56, had spent his working years on ski slopes and construction sites. After a two-year bike trip with his brother from Paris to Cape Town in the 1970s, he studied ski instruction in New Zealand. Bob later went to college in Colorado and eventually worked as a ski instructor in Park City, Utah, for 14 years. That's where he and Alex met; she was a beginner in one of his classes in 1986.

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When they found the 1850 farmhouse they eventually shaped into the 14 guestrooms of the Inn at Danbury, the couple knew they had a project on their hands, with many long workdays ahead for the whole family.



Alex serves pilsner beer to Wilmot residents Scott and Lori Call. Lori was honored with the title of Ms. Oktoberfest 2008.

“This really was a family affair from the very beginning — and it still is,” says Alex. Today, Meagan, 16, Zacchaeus, 14, and Daphne, 11, understand every job associated with the inn's keeping, although the kitchen remains Chef Bob's domain. (Big sister Chelsea, 19, a college student, helps out when she's home.)

“The kids' participation is teaching them a lot about people, about life, and about people skills and life skills,” says

the tucked-away nurturing of a New England retreat, and the experience of coming home.

In true New England fashion, the house itself evolved in size over time from simple “big house” at the front to additions of “little house, back house” and, finally, the big red barn where the Grafts have their quarters upstairs, and where guests can enjoy an indoor swimming pool on the ground floor.

Each guestroom includes its own thoughtfully decorated bathroom, a sitting area often equipped with wingback chairs, antique furniture and comfortable beds. Many rooms are family friendly, and some are now dog friendly, accompanied by a few reasonable house rules. “We understand how hard it is to leave four-legged family members behind,” says Alex.

The cozy sitting room at the front of the house is the *only* place there's a television and, even then, it offers just a handful of channels. The goal here is to draw visitors “just 55 minutes north of Manchester, but a million miles away from a hectic lifestyle.”

And whether the inn is booked to the gunwales or sheltering a few solitary souls, its rooms are filled with the

frangrances of Bob's baking and cooking. Shortly after the Grafts got the inn up and running, he decided it was time to try some of the recipes handed down in his Austrian-American family and give the establishment a hallmark all its own. **Striving for the best, even when it's wurst**

The Grafts' homey Alphorn Bistro seems the perfect setting for the comforting specialties it serves. Oak flooring, exposed beams, an impressive stone fireplace and lots of blue-and-white-checked fabric evoke the inviting atmosphere of traditional Bavarian eateries.

In its six years, the inn and its restaurant have earned a raft of awards, including "Best Breakfast in New England", "Best Kept Secret" and #11 bed and breakfast in the country (the last according to *Arrington's Inn Traveler*). The Grafts also received the North American Restaurant Association's Award of Excellence.

The inn's summer season kicks off each Memorial Day weekend with a Best of the Wurst Festival complete with musicians, rib-sticking food, German beer on draft, and a host of contests with prizes for best traditional German, Swiss or Austrian garb. As with most of their special events, the Grafts offer overnight accommodations at a package rate. The summer season wraps up with Oktoberfest, which the Grafts have moved to Labor Day weekend for the prospect of warmer weather (and it's a time when many are in New Hampshire anyway).

Most any special event the Grafts undertake at the inn usually has a beneficial aspect, too. Oktoberfest patrons see a portion of their cover charge donated to a charity. Or they can bring two canned goods for the New Hampshire Food Bank and receive a discount. On the Sunday after Father's Day this year, Bob donated all of the bistro's profits that day to Concord Hospital's Payson Institute for Cancer Care. And while a high school senior, Chelsea Graf was honored with *Kearsarge Magazine's* Good Citizen Award after conducting a highly successful fundraiser to assist victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Going the year-round distance

"We depend on summer tourism and foliage season to keep our rooms full, and good skiing at Ragged Mountain, just up the road, helps us,

too," says Alex.

But what about those other months between vacation seasons and holidays, better known for overcast

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INSIDE BOB'S KITCHEN

A German-food-lover's dream, the Alphorn Bistro's menu is stocked with standards like bratwurst, schnitzels, spaetzle (tiny, noodle like dumplings), venison osso bucco and traditional Swiss cheese fondue, every bit of it hand cooked to order by Chef Bob Graf. (One house specialty, sauerbraten, requires four days advance notice, as Bob needs that much time to marinate it properly prior to cooking.)

"There was a time in New England ski country where you couldn't turn around without bumping into a German restaurant," says Bob. "Part of the draw for us now is that we're the only ones for miles around who are doing this kind of thing."

Another undeniable part of that draw is that they're doing it so well, and with an accommodating approach that reflects a more European sensibility toward customer service. Many wouldn't equate German-style cuisine with vegetarian and vegan options, but Bob, with adequate notice, is up for serving up his tasty fare while also meeting most any dietary request.

"In part, I learned to cook because I love to eat well, and with a family and a business to run, there wasn't much time or money for eating out. So, I made it happen right here," Bob says. That cooking has earned him numerous awards.

As he presides over the inn's kitchen, Bob draws on a legacy handed down from his grandmother's recipes for irresistible German food. His standards are high and his preparation and presentation exacting. The result is truly authentic cuisine, most of which is often labor intensive — and noisy. On busy nights when

the orders for schnitzel are flying, you can hear him pounding away in the kitchen to get those cuts of meat tender-thin. (And beyond traditional veal and pork, he even whips up schnitzel from chicken or, even more unusually, haddock.)

For those less certain about the delights of German cooking, the restaurant's menu offers prime rib, pasta and plenty of other meat, poultry and fish dishes.

To complement the cuisine with European flair, the Grafts offer a broad and appealing range of imported wines and beers for which they personally shop overseas.

"These trips are where I often discover new menu items, too," Bob says, such as Rattsherren Pfanne, a baked Austrian dish made from pork medallions, fontina cheese and a creamy mushroom sauce. "I test each new recipe on the family," says Bob, "and if it passes muster, we add it to the menu." It's now a customer favorite.

The eternal dilemma at Alphorn Bistro remains, after all of that hearty German cuisine, how do you fit in such scrumptious homemade desserts as linzer torte, apple strudel or chocolate Bavarian cream? One innovative guest's solution: Save it for a "starter" before breakfast, if not a delectable snack.

Unlike some chefs who hide the keys to their culinary delights, Bob publishes many of his recipes for all to see on the Inn's web site: <http://innatdanbury.com/recipes.htm>. Perhaps that's because he's discovered that when folks learn just how much work some of these delicious dishes involve, they'll gladly let him do the cooking.

— Phyllis Ring

COOKIE WORKSHOP

BY *Judith Brightman*

Certain fragrances immediately conjure up wonderful memories. We experienced this firsthand when we joined innkeepers Bob and Alex Graf and their daughter, Meagan, at the Inn at Danbury for a cookie workshop. The scent of ginger, cinnamon and nutmeg welcomed my granddaughter, Chandra, and I at the door. It was November, and Alex was decorating for Christmas.

Meagan offered us coffee or juice, and encouraged us to wander through the inn until all 11 participants had arrived. We were a diverse lot — a woman from Switzerland, who came by way of South Africa, and her friend from Manchester; two sisters and two friends from nearby towns; a local married couple; a woman from Newport, R.I.; and my granddaughter and I from Maine.

Bob and Meagan provided expert instruction during the hands-on workshop using traditional recipes. Alex served as the support team, taking away dirty dishes and returning with trays of baked cookies. The recipes and spices evoked memories and sharing among the group of Christmases long ago and more recent; recipes passed down and recipes

shared; and resources where one might find special ingredients. In Bob's family, his brother is the conservator of the Graf family recipes, especially one that turned out to be the favorite of all: *leckerli*.

Judith Brightman, a freelance writer from South Berwick, Maine, fell in love with the Kearsarge region and the Inn at Danbury in the fall of 2007. She shares her love of writing and baking with her granddaughters.



Leckerli

- 1 cup granulated sugar
- ½ cup honey
- ½ cup chopped candied orange peel
- 1½ tsp. ground cloves
- 1½ tsp. nutmeg
- 1 tsp. cinnamon
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- ½ cup cold water (for dissolving soda)
- ½ lemon rind, grated
- 1 cup almonds, sliced thin
- 2¾ cups sifted flour

Heat ½ cup sugar and honey to boiling. Remove from heat; add peel, spices and soda dissolved in ¼ cup cold water. Add remaining ingredients (saving ½ cup sugar and ¼ cup water for icing). Knead until well blended. Roll dough to ½ inch thickness. Place on greased wax paper on cookie sheet. Bake in moderate oven for about 25 minutes. Invert onto wire rack and remove wax paper immediately. Turn right side up. Cook remaining sugar and water until mixture spins a thread. Spread icing on the *leckerli*. Cut into diamond shapes. Allow to cool. Store in airtight container for at least one week. (Storing them enhances the flavor, although most people can't wait that long to sample them.)

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skies — or mud? Just how do you keep

a country inn operating successfully in the remote reaches of the region?

With trademark European hospitality and canny New England ingenuity, the Grafs package good food with lots of fun and cozy accommodations, so guests can really kick back and

enjoy it all. In that department, Alex and Bob “are always thinking and always listening to what our guests have to say.”

As with the rest of the year, the Alphorn Bistro is the engine that drives the inn's success. It serves dinner Wednesday through Sunday. On the last weekend of September, the Grafs extend their Oktoberfest theme with a beer-tasting dinner, a five-course meal paired with some of their very best imports, “properly poured, so you really get the taste experience,” Alex says.

A month later, the last Sunday in October, offers a follow-up Oktoberfest Wine Dinner, where patrons can sample such Austrian vintages as Gruner Veltliner (a perfect companion for many *schnitzels*) or even Eiswein, that rare, sweet treat produced after frost has bitten the grapes on the vine. This event also features a five-course dinner matched with appropriate wines.

In late November, and again two weeks before Christmas, the Grafs hold cookie-making classes (which can also be combined with overnight accommodations) for those of all ages, accompanied by milk, cocoa or a special treat — traditional German *glühwein* (red wine mulled with spices).

For those who'd like to skip the holiday hullabaloo at home, the Grafs offer a wide array of options, from a Thanksgiving eve appetizer and martini party to a feast on Turkey Day itself. Guests can even make it a sleepover if

they wish, turning Black Friday into a shopping excursion at nearby outlets in Tilton or staying put with a relaxing massage, which they can book through the inn most any time of year.

The Grafs reserve Christmas Eve for family but open their business by 3:30 p.m. on Christmas for a five-course prix-fixe dinner by reservation. They offer a similar four-course package for New Year's Eve, with festivities rounded out with a midnight champagne toast and treat. Remarkably, they're back at it again the next day with a New Year's Day breakfast. In fact, those willing to make a reservation can sample Bob's award-winning breakfast even if they don't happen to be a guest.

The grand version of that breakfast is held each spring as a Mother's Day Brunch. Patrons can also stick around for a special dinner that day or turn the whole weekend into a family-style stay, if they wish.

"Since family's always our own priority" — so much so that they've blended business and family life together — "we're always coming at what we plan from that direction, always looking to see what can help people come together as family and friends, and have lots of fun together," Alex says. **K**

Phyllis Ring's articles have appeared in Ms. and Writer's Digest. She lived in Germany as a child, returning there at every opportunity, and is currently researching a novel set there during World War II. A book of her essays, Life at First Sight, is scheduled for release in spring 2009 from Bahá'í Publishing. More information about her current projects can be found at www.phyllisring.com

Andover resident and freelance photographer Marty McAuliff admits little knowledge of German cuisine beyond bratwurst, but always adds "Leica MP" to his Christmas wish list and does enjoy a cold St. Pauli Girl lager on a warm summer day.

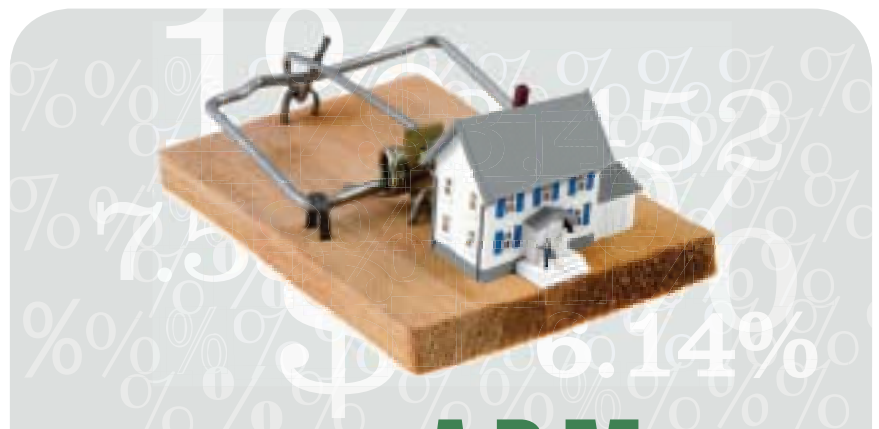
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