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A York Harbor 'cottage' that far exceeds the norm

By Hilary Nangle, Globe Correspondent | September 30, 2007

YORK HARBOR, Maine - One of the first things I do when arriving at an inn is scan through any guest-comment books seeking hints, advice, or warnings. What I read at the Chapman Cottage not only put me at ease, but also hinted that the bed-and-breakfast might exceed our expectations: "Simply divine! Comfortable, serene, lovely, a delight to every detail," wrote one guest. "The care, charm and warmth of Paul & Donna will make this stay an exceptional memory . . . topped by culinary mastery."

The three-story, sunshine-yellow house commands a small knoll in a neighborhood of historical summer "cottages" midway between York Village and the harbor. Socialite Fannie Chapman built it in 1899 as a retreat from Doylestown, Pa., and vacationed here with her sisters Mary Mercer and Elizabeth Lawrence. The house retains the easygoing elegance of its roots, though the original Colonial has been augmented with wings, dormers, porches, and balconies.

Paul and Donna Archibald purchased the property nine years ago, renovated and updated it, and opened it as an inn five years ago. Two years later, they added a restaurant. When we arrived, Paul was in the kitchen preparing dinner, and the enticing aromas drew us inside.

We had come to the Yorks to poke around the cute shops in the village, walk the shorefront paths, and perhaps catch a few rays on the beach. Not expecting to spend a lot of time in our room, we had booked Elizabeth's room on the third floor, the most modest of six available; others have whirlpool tubs and fireplaces.

The room was far more comfortable than we had anticipated. Despite being tucked under the eaves, it was light, airy, and spacious, and decorated in a bright cottage style. Furnishings included a table with two Windsor-style chairs, an upholstered oak rocker, wicker dresser, queen bed with blissfully soft sheets and a plump duvet, reading lights, an extra-large bath with a full-body shower - kind of a vertical Jacuzzi - and a huge deck with views over and through the trees to the harbor. Soft robes, Wi-Fi, cable TV, air conditioning, and a library of good reads right outside the door made Elizabeth's room a comfortable retreat. The only thing lacking was luggage racks.

Once settled, we headed to the first-floor wine and martini bar, grabbed a tall table by the fireplace, and made quick work of a tasty sampling plate of grilled spicy shrimp, beef empanadas, Spanish-style chicken skewers, and salsa. By the time we moved into the restaurant, a convivial but not boisterous crowd of locals and guests filled the bar.

In the dining rooms, deep red walls, white tablecloths, nicely spaced tables, soft lighting, classical music, and comfortable chairs signaled that we were in for an evening of fine dining. The cues didn't mislead. The service was professional, without being stuffy. We didn't expect to be wowed by the food, but we were.

We began with salads of fresh field greens topped with goat cheese, roasted pecans, and cranberries tossed with a light, cranberry vinaigrette. My house-made hazelnut ravioli in gorgonzola cream sauce, sprinkled with Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, was rich and smooth without being overbearing. My husband's pork tenderloin stuffed with goat cheese, spinach, and sun-dried tomatoes was sublime. The portions were generous - perhaps too generous, because we didn't have room for dessert.

It would have been nice to retire to a drawing room or other quiet common area, but the inn has only the lounge, which was still filled with parties awaiting dinner. Instead, we strolled along the Fisherman's Walk edging the harbor and out to the Wiggly Bridge, then retired to our room and watched the sunset from our deck.

By morning, we were salivating over the thought of breakfast, and we weren't disappointed. It began with fresh

fruit, followed by orange-blueberry muffins that blossomed out of individual ramekins resembling flowerpots. Next came creamy scrambled eggs accompanied by crisp strips of luscious bacon; a grilled, buttered roll; a slice of melon; and fresh grapes.

Back in our room, I reopened the guestbook and scanned the laudatory comments. I thought to simply write "ditto." Upon reflection, I realized that what the Chapman Cottage did best was exceed expectations. In an era when websites and advertisers tend to oversell accommodations, that's perhaps the highest praise of all.

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