

SHORE SPECIAL: Foxes offer hospitality in Onancock

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Sandra and Paul Fox / Jay Diem photo

ONANCOCK — The innkeepers at the Inn and Garden Cafe in Onancock are always coming up with new ideas to please their guests — from fresh menu items to the large new special event space they call the Carriage House, which opened late last year.

The inn's motto is "Southern Hospitality with an Elegant Twist," and it suits innkeepers Sandra and Paul Fox, who come across as friendly yet sophisticated.

Among notable accomplishments in their fledgling career is having been chosen in 2009 to represent the Eastern Shore of Virginia in the Virginia Travel Guide's "Portraits of Passion."

"We try to bring something different here on the Eastern Shore," said Sandra Fox.

That includes touches like offering overnight guests her homemade muffins, breads and pastries, as well as incorporating into their meal offerings foods and experiences the couple gleaned from their extensive travels.

They purchased the inn at 145 Market St. from acquaintances in 2005, shortly after it opened. Although this is their first experience as innkeepers, the two, who came to the Eastern Shore from Northern Virginia, have always loved entertaining guests at home and Paul loves to cook, especially grilled and slow-cooked foods — hobbies that translate well into their new career.

Sandra also owns a management consulting business with employees based in northern Virginia. After Paul suffered a stroke in 2001 that left him paralyzed on his right side, the couple looked for an opportunity "to get away from the rat race," Sandra said. That escape came in the form of the Inn and Garden.

The inn, with its signature flowerbeds out front, serves as a welcoming presence for visitors entering Onancock for the first time — especially now, with the new Carriage House's cheery red roof fast becoming a landmark.

But it also is popular with locals, who return regularly for the Foxes' unique food events, including themed prix-fixe dinners served the first Thursday of each month before the Onancock International Film festival.

Last month they served British food, including entree choices of prime rib with Yorkshire pudding, fish and chips or roast leg of Welsh lamb, in honor of “The King’s Speech.” Their “Attitude Adjustment Hour” is on Second Fridays, when the town’s businesses and art galleries stay open late; Pasta Night is every Wednesday; and Sunday brunch is served.

The Foxes serve up a full gourmet breakfast to overnight guests themselves and Chef Gary, who has worked with the couple for two years now, comes in to cook other meals. Guests can dine in the intimate fireplace room or in the window-filled gazebo, where they have a full view of the gardens.

Paul is an avid gardener and Sandra also calls him “the recycle king” at the inn, which is certified as Virginia Green Lodging, a state initiative that encourages hospitality providers to take steps to reduce their impact on the environment, including by recycling.

The inn recycles all bottles, cans, newspapers and plastics and also composts food waste for use in the garden, which produces a bounty of fresh vegetables and herbs for the gourmet meals enjoyed by guests. Sometimes Paul’s garden produces more than can be used and the Foxes take the excess to residents of the Hermitage on the Eastern Shore, a nearby retirement community.

The four-bedroom inn was built around 1880 as a private home and rehabilitated in 2003-2004. On the walls as one enters the inn are photos of couples whose wedding receptions the Foxes have hosted since becoming innkeepers.

The couple’s care for their guests extends to some unusual steps they take to ensure visitors’ comfort, including providing each a complimentary GPS unit preloaded with information about how to find local art galleries, beaches, wineries, golf courses, restaurants and other attractions.

Each room also has an assortment of local books for guests’ enjoyment, along with access to the inn’s DVD and game collection and complimentary wireless high speed Internet access. The Yellow Room on the inn’s first floor also is wheelchair accessible.

Since their arrival on the Shore just a few years ago, the Foxes have become an integral part of the community. “We just jumped right in when we moved here,” said Sandra, who is on the board of directors of Hospice and Palliative Care of the Eastern Shore, served on the Onancock Business and Civic Association board of directors and is currently president of the Eastern Shore Bed and Breakfast Association. She even ran for Town Council last year.

Giving back to the community is an important part of their lifestyle.

For example, in January the inn hosted a oyster roast fundraising event for Hospice sponsored by Sandra’s business partner which raised over \$3,100 for the organization. They also are part of Onancock restaurateur Johnny Mo’s C-FOOD group, through which local restaurants each month donate pounds of homemade soups to the Foodbank of the Eastern Shore.

Additionally, the Inn and Garden supports the Eastern Shore Literacy Council's annual Feed-a-Mind fundraiser, in which volunteer servers donate their tips from meals served at local restaurants.

They also participate in fundraisers for charities further afield across the Chesapeake Bay, including the March of Dimes and the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia.

The Carriage House is just the latest of the Foxes' efforts to find new ways to meet needs they see in their adopted home. The facility, which features an open floor plan, lots of windows and a projection system with a 10-foot screen, means the inn now can accommodate groups of up to 100 or so for conferences, weddings, private or office parties and the like.

"We felt a need for something different here in Onancock," Sandra said, adding that with the additional space the new building offers, "We can have events that draw people here to Onancock."

Already they have hosted in the Carriage House a number of events, including weddings, birthday celebrations, baby showers, a New Year's Eve party and a daylong retreat for nurses from the local hospital.

It is clear Sandra and Paul Fox have had a positive impact on the Eastern Shore with their creative flair and willingness to innovate while at the same time respecting tradition.