



At Home in Harbert

CHICAGO TRANSPLANT LOVES HER BED-AND-BREAKFAST LIFE

Nancy Watson not only has made a new life and home for herself in Southwest Michigan, she's making it for others – albeit temporarily – at her bed-and-breakfast in the lakeshore community of Harbert.

“I like meeting so many interesting people and helping them relax and enjoy their vacation here,” she said. “It’s fun to make new friends each week.”

In business for a year, Watson has settled quickly into the Harbert community she now calls home.

“I wanted to downsize and still get to be a creative,” she said. “I love having people here, and bed-and-breakfast inns attract friendly people.”

Located on an acre and a half lot on Prairie Road just a short distance off Red Arrow Highway, Harbert House can be found in a quiet neighborhood where people can get away and surround themselves with nature. The home's back yard borders a prairie, and Lake Michigan beaches are just a 20-minute walk away.

“If they want, people can just sit back and watch the deer and birds in the back yard or go outside and lay in the hammock or play a game of croquet,” she said. “We're pretty lucky here to

have this kind of view.”

Harbert is perhaps still best known as the home of poet and author Carl Sandburg, who lived here for 15 years during the time period he was writing his biography of President Abraham Lincoln.


Today, the quaintness he enjoyed can still be found along with the unique restaurants, art galleries, shops and antique malls that dot the roads running through Southwest Michigan's Harbor Country.

Watson sees her new life as combining the best of both worlds. She's been able to get away from the hustle and bustle and fast-paced lifestyle of her previous career as a caterer, while her role as innkeeper allows her to continue to make use of her culinary talents and love of cooking.

She offers a hot breakfast each morning and wine and hors d'oeuvres each afternoon. As she puts it, she offers “sweet dreams” and “delectable cuisine.”

“I try to have unique menus,” she said. “Breakfast gives me a chance to put on my gourmet hat.”

She tries to use local produce in her cooking whenever



possible and loves to make delectable desserts such as cinnamon chocolate nut bundt cake, pineapple upside-down cake and blueberry buckle for her guests.

She does all the cooking herself and has help with some of the cleaning. “

Compared to running a full-service catering company in Chicago, this feels like a vacation,” she said. “I have time to enjoy the country myself.”

She first started thinking about opening a B&B three or four years before she took the plunge and moved to this side of the lake. She had visited here before and liked the area.

“I knew lots of people who had second homes here or who were used to coming here,” she said. “It's just a charming area. For myself, I was looking for something different to do. It wasn't a matter of scaling down exactly, but definitely dialing down.”

She sees the Harbor Country area as perfect for both her and her guests.

“It's close enough to Chicago for people to come for a weekend, but it's also so different than Chicago,” she said. “The beaches here are less crowded; it's a night and day difference.”

Her life in Chicago for the past 25 years involved establishing her catering business in Morton Grove, Nancy S. Watson Cook Inc., which took her all over the city and the suburbs. Before that, she spent eight years as a school teacher in the Chicago public schools.

“I taught school, and I would dissipate my frustrations by cooking,” she said. “I loved it, it became my passion, and I knew I had to do that. I'm still happiest when I'm in the kitchen ... Food is really important to me, so I try to make it stand out.”

She thinks many people are looking for the friendly atmosphere that can be found in a bed-and-breakfast when they want to get away for vacation.

“A typical bed-and-breakfast is very nice and social,” she said. “It's for people who want a homelike atmosphere rather than a sterile hotel.”

“People want a unique experience – the lodging on the interstates are all the same. You could be here, Georgia or Arizona, and they'll all be the same. Beds-and-breakfasts and small inns are so unique; each has its own personality.”

She's found that what drew her to Harbert also draws other

► The Gallery room at the Harbert House Bed & Breakfast.

WRITTEN BY: DEBRA HAIGHT
PHOTOS BY: JOHN MADILL



▶ Nancy Watson in the dining room at the Harbert House Bed & Breakfast.

people and brings them back for return visits. People like the small-town atmosphere, the nearness to Lake Michigan and the draw of other attractions such as vineyards.

"What I love is that it's so eclectic and unique," she said. "There's no Starbucks or Banana Republic in sight. It's so refreshing to see one-of-a-kind galleries and boutiques and no chain restaurants. ... We're 90 minutes from Chicago, but it's a world away."

She said the people come for a variety of reasons.

"A lot have been drawn by my cooking abilities," she said. "Since I was a chef and have done creative meals, it tipped the scales.

"Sometimes people are on their way to somewhere else or they're just getting away. I had a family from England who had been in Chicago and wanted to have a more laid-back country experience. Last Thanksgiving, a family was having a large gathering and couldn't house everybody, so some stayed here. I made breakfast for them the next morning."

Inside Harbert House, people will find five guest rooms, each with its own private bath and own television, as well as spacious common areas with dining and family rooms and a screened-in back porch. It's equally home to couples and families enjoying a few

days away or large groups coming for a football weekend.

Each of the five guest rooms has its own style and theme. The Gallery Room is the largest of the five, with two beds and paintings from local artists on the wall. The other rooms have sun, Southwest, Old West and pear themes with much of the decor items coming from Watson's own collection.

"When I first saw the house and the size of the rooms, it spoke to me that this would make the perfect bed-and-breakfast," she said. "The house had been on the market for a couple of years, and it spoke to me, I could picture myself cooking up a storm in the kitchen."



▶ The Harbert House Bed & Breakfast.



▶ The Old West room at the Harbert House Bed & Breakfast.

While summer is her busiest time at Harbert House, people also come at other times of the year. She plans to offer discounts and special deals for the fall and winter months, which can be found along with regular rates, online at www.HarbertHouse.net.

"I would like to get people here in the winter," she said. "We have a fireplace, people can come and enjoy that or go out to restaurants or cross-country skiing. ... I'll even be here for Christmas. People can come for football weekends in January, for Valentine's Day in February and even for a Saturday cooking class." ■

HARBERT HOUSE FRITTATA

Makes 6 servings
 13 eggs (2 per person / one for good luck)
 6 ounces fresh baby spinach
 2 ounces crumbly goat cheese
 Six slices ripe tomato
 2 tablespoons butter

Melt butter in a skillet that can go in the oven. Saute spinach until wilted. Beat eggs with salt and pepper to taste, until frothy and add to spinach. Place tomatoes decoratively over eggs and sprinkle with goat cheese. Bake at 350 degrees approximately 20 minutes or until set. Serve with bacon wrapped-shrimp and fresh fruit.

THAI TURKEY MEAT BALLS

(served with wine in the late afternoon)
 Makes about 20 bite-sized meat balls
 1 pound ground turkey
 ¼ cup bread crumbs
 1 egg

Soy sauce, curry and chili powder to taste
 Mix ingredients and shape into 1 inch balls. Bake at 350 degrees for 20 minutes. Serve with sliced cucumbers and sauce.

SAUCE

½ cup chunky peanut butter
 3 tablespoons brown sugar
 ¼ cup fresh lime juice
 Melt together over low heat until combined.

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