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Cozy, warm and ... green?

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A few innkeepers aim for sustainability

**By Anika Clark
Sentinel Staff**

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WALPOLE — Innkeeper Jacqueline L. Caserta's garden bursts with chives, thyme and four different types of mint. With her guests' palates in mind, she grows nasturtium for spice, chamomile for garnish and tea and edible Johnny-jump-up flowers for that little something extra.

But Caserta has much more than a green thumb. She has a green inn.

The Inn at Valley Farms, which sits on a slope just below Alyson's Orchard, is the first inn or hotel in the Monadnock Region to be designated an "environmental champion" through the New Hampshire Sustainable Lodging & Restaurant Program.

Launched about four years ago, the program encourages environmentalism in New Hampshire's hospitality industry. According to program Manager Michelle R. Veasey, it also feeds a growing consumer demand.

"Basically, everyone is expecting more green," she said. "If they don't see recycling at a facility, they're wondering what's going on."

The sustainable lodging and restaurant association offers certification on three levels based on green initiatives in four different focus areas — energy efficiency, water conservation, waste reduction and education.

An "endorsing partner" pledges to evaluate at least one initiative in each area. An "environmental partner" carries out a minimum of two initiatives in each area. And an "environmental champion" gains green certification through a third-party audit.

Alternatively, a hotel or inn can become an environmental champion if an audit by the New Hampshire Sustainable Lodging & Restaurant Program finds a specific level of success in each focus area.

So what's so green about the Inn at Valley Farms?

The answer is everywhere from the New Hampshire-made organic soaps sitting on the bathtub ledges to the shower dispensers that help reduce waste.

It's in the inn's compact fluorescent lightbulbs and in the low-flow water heads and toilets.

One can see it in the stuffed animals sold at the inn gift shop, made by Harrisville craftswoman Marcy J. Schepker — a woman who transforms old sweaters into pigs and chickens, horses and zebras.

Caserta's environmental commitment is also rooted in the inn's history: The property came into the family's hands 11 years ago when Caserta's parents, Charles and Bonnie, bought it to prevent development of the site.

Then there's the farm, where Caserta and her brother Christopher Caserta raise cows, turkeys, chickens and cashmere goats. All of the animals are pastured and the chickens spend their winters in a greenhouse that stays at about 60 degrees.

"We certified the farm organic before we even moved in," she said, adding that while cost issues have prevented her from maintaining that certification, she still follows all the practices.

To Caserta, this earth-friendly approach has always seemed logical.

"I've always been a huge gardener, and it just always made sense to me," she said. "Why spray chemicals on something that you're going to eat?"

Timothy M. Brady and his wife, Amy, also shared a green inclination when they bought Brattleboro's Forty Putney Road Bed and Breakfast in 2007.

Since then, the two have followed a similar environmental path as Caserta, using recycled and organic products and buying locally whenever possible.

Formerly limited primarily to yard waste, composting at the bed and breakfast will soon include kitchen scraps, and rainwater's routed away from the public sewer system into the property's garden.

Bottled water's been replaced in favor of glass carafes and soon-to-be-used souvenir sports bottles made from recycled aluminum. The bed and breakfast also participates in the Cow Power program, in which Central Vermont Public Service customers' electricity payments support harnessing energy from methane waste.

Forty Putney Road is one of six inns and hotels in Southeastern Vermont carrying a "Green Hotels in the Green Mountain State" seal. This, according to the program's Web site, is given to lodging owners who show "exemplary environmental stewardship" and a commitment to preventing pollution and pledge to do even more through an environmental management plan.

Still, Timothy Brady said, "We're not really pushing the green thing. It's something that we do because it's something that we believe in."

But Veasey said the benefits of being an eco-friendly hotel extend well beyond environmental do-gooding.

"Most of the initiatives that we encourage (people) to take on actually lower their operating costs," she said.

Green cleaning supplies are often cheaper than those containing hazardous chemicals, according to Veasey, and recycling can save money.

Since using compact fluorescent lightbulbs and low-flow shower heads, Eric R. Lorimer of the Jack Daniels Motor Inn in Peterborough — an "environmental partner" through the New Hampshire program — said he's seen utility costs per guest drop somewhat.

However, he said, when he and his wife, Pamela Lorimer, replaced the oil-fired hot water boiler with a tankless propane water heater, "That was probably the single biggest cost savings, but also was cleaner and it was more efficient overall."

Through a recent partnership between the New Hampshire Sustainable Lodging & Restaurant Program and the state, the N.H. Department of Environmental Services has agreed to use lodging that's green or sustainable whenever possible for work-related travel, according to Veasey.

Meanwhile, she described greening one's hotel as a powerful way to grow customer loyalty.

"People tend to have a closer tie to businesses they feel are trying to make a difference in their community," she said.

While no one's told Timothy Brady that they've booked a stay at Forty Putney Road simply because it's green, he described a similar dynamic.

"People that are looking to stay in an inn are often looking not just at the inn but at the innkeepers. ... You size up who is it that's running the place," he said. "You want to stay in places where people have common interests and that's just one more thing that aligns (us) with a guest."

And Caserta said it's simple to increase an inn or hotel's sustainability.

"I think it's almost easier as a smaller property to implement these things," she said. "It's not that hard."

So why doesn't everyone jump on the green bandwagon?

Some aspects of going green aren't as easy as recycling, asking guests to reuse their towels or screwing in

a compact fluorescent lightbulb.

"I think one of the big challenges is employee education," Veasey said. Owners may pursue environmentally friendly initiatives, but unless they really make their employees understand why these efforts are important, she said, "It's easy to fall back on old habits."

Many innkeepers are interested in solar energy, she said, but even with expanded federal and state incentives, photovoltaic systems still call for a significant investment.

"We're right there at the point where it's going to become cost effective," she said, "but in this economic environment, it's tough for properties to think about putting that kind of investment into renewables."

In the meantime, Timothy Brady said, "One of the big issues right now is that the health rules haven't really caught up to the environmental movement. ... There are new green (cleaning) products that are alternatives to bleach that independent studies have shown are effective but they're not approved to be used in a hotel environment yet."

Numerous people interviewed described another serious hurdle: "greenwashing."

This refers to the use of an amorphous "green" label as a catch-all that can confuse consumers and include big businesses that may not follow the best environmental practices.

"I've read some surveys that more and more people look for green lodging," Lorimer said. "I think unfortunately, though, the message is getting kind of blurred with all the different certifications."

The same is true for "organic," according to Caserta.

"There's big corporate companies now that all sell organic eggs, but they're housed in buildings with thousands of chickens that never see the light of day," she said. "I think that a lot of organic farmers are now not even wanting to use the term because it has really become bastardized."

Recognizing this, Veasey said the New Hampshire Sustainable Lodging & Restaurant Program's being tweaked to be less subjective and require re-certifications. She also stressed the importance of businesses being as transparent as possible in marketing their green initiatives.

Meanwhile, Timothy Brady described an even more central challenge.

"We have an old house with old windows. You don't want to destroy the integrity of any of that," he said. "It's the balance of trying to improve them and at the same time not destroy them."

Regardless, Caserta's issuing a challenge of her own: She wants other New Hampshire innkeepers to follow in her green footsteps.

Anika Clark can be reached at 352-1234, extension 1432, or aclark@keenesentinel.com