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J. KENJI ALT FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Guests at the Union Street Inn on Nantucket enjoy breakfast in the garden.

Couple add special touches to Nantucket inn, menu

By J. Kenji Alt
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NANTUCKET — Deborah Withrow, 58, stands in the small dining room of the Union Street Inn and from a side table picks up a hand-drawn walking map of the island. “Nantucket used to be the center of the universe,” hyperbolizes her husband, Ken, 59, as she hands it to us. “Whale oil was lighting the streets from New York to Paris.” As lovers of the island (Ken for its history and Deb for its secluded natural beauty), it pains them to see midsummer visitors who think solely of the shopping and eating.

Ironically, eating is one of the inn’s biggest draws: Soon after buying the 18th-century Federal-style building off the central cobblestone Main Street in 1995, the couple took advantage of its status as the only inn located in a commercial zone (the rest are residential) by installing a commercial-grade kitchen and having it inspected. Now they’re the sole B&B serving a real breakfast.

While guests at other inns must content themselves with croissants or muffins, Union Street Inn guests are offered elaborate hot meals. Just outside the kitchen door in the garden, guests in the early-

morning sun tuck into fluffy, goat cheese-stuffed omelets and warm chewy bagels thickly layered with smoked salmon, red onion, and dill.

Before moving to the island, Ken spent over 20 years managing luxury business hotels in New York and Chicago, while Deb worked in retail space design. So though the former whaling captain’s home still has the features that typify Nantucket charm (slightly crooked walls, creaky wide-planked floors, and the traditional gray clapboard exterior), the couple has had 13 years to make off-season renovations, outfitting the

RECIPE ONLINE

For Union Street Inn’s French toast recipe, check out www.boston.com/food.

rooms with all the trappings of a boutique hotel. You’ll find poster beds and Frette linens, wood-burning fireplaces (nights can get cold on the island, especially in the shoulder seasons) and plush Matouk robes in the closets. “In New York hotels, there is no off-season,” explains Ken. “Out here, we actually have the time to apply our design and hospitality sensibilities.” A night at the inn costs between \$159 and \$549, which includes breakfast (two- or three-night minimum stay).

The off-season offers Deb another advantage: recipe development. When the Withrows first took over, Deb did all the cooking. Then, the menu consisted of fried eggs, sausages, toast, pastries, and a pared down version of the current bagel-salmon duo. Deb contends that refining her recipes over the years is what gives their early-morning cooking its good reputation on the island.

Two cooks in the open kitchen work efficiently to get food to guests quickly. But it’s really unnecessary: Sweet, thick-cut challah, soaked in a rich orange-scented custard, then fried slowly in butter — an over-the-top French toast — is worth the wait.

Even something as ordinary as blueberry pancakes is elevated. Deb makes a blueberry compote, which she spoons over pancakes as they cook on the first side. When flipped, the sugary compote caramelizes into a crunchy, lacey, cookie-like crispness on the exterior. The Withrows have taken a classic and transformed it into something new, still maintaining its understated and simple elegance.

Just like they’ve done with the inn.

Union Street Inn, 7 Union St., Nantucket, 888-517-0707, www.unioninn.com.