

The Wow House

A couple with a bit of an aversion to B-and-Bs has turned a midcoast manse into an intimate, but not overbearing, hideaway for people just like themselves. By Andrew Vietze.

CHERYL Michaelsen's husband doesn't like bed-and-breakfasts much. Give Mike LaPosta a choice when he's traveling, and the Rockland resident would typically pick a motel over some swanky inn. He prefers a private bath, breakfast on his own, no one looking over his shoulder all the time, just a quiet, pleasant overnight. "He doesn't like to talk to me in the morning, never mind strangers," says Michaelsen with a laugh.

Which makes the couple unusual candidates to own one of the midcoast's finest bed-and-breakfasts. But there is LaPosta joking with guests as they arrive at the Berry Manor Inn on a tranquil side street in Rockland. ("I still can't figure out why she wouldn't let me name this place Chuck Berry's," he says to someone in the lobby, pointing to a picture of the Victorian mansion's first owner, Charles Berry.) When they purchased the 1898 stunner in 1998, LaPosta and Michaelsen decided they'd set up a bed-and-breakfast for people like Mike to stay in, people who wouldn't normally be caught dead in one. And in so doing they've created an exemplary

inn, the only AAA Four Diamond historic B-and-B in the midcoast.

Buying one of the grandest old homes in a happening coastal community cer-

tainly gave them a good start. The 6,800-square-foot manse was built by Rockland burgher Berry for his wife as a turn of the century wedding present, and it's almost perfect for a B-and-B. All three stories, sixty-six windows, twenty-four rooms, and eleven dormers. The distinctive house is on one of the nicest streets in Rock City, just a couple of blocks from the shops, galleries, restaurants, and Farnsworth Art Museum on Main Street but in a sedate neighborhood of other old homes that feels well away from the traffic downtown.

A rich maroon color that works well with the Berry name, it was a showplace in its day, incorporating a mix of architectural styles. The house combines the symmetry and stature of the Colonial Revival, the rounded façade of Queen Anne, the gables, rambling floor plan, and unifying siding of the Shingle Style, and a healthy dose of Victorian fancy. Charles Berry ran a livery with his brother and also served as mayor, and his family had their fingers in just about all of the goings-on in Rockland, helping to found Rockland



The striking Rockland hostelry that Cheryl Michaelsen (second from right) and her husband, Mike LaPosta (third from left) created has proven immensely popular with both guests and the couple's own parents (above), who now help run the inn.

70 DOWN EAST

Photographs by Todd Caverly/Brian Vanden Brink Photography

"You don't own an old house like this — it owns you."



Savings Bank, investing in the lime industry, owning real estate and hotels and several businesses downtown.

The house on Talbot Avenue was in keeping with the family's stature. At the time, this residential thoroughfare was the place to be in Rockland, away from the fish processing of the waterfront and the heavily trafficked roads used for transporting lime. "It's hard to imagine that this place was home to a single family with just one child," says Michaelsen, who's done extensive research on the house. But the family had plenty of servants living upstairs.

Where there once were maids' rooms, there are now guest quarters. The second and third floors have four guest rooms each, and they're all decorated and furnished with the comfortably rich style of the Victorian age. The adjacent, 4,000-square-foot carriage house offers another quartet of rooms, these a tad more modern and a bit more luxurious.

Every room has a private bath with an antique look but all the modern conveniences (dual showerheads are com-

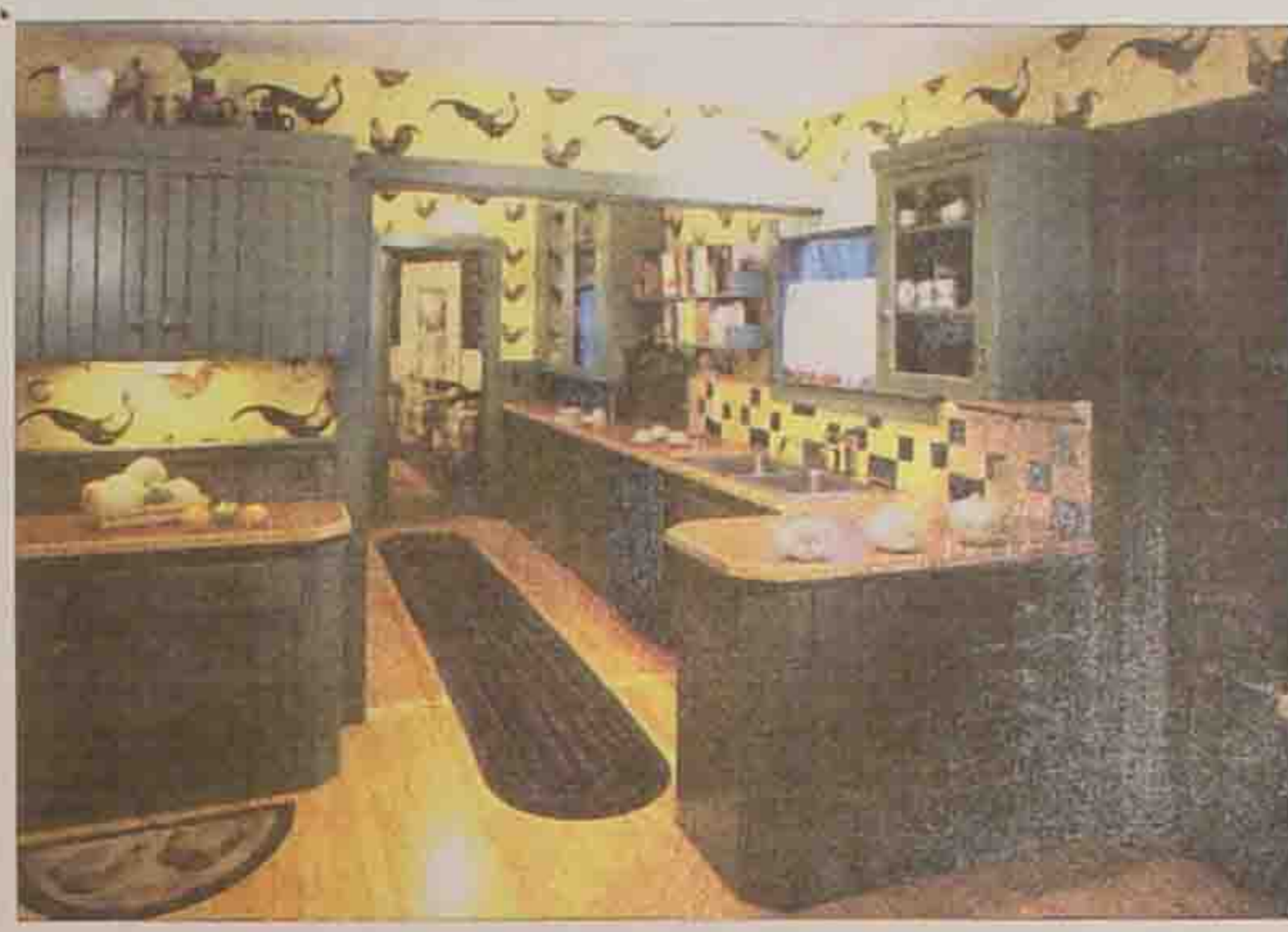
mon), and even the smallest of these guest quarters is fairly commodious. Ceilings are 10.5 feet high, beds are big and plush — most are king-sized — and the innkeepers have worked to retain a luxuriously antique feel. TVs are hidden away, canopied beds have been custom made, reproduction furnishings have been positioned just so. The wallpaper is floral, the colors are rich, the moldings ornate, and the patterns dazzling, but everything feels sumptuous rather than over-the-top.

"We wanted things to look antique," says LaPosta. "But," he says, pointing to some overstuffed chairs, "we wanted people to be comfortable." Guests have the run of the place, from the formal parlor and living room on the first floor, through the pantry stocked with juices and pies and popcorn, to the library in an old smoking room on the second floor to the lounge on the third.

Of course ideal as the building is for an inn, it wasn't exactly designed as one, and it took



72 DOWN EAST



Comfortable furnishings and carefully preserved architectural details capture the home's Victorian style, while the separate tables in the dining area reflect the owners' desire to keep their inn intimate, but without being overly cozy. The result is an establishment that would make the original owner, Rockland magnate Charles Berry, proud.

months of work — ninety contractor days to be exact — to get it in shape. And the project went forward with all the eyes of the Penobscot Bay city looking on. When you buy one of the largest, most impressive, and most historic homes in town, you inherit more than just shingles and pillars.

"The house doesn't belong to us, it belongs to Rockland!" says LaPosta, a native upstate New Yorker who only recently left his job with a major medical supplier to work full time at the inn. So naturally the city's residents were curious to see what was going on when LaPosta and his wife began their renovations in 1998.

The couple were newcomers after all — both to the city and the business. They had decided to open a B-and-B after visiting only one. ("The fact that Mike didn't like to stay in them made it hard to do research," observes Michaelsen wryly.) They decided on Maine because they'd both lived here in the past — "we didn't even discuss the where," she says, "Maine was a given" — and toured twelve B-and-Bs from Kittery to Bar Harbor once they made a plan to go for it and leave their old jobs behind. Michaelsen quit hers at a medical center in Boston and moved up full time while LaPosta commuted until last March.

On their tour of Maine, the couple visited Rockland to see another house, and "just fell in love with the city," which was undergoing its transformation from fishing town to tourist-friendly cultural center. They drove by the old Berry place

(Continued on page 80)



OCTOBER 2004 73

The Wow House

(Continued from page 73)

and were sold on it almost immediately. "We called this the 'Wow' house," says Michaelsen. "And it had a little For Sale sign out front."

Having dealt with local officials during their previous lives in New York and Boston, where "they go out of their way to be nasty to you," says LaPosta, the couple were blown away by how welcoming and accommodating the city of Rockland was to them. "They wanted to see how they could help us make this work, and everybody was great, from the fire code inspector to the police to the code officers, you could just tell there was some energy in town."

Their neighbors were quite involved, too. "People would park in the driveway and just watch," says LaPosta. "The bold ones would walk right into the house to see what

Guests are overwhelmingly positive about the place — repeat visits are common, and people who live just up the road stay at the inn for a minivacation.

we were doing." "At certain points during the renovation we'd have big dumpsters out front, and it'd be noisy," adds Michaelsen. "Here we were, a couple from away, making a big mess, and people wanted to make sure we were not destroying the house."

Far from it. Anyone was doing everything right by the building. They used old photographs, the memories of neighbors, a bit of research, the information the house itself was providing when paper and old boards were stripped away, and a good bit of common sense to come up with their renovation plan. Wherever possible they saved the neat antique fixtures and features that gave the house character. In one room the lead sluice that served as the original plumbing can be seen through a piece of glass in the floor. In others the signature of the original wallpaper carved is preserved with a frame. A beautiful, hand-carved wooden sign — based on the Berrys' original stationery — greets guests in the carriage house.

The couple hired all sorts of locals, many of whom had been in the house before, to help them bring the old gem back. "Some

of the contractors had been to ice-cream socials that their old high-school teacher had here years ago," says Michaelsen.

No one observed the proceedings more keenly than the ladies of the Talbot House, a home for older women next door. "I'd go over there occasionally with wallpaper samples and photographs," says Michaelsen. "And they'd have written up a list of questions for me. 'Who was in the red truck? What were you doing in the road that day? Why did you move the pig [a statue near the driveway]?' To this day when we have weddings we try to have them on the Talbot side of the house — and they still send over questions ahead of time. 'Who are the bride and groom? Will the bride be wearing a full gown?' Then they all line up at the window to watch."

The couple became so friendly with another elderly neighbor, a ninety-something woman who lived in a small place nearby, that they ended up caretaking for her. She's got her own room now in the carriage house and enjoys meeting the guests and visiting with Captain Nemo, the charismatic house cat.

Other boarders these days include Michaelsen's mother and stepfather and LaPosta's parents. "It's a real family affair," says LaPosta, "and everyone gets along great until the Red Sox and Yankees play each other." The couple's parents help bake pies, serve breakfast, clean, and handle a bunch of other tasks. Mike's dad is in charge of the laundry and is so exacting that other innkeepers have asked whether he'd hire out. Michaelsen and LaPosta live in what was once a coal storage space underneath the house, prompting Michaelsen's mother to call her Cinderella on occasion.

When the dust had finally all been vacuumed away after their months of renovation work, Michaelsen and LaPosta hosted an open house. And 240 people showed up to tour the place. "All of the contractors came with their families — they were so proud of their work," says Michaelsen. "It was rewarding for us that everyone took so much pride in their work and wanted to show it to their families." They opened for business officially in June of 1999.

ALL through the process, Michaelsen and LaPosta kept in mind what Mike and LaPosta-B customers like Mike would want. "That's why we don't have one long table in the dining room," LaPosta points out. Instead there are several small

tables arranged in the large formal dining area, which can be clustered together if a group is in, but can be private if not. "We also insisted on having private baths in every room, and we tried to insulate between rooms so it's very quiet." "There are lots of public spaces," adds Michaelsen, "but plenty of places to get away as well."

The couple's sense of humor and the respect with which they do things helps to put people at ease, too. "When the furniture guy showed up to make a delivery, he ended up in a hot tub eating an ice cream," says Mike, as if these things just happen. Whimsy is evident everywhere at the Berry Manor Inn, but not in the cloying way it can be when it goes unchecked. Each tub gets a rubber ducky, for instance. Bathroom literature tends toward such necessary-room classics as *Flushed with Pride*, *The Vanishing American Outhouse*, *Thunder, Flash, and Thomas Crapper*, Mike's collection of mechanical singing hamsters sprawls across a sideboard in the dining room.

It all seems to work. Guests are overwhelmingly positive about the place — repeat visits are common and the little black journals placed in each room ooze with praise and pledges of fealty. People who live just up the road have been known to stay at the inn for a minivacation. Better still, fellow Rockland residents are happy with what the couple have done with this city institution. They've formed solid friendships with lots of neighbors and other business owners.

So the city is happy, the guests are happy themselves, the couple owns quite a happy current role. "You don't own an old house like this," says Mike LaPosta. "It owns you. We feel lucky to be able to live here and share it with other people."

And despite his misgivings about B-and-Bs — he still doesn't like to stay in them — LaPosta is truly enjoying his current role. "Being an innkeeper is great," he says. "It's different than staying in a B-and-B because you're controlling the environment." With a smile he tells the story of one guest he was particularly happy to serve, a fellow much like LaPosta himself.

"We had this one guy whose wife had dragged him to a couple of B-and-Bs and he'd hated every minute. But he loved it here, he told us — and they ended up staying a couple of extra days." □

The Berry Manor Inn is located at 81 Talbot Avenue in Rockland. Call 207-596-7696 or visit www.berrymanorinn.com for more information.