

WHO ARE THE INNKEEPERS?

Green Acres

Proprietors Marie and Steve Nygren (opposite center) share life on their family farm, a tranquil retreat set on acres of woodlands and pasture. Delightful diversions await guests, such as dining al fresco in the shelter of a gazebo or floating through the air on a rope swing suspended from a century-old water oak.

A City Couple in Georgia Turn
Farming into Prolic

BY MARGIE BURNS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RONNIE OWINGS



*S*eren-Be, a bed and breakfast located only thirty-two miles south of downtown Atlanta, is the inspiration of Steve and Marie Nygren. Steve, part of the '60s generation, became one of the following decade's entrepreneurial giants, only to come full circle and return to the spiritual roots of that ardent era. Two years ago, he and Marie traded city life for the slower pace of life "down on the farm." The couple created a haven on almost three-hundred acres of pasture land and woods that gives them — and their guests — license to view the world through glasses tinted a softer shade of rose than most. "The name Seren-Be," explains Marie, "is a combination of serenity and being."

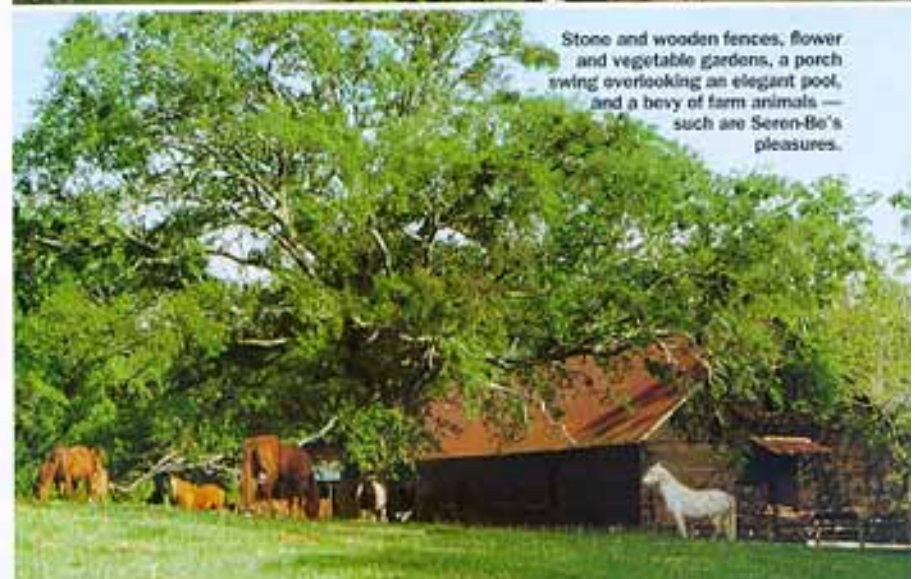


But the evolution didn't happen overnight. It amuses the currently long-haired Steve to recall that he was "clean-cut and corporate" when his friends were "long-haired and free spirited." While others were expressing their libertine side, the eighteen-year-old college student signed on as a summer dishwasher at Stouffer's Top of the Rockies in his home state of Colorado to earn pocket money. His entree into hospitality came soon afterward, when he was asked to step into the shoes of an absent *maitre d'hôtel*. So began his fascination with the food industry.

By the time he was twenty-four, Steve had been promoted up the corporate ranks to national director of marketing for Stouffer hotels. At twenty-seven, he ventured out on his own and opened The Peasant Restaurant, an Atlanta eatery that developed into a



Stone and wooden fences, flower and vegetable gardens, a porch swing overlooking an elegant pool, and a bevy of farm animals — such are Seren-Be's pleasures.





multi-million dollar chain. Along the way, Steve met and married Marie, who also had grown up in the food business, helping her mother, Margaret Lupo, the owner of one of Atlanta's more popular restaurants. Seemingly rooted in the city, the couple began raising a family. "Most of my success has been due to being in the right place at the right time," demurs the magnate-turned-gentleman-farmer — and innkeeper.

Indeed, finding Seren-Be was no exception to Steve's run of good fortune. "We were out on a 'ramble,' not actively house-hunting," he says, explaining the jaunts conducted by the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation for properties going up for bid at state auction. But the trip became more than a "ramble" once the couple saw the land with a lake and streams that feed two creeks — one leading to a waterfall — that spill into the nearby Chattahoochee River. "A turn-of-the-century farmhouse and 1930s barn, and we were hooked," adds Steve.

At first the family used its country estate, land once inhabited by the Creek Indians, for weekend escapes, exploring hiking trails that led deep into the woods, riding horseback across green meadows, or canoeing the lake. They still maintained their urban life, which included the operation of Steve's business and an 8,000-square-foot manse set in one of Atlanta's more fashionable districts. But then, at the peak of a twenty-five-year career, Steve decided to sell the franchise he had built from scratch, trade his corporate suit for denim, and move to the country full-time with his family.

Thus Seren-Be came into being. From one transformation to another, the Nygrens created a tiny utopia. In decorating the renovated farmhouse for themselves and an adjacent barn and cottage for guests, they blended Marie's folk art collection with the rustic environment. "The decor is what I call 'country eclectic,'" says Marie, "with the art and antiques lending the rooms a



Folk art lends a capricious air to the enclosed porch of the main house, where a repast of warm biscuits and muffins, tomato-basil frittata, collard green soufflé and bacon is served. Walnut-stained paneling and a stone fireplace say country comfort with a Southern drawl in the common room of the guest house.



Because Seven Be also is home to an assortment of friendly farm animals, the decor is both fittingly rustic and serendipitously quirky.

Whimsy and art dominate the sitting area on the dining porch in the main house, where a painting of a wolf among a gaggle of geese hangs above a casually slip-covered sofa. Even the pillows have been touched by Picasso.



primitive feeling." Because Seren-Be is also home to friendly farm animals (including some of the cutest piglets you'll ever see), the atmosphere is as rustic as it is refined.

One decorative piece particularly favored by the Nygrens is a round glass-topped table designed by a local artist entitled "The Three Graces." Although the name is derived from Greek mythology, Marie says, "It reminds us of our own three daughters." These three graces — aged thirteen, twelve, and nine — play an active role in life at Seren-Be, where the days revolve around nature.



Pale walls, bold colors, and checked fabrics lend a country-fresh look to guest rooms. The Impressionist-style painting in the upper-loft suite lends the spacious aerie its muted palette.



"Steve, the girls, and I are responsible for the upkeep of the place, from cooking and serving, to feeding the animals," says Marie, ingrained

since her own childhood with the traditions of a family-operated business.

The sunlit porch of the original farmhouse reflects the bucolic outdoors, its wooden swing cushioned with boldly splashed pillows of red, yellow, and green. In the barn, the other guest common area features a cozy loveseat and deep chairs covered in floral prints, centered around a stone fireplace. Accommodations here are cheerful, simple, and unpretentious, with an emphasis on nature and light. These spacious havens display knotty-pine floors scattered with rugs, patchwork quilts on bobs topped with bright pillows (there is a mix of double, one queen, and a twin-bedded room), and botanical prints on white-washed walls. Fresh flowers and potted plants complement antique and hand-painted furnishings. Down the bridle path, a cottage containing two more bed-



rooms also awaits overnight visitors.

The bed and breakfast bespeaks home and family to everyone who steps through its welcoming doors. Marie whips up mouthwatering Southern, down-on-the-farm breakfasts, which frequently include morning eye-openers like cheese grits paired with farm-fresh eggs and sliced country ham, fried green tomatoes, crab cakes, and homemade buttermilk biscuits. While her daughter cooks, Margaret, who also retired to the farm, sometimes keeps her restaurateur's hand in as morning host and server. The soul-satisfying repasts may be taken in guest rooms, on one of the porches, or in the gazebo.

Swimming in the big pool, sunbathing in the hot tub banked by perennial gardens, or splashing in the shimmering lake are just a few of the leisurely pastimes at Seren-Be. Guests and their families also may idle away their days observing the steady rhythms of farm life unfold — feeding the multitude of stock, hopping a ride in a hay wagon, and ending the day with a barbecue, marshmallows roasting in the ambient glow of a bonfire.

Die-hard city folk might say Steve and Marie Nygren discarded the all-American success story, but the Nygrens would argue that they simply turned it into a more serene one. —

Seren-Be Bed and Breakfast, 10050 Hutchinson Ferry Road, Palmetto, GA 30268, 770/463-2610, fax 770/463-4472. Three guest rooms and cottage, all w/private bath. Rates \$93 to \$133, including full breakfast. Cancellation policy. No smoking. Personal checks.

