

the norseman restaurant | gina and adrian noordhof

It has been more than 1000 years since the Vikings briefly inhabited L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern tip of the island of Newfoundland. Yet the place speaks in echoes of Viking voices long gone. The wind whistles whispers over fields and mounds. Mirages of Viking ships shimmer on the distant horizon. At times, it is as if those long ago people never left. This is how it feels at the Norseman Restaurant and Gaia Gallery owned by Gina and Adrian Noordhof. Gina and Adrian, both tall, blonde and fair, look like 21st century Norsemen. But they're not. Gina, from Newfoundland and Labrador, and Adrian, from Alberta, established a first class gourmet restaurant at the end of the road on the edge of the ocean in a place where few would dare to dream of such a venture – let alone actually do it.

Gina and Adrian did not set out to be entrepreneurs. Gina has a Bachelor of Science in Geography and a Masters in Environmental Science. Adrian has a Sociology degree and he completed the Canadian Securities Course. Gina's mother, Bella Hodge, however, is a businesswoman. She owns the Valhalla Lodge Bed and Breakfast and owned the restaurant business before Gina and Adrian purchased it from her. Gina spent summers working in her mother's businesses. Her business education occurred on the job. She was involved in dealing with customers, taking bookings and doing marketing for her mother. Soon Adrian was also involved. He had an interest in cooking which naturally led to the development of his gourmet culinary skills.

After gaining experience and expertise working in the family businesses, Gina and Adrian wanted to own their own business and to steer their own course. The time was right and they bought the restaurant business from Bella. They created a casual fine dining establishment with high quality gourmet food and professional and personable service that rivals the best in the country.

Some people thought they were too ambitious, that they were aiming too high. Some people thought there would not be a sufficient market for such fine food. One person even said, "How can you have a restaurant without French fries?"

Gina and Adrian were determined. They were not going to have a deep fryer. They were certain that tourists would search out and embrace quality food. Their research told them that seasoned travellers were willing to pay for an exquisite culinary experience that specialized in local food.

And specialize they did. They offer a menu that features an array of fresh seafood: cod, caplin, halibut, shrimp, scallops and crab. However, it is the experience ordering lobster that takes fresh to a whole new level. The lobsters are held in a pen in the ocean. The customers can actually go down to the wharf and select their own lobster right from the cold North Atlantic. Gina says it is the cold water that enhances the flavour and texture of the lobster.

Whether they are serving bakeapples or caribou, the food has been transformed into an experience of simplicity and sophistication by the skillful hand of Adrian, the chef. Behind the restaurant is the Gaia Gallery. This gift store specializes in products sourced from artists and artisans: Labrador Innu tea dolls, Inuit carvings, handmade silver jewelry, and books on the historical and geographical heritage of the region. As in the restaurant, the focus is on quality.

Gina and Adrian have added a third dimension to their business - vacation rental properties.

They have recently purchased two traditional outport houses in Gunner's Cove just 11 kilometers from L'Anse aux Meadows. These houses were owned by Pulitzer Prize winning American writer Annie Proulx, author of *The Shipping News*, a novel set in the area. Situated in a meadow tucked into a beachside hill on the shore of a protected cove, the houses are a picturesque postcard image of old Newfoundland. They are so popular that they start to book up in the fall of the previous year.

The demand for first class quality vacation rentals in the region is high and Gina sees potential to expand the business. She hopes to buy or build more houses in Gunner's Cove. She looks at the success of Fishers' Loft in Port Rexton and sees a model for expansion for her businesses. Like Gina and Adrian, the Fishers started in the hospitality business by renovating a heritage structure. Now they offer first class accommodations in several newly constructed heritage-style buildings. The Fishers also have a fine dining restaurant and are even in the process of adding a small conference centre for corporate meetings.

Gina is animated as she talks about the potential for her business and for tourism in general in Newfoundland and Labrador. In 2010, 30,000 tourists journeyed all the way up the Great Northern Peninsula. This is not a huge number of consumers relative to other places and Gina said that her businesses saw only a fraction of these people, yet her profits were up by 30%. This confirms that she and Adrian are providing a product that discerning travellers are looking for.

Gina's experience validates her market research. She regularly surveys her customers to see how her businesses are meeting their needs. As well, she has benefited from on-going research done by the provincial Department of Tourism and the Canadian Tourism Commission. This has enabled her to spot trends in consumer demand and to provide services accordingly. For example, the research has highlighted the growing demand for culinary tourism.

Sometimes research involves trying a venture to see if there is a profitable market and to determine whether it is the right fit for the business. Gina and Adrian tried this with dinner theatre several years ago. Although they enjoyed the experiment, they found that it required that the business carry too many staff. It also put restrictions on what type of food could be served and when. They were also limited in how much they could charge for the total dining and entertainment experience. Overall they decided there was not sufficient profit margin in the dinner theatre experience to justify the hours and resources expended.

Another method of market research that Gina and Adrian particularly enjoy in the off season is their own travel. When they are not busy ordering, marketing and booking for the next season, they frequent tourist properties, restaurants and gift shop galleries in Canada and abroad. They observe and compare products and services and share experiences with the proprietors. During this time they also attend trade shows and conferences. This is an advantage of a seasonal business. It gives the flexibility to travel in the off season. This is a luxury that they do not have from May to October for Gina says that one thing she has learned in business is that "You've got to be there."

Gina and Adrian are there to serve their customers. For the most part these customers are world travellers. They come from Ontario, Western Canada, the United States and Europe. They are seeking unique travel experiences and they are willing to pay for quality. Gina credits

the colourful and captivating Newfoundland and Labrador tourism ads for attracting many of these sophisticated tourists. She also applauds the accessible and inviting websites for Tourism NL and Hospitality NL.

Sophisticated travellers do their research. Gina is ready for them. She has designed an attractive and informative website for their restaurant, gallery, rental properties and her mother's business, the Valhalla Lodge. She also has links to attractions in the area.

One of these attractions is a pet project of Gina's. It is Norstead, a community based nonprofit organization. Norstead is a replica Viking village originally built with government support to mark the 1000 year anniversary of Viking settlement. Gina is on the Board of Directors and assists with ideas and proposal writing to ensure the continued viability of the infrastructure. In the summer re-enactors are hired to display aspects of Viking life. Gina's own experience in dinner theatre showed her that there was a demand for evening entertainment; this niche is now filled by Norstead. Professional theatrical productions are mounted in the village. Recently Norstead purchased a kiln to make and sell Viking style pottery on site. Gina spends many hours volunteering with Norstead year round. She says that a business person has a social responsibility to make a contribution to her community. Norstead provides more jobs for the local economy and it provides tourists with another activity.

Life in the tourism business is hectic. Gina and Adrian work together all day, every day, throughout the tourist season. Gina manages restaurant tables, the gallery and the rental properties as well as assisting her mother with the Valhalla Lodge. As chef, Adrian takes charge of the kitchen. This does not simply involve cooking. In between there is planning, ordering, preparation and, of course, cleaning. They have a small staff to assist with all of the chores.

When hiring staff, Gina and Adrian look for people who have initiative and who are able to work with minimal or even no supervision. Of course, because they are in the tourism business, they need people who are pleasant, articulate and engaging. Unfortunately, Gina says that it is becoming increasingly difficult to hire staff because fewer young people are returning to live in the more remote rural communities of the province.

For Gina, her mother is a model, a mentor and in many ways a partner. Gina maintains an active role in running Valhalla Lodge Bed and Breakfast. Between them they shared the honour of the Newfoundland and Labrador Organization of Women Entrepreneurs (NLOWE) Entrepreneur of the Year Award for the western region.

The Viking spirit of adventure lives on today in Gina and Adrian in L'Anse aux Meadows. They look to the future with optimism as they anticipate the continued growth of their business ventures. They have established themselves in a remote but beautiful place. Unlike the Vikings, however, they plan a long and successful stay.