

OATES & BREDFELDT

Two B&B gurus teach the ins and outs of innkeeping.

by Stephen S. Howie

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After 20 years teaching potential innkeepers how to run a successful bed & breakfast, Bill Oates knows instantly how to spot an inn run by someone who shouldn't be in the business. "They have a list of things you can't do: don't get up in the morning until the bell rings, don't let the cat out, don't put your shoes on the white spread, don't play the television after 10 at night," Oates explained. "These are rules designed to fulfill the needs of the innkeeper, not the guest."

At Oates & Bredfeldt, a unique innkeeper-consulting firm in Brattleboro, the primary tenet is that the inn industry is a service business. "It isn't like nursing or teaching, where you're dealing with basic human needs in a service role," Oates explained. "We do not provide basic shelter and sustenance. We provide luxury, fantasy, and fulfillment—we fulfill desires."

Oates retains the manner and dress of what he likes to call his "previous incarnation" as a professor of Southeast Asian and Chinese history. He is a stately, subdued man with thick eyebrows and slightly unkempt hair. He left the academic world 30 years ago and sold inns to prospective innkeepers as one of the founders of Country Business Services, a brokerage firm in Brattleboro. To Oates, the brokerage business seemed inherently unfair and inadequate. "For one thing, you never got paid unless there was a sale," he said. "When there was a

sale, you got paid an immoral amount of money, because it had to cover all the things you did for free."

WHEN HE OPENED WILLIAM Oates & Associates 19 years ago, the idea was to charge clients only for the services they needed—whether it was helping prospective innkeepers find an inn, consulting services for current innkeepers, or assisting with the sale of an inn for those looking to get out of the business. The company's three-day seminar, "How to Purchase & Operate a Bed & Breakfast or Country Inn," quickly became the core of the business. Ten years ago, Oates' wife, Heide Bredfeldt, joined the business full-time and the name was changed to Oates & Bredfeldt. Up until then, Oates likes to joke that the only real associates were "two cats and a dog."

Oates & Bredfeldt is run out of a salmon-colored Victorian house set back from a steep street that flows into downtown Brattleboro. The house is the first thing potential innkeepers see, and Bredfeldt has decorated it to convey a single message—quality. The house is true to its turn-of-the-century origins, complete with a working wood stove in the kitchen and original stained glass going up the stairway. Paintings by Vermont artists adorn the walls, and visitors can gaze through the second-floor windows across the Connecticut River to a stunning view of Wantastiquet Mountains in New Hampshire.

OATES IS AT EASE USING THIS 1895 home as a business, and he is equally adept at integrating his own family into the business of training innkeepers and managing inns. Bredfeldt, a trained psychotherapist, plays a critical role in the seminars, focusing on the psychological and emotional strain of running an inn. Up the road, in Jamaica, Vermont, their son, David Hiler, runs the Three Mountain Inn, where clients generally stay while attending the seminar. They also can take part in an internship program and experience firsthand the endless details of running a family-operated inn. Oates serves as a third-string bartender at the Inn on Saturday nights. Bredfeldt is the inn's decorator and oversees its upkeep as the head of quality control.

"What does it mean to be quality?" Bredfeldt asked rhetorically. "You don't have plastic flowers, you have real ones. You have luxurious towels, quality soaps, comfortable beds, extra pillows, curtains that give privacy but also allow people to look out. You're constantly thinking, what would make a guest comfortable?"

Since Oates & Bredfeldt began, some 2,000 people have attended the seminar, more than 600 of whom have gone on to become innkeepers. Oates insists that he's just as proud of the other two-thirds who take the seminar and decide not to buy and run their own inn. The decision to get into innkeeping is often based on a fantasy about how good innkeepers have it—a

Innkeeping is a couple's business, and another focus of the seminar is on the difficulties and compromises that go along with having a 24-hour-a-day business partner. "Some couples work together very well, usually if they complement each other and have different skills," Oates explained. "But the fact that they're together 24 hours a day can intensify any dysfunctional part of a relationship. It's a lot harder to cover it up."

As a former therapist, Bredfeldt specializes in the marital negotiations inherent in a couple's desire to make a living together. The decision to become innkeepers is one that can backfire if couples aren't prepared for the difficulties, financial and otherwise, of living and working together. The rhythm of innkeeping is antithetical to a traditional nine-to-five

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beautiful home, a rustic setting, a profitable existence far away from all the hustle and bustle of urban life. The job of Oates and Bredfeldt at their seminars is a combination of reality therapy and couples' counseling for double-income professionals with an idealistic notion of what it takes to run an inn.

"I'm really trying to break people's bubble," said Bredfeldt, who has been taking part in the seminars since they began. "We help them break through that fantasy that this is going to be a complement to a wonderful life and a wonderful setting. This is a business first and a lifestyle second."

AS SELF-PROCLAIMED "GURUS OF the inn business," Oates and Bredfeldt often find themselves in the role of myth-breaker, presenting seminar participants with the cold, hard facts of financing and managing a successful inn. One of the first myths they face is the misconception that smaller means easier. "For people who have smaller inns, there's almost a total inability to get away," Oates said. "When the phone rings, you're a slave to that phone. The larger the inn, the more likely you are to have competent help who can answer the phone, take care of details, and you can get away, even if it's only mentally for a few hours."

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lifestyle, where time off means evenings by the fire and weekend get-aways. As an innkeeper, weekends are the busiest times, filled with arriving and departing guests, and breaks usually come in the middle of the day after outgoing guests have checked out and before newcomers arrive. "You have to learn a new rhythm for living your life," Bredfeldt explained. "It can be a wonderful rhythm, if you're adaptable and flexible."

OVER THE YEARS, OATES & Bredfeldt has built an impressive list of seminar graduates who've gone on to start inns across the country—plus one in Scotland and a second in France. Graduates, whom Oates described as an extended family, call for advice about staffing problems, financial dilemmas and marketing. Oates has been compiling data on successful inns for 20 years, and now boasts a valuation method that is nationally recognized for determining

whether an inn can be profitable.

What innkeeping comes down to, he says, is infinite detail—there's always something else to do. "There's always a problem," Oates explained. In his gray sweater vest and dark blazer, he stared out from his second-floor office across to New Hampshire, surrounded by notes of things to do, people to call and numbers to crunch. "No matter how carefully you prepare, the guests arrive on Friday night and the heat goes off, there's a plumbing leak, there's electrical problems or a staff person doesn't show up. You can never sit back, relax and say, 'I'm prepared.'" ▼

Oates & Bredfeldt can be reached at 40 High Street, P.O. Box 1162, Brattleboro, VT 05302. The telephone is 802-254-5931; on the web www.inns-for-sale.com. Seminars for prospective innkeepers are scheduled for March 15-17, 2002, at the Pine Crest Inn, Tryon, NC, and April 26-28, or May 17-19, 2002 at the Three Mountain Inn in Jamaica, VT.

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