

"I went up to Boothbay and Wiscasset and looked at a lot of places there," he recalls, speaking English with a distinct French flavor. "But the broker we worked with said, 'You've come this far, you should come look at this last place.'"

This last place was the Youngtown Inn in Lincolnville, four-and-half miles northwest of Camden. A Federal Style 1810 farmhouse, the building had been the center of the Young family poultry and dairy farm for more than seven generations until 1982 when a pilot from Delta Airlines purchased the property to turn it into an inn and watering hole. Now, in 1991, the business was for sale again. Although the old farmhouse needed repairs, Manuel says it took him only two minutes to decide it was the right place to start their new venture.

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"We were very lucky to find this place," says MaryAnn. "Someone was definitely watching over us."

But as the Merciers prepared to reopen the business in January 1992 — this time as a French country inn — they knew it would take more than luck to make it a success. "Once you own a business it seems like you put your whole heart into it," explains MaryAnn, "and you hope for the best."

**T**HE results of their hard work are apparent to anyone who visits the Youngtown Inn for dinner. Located along Route 52 past Mount Megunticook and the lake of the same name, the inn is as welcoming a building as you could hope for: a stately, white-clapboard farmhouse with black shutters and red-and-gold trim. Lit up for dinner with its windows all aglow, it seems an outpost of worldliness and refinement along a darkened country road.

The inside of the inn is equally welcoming. Warmed by a potbellied wood stove and brightened by arrangements of fresh flowers, the extended dining room

is nicely understated. Stenciled white walls hung with French prints ascend to beamed ceilings, and naturally finished pumpkin pine floors shine underfoot. A small oil-lamp illuminates each white-clothed table.

"We wanted it to look like a French country inn," says MaryAnn. "Simple and clean. We wanted to have white tablecloths — which can scare some people off — because having dinner out should be a special experience."

On any given weekend night, one is likely to find seventy or so other people who agree. On a recent evening, the crowd included a big, well-dressed family (the inn encourages men to wear jackets for dinner); several distinguished-looking foursomes; a group of British-inflected travelers from Saudi Arabia; and a young couple engaged in hand-holding and quiet conversation, who were staying upstairs in one of the inn's six bedrooms. Reservations are strongly recommended, even in February and March.

Initially, MaryAnn had been concerned that, despite the inn's relative proximity to Camden and Route 1, its inland location would make attracting a clientele difficult. Now she recalls her husband's response: "People will travel for good food," he told her, and he was right.

Good food is the draw at the Youngtown Inn, and the Gallic menu makes few compromises to American tastes or trends. "I feel we've educated our clientele to classic French cooking," says Manuel. Courses are many — especially if you order from the prix-fixe menu — and portions are modest but pleasantly filling.

A glass of wine makes a nice beginning. Manuel has put together an eclectic list of French and California wines. Both the Smith & Hook Cabernet and Rutherford Hill Merlot are excellent, affordable choices.

Although the menu changes constantly, on a typical night one could choose from roast rack of lamb with fresh thyme (the all-time Youngtown Inn favorite), venison tenderloin with red currant and port, grilled filet mignon with Maytag blue cheese, or grilled red snapper with lime beurre blanc.

Appetizers might include lobster ravioli with American sauce (another favorite), escargots, or mesclun salad with warm goat cheese. Desserts are a

must; the crème brûlée is a stand-out, as are both the Grand Marnier and chocolate soufflés (which must be ordered at the start of the meal to allow time for preparation). Diners should expect to spend two or more hours and a hundred or so dollars, with wine, for a dinner for two.

**E**IGHT years after opening the Youngtown Inn, the Merciers are still working hard (a banquet room is next on their to-do list), and they still feel very lucky. Now the parents of three sons, Matthew, 8, Maxwell, 6, and Morgan, 1, they have also come to feel at home in the Camden Hills.

"Maine is just the perfect place to raise a family," says MaryAnn. "We love the safeness of it, and, of course, the people are wonderful. We call it Utopia."

Nor does this cosmopolitan couple feel isolated living in rural Maine. "We meet artists, musicians, scientists," says MaryAnn. "We meet people from all over the world."

"We just had a family from France stay here," interjects Manuel, "and they were impressed we were still French, still traditional, with the classic cooking, that we haven't gone the American way. They told us we offered American hospitality and French gastronomy," he says with a little smile.

For MaryAnn, one of the other rewards has been seeing local people come to accept this French inn as part of the community. Long after the tourists have departed, their inn is still open and busy, a testament to how highly regarded it is by locals in the know. "Everybody might not spend a hundred dollars," she says, "but I think they appreciate what we're doing, how nice the building looks, and they want to support us."

"Some neighbors, of course, are just amazed we're still here," she says with a laugh. "We still get people who call up and say, 'You're still there, it must be good. Guess we'll have to make a reservation.'" —Paul Doiron

*The Youngtown Inn is open for dinner Thursday through Saturday from 6 to 9 P.M., through March 31. Call for the expanded spring and summer hours. Personal checks and major credit cards are accepted. Located on the corner of Route 52 and the Youngtown Road in Lincolnville. 207-763-4290.*