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Oui, Oui, Washington

A young inn-keeping couple with roots in Cambodia and France raises the bar on hospitality in one small town. By **Joe Rada**, photography **Mary Margaret Chambliss**



Sokun and Guillaume share a hammock on the porch during a rare pause in their busy lives as innkeepers and restaurateurs.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Guillaume seranades Sokun on a piano in the Asian Room, a parlor devoted to her Cambodian heritage. A signature dessert, *le fondant au chocolat* (the melting chocolate cake) tops off Sokun's frequent French-themed dinners. The 1819 Lafayette Manor Inn is one of several historic bed-and-breakfasts in town.

A mélange of languages reaches the ears of guests who step contentedly away from breakfast tables at Lafayette Manor Inn. As they move to various parlors and porches, they hear French phrases drift from the upper hall, where a dapper man changes linens and tidies bedrooms. Cambodian terms fly from the kitchen, where a petite woman chops vegetables and plans an evening meal. Heavily accented English and pleasant laughter also spice these exchanges.

This exotic patois bounces between two young innkeepers as they go about their chores in Washington, midway between Athens and Augusta. Guillaume (wee-OM) Slama handles housekeeping, handyman, and cordial hosting duties. Sokun (so-COON) Nuon-Slama reigns over her kitchen.

The culturally diverse thirtysomethings chase an American dream. She's a political refugee from Cambodia and a devotee of gourmet French cooking. He's a Parisian

fascinated by vintage cars and Southern culture. Together they're changing the face of hospitality in their adopted setting.

"We came to this country with nothing but each other and a desire to work hard and succeed," Guillaume says. "We fell in love with this little town and are determined to make it a destination."

Route to Wilkes County Their path to east Georgia took many turns. Guillaume first came to the United States as an exchange student living with a family in Kentucky. Returning to France, he met Sokun, who at age 7 had escaped the Khmer Rouge regime that killed many of her relatives.

They married, set off for the "land of opportunity," and worked various jobs in Atlanta for eight years while saving toward their inn-keeping plans. "We did all kinds of things, but mostly I waited tables and designed software, and Sokun worked as an accountant and sold jewelry in a department store," Guillaume says. "Through the

Internet we found this antebellum manor for sale and decided to make the jump. We moved in three years ago and started creating the kind of inn we have always envisioned."

Being young and foreign and running a traditional Old South-type establishment can confuse newcomers. "Some people look at me and assume that I'm just the maid or the cook," Sokun says, astonished. "People think I'm too young or too Asian to run this kind of inn. I have to convince them that I am one of the owners!"

Many Irons in the Fire Grooming the 1819 manor—a white-columned two-story charmer much added onto over the decades—to suit their tastes proves to be just one of many tasks for the ambitious pair.

Guillaume drives his beloved 1960 Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud II as a limousine, picking up guests from nearby airports and driving them to the inn, weddings, reunions, and more. Sokun prepares gourmet lunches and dinners and offers cook-



➔ More about these innkeepers and the menus they serve: southernliving.com/livings



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GUILLAUME SLAMA



ing classes, sharing her French culinary skills with foodies from near and far.

They organize murder-mystery weekends, attract groups of car enthusiasts, and entertain guests around a piano—anything to bring more visitors to Washington. Once in town, people find plenty to explore: historic sites, home tours, festivals, a town square lined with owner-operated shops, simple drives along scenic roads, or a good book and a porch chair.

Two More Endeavors The couple opened Sophie’s, a sidewalk cafe a block from their inn, to give guests and locals another dining option. Sophie’s serves impressive sandwiches, pastries, coffee, and ice cream and encourages people to linger and watch life unfold on the square.

Their next move required a major leap of faith. Already working long days to run their inn and cafe, last year they bought The Fitzpatrick Hotel. Recently renovated, the three-story, redbrick, Victorian-era

landmark (which also faces the square) features 17 guest rooms and a restaurant dubbed Down Under.

“We went from 80-hour weeks to working all the time,” Guillaume says, fatigued but pleased. “We grew from 5 employees at Sophie’s to another 20 at The Fitzpatrick, counting cooks, waiters, housekeepers, and front desk clerks. It’s good though, because we can offer guests more choices. People stay at one place and eat at the others. A wedding party can take over the whole hotel and reserve the best inn room for the honeymooners.”

Home Sweet Home Even as the couple expands into side projects, the

seven-guest room manor with its four parlors and wraparound porch remains the closest reflection of their personal style. “That’s our art collection—French, Asian, and American—on the walls, our books and records on the shelves, our furniture and family photos, our vintage TVs and radios scattered everywhere,” Guillaume points out.

“Lafayette Manor is our favorite place in the world,” he continues. “It’s what we identify with most. It represents the standards we want to live up to. Everything else is extra. The way we’re going, we might never take a vacation for ourselves, but we’re glad to see people come here, enjoy their stay, and discover this area.” ●

Come for a Visit

Lafayette Manor Inn: 219 East Robert Toombs Avenue, Washington, GA 30673; www.lafayettemanor.com or (706) 678-5922. **Sophie’s:** 25 East Public Square, (706) 678-5921. **The Fitzpatrick Hotel:** 16 West Square; www.thefitzpatrickhotel.com or (706) 678-5900. **Washington-Wilkes Chamber of Commerce** (for more area information): www.washingtonwilkes.org or (706) 678-2013.