Travel

MOIRA NORDHOLT PHOTO

Derek and Jennifer Comeau mix dough for buckwheat olive buns in the kitchen at Harmony Dawn, where guests take part in cooking classes, meditation and exercises to help them eat healthier and live more fulfilling lives.

★ THE WELLNESS FILE

Finding the recipe for better living

Rice Lake retreat helps visitors reconnect with their inner selves through food

MOIRA NORDHOLT
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

RICE LAKE, ONT.—"Who am I?"

That was the question 12 of us were supposed to be delving into as we sat cross-legged on cushions on the studio floor, observing the rise and fall of our chests.

It sounded like the right path to inner peace, but I was having problems. I'm not used to silence being so *silent*.

We'd been served a dinner of protein-packed lentil-and-rice burgers with mushroom gravy an hour earlier, and my meditation was rudely interrupted by the sounds of my digestive system.

Is my stomach always that boisterous? Do the sounds of the city simply drown it out? What other symptoms are being masked by my noisy life?

So much for inner peace . . .

Along with a dozen others, mostly from Toronto, I was stirring, chopping, baking, kneading and meditating my way to well-being at Harmony Dawn, an off-grid retreat centre on 20 hectares of rolling wooded land bordering Rice Lake.

Owners Nicola Lawrence and Andy James opened Harmony Dawn three years ago to share "ways in which we can transform our lives and the planet by helping ourselves."

The buildings were designed using sustainable energy technology, harnessing the wind and the sun, and feng shui, the age-old Chinese art of building and placement in relation to the energy (qi) flow of earth, wind and water.

Their unique "Cooking, Meditation and Qigong Workshop" is part of a series combining cooking and the energetic arts. (Qigong is the ancient study of energy within human beings and involves movement exercises, visualizations and meditation.)

"We're incorporating what nature's bounty has to offer us seasonally with what we ourselves can do to create a healthy body, spirit and mind, leading to a fulfilling, healthy life," explains James, a martial arts teacher and author of several books on ancient wisdom, spirituality and meditation.

Nicola quotes a recent *Star* article as saying that daily meal preparation time has gone from six hours in 1900, to a paltry 20 minutes today.

"High fat, high sugar, and high salt fast foods have taken over our minds and diets, leaving us with a complete disconnection to our food and food supply," she says.

The aims is to reconnect with our food and bodies, and by extension our communities and our planet.

Connections were being made on many levels over the course of the weekend. For meal preparation, Nicola gave basic instructions, then set us loose with partners, each team creating their own one-course contribution to the meal.

Bread-making was popular. Getting our hands right into the food was a great way to make the connection between what we put in our bodies and the energy required to transform it from raw ingredients.

"Kneading dough is such a grounding meditation," enthused Nicola. "You have to really be present to feel the subtle nuances in texture."

You won't be offered any fancy spa treatments at Harmony Dawn, and you share a simple dorm-style bedroom and bathroom with fellow guests. You even have to bring your own sheets, pillowcases, towels and aprons, because providing an example of sustainable living does not include using extra water, chemicals and electricity to clean guests' laundry. What you are offered at Harmony Dawn, though, is more profound than a mud wrap and longer lasting than a massage. You'll be given tools to heal your life.

Frank Smith, an artist from Mount Albert, and his partner, Christine Owen, who works for the York Region District School Board, vowed to make Friday nights at home "healthy pizza night."

As for myself, I've been turning off the TV after eating and listening to my inquiring tummy. There's ancient wisdom in there.

Moira Nordholt is a Toronto-based freelance writer and vegan chef. She consulted with Harmony Dawn on their original menu planning. Her stay was subsidized.

Just the facts

- Harmony Dawn is 90 minutes northeast of Toronto near Cobourg on Rice Lake and is open year round for a variety of yoga, qigong and meditation retreats. Visit www.harmonydawn.com
- The next Cooking, Meditation, and Qigong retreat will be in March to coincide with the release of Nicola Lawrence's first cookbook, *The Dao of Harmony Dawn Cooking*. Contact Nicola Lawrence or Andy James at 705-696-2066.

★ FARE DEALS

Say 'I do' to deals for the big event

KATHRYN FOLLIOTT
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

After the all-important matter of saying "I do," many couples agree that hiring a wedding planner was their best big-day decision.

And now that destination weddings have become so popular, more resorts are promoting the services of their on-site wedding planners. Generally, these services are excellent, but how great would it be to have your very own Toronto-based planner, one who's knowledgeable in the ways of sun 'n' sand?

Luxe Destination Weddings specializes in luxury destination weddings in the Caribbean and Mexico, offering everything from location tips and bookings to planning and co-ordination for the big event, including on-site help.

And now through Feb. 28, couples who book their wedding with the company will receive a free wedding web site, plus complimentary design of your save-the-date cards, a $150 value in all. Each personalized web site allows two-way communication between the couple and their guests and can include information on showers, gift registries, destination details and photography. For more information check out www.luxe-events.com or call 1-888-LUXE-933 (1-888-589-3933).

JUST FOR US: Aw, shucks, you shouldn't have: three Fairmont properties in the U.S. are offering discounted rates just for Canadians. The Fairmont Copley Plaza in Boston, the Fairmont Chicago and the Fairmont Washington, D.C., have all posted a south-of-the-border special room rate of $225, in Canadian funds, for stays through April 9. A Canadian driver's licence or passport must be shown at check-in. For reservations, call 1-800-241-2008.

SANTA FE SAVINGS: Whiling away the winter in New Mexico just got more affordable with these hotel deals in Santa Fe.

To celebrate its 21st birthday, the Inn on the Alameda is offering a third-night rate of $21 (U.S.) with two nights booked, through Feb. 28. The three-night package includes daily continental breakfast, free parking, even a daily afternoon wine-and-cheese reception. This deal is not available for online reservations; to book call 1-888-984-2121.

Another deal, this one at La Posada de Santa Fe Resort & Spa, offers savings of 20 per cent with the Ski, Dine, & Unwind package, available through April 14. The two-night package includes accommodation, two half-day lift tickets per person at Ski Santa Fe, one 60-minute massage, lunch for two and parking. For details call 1-866-331-7625 or see www.rockresorts.com

BEST BUY OF THE WEEK: Travelocity's Summer in Winter sale offers low rates together with a fourth night free promotion. Featured destinations include Las Vegas, Hawaii, Mexico and the Caribbean. Reservations and travel must be made by Feb. 28. See www.travelocity.ca

Kathryn Folliott is a Toronto-based freelance writer. Prices quoted are subject to change and availability.

Picks of the week

STAR FILE PHOTO

Lush rain forests hem St. Lucia's famous Pitons.

Sunquest: Ixtapa, air and hotel, $1,169. www.sunquest.ca
Air Canada Vacations: Southern Caribbean cruise, air and cruise, $1,199. aircanadavacations.com
Nolitours: Varadero, air and hotel, $796. www.nolitours.com
Signature Vacations: Aruba, air and hotel, $1,698. signaturevacations.com
Transat Holidays: St. Lucia, air and hotel, $1,499. www.transatholidays.com
Conquest Vacations: Puerto Plata, air and hotel, $764. conquestvacations.com
Bel Air Travel: St. Maarten, air and hotel, $897. www.belairtravel.com
Sunwing Vacations: Puerto Escondido, air and hotel, $829. www.sunwing.ca
Sell Off Vacations: Costa Rica, air and hotel, $1,107. www.selloffvacations.com
itravel2000: Camaguey, air and hotel, $728. www.itravel2000.com
Sears Travel: Manzanillo, air and hotel, $732. www.searstravel.ca
Tour East: 16-day Vietnam & Cambodia package, air, meals, accommodation, transfers and sightseeing, $3,500. www.toureastholidays.com

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