

TODAY'S WEATHER

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THE WELLNESS FILE

Finding the recipe for better living

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

January 18, 2007

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."

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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

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.

Andy James at 705-696-2066.

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 aim 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.

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

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