

Eat, sleep and be merry

What's not to like about a bed and breakfast that features mattresses favoured by the Queen and meals cooked in a stove favoured by Martha Stewart and Jamie Oliver?

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ENTERPRISE

Not much as it turns out.

Maria and Wouter Eshuis have been operating Belle Vie for the last six years, a few minutes northwest of London. The bed and breakfast is an 1836 cottage they moved and restored when they built a new house on their Denfield Road property.

"This cottage was part of the original farmhouse," says Maria. "We got a permit to move it when we built our new house. Originally, we wanted to use it as a pool house. Then we started to renovate it, and we ended up spending a lot of money. It needed a lot of work."

When a friend asked if he could live in the cottage for six months, "we thought maybe we could get some money out of the building after putting so much in," Maria says, laughing.

So when their friend moved out, they got into the bed and breakfast business.

The 945 square foot cottage has

BELLE VIE

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MORRIS LAMONT/London Free Press

SLEEP LIKE ROYALTY: Wouter and Maria Eshuis, who operate the Belle Vie Bed and Breakfast, stand beside a Hypnos bed. The bed is a European specialty product that the couple now sell from their Bed and Breakfast.

two bedrooms and is completely separate from the Eshuis house. It looks like it was moved to London from somewhere in the French countryside.

"When we first opened, about 95 per cent of our guests were Americans," Maria, 53, says. "Then Americans stopped coming up and we started getting a lot of Canadian guests. We're not too busy in the winter, but from

April to November, we're quite busy. We have regulars who come for the same week every year."

Raised and married in the Netherlands, the couple has always had an entrepreneurial bent. They moved to Canada in 1982, a year after vacationing here. During that vacation, they saw the farm they eventually would purchase. "It was a mess,"

Maria recalls. "After we had been here a year, we approached the owners and offered to buy it."

They restored the property, built a new house, opened a B&B and had five children who now range in age from 11 to 23.

Long before they converted the cottage into a guest house, they went looking for an Aga cooker. Legendary in Europe, the Aga cooker is a Swedish invention

that has several cooking surfaces and cavities, all heated from one energy source — gas, propane or electricity. Sculpted from cast iron, it's as much a kitchen showpiece as an appliance.

"We had trouble finding one in Canada," Maria recalls. "We had seen them in movies and read about them. It seems like they're always mentioned in British novels. We bought ours in 1993, and in 1997 we started selling them."

The Hypnos bed is named after the Greed God of Sleep

They are now the Ontario reps for the complete Aga line of products, selling and servicing them across the province. Guests at Belle Vie can take part in Aga demonstrations and food tasting.

Most recently, the couple has started selling Hypnos beds and mattresses. Like the Aga line of cookers, Hypnos is a European specialty product. Named after the Greek God of Sleep, the mattresses are handmade with all natural products. The company holds two Royal Warrants and supplies its beds to the Queen and her family.

"We thought it was a good fit with the cookers and our guest cottage," Maria says. "When you stay at Belle Vie, you sleep on a Hypnos bed, so you can try it out and see what it's all about. We love sleeping on them."

Great food and a comfortable bed in a private country setting: It's a recipe the Eshuis family hopes will appeal to visitors for years to come.

Comments and suggestions for future profiles can be sent to Enterprise, c/o The London Free Press, 369 York St., London, Ont. N6A 4G1. A message for freelance writer Christopher Clark can be left at 519-667-5529.