



Cindy Youse in her studio



SHARED DREAMS AND SERENDIPITY

by Amanda C. Mitchell / photos by Thomas Roshkind

Larry and Cindy Youse: Who says you need experience to fulfill a dream?

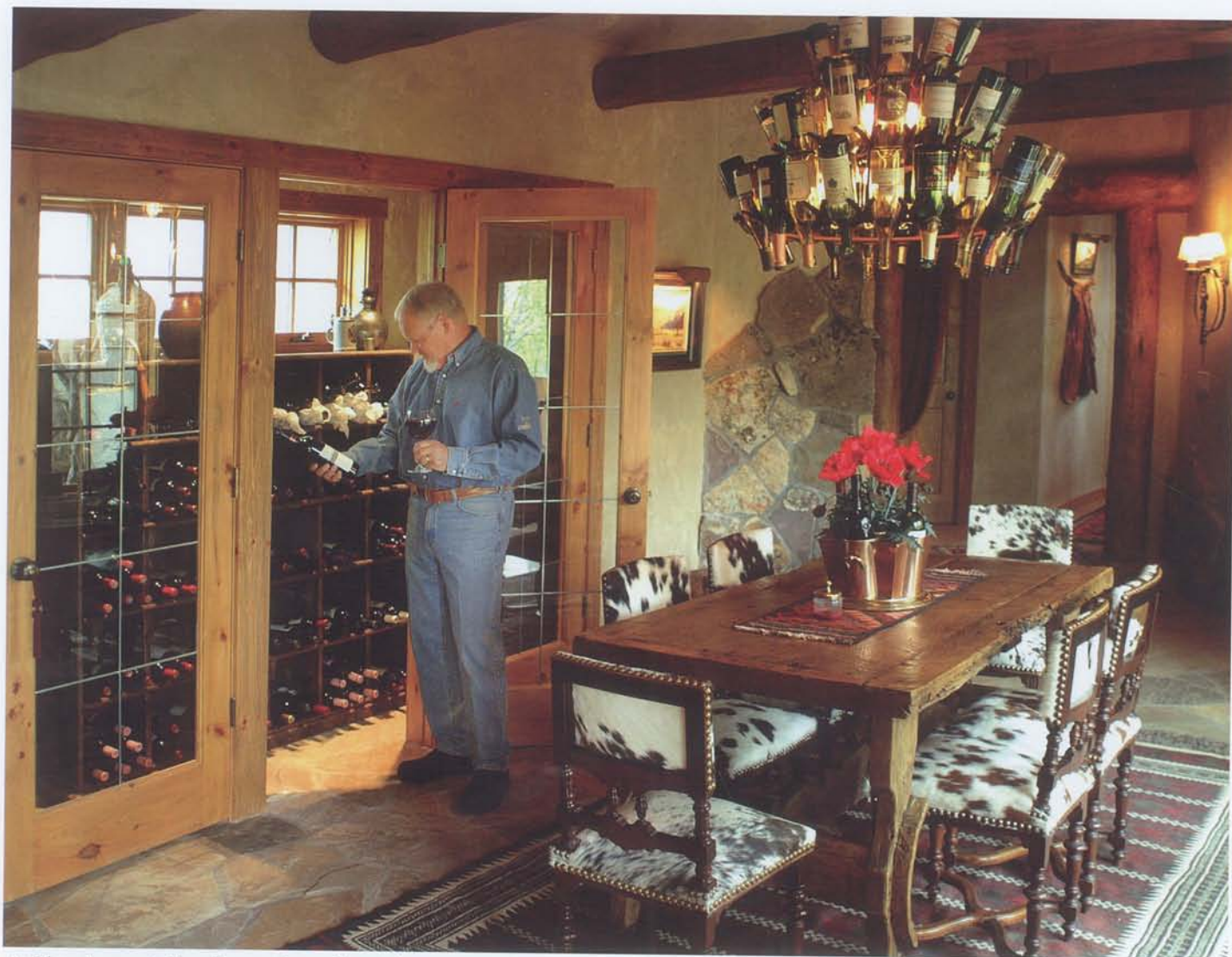
IT HAS BEEN OVER 35 YEARS since Larry baked Cindy her 16th birthday cake and even longer since he crowded around her desk with the rest of the kindergarten class to watch her paint.

Cordillera members since 1995, Larry and Cindy Youse are life partners. Their relationship has evolved from one partnership to the next: bus route buddies to spouses to successful entrepreneurs and dream-makers.

Larry was Cindy's paperboy in their hometown of Indianapolis. They were best friends throughout childhood — and later fell in love. After Larry completed his degree in marketing at the University of

Indiana, the two married and moved to Cincinnati so Cindy could finish her fifth year at the University of Cincinnati College of Design.

Twenty-six years old and married less than five years, they decided to open a restaurant. Neither had experience in the business, although Larry had always enjoyed time in the kitchen. One night after Cindy arrived home from her job at an advertising firm in Cincinnati, the two hopped in the car in search of their restaurant. Thirty minutes and a



Artful touches grace the Youses' lives, at home and at work

wrong turn later, they found it: a condemned 1900s Victorian building. "I just knew that was it!" Cindy recalls enthusiastically. Serendipity, some would say.

"Our idea at the time was to open a restaurant with a focus on desserts," Larry explains. With the Cincinnati theater district nearby, they hoped to attract the after-dinner crowd. Plus, desserts sounded less intimidating to the novice chef. While Larry attended to "everything to do with food," Cindy put her design degree to work on "everything visual," restoring the Victorian heritage of the old building. She filled the rooms with antiques and created spaces for artwork. A long brick wall inside the restaurant displayed artwork by various recognized midwestern artists, including Cindy's own acknowledged oil paintings of impressionistic landscapes, gardens, and still life scenes. Such touches created a comfortable setting "where people feel good," a goal of the owners.

They opened with a menu featuring 20 desserts and dessert-like entrées, such as crêpes and quiches.

"We did everything wrong," Larry chuckles.

Surprisingly enough, the customers started coming, and they just kept coming. Twenty-seven years later, The Grand Finale (named after their original dessert concept) now turns 400-500 patrons per day, serving lunch and dinner, and employs 140 staff members between two restaurants. (The couple purchased The Friendly Stop Cafe across the street when the owner, an elderly woman, asked them to buy it. They could not refuse, as the diner was a staple of the community. The Youses' teen-age son, Zach, and his friends often enjoy meals at the neighborhood diner.)

Larry recounts the evolution of The Grand Finale's menu: "The customers just started making suggestions — 'why don't you serve some real food?'" So they did. The menu now reflects a creative American style with French influences. Larry explains his approach toward cuisine: "I take foods that people like and combine them in different ways. My mom was a great cook."



Cindy Youse on the stairs that lead to her art studio

They both laugh when they explain their customers' immense loyalty to the menu: "We can't take items off our menu or our customers would have a heart attack!" A number of regulars have been frequenting The Grand Finale since opening day.

Larry and Cindy approach their business from a family point of view. "We never hire one person; we hire the entire family," Cindy explains.

The Youses' success stems partly from their individual strengths: Larry's love of cuisine and hands-on approach to learning, Cindy's creativity and eye for design. They have also relied on shared traits: energy, ambition, and a commitment to their partnership.

Although they look forward to a day when they can call Cordillera their year-round home, Larry knows that any decisions about the restaurant's future will be made based on "what is in everyone's best interest" (meaning his large family of employees). Like the Youses' loyal customer base, 10 of their employees have been with them for over 20 years.

Larry and Cindy hope to eventually transition to Cordillera full-time. The couple bought their lot on East Timber Draw in 1993 after a painstaking search in the Vail Valley for "a cabin in the woods," Cindy's lifelong dream. Remembering the drive up the long dirt road leading to the newly developing Ranch at Cordillera, Cindy enthuses, "As with our restaurant, I knew this was it."

Although they intended to wait a few years to build, they "just couldn't stand it." Having returned from a visit to Switzerland, Cindy's

fond memories of the Alp architecture inspired her to draw a sketch of the initial home design on a napkin to present to the architect. As with their restaurants, they continue to update their cabin in the woods to meet their changing lives. Recent additions include a spacious master bedroom that feels much like a tree house looking out into the surrounding pines and aspens, and an art studio placed over the garage for Cindy's burgeoning painting career.

"We live in a fishbowl in Cincinnati," Cindy remarks, contrasting that with the peace and tranquility of their Cordillera home. Friends back home thought the Youses were crazy to build "way out there" (theirs was one of the first custom homes to be built on the Ranch). The decision, however, doesn't seem so preposterous, considering the busy nature of their lives in Ohio. They jokingly refer to the three buildings — their home and both restaurants, which are all within 50 yards of one another — as "our crazy corner." In Ohio, their lives and the lives of the restaurants are virtually indistinguishable.

Cindy explains, "When I make that drive from Denver to the mountains, I can feel my soul coming back to my body." The couple delights in the simple, everyday normalcy found here, such as brewing a pot of coffee in their own kitchen. Larry's passion for golf and lifelong commitment to cooking along with Cindy's focus on art will become the new time-consumers in their lives. As for their skeptical midwestern friends, they begin shopping for property after their first visit to "Youses' Yampa." ☺