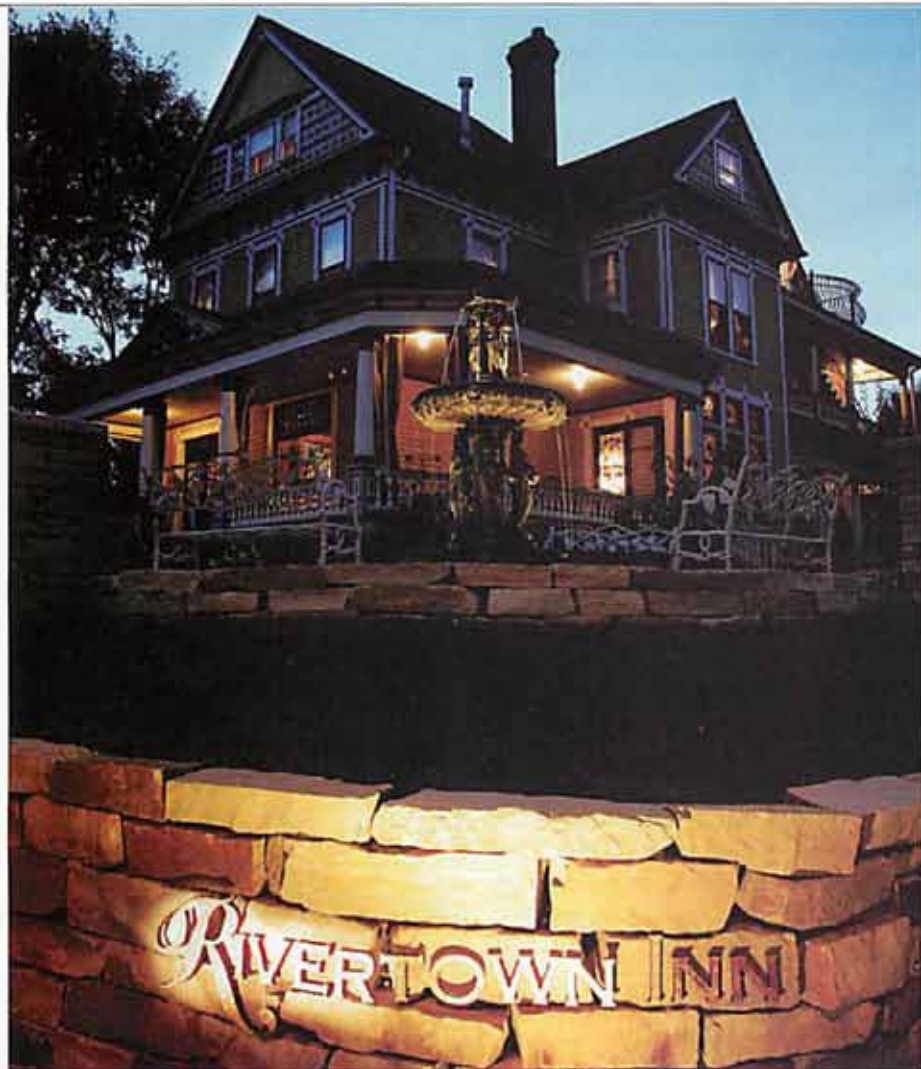


# Fine Living

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## TRAVEL

### The Rivertown Inn



WHEN YOUR EVERYDAY NARRATIVE NEEDS a plot twist, a literary-inspired escape may be the solution. At the Rivertown Inn in Stillwater, Minnesota, creative inspiration — and just plain luxury — is abundant. Each of the rooms in the 1882 home gives a nod to a different literary great of the 19th century and the décor follows suit — from the heady opulence of Oscar Wilde, to the intrigue of Agatha Christie, to the English cottage serenity of Jane Austen. For authenticity's sake, owners Jeff and Julie Anderson have used period antiques for each room and also provide selected volumes of the writer's work.

A quaint border town just 30 miles from the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport may seem an unlikely setting for such a retreat. Indeed, entries in the inn's guestbook reveal a common theme: incredulosity. From a young aspiring writer to a pair of 70-something newlyweds, no one seems prepared for the hotel's decadence and service in an age of drive-thrus and self-checkouts. But then again, this inn is refreshingly behind the times.

On a recent mother-daughter weekend, "cozy" was not what I expected to feel in a 127-year old house filled with museum-worthy antiques, but the inn's warmth and serenity was undeniable. After brief stops at

the self-serve wine, coffee and cookie alcoves, innkeeper Mary Dieter led us to our room. Three floors up with a view of the garden, it fittingly evoked the spirit of Jane Austen. In addition to a king-sized bed topped with a cloud-like comforter and goose-down pillows, it had subtle feminine touches — sage walls, drooping bed curtains, gilded mirrors, a window seat. It's no surprise that guests say they feel they've walked into a scene from a favorite novel. (Except for the gas fireplace, extra-large whirlpool tub, and Mendelssohn playing softly on a Bose radio, of course. Elizabeth Bennet never had it so good.)

After a night of eating and blissfully doing



If you've ever fantasized about escaping into your favorite novel, a stay at the charming Rivertown Inn can make your literary dreams come true. Rooms include the Oscar Wilde Carriage House Suite (top, left) and the Agatha Christie Carriage House Suite (bottom, left).

not much else, we were tempted to oversleep the next morning. But the scent of coffee and muffins soon coaxed us out of bed. In warmer seasons, breakfast is served at individual tables on the front porch. That morning, we found places at the large dining room table. Coffee, fruit, and muffins can be delivered to your room if sitting elbow-to-elbow with strangers is unappealing. But then you'd miss Chef Ray's three-course gourmet breakfast.

Chef Ray Wyatt was born and raised in England, though he came to Minnesota by way of Denmark and Australia. He's also backpacked around the world twice — no surprise he credits travel as his biggest culinary

influence. He writes his menus daily, drawing on his mood and available ingredients. That day's breakfast began with the familiar — chocolate and cranberry orange muffins — and went on to the exquisite — warm strudel with chai custard, pastry filled with chocolate raspberry truffle, and egg soufflé in a shimmering pool of basil cream sauce. I couldn't remember a time when breakfast lasted so long or tasted so good.

Besides the masterpieces on its shelves, the inn has stories of its own. For years, the Andersons lived around the corner from the stately, but neglected, Victorian mansion. They finally bought it in 1999 to save the

home and invest in the community. Over the next eight years, they renovated every square inch, reclaiming the debris-filled carriage house, planting gardens, and accumulating one-of-a-kind furnishings: a mahogany statue from the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City, a hand-painted reredos from an altar in a long-gone Milwaukee church, more than a dozen stained glass windows from old churches and private homes, a canopy bed that traces its origins to 1850s India. All of this to provide an unforgettable experience, close enough for a three-day weekend, but worlds away from everyday life.

— ANDREA BAHE