

Living It Up at the Lyle Hotel

Couple finds hard work and loving care makes a growing business and a contented life

By Jeanie Senior

Solea Kabakov and her husband, Chris Marlinga, spent 18 months looking all across the western United States for a bed and breakfast-type property to buy—from Taos, New Mexico, and Flagstaff, Arizona, to an old stone school in Montana, near Glacier National Park.

They were beautiful places, but Solea says they kept looking.

Then, in October, a real estate agent led them to the Lyle Hotel.

“We drove up and thought, we’re going back in time,” Solea says, describing the love-at-first-sight encounter.

The location was great.

“And it was a historic property, which was a big plus for us,” she says. “It just looks like the Old West.”

The century-old railroad hotel next to the main line of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway had special appeal for Chris.

“My husband has always liked trains,” Solea says.

In January, the couple bought the hotel from Jim and Penny Rutledge, the owners since 1999.

A frantic round of painting and redecorating ensued, which includ-



Above, Solea at the front desk. A poster featuring her musician father hangs on the wall. Below, Chris Marlinga and Solea Kabakov stay busy renovating and reviving the Lyle Hotel.



ed a new oak floor in the lobby. The hotel re-opened 10 days later.

“They were still nailing in the floor the morning of our opening party,” recalls Solea. “It was kind of exciting. We had 20 people working on it.”

The couple and their children—Lucius, almost 2, and Izabella, 3—moved to Klickitat County from Las Vegas, where they lived for six years.

“That was the catalyst for our move, because we didn’t want to raise two little kids in Las Vegas, Sin City,” says Solea. “It’s a lot of fun for adults, but we’d entered a new phase of our lives, and we had to look on to the future.”

Life in Lyle, running the old hotel with the cottonwood trees shading the entrance, is vastly different from Las Vegas, where Solea worked in a casino and Chris was a sous chef at the enormous Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino.

Mandalay Bay dwarfs the Lyle Hotel, where the dining room seats 40.

“Oh my word,” says Solea.

"You'll love this. His kitchen was 11,000 square feet, and that's just the kitchen. It was the largest freestanding banquet room in the world. They can seat 6,000 people in one room, one seating for dinner."

Chris worked under the banquet kitchen's executive chef. Besides meetings and corporate events—dinner for 10,000, anyone?—the staff did weddings, private parties and birthdays. They put on dinner for 40 people in a penthouse suite.

Now, Chris is executive chef at the little Lyle Hotel. Solea is executive director, a title she says cheerfully refers to everything else.

The couple are putting their own stamp on the business. The 10 guest rooms have new drapes, new paint and, in some cases, new wallpaper. Solea is adding antique furniture and paintings to the rooms.

The couple have already redone the restrooms off the dining room and rearranged the kitchen to suit Chris. Next will be upgrading the five bathrooms hotel guests share on the second floor.

"Going room by room, we're trying to keep in stages," Solea says, displaying the period-look wallpaper going up in one room and a painting that will be hung in another guest room.

She is planning to put Pendleton wool bedspreads in some of the guestrooms.

"This was a sheep town," she says, gesturing out a window toward Lyle Point, where thousands of sheep were penned and eventually shipped on the railroad.

The hotel, which is open year-round, now serves lunch on summer weekends. The menu features



Top, Solea pours one of the many varieties of wine on the hotel's list. Diners travel from all over to enjoy dinner at the hotel. Above, the Lyle Hotel has become a Gorge destination.

barbecued chicken, beef brisket or pork ribs. Dinner is served Wednesdays through Sundays, with a menu including steak, pasta, pork ribs, grilled salmon and nightly specials.

Solea says Chris loves to cook.

The couple is expanding the hotel's already extensive wine list, specializing in Northwest wines.

Both are wine enthusiasts.

The dinner crowd is expanding. Diners primarily come from the Gorge.

"Some Lyle locals are coming regularly," says Solea. "We get a lot of people from The Dalles, a few from Goldendale, Hood River, a lot from White Salmon and Bingen.

They have learned to anticipate capacity crowds at least once a month. That is when Solea's father, Joel Kabakov—a classical guitarist and composer—visits from Seattle and plays flamenco guitar in the dining room.

"My mom's a flamenco dancer," Solea says.

That helps explain the origin of her name, which comes from a gypsy song. It is pronounced "So-lay."

Solea always asks guests where they heard about the Lyle Hotel and "99 out of 100 say the Internet." Guests primarily are from the Northwest, although Canadians, Californians and Europeans are in the mix.

The room rate includes a continental breakfast.

Solea was born in Boston, and Chris was born in Chicago. They met in high school in Fullerton, California.

"We both moved there as kids, with our families," she says.

After high school, Solea attended Western Washington University in Bellingham and studied music. Chris went to culinary school in Seattle.

Although it is far different from Las Vegas, or even Fullerton, Solea says Lyle is by no means the smallest or most rural place the couple has lived in Washington.

"We lived in Ferry County, out in the mountains in the middle of nowhere," she says. "The nearest town had 400 people, and we were 12 miles out of town." ■