

# big mountain love story

For 18 years, an inn on a mountain between Dillsboro and Bryson City has been the home of George and Hanneke Ware, and they wouldn't have it any other way.

Written by **JEREMY MARKOVICH** • Photography by **EMILY CHAPLIN AND CHRIS COUNCIL**

**T**HE WOODPILE NEEDS RESTOCKING, so George Ware throws some logs in the wheelbarrow. He's on schedule, he says. It's always good to be on schedule. His wife, Hanneke, lithely walks up a hill overlooking the Chalet Inn, bounding over gravel in wedge espadrilles. Out back, butterflies flit through the air as salamanders scramble over rocks that sit, arranged carefully to look random, in a grassy knoll. A stream runs down from a spring in the woods, turns right, and veers around the side of the inn. The building has

a tall roof and six rooms. It's a big, sturdy building, up the hill from a pasture and past a kennel, atop a driveway. It's surrounded by tall trees, in a fold in the hillside just perfect enough to hold it. You don't see it until the last moment. There are walking sticks and an umbrella near the front door. The front room is full of mountain milieu and smells of firewood. Later at night, if you peek in through the kitchen opening, you can see George hunched over a desk, with only a lamp on, going over the books. An innkeeper's work is never finished.



**George Ware** met his wife, Hanneke, in the Netherlands, fell in love, and brought her and a little bit of Europe to western North Carolina.

**COMING TOGETHER**

George and Hanneke bought this land 21 years ago from a real estate agent who didn't think to show it to them because it wasn't worth much. Back then, it was just a neglected farmhouse surrounded by a sheath of brush and a tangle of weeds and vines in the middle of 22 forested acres. It took five years of searching, from Pickens, South Carolina, to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, from Boone to Robbinsville, to find this place. It was perfect.

The Wares tell their story around a table behind the kitchen. George, in a short-sleeve, plaid shirt and shorts, leans back in his chair. Hanneke leans forward, light as a feather. They met years ago in the Netherlands. It was the stroke of midnight, Valentine's Day, 1983, in Maastricht, during the Dutch version of Mardi Gras in the Dutch New Orleans. George was there, stationed at NATO headquarters, but on this night, he was leaving a pub. Hanneke, down with some girls from Amsterdam, was pushed in by revelers pouring in from the crowded street. They collided. He spilled his beer on her. Being a gentleman, he had no choice but to buy her a glass of wine. They became friends. They fell in love.

"I really did want to be rich," she says, smiling through a Dutch accent, "and then I met him, and I thought all Americans were rich. And so I thought I hit the jackpot."

"Then reality set in," George says in his low, dry voice. Hanneke laughs so hard, she pitter-pats the table with her hands. She was a big-city-girl who grew up thinking she'd be a dancer. He joined the United States Army, became a lieutenant colonel, and lived in 18 different homes before settling down. Neither are where they thought they'd be. So how did they come to be here?

**MOUNTAIN PRESENCE**

Here is Jackson County, a place that sits west of 98 percent of North Carolina's population. Just down the road, right next to each other, are Dillsboro and then Sylva, with quiet, nostalgic streets and cute restaurants along the Tuckasegee River. Go a little farther, and you can take a ride on a historic steam locomotive. Or you can shoot craps at Harrah's. It's all within a 12-minute drive.

But what you cannot escape from, the things that are everywhere and surround you and are always in your consciousness, are the mountains. They loom over you wherever you go, casting shadows and wrapping themselves around you. The land is rugged and deep and still hard for humans to tame.

It was this land that drew in George, who was told the only respectable work was an engineer's but found his way into the military and didn't leave for 23 years. George's neighbor at Fort Bragg grew up in the mountains and could never quite

escape their gravity. Every weekend, he drove seven hours each way, just to go back, just to be there. George thought he might go have a look for himself, and he did in 1979.

The area turned out to be perfect. The hardwoods of western North Carolina remind Hanneke of the Black Forest in Germany. A Bavarian home was meant to be here. While in Germany, George fell in love with gasthauses — little country inns so small that you had no choice but to bump into the owners and talk and eat and learn. George wanted one of his own. He wanted a big mountain home but couldn't afford it unless he opened it for guests.

**GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS**

Fresh out of the service, George was talked out of another master's degree by the dean of the school he planned to attend. You've got the management experience, the dean said. Might as well get a job and learn the hospitality business on somebody else's dime.

First, George helped manage a 500-seat seafood restaurant in Columbia, South Carolina, before moving to Cashiers. There, he and Hanneke worked for the High Hampton Inn and Country Club. She was assistant to the resort's general manager. He ran the dining room.

In August 1990, they bought the land and started discovering things. Snakes, mostly. They found a fox den under the farmhouse, the skeleton of a cow out back. They started pulling weeds and calling in carpenters and craftsmen

to build a new gasthaus up in their new cove. It took three years of sweat and dirty hands and sawdust to get the place open. They built balconies and rerouted the stream. They planted grass and put in a pond. They stocked the library with books, made some of George's old military relics into plaques, and hung them on the walls. Even after guests started arriving, the work wasn't finished. Money trickled in, and once enough of it arrived, George and Hanneke gutted the

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Reminders of Hanneke's Dutch roots decorate the inn.



The Wares transformed a neglected farmhouse into a secluded escape in the woods of western North Carolina.



rooms and redid them.

When you sit and look around, you wonder how anyone could find this place. “People don’t stumble on us,” George says. “Thank God for the Internet, and thank God for Jim and Joanne Newell.”

The Newells used to run the Olde Towne Inn down in Dillsboro. George stayed there once on a trip up to scout property. Jim and Joanne talked about gutting the place and building it up. George learned something he hadn’t expected: The Newells weren’t competitors; they were friends. They wouldn’t take down the Olde Towne Inn’s vacancy sign until it and the Chalet were full.

### THE INN LIFE

Once guests started coming (and coming back), the innkeepers came up with the routine they still follow today. Hanneke cooks and cleans. George mows and fixes. Hanneke usually grabs the phone. George keeps track of the money. Rarely are they in the same place at the same time. If they are, it means something isn’t getting done.

Their day starts at 6 a.m., when George goes downstairs and preps the kitchen. Then Hanneke comes down and fixes breakfast, packing it in thermal bags to leave outside each door. George starts finding people and telling them about the weather and what they ought to do. He knows everything down to the minute: 8-12 to the restaurants, 12-15 to the park entrance, 25 to white water.

It is all hard work. There are, by one trade group’s count, 17,000 bed and breakfasts in the United States. Nearly three-quarters of all innkeepers are couples. And many inns don’t last. You constantly have guests in your own home, walking around in your yard, relaxing as you try to live your life.

The Newells gave up on the Olde Towne Inn years ago. George and Hanneke think they would have, too, if they’d opened their bed and breakfast down in town. There’s all of that noise. That commotion. Up here, George says, “I walk to the front window every morning, and it just recharges the batteries.”

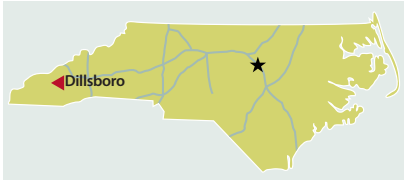
### PACE OF CHANGE

The view from the window wasn’t always there. In the early days, trees surrounded the inn. One day, George was up on the roof and a faraway mountain caught his eye. He yelled down for Hanneke to bring up his compass and a raised-relief map. “And by God, I see that mountain; that’s Double Top,” George says. “And I found out from our front balcony you can see all the way to the Blue Ridge Parkway.”

**Signs (top) direct guests** to relaxing spots on the inn’s property. Photos (bottom), hanging in the inn’s entrance, capture the Wares’ transformation of an ordinary house into a chalet.

### **Chalet Inn**

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machete and lop shears and just started hacking their way through the forest.

Same with the sunset. About six years ago in November, a park ranger from Tennessee came down to the inn from the trails and said he saw Clingman's Dome. So up went George with a topographical map and binoculars, and by God, there was the dome. Then, by God, there was the sunset. Down came some trees, and up went a bench. It's an incredible sunset. Guests send pictures all the time. George and Hanneke never get to see it.

Each day is long, and the job requires six or seven days a

The trails evolved the same way. George and Hanneke walked in the woods during breaks. "Darn," George said. "This is dumb, gettin' scratched," and on their next walk, they brought a

week of work year-round. Most innkeepers only last about five years before moving on. George and Hanneke have been at this for 18.

### **SETTLED IN**

A while back, they had a decision to make. They were booked solid; on July and October weekends they were turning away three times as many people as they had rooms. They were working seven days a week. They could either sell this place and move on, or expand and hire more staff. George looks at Hanneke, and his dry voice starts to waver. "Neither one of us wanted to leave the cove."

They built a new set of rooms in a new building at the top of a hill. From up there, you can see the pond, the fountain, the fire pit, and the stream. You can see Double Top and the Blue Ridge. You can see it all. And you look down at the Chalet Inn and see what George and Hanneke see. Home. 🏠

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