



## ACCOLADES

### Bernard's & West Lane Inn Working Together to Make a Bride's Day Special

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*By Pamela Brown*

Bernard's and West Lane Inn share qualities similar to a bridal couple--they complement each other. Located side-by-side in Ridgefield's historic district, Bernard's is an award-winning French restaurant offering elegant wedding receptions while the West Lane Inn provides comfortable overnight lodging. "If bridal couples and their guests need accommodations, I suggest next door. It works beautifully between us," said Sarah Bouissou, owner of Bernard's with her husband, Bernard, also the executive chef.

For Stamford residents Kelli McCourt and her husband, Kevin, the two sites offered the best of both worlds. "Everyone was so genuinely friendly and made it a really pleasant weekend in New England," said Kelli, whose April wedding featured a sit-down dinner for 48. "Bernard's is a beautiful setting--that's what drew us to it. It's so pretty from the outside. We loved the intimate atmosphere, and the food was incredible, the service superb, and the cake was beautiful. People are still talking about the food. Everything, right down to the last detail, was just great. It all worked out perfectly. Discovering the inn was next door was a bonus. "We thought it would be a nice place to stay for our wedding night. It was so convenient."

Bernard's is committed to maintaining Zagat's description of their French restaurant--serving exceptional cuisine and offering refined service in a picture-perfect New England setting. "We want everyone to have the wedding they've dreamed of, and we love living up to everyone's expectations, and often exceeding them. We pride ourselves on personalized service. Brides enjoy and appreciate that Bernard and I are both the owners. He cooks and I do all the planning," said Sarah, a caterer for 17 years.

Bernard's offers two wedding package featuring custom-designed menus. "I sit down with each bride or couple and go over what they're picturing for their special day. Just before the wedding, I go over every detail," Sarah said. Kelli appreciated Sarah's expertise. "Sarah was a big selling point. She was so wonderful to deal with. Everything was so easy Sarah made everything so nice."

Sarah credits Bernard's expertise in contemporary French cuisine with making the restaurant successful. "Bernard is an outstanding chef who puts his signature on every dish. That's why I think people choose us over wedding halls. Critics have called him a culinary genius," Sarah said. Over the years, Bernard's has received numerous awards, including four stars from The New York Times. "Everything's cooked to order, and it's different. We also offer wild game. Brides can select pheasant, venison or wild boar...we really can do almost anything." Bernard's also offers off-premises catering, and an onsite pastry chef, Catherine Laughlin, who custom makes cakes in a variety of flavors.

Bernard's uniquely designed dining rooms accommodate varying numbers of guests for sit-down dinners. Upstairs, the dining rooms seats 70 guests, and the first floor 135. Other rooms accommodate parties of fewer than 40. Brides may reserve exclusive use of Bernard's; however, Sarah will close on two Saturdays per month.

Built in 1875, the building was an inn the turn of the century and has been a restaurant since 1942. Sarah and Bernard took it over in 2000. Sarah describes it as having understated elegance. Three fireplaces, a spiral staircase and a Steinway grand piano provide a romantic setting. "We love the charm a historic home offers--wonderful, little nooks. It's intimate because there are different rooms, although it all opens up nicely," Sarah said. Weather permitting,



*Superb dining matched by the charm of the decor and gardens makes bernard's restaurant a favorite wedding choice. - Kristen Hensen Photography*



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cocktails are served outside on the patio or in the garden.

A wedding garden overflowing with seasonal flowers from May through October is used for wedding ceremonies and photographs. A ceremonial arbor features cascading wisteria, honeysuckle and roses. "The Gardens are quite spectacular. The architect designed them so there's always something flowering," Sarah said. In addition, there's a formal herb garden with 25 herbs as well as red and green grapes, blueberries, strawberries, and roses.

Bernard's doesn't have a bride's room. "That's where the inn comes in really handy. When someone rents the whole restaurant on a Saturday night, as part of the package, I pay for an overnight bridal room at the for them, " said Sarah.

The innkeepers appreciate their location. It's great being next to Bernard's. They do a great job with wedding parties and are one of the best restaurants in Connecticut," said Debbie Prieger, co-owner of the inn with her mother, Maureen Mayer. "It's very convenient for wedding guests. We complement each other very well."

For Kelli, the inn offered a welcoming place for herself, her parents and out-of-town guests. "It's a beautiful old house and the rooms are really nice. The day of the wedding we literally took it over. Everyone was getting ready, running back and forth from room to room. There was all this activity going on and the owners didn't bat an eye. They were so nice," she said.

The innkeepers strive not only to make their guests comfortable but also to make the occasion memorable. "Many bridal couples stay here their first night so they don't have to go to the airport or so they can sleep later in the morning. Bernard's is a great asset to us. We have a very good working relationship with Sarah and Bernard," Maureen said.

Built in 1849, the three-story yellow Victorian with large front porch is nestled on more than two manicured acres dotted with maple trees. Under current management since 1978, it has 14 rooms in the main building, two with fireplaces. A separate cottage has four deluxe rooms with kitchens and private decks. Maureen emphasizes it's not a bed and breakfast.

"Anything a five-star hotel has, we're the same, only smaller. We provide all the amenities our guests could desire. We try very hard to meet a customer's requests," Maureen said. Each room includes a private bath with heated towel rack, refrigerators, air conditioning, wireless Internet, satellite TV, and daily maid service. Living on the premises, Maureen and Debbie provide 24-hour service. The inn is registered in American Historic Inns; USA Today named it one of America's finest inns; Zagat's called it "a great getaway."

The inn is distinguished by its vintage country charm. Its exterior was recently repainted and the entire porch refurbished with new columns and mahogany floors. Inside there's original cherry molding, woodwork and an old-fashioned fireplace. A sweeping staircase leads to the second floor. "It's gorgeous. Our lobby is very welcoming," Maureen said.

Many brides use the inn for photos. "Even if they're not staying here, they come over from Bernard's and take pictures on the porch and front lawn," she said. Maureen has decorated all the rooms in a different style. Bridal couples stay in special rooms that are bigger and feature bay windows and king-sized beds.

Maureen finds being an innkeeper very satisfying. "I love hearing people say, 'I had a wonderful time; I'm going to be back.' It's so rewarding," said Maureen, who often forms friendships with guests. "It's an extension of my home; people are warmly welcomed, and I get to know them" In the warm weather, guests may walk out on the terrace and find one couple having a bottle of wine, another eating cheese and crackers, and sharing back and forth, and they welcome anyone who'd like to join them, she said.



*West Lane Inn provides an elegant and romantic setting for wedding ceremonies, the bridal couple and guests. - Courtesy of West Lane Inn*



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Originally, the inn was home to the Bissells, a prominent Connecticut family who owned the H.P. Bissell Company, one of several drugstores in Ridgefield. In 1910, the home became a boarding house, and in 1935 it was divided into five apartments. In 1970, Maureen purchased the building, kept it as apartments and then converted it to an inn.

The inn offers a complimentary continental breakfast or an optional a la cart menu; it doesn't serve lunch or dinner. The food, prepared by Maureen or Debbie, features homemade sour cream coffee cake, blueberry muffins, and fresh-squeezed orange juice, of which Maureen is very proud. "I come from a restaurant family. My father was quite a big restaurateur in New York, and I worked for him for quite a while," Maureen said. Breakfast is served on the outdoor terrace May through October or in their breakfast room, and since they don't have a restaurant, guests go next door to Bernard's for dinner.

Maureen and Debbie are proud of their inn. "Being in business for 30 years has given us a feeling of accomplishment," Debbie said. Maureen loves running it. "It's fun because it's different customers every single day. That makes it so interesting," said Maureen, who especially enjoys the brides. She loves seeing the different gowns and enjoys the excitement of those special occasions. "It's so nice to see happiness," she said.

Bernard's is at 20 West Lane in Ridgefield 203-438-8282, [www.bernardsridgefield.com](http://www.bernardsridgefield.com). The West Lane Inn is at 22 West Lane, 438-7323 [www.westlaneinn.com](http://www.westlaneinn.com). Bernard's and West Lane Inn share qualities similar to a bridal couple--they complement each other. Located side-by-side in Ridgefield's historic district, Bernard's is an award-winning French restaurant offering elegant wedding receptions while the West Lane Inn provides comfortable overnight lodging. "If bridal couples and their guests need accommodations, I suggest next door. It works beautifully between us," said Sarah Bouissou, owner of Bernard's with her husband, Bernard, also the executive chef.

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Sarah's  
Wine Bar 

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